MEET TOM RAYFIEL, THE OBITUARY WRITER FOR THE “GAZETTE”

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Photograph by Michael Berman

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By Emmett Lindner

Tom Rayfiel, a Coop member who spent many a shift working in the dairy cooler, has been writing obituaries for the *Linewaiters’ Gazette* for years. It may sound macabre to deal in death, but obituaries solidify recollections of loved ones that might otherwise fade over the years—in both memories and conversations. Through Rayfiel’s writing, a Member remains a part of the Coop’s collective memory and history for generations.

He aims to capture someone's life by speaking with their loved ones and acquaintances to boil down decades of experiences and find the core personality of the person who has passed.

Some of the members Rayfiel has written about include Tim Mohr, a food-processing squad leader, who was also a translator with accomplishments that "are almost too many to name"; Shelly Weiss, an early Member who was "a force of nature at whatever she set her mind to"; and Alison Rose Levy, a longtime writer for the *Gazette.*

> "WE SHOULD ACKNOWLEDGE WHEN ONE OF US DIES," SAYS RAYFIEL. "OTHERWISE, A PERSON JUST FAILS TO SHOW UP FOR THEIR SHIFT A FEW TIMES AND FADES FROM MEMORY."

"I never thought of writing them myself until I saw a makeshift memorial notice on the wall of the Coop's receiving area announcing the death of our (very young) beer buyer," said Rayfiel. "I felt, if we are a community, we should acknowledge when one of us dies. Otherwise, a person just fails to show up for their shift a few times and fades from memory."

Mr. Rayfiel is a writer by trade and has published novels including *Split-Levels* and *Colony Girl.* He has also worked with *VICE,* creating tongue-in-cheek "living obituaries."

In this interview, Rayfiel discussed how he writes obituaries, how he began his career and what writing about death has taught him. (Note: This interview has been edited and condensed.)

Can you tell readers a little about yourself?

I was born in Westchester and grew up in northern New Jersey and went to school in

Iowa, Grinnell College. Then, I lived in various other places, Saratoga Springs, and in Paris and London for a while, doing odd jobs and was always writing.

In Paris, I did screenwriting for a bit. I worked with French directors who were hoping to make it big in Hollywood by writing scripts and I helped them out.

I always wanted to be a prose writer. Screenwriting was more a way to make money. It's a very interesting craft, but I knew pretty early on that I wanted to be more in control of the final product than you are as a screenwriter. You're basically there to help the director achieve his vision, I suppose, and it's all subservient to that.

And you can be more independent as a novelist.

Yes, you can also be more poverty stricken.

I did write short stories first. I published short stories in various literary quarterlies and eventually, I published several novels. The novel as a form has always fascinated me.

When did you move to Brooklyn?

Maybe 34, 35 years ago. My wife is a potter, Claire Weissberg. She's Claire of Claireware, the pottery store down on Union and Nevins in Gowanus. We moved to Brooklyn because we wanted to be near a gas-fired kiln she had found on Third Avenue. It was not chasing after some trendiness at all. It was just one of the few gas-fired kilns she found that she could have access to.

Did you join the Coop when you first moved here?

Pretty soon after. At that time, it was very different. It was only open a few hours a day, and it was a much smaller space. Obviously, it hadn't expanded the way it is now.

At first there was no dairy cooler. It used to be just a refrigerated cabinet that you would haul everything out of and rotate one by one and put new stuff in. My first job was at the bottom of the conveyor belt. No one told me that you had to brace all the items because the conveyor belt was angled way too steeply.

Photograph by Michael Berman.

So, the first thing I sent up was a load of flour and a load of cucumbers. The flour tipped over and broke, and as I was staring up at the conveyor belt, this cascade of cucumbers and flour came out. Any other job, of course, I would have been fired on the first day, but it being the Coop, they just explained to me what I needed to know, and eventually I figured the rest out.

I enjoyed seeing how a coop works from the inside, instead of just seeing the finished product. It’s kind of amazing to me how all the moving parts fit together as well as they do.

THERE IS—NOT TO GET TOO CORNY ABOUT IT—A SENSE OF COMMUNITY AT THE COOP THAT I CERTAINLY DON’T FEEL WHEN I GO TO WHOLE FOODS OR KEY FOOD.

At what point did you think about writing obituaries for the Coop?

I saw that flyer, which I still occasionally glimpse when they have the door to the receiving area open for our beer buyer. It was a little homemade announcement that he had died. And that really struck me as being insufficient. That’s when I got the idea of going to Joe Holtz with this idea of being the obituary writer for the Coop.

What is your process for writing the obituaries?

I go where they lead me, but I keep them all about the same length. There’s a sort of general underlying form, which is: I talk a little bit about the person’s life outside the Coop, but then I also emphasize what they did in the Coop and what the Coop meant to them. I try to talk to people who worked with them at the Coop, people who knew them. Often I find the Coop had a real place in their lives. And that’s the part I try to emphasize.

There is—not to get too corny about it—a sense of community there that I certainly don’t feel when I go to Whole Foods or Key Food.

I don’t have a template. I try to wing it each time. I’m sure that I am, in fact, asking very similar questions, but I never wanted to become so rote that I’m just reeling off questions from a boilerplate email I have. I try to make it a little more individual.

I’m very intent on not making it a literary performance in any sense of the word. I just want to stay out of the way as much as possible. I want to get the information out there, and I love getting quotes from people who knew the person. I don’t want to

have some kind of flourish that's mine. So mostly it's a question of staying as invisible as possible.

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Is it ever difficult to speak with family members or friends for the stories?

Yes, I always prefer email, because I think for both sides, they get to sort of gather themselves more than if you're on the phone. There have been times when people aren't comfortable writing it out, then I've talked to them. Sometimes it's been hard for them, and I certainly tread lightly. I'm not a muckraking obituary writer. All I want to do is memorialize these people, not find out some hidden truth about them.

What do you take away from writing about death so often?

What still amazes me is that we are individuals and everyone has their own story. It's a truism, but it's great to find out again and again. And it's very often very touching to see the impression people made on other people, even if it's just tangential. After they're gone, people still leave this sort of resonance with other people. And I pick up on that.

It does reinforce this sense I have that we've created—not to get too grandiose about it—but we have created this low-level sense of community, which, especially in these times, I feel is kind of rare and worth preserving. Now, luckily, we're all united in the fact that we're all going to die, so maybe that will keep us at least together in that sense.

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