Why Hiroshima Ranks Number 1

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John Hersey’s Hiroshima is a lean piece of journalism history. After its 1946 release, Hiroshima was crowned the number one work of American journalism from the twentieth century (Stephens, 1999). Hersey’s story describes the lives of six characters in the wake of the devastating atomic bomb that dropped on the Japanese city.

Upon its debut in the New Yorker, Hiroshima seemed to freeze the media, and demand the attention of a wide audience: “Many newspapers re-published portions of the article on their front pages or devoted editorials to it. The Book of the Month Club distributed Hiroshima free of charge to its members. ABC pre-empted its radio schedule to broadcast a reading of the entire piece” (Michaud, 2010). Such a slender little book has made a huge impression. But how? At times, Hersey’s writing style comes off dry. He’s matter-of-fact, almost indifferently so. In spite of all this, there is a reason Hiroshima bests other stories in its field. But to understand why, we must first understand our author.

Hersey didn’t need Hiroshima to immortalize him. He’d already won a Pulitzer Prize for his fictional novel A Bell for Adano (Severo, 1999). But the construction of Hiroshima was an entirely different endeavor, one only someone with Hersey’s personal background deserved to tame. The journalist grew up in Tientsin, China in 1914 in a family of missionaries, similar to one of his Christian sources in Hiroshima, Reverend Mr. Kiyoshi Tanimoto. Before Hiroshima, Hersey worked for Time Magazine (Severo, 1999), where he covered World War II. His
political activism grew as he showed his opposition for the Vietnam War (Severo, 1999), an anti-war attitude that made sense, given Hersey’s earlier exposure to it in *Hiroshima*.

Within nine days of the B-29 bombers’ first and second attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki respectively, Japan’s emperor surrendered to the United States. The war was ending, and Americans had much to celebrate. In Hiroshima, the battle had just begun, and it would continue for a good while after losing 90 percent of its population (History.com Staff, 2009). But nobody in the States initially thought of that. *The New Yorker’s* managing editor, William Shawn, brought the realization to light that “the story of the bomb’s victims remained untold” (Michaud, 2010). The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics says journalists should “boldly tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience. Seek sources whose voices we seldom hear” (“SPJ Code of Ethics,” 2009). This is very much what Hersey and Shawn set out to do with this book: Give a voice to the voiceless.

Hersey describes some gruesome accounts in the book. Many victims suffer flash burns, nausea, amputation, and worse (Hersey, 2009). His ability to earmark the details of such a tragic event so accurately is both a testament of his writing, but also his embrace of what would later be coined “new journalism.”

To understand new journalism, one must look to the past to understand what it isn’t. When Samuel F. B. Morse invented the telegraph in 1845, a new form of journalism emerged (Scanlan, 2003). Reporters during the American Civil War could use Morse Code to send messages quickly (Scanlan, 2003), but they also ran the risk of having the wires cut. To work around this, they sent the most important facts first, and this created what is known as the inverted pyramid, which is still used at many daily newspapers today (Scanlan, 2003). This style, however, isn’t present in Hersey’s *Hiroshima*. Instead, he maintains a long form style,
which is what new journalism represents: The divorce from the inverted pyramid. It’s the beginning of feature-length storytelling (G. Borchard, personal communication, April 12, 2016).

This approach was well ahead of its time. It wasn’t until the 1960s and 1970s that new journalism publicly began to take shape (G. Borchard, personal communication, April 12, 2016). It received its push from a number of sources including The Washington Post’s Watergate piece and even Hunter Thompson’s Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas. The Post’s investigative work, led by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, would entice many with its fact packing, extensive reportage (G. Borchard, personal communication, April 12, 2016). As for Thompson’s Fear and Loathing, that began as a sidebar for the rebellious Rolling Stone magazine (G. Borchard, personal communication, April 12, 2016), and became a vivid book narrative. Neither of these stories used a pyramid structure. Hiroshima essentially does not either. Hersey never quotes any of his six sources in a traditional way. Any quotes present in the book are woven narratively.

It’s clear from the sheer amount of detail and information squeezed between Hiroshima’s some 150 pages that Hersey really knows these survivors. According to Michaud (2010), the author spent a month in Japan interviewing the six sources for his book. Judging by how he lays out the facts, but knows enough about the intimate details, he’s been in his sources’ heads. He understands their motivations and their desires.

A brief snapshot of Hersey’s intimate understanding of his subjects shows in how the religious Mr. Tanimoto scrambles to help the injured: “He lifted the slimy living bodies out and carried them up the slope away from the tide. He had to keep consciously repeating to himself, ‘These are human beings’” (Hersey, 1946, p. 45). Shortly after, Mr. Tanimoto accidentally steps on an injured person, and Hersey, again, documents his inner grief. “Mr. Tanimoto,
ashamed of hurting wounded people, embarrassed at being able to walk upright, suddenly thought of the naval hospital ship, which had not come (it never did), and he had for a moment a feeling of blind, murderous rage at the crew of the ship, and then at all doctors” (Hersey, 1946, p. 46). Hersey turns his sources into characters. He doesn’t just parrot off what is said in a quote. This makes him stand out against traditional reporters who might knock on a source’s door at 3 a.m., expecting him or her to open up at once. Hersey’s reporting is based around trust in a similar fashion to The Post’s Watergate piece.

Earlier, Hersey’s neutral, at times dry, tone came under scrutiny. But when connecting everything the author has accomplished with Hiroshima, it’s easy to imagine why he’d approach the story this way. Albeit he graced readers with a new form of storytelling, at the end of the day, he was still a journalist. Objectivity is necessary, and Hersey holds onto that throughout the book. His writing voice is never imposing or projecting. It’s almost like he’s absent all together. This “ghosting” of the narrator makes for quality journalism. The best story, in any medium, is one without breaking the fourth wall, or drawing attention away from the subjects. Hiroshima is a testament of the people that survived there. Hersey’s own opinion has no place, and he knows it.

As helpful and entertaining as new journalism may be to a reader, the ultimate goal of any article is to inform. Hiroshima does this in a number of ways. Hersey doesn’t give so much of an outsider looking in perspective as he does an insider looking out. He’s immersed himself in this war-torn world, earned the trust of the survivors and is essentially one of them. With such access, he uses Hiroshima to tell the losing side’s tale. There were mixed feelings about the bomb among survivors (Hersey, 1946). But Hersey let his subjects express these feelings, rather than implant his own opinion in his writing. On one hand, some survivors were hateful
toward America, and others almost seemed to shrug and say, “That’s war, deal with it.” One quote by Father Siemes addresses this nonchalance, and poses a question to humanity: “It seems logical that he who supports total war in principle cannot complain of a war against civilians.

The crux of the matter is whether total war in its present form is justifiable, even when it serves a just purpose. Does it not have material and spiritual evil as its consequences that far exceed whatever good might result? When will our moralists give us a clear answer to this question?” (Hersey, 1946, p. 90).

_Hiroshima_ stands the test of time because its formula works. Its introduction of new journalism was well ahead of its years, and would eventually carry over to other great works such as _The Post’s_ Watergate investigation. Other authors may have written similar works of nonfiction, but the topic of such a devastating act of war immortalizes _Hiroshima_. The book was inducted into the “Top 100 Works of Journalism the United States in the 20th Century” in 1999 (Stephens, 1999). Sadly, Hersey never got a chance to see this accomplishment before he died in 1993 of cancer (Severo, 1993). His legacy, however, lives on in the journalism world.

References

Borchard, G. personal communication, April 12, 2016. — Lecture


