

Why I have never won a Walkley

JANE CARAFELLA ENCOURAGES THOSE WHO DO THE HOUSEWORK OF JOURNALISM – THE COUNCIL REPORTS AND HUMAN-INTEREST STORIES – TO STAND TALL AND BE PROUD DESPITE THE LACK OF AWARDS. CARTOON BY JUDY HORACEK.

About this time of year, when the Walkley winners are announced, I begin to feel wistful, because unlike many journalists my age, I have never won a Walkley Award.

I realise that most scientists have never won a Nobel Prize and do not feel slighted, and that not every actor expects to win an Oscar, and that although teachers may give gold stars, they seldom receive them – nor do they expect to. But look around you. By the time most other Australian journalists have been in the business for 30 years or more they can safely be introduced as “award-winning”, sometimes “multi-award winning”. If they haven’t won a Walkley or two, they’ve won a Peace Prize, or awards for science journalism or some such. In fact, for journos of my generation, being introduced as “an award-winning journalist” is so common that as a non award-winning journalist, I now feel compelled to explain myself.

The problem is that like many other non award-winning journalists, I have spent most of my career doing the housework of journalism. In my early days on a suburban newspaper this included council reports, court reports, police reports and human-interest stories that were really glorified captions.

Later, I wrote on women’s issues for the now defunct Accent section of *The Age*, which although ground-breaking at the time, were not highly valued by the paper or by the reporters who were sometimes assigned to the section. “I’m not writing about looking up women’s vaginas,” one female reporter tearfully announced to the editor, upon discovering that she’d been assigned to Accent.

The stories we covered, such as the fight against genital mutilation in Africa, transgender issues, rape, abortion, surrogacy and adoption, did not seem to fit any of the Walkley categories at the time, which seemed to favour stories on crime or politics. Only once did I feel that a story might fit the bill. It was an interview with a man who claimed to have been raped by a woman. He came to Accent because no other journalist believed him, despite him having been compensated by the Crimes Compensation Tribunal. The trouble is no-one believed me either.

When I resigned from *The Age* in 1995 to freelance and better juggle family life, the only paid work I had was a weekly column on family issues that had evolved out of a pregnancy diary called “A New Life Journal”, and commissions for monthly cartoons for *Playgroup* magazine and for the Australian edition of *New Scientist* magazine, where I illustrated the letters on the Antipodes page.

Science was not my forte, but as all freelancers know, it is much better to say yes now and worry later about how you are going to deliver than to say no and deny yourself potential income. I recall on one occasion the Australian *New Scientist* editor, Ian Anderson, calling to ask if I could white out the trees in the cartoon. “Er, there are no trees in Antarctica,” he kindly explained.

Although I was not very good at drawing, years of headline writing and a good sense of humour meant I was good at gags. This ability gave me another string to my bow when writing work was thin on the ground. And although other cartoonists did political cartoons, I did politically correct cartoons, frequently for groups that paid by the dozen, not the hour.

During the 1990s, when “key competencies” was the catchphrase, I illustrated lots of training manuals for TAFE colleges, including one on how to be a petrol

station attendant. One particular cartoon involved drawing an attendant hitting an emergency button to stop a smoking motorist from potentially blowing himself up. I drew the attendant looking horrified but was asked to change it to a cheesy grin because petrol station attendants always had to look positive.

For almost 10 years, every month I also illustrated articles for the *Alternative Law Journal*, published by the Monash University law faculty, extracting laughs from such topics as the Mabo inquiry, homelessness and domestic violence.

As a freelancer, you take whatever comes your way, and much of this also included writing the stories that were used to prop up the ads in the employment section of Saturday’s *Age*: stories on nurse education or new health appointments or how one becomes a podiatrist.

Doing the housework of journalism also meant being the travel writer who didn’t go anywhere: writing the fillers about what happens to lost baggage or the specials being offered by new airlines. In fact, during my brief stint as a contributor to the travel section of *The Age*, the furthest I went was down to the letterbox and back to collect my cheques.

It also meant editing submissions for community groups – 120-page tomes usually written by a committee of 12, which meant translating phrases such as “consideration of the provision of the implementation of” into plain English – and writing speeches for politicians I would never vote for, and working for people I would never meet, because as a contributor only my work was required, not my presence.

As a freelancer, I also learned it was much more economical to interview myself on topical issues. Minimal research was required, there was no chance of being sued and if the story did not sell, there were no disappointed or disgruntled contacts. Once, when I interviewed myself about being a tribal defective and hating sport, I received a swag of emails from fans, many of which began: “Dear Jane, I think I love you.”

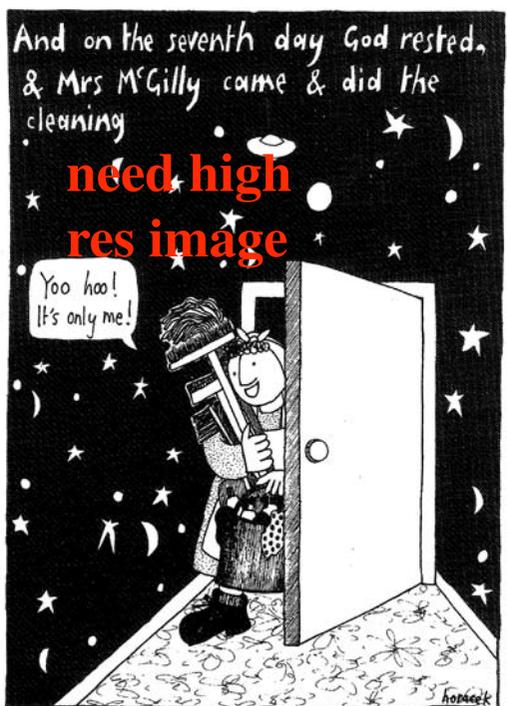
Later, I moved from writing to teaching journalism in the suburban newsroom and then online, for which there are many rewards but no awards.

So, as I raise my glass to the 51st Walkley Award winners, I would also like to salute the non-award winning journalists – the ones who write the council reports, advertising features, the motoring reports, the real estate, the weather, the briefs and all the other sections that are the foundations of modern newspapers, and where the challenge is not to expose corruption or reveal insights, but to find a new way to say the same old thing.

One of the things I tell my community newspaper cadets is that working for a community newspaper provides a great opportunity to sample all styles of journalism and to discover what type of journalist they want to be. I hope they will be the Walkley-winning type. But if not, I can assure them that whether they win awards or not, they can still win readers, which after all, is surely the most important ambition.

Jane Carafella is a journalist with 30 years’ experience. She would have illustrated this herself had she not been so busy editing a book on rice for the King of Thailand. (True).

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