





Secrets of the City

What The Wire reveals about urban journalism

BY LAWRENCE LANAHAN

Baltimore via Wide Angle

High up on a pole, under a police decal spelling out CITIWATCH and a flashing blue light, the security camera on Calverton Road captures something unusual on the streets of west Baltimore this bright summer morning—a man in a suit standing at a podium. It's election time, and for Keiffer J. Mitchell Jr., a candidate for mayor, this

corner symbolizes the city's biggest concern: crime. He stands in front of Club International, where five months earlier a pair of patrons who had been kicked out for urinating on the dance floor are accused of returning with a gun to murder the bouncer. Baltimore—already legendary for violent crime—has seen a 14 percent increase in homicides and a 24 percent increase in nonfatal shootings over the same period in 2006. On July 30, a man who had been shot just blocks from Mayor Sheila Dixon's house approached her security detail for help. Four weeks later, a man shot while driving his SUV plowed through a concrete wall and met his maker at the bottom of a swimming pool in the back yard of Baltimore's most famous defense attorney, Warren Brown.

Passing buses occasionally drown out Mitchell's amplified words, but through the clamor his solution emerges: four hundred extra police officers and a 15 percent raise for the whole force. More murder? More cops. A simple problem. A

simple solution. Yet on the corner across the street from the hubbub, where I'm standing with several residents, the situation seems more complicated than that. Everyone starts talking at once: how hard it is to pay for utilities and prescriptions on a fixed income; how few after-school programs, libraries, and summer jobs are left; how promised playgrounds and recreation centers never arrive; how the media only show the neighborhood in a negative light; how the politicians only come around when they're trying to get elected.

The further back I step, the sadder the scene looks. Mitchell is talking to three television cameras, a handful of reporters, and another man in a suit, and from this perspective, the wider concrete and asphalt desolation just swallows them.

It could be a scene from *The Wire*, particularly this year. The fifth and final season of David Simon's dramatic HBO series will focus on the newsroom of a fictional paper called, like the real one, the *Sun*. *The Wire*, although fictional, explores an increasingly brutal and coarse society through the prism of Baltimore, where postindustrial capitalism has decimated the working-class wage and sharply divided the haves and have-nots. The city's bloated bureaucracies sustain the inequality. The absence of a decent public-school education or meaningful political reform leaves an unskilled underclass trapped between a rampant illegal drug economy and a vicious "war on drugs." In the final season, Simon asks why we aren't getting the message. Why can't we achieve meaningful reform? What are we telling ourselves about ourselves? To get at these questions, he wants us to see the city from the perspective of a shrinking newsroom.

Back in 1983, Simon was thrilled to land a job at the *Sun*. He says he had been an ink-stained-wretch-in-waiting ever since he was twelve, when his father—a former newsman himself—took him to a production of *The Front Page*. Simon joined his high school paper and later became editor-in-chief of *The Diamondback* at the University of Maryland. While he was in college, he says, he filed so many stories as a suburban stringer for the *Sun* that he was forced to graduate more than a year late. Then suddenly there he was: a full-time gig in the house of Mencken and Manchester. He had an enormous respect for the *Sun*, and he pounded his beat eagerly.

The job lasted twelve years, and Simon became increasingly disillusioned toward the end. In 1995, he angrily ditched the *Sun* and went to television, where he dedicated himself to telling the world how screwed up it was, layer by layer. And now he turns his eye back to journalism, giving us something to ponder: Why is a newspaperman-at-heart devoting the final ten hours of one of the most acclaimed television dramas in history to the role of journalism in the decline of the American empire?

A Story Without a Villain

The offices of Simon's Blown Deadline Productions sit on an isolated waterfront street in Canton, a historically working-class Baltimore neighborhood. Canton's brick factories now house retail stores and condos, but Simon's office is in the one section where there is still active industry. Across the harbor, the Port of Baltimore's epic blue cranes gleam in the sun.

Fans of *The Wire* would recognize these cranes from the

second season, a rumination on the decline of the working class, set at a stevedores' union. The first season focused tightly on a wiretap investigation of a major drug organization, as if it were a police procedural. But the addition of the union revealed Simon's true intent: he was building a city. By the end of season two, he had explored the criminal-justice system, the drug organizations, and the port. The third season added city hall, the churches, and the public-health sector. The fourth season added the school system, academia, nonprofits, and the inner-city family.

**'I admire journalism
where I actually see a
nuanced world.'**

—David Simon

Simon was writing a televised novel, and a big one. Innumerable subplots came and went, and main characters disappeared from the show for several episodes at a time. Nothing ever resolved itself in an hour, and there were no good guys or bad guys. All were individuals constrained by their institutions, driven to compromise between conscience, greed, and ambition. Facets of their characters emerged slowly over time. They spoke in the sometimes-unintelligible vernaculars of their subcultures. All of this made unprecedented demands on viewers and provided an immense reward to those who stuck around. A righteous anger at the failure of our social institutions drives *The Wire*, but the passionate ideas that fuel it are hidden several layers down.

In early September, I visited Simon's office in Canton. The crew had just wrapped filming on the final episode, and the lobby was cluttered with boxes and plastic-wrapped wardrobe. Simon arrived wearing a black-and-white Hawaiian shirt and Ray-Bans pushed back over his bald head. He took coffee orders from his staff, and we drove to a nearby Starbucks. Mardi Gras beads dangled from Simon's rearview mirror, and Liam Clancy and Thelonus Monk played on the stereo.

This was Simon at ease. He has a great sense of humor and loves a good yarn. But when we sat down at a conference table to talk about his career at the *Sun*, Simon was taut and focused, sometimes twisting a paper clip or drawing perfect 3-D boxes on a legal pad. He is still passionate about journalism, and when his frustrations surface he uncorks a blue streak worthy of his fictionalized detectives and drug dealers.

When the *Sun* hired Simon immediately out of college, he didn't know Baltimore at all, and the cop beat would not have been his choice, but he worked his tail off. "I filed three hundred bylines in my first year," Simon says. And though he was green, his colleagues found him fully formed as a reporter and a writer. "He was writing about the sociology of the city through the prism of the cop beat

and the criminal-justice system,” says Rebecca Corbett, his first editor, now an editor in the Washington bureau of *The New York Times*. “And he fairly uniquely looked at the people who we tend to view just as victims or bad guys, and looked at these neighborhoods as real places that we had better understand.”

Simon began to hit his stride after a five-part series in 1987 on notorious drug lord “Little Melvin” Williams. (Williams, five years out of prison, now plays a deacon on *The Wire*.) Then he asked Police Commissioner Edward Tilghman if he could spend a year shadowing the homicide department for a book. Surprisingly, Tilghman said yes, as did Simon’s editors, and in 1988 Simon took fifteen months off to report *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*, published by Houghton Mifflin in 1991.

That same year, The Times Mirror Company, which had bought the *Sun* from the A. S. Abell Co. in 1986, lured John Carroll away from the *Lexington Herald-Leader* to edit the *Sun*. “The paper had problems that needed to be solved,” Simon says, and he was excited to see Carroll come on board. Carroll’s stellar reputation as a protégé of Gene Roberts at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* had preceded him, and Simon believed that the *Sun* would have the ingredients—*Sun* veterans, talented new hires, new leadership, and flush finances—to produce first-class journalism.

In 1993, Simon took a second book leave, this time to observe the war on drugs from one of the roughest neighborhoods in Baltimore for *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood*, which he co-wrote with retired Baltimore homicide detective and current *Wire* co-producer Ed Burns. Shortly after Simon left, Carroll brought in Bill Marimow, a colleague from the *Inquirer*, as metro editor at the *Sun*, and Marimow quickly rose to managing editor. Out on the streets, Simon was developing a fuller vision of where he wanted to go as a journalist. The cops and crime beat, it turned out, was the best thing that ever happened to him, and he thought that his two year-long, book-reporting excursions had revealed deeper truths about why the city was the way it was. He felt ready to address its complexity.

Simon returned briefly from book leave to write a four-part series called “Crisis in Blue” for the *Sun*, about a dysfunctional police department. At the time, Baltimore had registered a record number of homicides the previous year, and a new police commissioner was about to take the helm of a department in decline. It was a sprawling subject, but Simon found the numbers to focus and quantify it: crime was up 37 percent, yet arrest rates were down for violent crime because the felony divisions had been depleted to fill the ranks at homicide. Simon captured the qualitative nuance through his deep reservoir of sources in the department and on the street: robbery victims who never heard back from the police; a junkie rotating from the corner to the courthouse five times in six months only to receive a verdict of probation before judgment; detectives who advocated for a unit to target violent drug rings only to get transferred because they had deviated from the street-level arrest orthodoxy. Simon had the historical grasp to show the progression from a well-respected department full of disciplined Vietnam veterans through twenty years of

“planned attrition” to a disorganized, underpaid force that was moonlighting to pay the bills. His sociological eye caught the systemic flaws in a futile drug war: a patrol cop collecting court pay for six cases in one day while his collars walked out with probation; the irony of the fact that neighborhood activists’ demands to clean up the corners led to mass arrests of users while the repeat offenders who brought the drugs to town and did the murders walked free.

For an exposé of a failing police department, “Crisis in Blue” is remarkably free of villains. The reader finds not just individual actors making bad decisions, but a fatally flawed system that those actors struggle to accommodate. Reporting from the front lines of the war on drugs taught Simon everything he needed to know about that system. “How can you report on a place like Baltimore, where one of every two black males is without work,” he said, “and in any way regard the economic structure as being viable?”

A ‘Rule for the New Millennium’

The outline of Baltimore’s decline can be seen in the numbers. Over the last thirty years or so, the city lost 28 percent of its population, and manufacturing jobs declined from 20 percent of available work to 8 percent. In 2006, 19.5 percent of Baltimoreans lived in poverty, and, as of 2000, 43.4 of blacks were absent from the labor force (the city is 64.4 percent black). Poverty is a fact of life for 22.9 percent of blacks, 30.6 percent of black children, and almost half of all female-headed black households with children five years old and younger. Only 35 percent of Baltimore students graduate high school within four years. It has the nation’s second highest increase in new AIDS cases. A massive drug economy serves an estimated 50,000 addicts, and there are roughly that number of vacant housing units. And Baltimore’s 2006 homicide rate of 43.3 per 100,000 residents was one of the highest in the country, behind only five cities, including New Orleans and Detroit.

The difference between, say, west Baltimore’s Boyd-Booth neighborhood and Roland Park in leafy north Baltimore is shocking. According to the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance, the juvenile arrest rate in Boyd-Booth’s census statistical area is 206 per 1,000 residents. In Roland Park, it’s 1.6. All the comparisons are staggering. Median household income: \$23,070 to \$64,571. Percent of employed working-age adults: 46.1 to 76.1. Domestic violence rate per 1,000: 68 to 1.9. Median home sale price: \$33,750 to \$235,000. Percent of residential properties that are vacant: 19.9 to 0.1. Absentee rate in tenth grade: 81.5 percent to 16.7 percent. Teen birth rate per 1,000: 117 to 0.

Baltimore cannot be replicated: the liberating weirdness, the lunch-pail ethic of the Colts and Cal Ripken, the peculiar conversations of hundreds of barfly-savants, the seafood, the accents.... It’s a lovable city. It really is. Nonetheless, it is two cities. More than one former *Sun* reporter gave me the same spiel: You can live in Roland Park, drive down St. Paul Street to your office at Legg Mason or T. Rowe Price, and life is sweet. But go several blocks to the east or west, and the “Land of Pleasant Living” quickly becomes “Bodystore, Murdaland.”



A tale of two Suns David Simon on the set of *The Wire*, in a fictional Baltimore metro daily named after the real one where he worked as a reporter for twelve years.

It's not quite fair, however, to lump all of blighted east and west Baltimore together. It is still a city of neighborhoods, and there are nuances. Many people still love the place. The corner of Baltimore and Calverton, for instance, where mayoral candidate Keiffer Mitchell spoke of decay, was recently a symbol of renewal. The neighborhood, Boyd-Booth, was typical of Baltimore's early 1990s heroin-and-murder-driven nadir. But using a new law against "nuisance properties" and a plan implemented by a coalition of police and community groups, this neighborhood achieved a 52 percent reduction in violent crime and an 80 percent decrease in drug arrests from 1993 to 1995.

The complex Baltimore of Boyd-Booth is the Baltimore that Simon has chosen to document, and his reporting on the streets revealed to him the "wire" that eventually informed

The Wire: it threads through both "our" lives and "their" lives. Simon believes that we've agreed as a country that our economy can thrive without 8 to 10 percent of the population. Thus, in his view, those without the education and skills to get by are inevitably going to turn to the only viable economy in their neighborhoods—the drug trade. To contain that problem and its attendant violence, he believes, the war on drugs has morphed into a war on the underclass. In both the viable and unviable America, Simon argues, capital is more valued than human lives, whether you're an expendable tout in a drug organization, a cop trying to put good police work over statistics, a stevedore trying to pull in a full week of union wages, a teacher trying to educate rather than teach to the test, or, as the new season of *The Wire* argues, a reporter trying to capture the complexity of urban life rather than haul in sound bites.

In March 1995, Simon finished his work on *The Corner* and returned to the *Sun*. He began writing narratives from the point of view of his subjects, judging his own work on whether a subject would recognize the truth of his life on the page. "I admire journalism where I actually see a nuanced world with complex human beings captured," Simon says. Journalism, he thinks, should bring "real life and real issues through the keyhole" in a way that leads to "meaningful thought, if not action."

But Simon wouldn't achieve his ideal at the *Sun*. In May 1995, Times Mirror installed former General Mills executive Mark Willes as CEO. When Times Mirror bought the *Sun* in 1986, the chain was regarded as fairly benign, but when the "Cereal Killer," as Willes came to be known, gave a speech to reporters on Calvert Street "about product and product share," Simon lost hope. "We sat there listening, thinking, 'Is this guy going to mention the elemental public trust?'"

To Simon, the indifferent logic of Wall Street has poisoned the relationship between newspapers and their cities. Simon says he only sees two fixes: some kind of quasi-public business model, and some new way for newspapers to charge for all the content they deliver free on the Internet. But then he adds one more: "Third would be that nobody thinks about winning a prize until December 1. Because if that thought is in your head prior to the end of the year, about what you need to do to win a prize, you're an asshole, and you're part of the problem."

What he sees as a prize mentality is what ultimately drove Simon from the *Sun*. To him, the institution was being corrupted from within as well as without. Although Simon considers John Carroll's 2005 stand against corporate cutbacks at the *Los Angeles Times* to have been noble, the Carroll-Marimow reign at the *Sun* had increasingly enraged him. Simon saw their approach as a formula for winning Pulitzer Prizes: "Surround a simple outrage, overreport it, claim credit for breaking it, make sure you find a villain, then claim you effected change as a result of your coverage. Do it in a five-part series, and make sure you get 'the Baltimore *Sun* has learned' in the second graph."

Simon believes that approach is reductive, giving complex problems the illusion of simplicity. Just six months after returning from book leave, Simon packed his bags, having

absorbed what he calls his “rule for the new millennium”: any institution will eventually betray those who serve it and those it is meant to serve. He definitely included Carroll and Marimow’s prize-winning *Sun*. He used the word “venal.”

One Layer Down

I highly advise that you never get between David Simon and John Carroll or Bill Marimow. Rafael Alvarez, a friend of Simon’s who wrote for *The Wire* and worked with him at the *Sun*, told me that exploring this difference—separating “the business end from the personal end,” as he said—would be exceedingly hard because the two are intertwined. “It’s like asking people about a divorce,” he said. “It’s very complicated.”

Carroll and Marimow are two of the most highly regarded journalists in the country. The *Sun*’s bold reporting and lively storytelling won praise from this very magazine in the late 1990s. Marimow won a Pulitzer as a reporter in Philly and his reporting led to another for the paper, and the *Los Angeles Times* won thirteen under Carroll’s leadership. If the possession of a Pulitzer means that one exemplifies the ideals of the profession, Simon is basically criticizing the entire world of newspapering.

He doesn’t always deliver that criticism with a light touch. In April, a friend of mine was scheduled to participate in a storytelling series called “The Stoop” at a Baltimore arts organization called Creative Alliance, and it turned out that Simon was on the bill, too, so I went. The theme was “My Nemesis,” and after six fantastic tales, Simon stepped to the stage in an untucked black shirt and jeans. “My nemesis,” Simon said graciously, “is whoever asked me to follow that up.” Simon then set up his own story. He described himself as a grudge-holder nonpareil, motivated only by an egotistical need to prove to people that they were wrong and he was right. “So naturally,” he said, “the place I needed to be was in journalism.” He was happy at the *Sun*, he told the full house, but then Marimow and Carroll came along.

Simon slammed their vision of journalism. He trashed the work they were most proud of, mocked their social graces, and dropped on them a generous payload of f-bombs. “Whenever they hear the word ‘Pulitzer,’ they become tumescent,” he said. Naming a nasty fourth season *Wire* character “Marimow” wasn’t enough, so Simon cast one-dimensional caricatures of Carroll and Marimow for the fifth season just to put a finger in their eyes.

The twist in the story, in Simon’s telling, is that when he heard about Carroll’s heroic stand at the *Los Angeles Times* and about Marimow’s recent bout with prostate cancer, he felt bad. And then, when his actors started filling out the characters as real, complex human beings, he realized his own smallness and pettiness. Good storytelling dictated that the season would have to fully develop the characters and confront the bigger issues currently facing journalism, not just irritate his old “asshole bosses.”

When I brought up this Creative Alliance tale with Simon, he distanced himself from it, taking pains to insist that *The Wire* is not a *roman à clef*. The Stoop story was full of hyperbole, he said; he had wanted to spin an outlandish story to help raise money for the nonprofit. “You caught me at a point

at which I was really trying to be entertaining, and I hope that story came across as genuinely self-effacing,” he said. “It’s not as personal as I made it.”

After I interviewed Simon, I called John Carroll, hoping to get past any simplistic animosity and discover the more complex roots of their disagreement. Carroll was reluctant, but finally agreed to meet and requested that I send him stories Simon had used as examples of their differing journalistic approaches before we met. Marimow also agreed to talk as long as I read several *Sun* stories from the late 1990s.

Carroll has a face that belongs on a coin and a genteel, yet casual manner. I met him in late September at his Lexington, Kentucky, home. When I arrived, we chatted over coffee about a book he’s writing and his joy at returning to reporting after decades of editing. Then we went out to the back patio, where we spent several hours talking in nearly perfect weather about his career and his approach to journalism. A couple hours in, Carroll said, “I got from the *Sun* that humorous broadcast about how bad Bill and I were.” The Creative Alliance had been streaming an audio version of Simon’s story online for months, but Carroll only discovered it in the twenty-four hours since I had flown out of Baltimore after an interview with the *Sun*’s editors. In that small window of time, a flurry of activity had started. “I forwarded that to Marimow, by the way,” Carroll said. After the audio started floating around the newspaper world, e-mails to Carroll followed. A *Los Angeles Times* colleague wrote, “I’ve heard through the grapevine that there is a possibility of your being subjected to unjust criticism.” One of Marimow’s editors at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* sent a passionate two-pager: “There are legions of journalists—legions—who will stand up, speak the truth, and take this guy on.... It’s as Martin Luther King put it, the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.”

I suggested to Carroll that perhaps some of the contentiousness surrounding Simon’s departure could be explained by Alvarez’s divorce analogy, and I said I was trying to find a legitimate, substantive difference underneath. But the way Carroll saw it, Simon’s beef with his stewardship of the *Sun* was only one in a long trail of burned bridges. “Where has he ever worked that he didn’t rage at?” Carroll said. “University of Maryland? I talked with the dean yesterday.” While at *The Diamondback*, Simon had apparently talked trash about the school’s president. And now, Simon is “not speaking to the *Sun*, or at least some of them. I’ve got something on that,” Carroll said, handing me a faxed copy of an indignant, six-page letter Simon had written to the *Sun*’s public editor in August that began, “ALL THAT FOLLOWS IS NOT FOR PUBLICATION.”

Carroll seemed unfazed by Simon’s zingers at him in the Stoop story, but the comments about Marimow went too far for him. “Simon has a credible point of view about American society,” he said. “But he also, I think, has a need to hate. And I just think it’s unfair to Bill Marimow, who deserves it less than anyone I can think of.”

A few days later, I visited Marimow at the *Inquirer*, where he recently returned as the top editor. He hotly defended Carroll as a gentleman and a stellar journalist. “He owes

John an apology,” Marimow said. “He really does.” Marimow didn’t find the Stoop story self-effacing. “At the end,” Marimow said, “where he says, ‘Well I really feel sorry for Bill because he had prostate cancer, and I don’t want him to die’.... To me all that stuff is utter, unmitigated bullshit. It’s cowardly, it’s dishonorable, and it’s nettlesome. I’d never say that about anybody.”

I passed along Simon’s assurance that he had exaggerated and that the show is fictional, and Marimow suggested I talk to Mike Leary, a new managing editor at the *Inquirer* who had just left the *Sun*. Leary, he said, was in the room with Simon when he had negotiated with the *Sun* for rights to the name and facilities. Leary told me that in those conversations, Simon disclosed that the upcoming season would indeed feature characters based on Carroll and Marimow. “

Many other former colleagues of Carroll and Marimow—including admirers of Simon’s work—went on background to warn me of Simon’s bitterness. One former *Sun* editor praised Marimow and Carroll and then warned me: “You don’t want your name on a story you’re going to regret five years from now.”

In October, I met again with Simon at a coffee shop in Manhattan. Regarding the portrayal of former colleagues in *The Wire*, he said he is entitled to make fiction from his own memories. The show, he says, is allegorical, meant to address all American cities, not just Baltimore, and the journalism industry as a whole. And Simon claims the upcoming season will show a great affection for his craft and his alma mater. He cast about twenty *Sun* alums in small parts, and the first episode will simply be a validation of the craft: the city editor—the “conscience” of the newsroom for this season, says Simon—pounces on a good story and gets it in the paper. He said 70 percent of the underlying criticism will be about downsizing. It won’t, he said, be “fighting some forlorn battle over shit that happened in the newsroom fifteen years ago.”

Simon disparaged Carroll’s and Marimow’s “ad hominem” attacks on him in the press and pulled out a copy of *The New Yorker* that had come out the day before. There was an 11,000-word profile of Simon in the issue, and he flipped through to find two quotes. In the first, Marimow says Simon’s “obsession” with Carroll’s regime is “as monomaniacal as Captain Ahab.” In the second, Carroll says Simon disdains anyone else who succeeds at police reporting. It was a psychological issue, Carroll said, and he pointed to the scoreboard: “Bill Marimow won two Pulitzers as a police reporter; David won zero.” As Simon sees it, Carroll and Marimow refuse to debate him on the substance and resort to bunk psychoanalysis.

“The things they valued in journalism—management, not my colleagues—I do not value,” Simon says. “The things I valued in journalism, they did not have regard for.”

Two Layers Down

For Simon, this dispute basically comes down to the complexity of urban problems. As he sees it, the “Philly model,” imported to the *Sun* by Carroll and Marimow, ignored the decades of economic, racial, political, and social disconnects underlying that complexity. When it spurred reform, it was

reform that could not match the intransigence of the underlying patterns. The reporting itself was formidable, Simon says, but to him, homelessness, addiction, and violence aren’t the central problems. “Those are all the symptoms of the problem,” he says. “You can carve off a symptom and talk about how bad drugs are, and you can blame the police department for fucking up the drug war, but that’s kind of like coming up to a house hit by a hurricane and making a lot of voluminous notes about the fact that some roof tiles are off.”

As an example, he cited a 1994 *Sun* story about an alcoholic whose “enthralment with dope and booze...brought him Social Security disability checks for ‘chronic alcoholism.’” The article noted that Social Security was doling out over \$1 billion a year to 200,000 addicts and alcoholics, and it was published during the push for reform that eventually spurred President Clinton to “end welfare as we know it” in 1996 with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Simon said the *Sun* story was simplistic; it had a villain, fraud, and the possibility of reform. “A lot of people were getting SSI [Supplemental Security Income] checks and maybe weren’t truly disabled,” he said. “That’s a nice, tasty little thing you can bite off and win a prize with.”

Social Security eventually proposed a \$300 million plan to purge the Supplemental Security Income rolls of those using their checks, as the *Sun* put it in a follow-up article, to “drink and drug themselves to death at taxpayers’ expense.” That article did note the irony that the plan’s funding could have bought a year of residential treatment for 15,000 addicts. But Simon still felt it lacked enough context of mid-1990s welfare reform. He pointed out that as state social workers watched traditional welfare being pared down in those days, they began deliberately pushing welfare recipients onto the disability rolls out of concern for their...well, their welfare. Simon said that without an SSI check, many people would have been starving, disability or not. He wanted to see the *Sun* address the wider context of welfare reform, to capture how it was “landing in the street,” to show who was falling between the cracks as the safety net was redesigned. The *Sun*, Simon believed, had written a simplistic story: “Nobody’s minding the store at SSI.”

“One story is small, self-contained, and has good guys and bad guys,” Simon said. “The other one is about where we are and where we’re going as an urban society and who’s being left behind, and it’s harder to report.”

Part of the problem with stories like this, Simon says, is the *Sun* had killed off its poverty beat in the early 1990s. (Several former *Sun* reporters brought this up independent of Simon.) To write intelligently about the complexity of urban society, Simon said, reporters need to know not only their beat inside and out, but possess an awareness of social and economic trends “over years, if not decades.” When new reporters take on a story like this, Simon said, they are not “constrained by history.”

The crucible moment for Simon was a disagreement over “The Metal Men,” a story that followed two addicts as they scavenged the city for piping, roofing—anything, really—to sell to scrap-metal yards that were all too willing to look the other way. It was exactly where Simon was going: tying an

intimate portrait of desperate people in a blighted neighborhood to the same economic system that propels the rest of us along so smoothly. Here's how the story ends:

Grant them, at least, some small due for creating wealth by destroying wealth, for going beyond the stereotype that says a dope fiend stands on a corner all day, scratching and nodding. Hard work doesn't scare a metal man.

"Sometimes," says Gary, "getting high is the toughest job there is."

Simon claims that Carroll spiked the story. Jan Winburn, an editor Carroll had recruited to improve the paper's narrative journalism, says she convinced Carroll to print the piece, and it ran on the front of the Sunday magazine. But Simon had reached a breaking point. Since returning from book leave, Simon had grown increasingly alienated. At the wine-and-dine "salons" management had convened to discuss how to "make the *Sun* great," Simon says he was appalled to hear reporters trashed by name. He had been rejected when he proposed a series on race. He also thought his book reporting made him more valuable to the paper, and that he deserved a higher raise than what Marimow was offering (he insists it was not about the money but recognition). There was a buy-out on the table, and he had a standing offer for work on the television adaptation of *Homicide*. He took the buyout.

John Carroll remembers things differently, though not as clearly—he hasn't been thinking about David Simon as much as David Simon has been thinking about him. First, regarding the SSI story, Carroll says fraud is fraud. He didn't want to see every pathology in American society squeezed into one story, and he thinks a newspaper should write about fraud upon learning of it. "In my mind," he said, "if you want to have public support for government social programs, those programs have to do what they say they're for.... You'll end up with fewer social-service programs if you take the attitude that they're just there to be ripped off for a higher purpose."

"The Metal Men" was symptomatic to Carroll, too, but in a different way than for Simon. Carroll had found it to be too similar to the reporting Simon was doing for *The Corner* at a time when he felt too many *Sun* reporters were using the newspaper as a base for their book-writing careers. "When you're in a downsizing business," Carroll said, "you have to make some pretty tough decisions in favor of people there everyday knocking themselves out for the paper." (Simon vehemently protested this, saying he did original reporting with mostly newfound sources.) Carroll also doesn't remember spiking "The Metal Men." "If I did," he said, "maybe I provided the antidote by hiring Jan Winburn." Landing on the front of the Sunday magazine, he said, must have been a vote of confidence.

But Bill Marimow thought "The Metal Men" ennobled the thieves who were stripping the city of its infrastructure, regardless of whether the subjects recognized the truth of their lives on the page. And when I went to see him in his glass-walled office at the *Inquirer*, he gave me a stack of stories that demonstrated his passion for urban issues. All had resulted in reforms, he said, that bettered the lives of the very people David Simon reported on with such zeal: a

deeply reported chronicle of cops indiscriminately unleashing poorly trained K-9 dogs on unarmed blacks; an exposé of a judge moonlighting as a slumlord; coverage of fifty-two children dying "needlessly" because of the failure of Philadelphia's Department of Human Services.

Marimow felt he was covering not only the symptoms, but the roots of urban problems. A story about students assaulting teachers was followed by a story about the failure of a special-education program. That article suggested that the assaulted teachers had been at risk because many of the attackers had previously been mishandled by special-education programs and then sent into regular classrooms. "This has nothing to do with Pulitzer Prizes," Marimow said. "It has everything to do with: my wife's a teacher, I'm hypersensitive to this, and I wanted to transcend symptoms to causes and solutions."

Carroll felt he had addressed the complexity as well. A Pulitzer-winning *Los Angeles Times* story about problems at

'Let's pick one thing, and hammer the living hell out of it.'

—John Carroll

a hospital serving a black neighborhood addressed the subtle racial dynamics that held the city's leadership back from demanding improvements. According to the article, the hospital was literally killing patients. But because it was staffed with many black doctors and had been the pride of black Los Angeles since just after the Watts riots, it could not be criticized; it had become a third rail to both white and black leaders. The *Los Angeles Times* stepped on that rail, and Carroll believes it saved lives. Carroll also handed me "Enrique's Journey," a gripping narrative of a Honduran boy who endured countless bitter hardships to rejoin his mother in America. Here, Carroll argued, was a disproportionate amount of a newspaper's resources spent to penetrate the story of an impoverished part of America that few of us understand.

You might argue—especially if you're David Simon—that there are broader economic and social forces at work in all these stories, that black hospitals in many cities will continue to have problems, that poor children will continue to die needlessly, that immigrant families will continue to be fractured. And this is where the difference emerges between Simon's broad sociological approach and the rifle-shot approach taken by Carroll and Marimow, and rewarded all over the country by the Pulitzer board: the latter approach demonstrably affects—possibly even saves—individual lives.

"I don't think a paper can necessarily take on all the complex issues that go into blighted neighborhoods and blighted lives," Carroll says. "To try to do every factor, you'll dissipate your energy and not really give attention to any one factor."

Carroll offered the school system as an example. There could be fifty topics worth writing about, he says, such as unions protecting bad teachers, wasteful bureaucracy at the board of education, and unsafe schools. "If you do all fifty," he says, "you won't do anything well enough to have an impact."

At the *Sun*, Carroll and Marimow took on education, asking themselves what the real vital sign of a school system is. When they read that children rarely catch up if they don't learn to read by third grade, they started a series called "Reading by 9." "We'll continue to try and cover everything," Carroll said. "But let's pick one thing and hammer the living hell out of it." The spotlight was unrelenting: the paper regularly posted reading scores for every school in the city, and there were dozens of articles over several years.

This isn't to say Carroll doesn't support Simon's vision of journalism. "I admire that kind of reporting," he says, "telling what's going on in these areas by going there and dealing with the full complexity of it.... But you've got to be really good at telling it." Without the talent, he argues, you can't tackle that kind of reporting, and that kind of talent "doesn't grow on trees."

"I know it's a monumental economic and moral issue," he says of the underclass and increasing inequality. "But what is the solution? I don't know. I myself would be very happy to pay more in taxes even though I pay a lot. To do my share to make it a country in which everyone has insurance, an opportunity for a job, everyone has the right to a living wage.... I agree with his cause, basically. I think he's a bit of a head case, but he's smart, creative, and on the subject of race and class in America, he's on the side of the angels."

But Carroll insists that it's worth it to push harder on more discrete issues. "I don't doubt that thousands of children learned to read because of that unwavering spotlight," Carroll says. "Did it solve the problem of inadequate schools, poverty, racism, or other issues that are so intractable in the city? No. But it did some good for some people."

How Wide an Angle?

Simon does raise an interesting question about results-driven investigative journalism. It certainly improves the lives of some people, but reforms are often short-lived, the underlying patterns unyielding. Reform, in fact, is the theme of the third season of *The Wire*. In the main plotline, a renegade police major, tired of watching mass arrests make no perceptible impact on violent crime, secretly tries to legalize drugs in his district. He sets up three spots in the city where the police would not interfere with the sale or use of drugs, and violent crime goes down. Word of the plan leaks to reporters and politicians, who inevitably pounce on the controversy for their own good. When the police brass find out, the disgraced major goes out on a lieutenant's pension.

The on-screen epigraph from the first episode of the season, a line taken from a street-level drug dealer, says it all: "Don't matter how many times you get burnt, you just keep doin' the same." The episode opens with Baltimore's mayor standing with his hand on a pump that, when depressed, will trigger the demolition of a high-rise building that had been a violent, drug-infested housing project. He proudly

announces the construction of new low- and middle-income townhouses, then depresses the pump. The building comes down, and the dust escapes the established perimeter, slowly engulfing the surprised faces of all the politicians and glad-handers in attendance. The scene was unsubtle by Simon's standards, but it was his marquee message: obsess over the smaller problems, and the bigger problems will blow right back in your face.

Will the thousands of additional children who learned to read in Baltimore after the "Reading by 9" series thrive into adulthood? The spotlight was on the schools, but much of what determines success in learning to read is learned at home before kindergarten. Once children get to school, well over half of the variance in their achievement scores is attributable to factors outside the schools. Perhaps 15 or 20 percent is attributable to teachers. And overall early gains by disadvantaged children often disappear by high school. (Coincidentally, in *The Wire*'s final season, this very fact will hamper a mayor's effort to reform elementary schools.) Ought the spotlight shine on the extracurricular socioeconomic factors that interfere with learning?

A spotlight beamed higher and wider, however, may not effect any appreciable change. Is it a greater virtue to confront deeper truths about where our country is going and how successful we are at living up to the American ideal of equal opportunity than it is to improve individual lives? Should we keep doin' the same, no matter how many times we get burnt?

Lynda Robinson, Simon's colleague at the *Sun*, now an editor at *The Washington Post Magazine*, says that he was on the right track before he left nonfiction. The combination of systemic analysis and narrative, she says, is the highest form of journalism, and she cites reporters like Katherine Boo as examples of the "investigative-narrative" style. "You come out of it not just understanding why the system isn't working, but caring and understanding the lives of people affected by it," Robinson said. Jan Winburn, who is now delighted to have the title of narrative editor at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, also mentions Boo's work as a model. "Ironically," she says, "a criticism of narrative is that you paint a picture of what's happening, but don't get at the root cause or explore the policy that causes that problem. The great reporters are bringing those two things together."

Simon was careful not to hold up one or two examples as a model for his vision of journalism, saying more generally that he'd like to see "problems and people portrayed in all of their complexity and contrariness." He feels reporters who want to understand the context of urban stories should read books that capture the complexity of social forces, such as Nicholas Lemann's *The Promised Land* and William Julius Wilson's *When Work Disappears*. Wilson's tract, in fact, surveys the last forty years of media coverage of the underclass and convincingly laments its increasing focus on the "culture of poverty" at the expense of structural explanations.

At a 2006 Columbia Journalism School panel on "the crisis of boys," economist Marcellus Andrews painted a picture similar to Simon's: social forces that are too strong for individuals to push back against; a lack of skills and education

that renders the underclass “redundant” as laborers; the only available jobs offering wages too low to support a family; schools providing an education too shoddy to enable the type of collective social mobility that could raise up a community; an illegitimate economy as the only solution for the underclass and an all-out war in response. “The ‘surplus male’ crisis shows up in the form of violence in streets,” Andrews said, and journalism fails to “show folks how they are pushed by unintentional forces.” He advised journalists to “give a sense of the hardness of this thing, a sense of the blood on the floor...so that when someone finishes reading the story they...will not succumb to simple-minded answers.” (At one point, I read a quote from Andrews to Simon—“the end of the American segregation system a half century ago put black people onto the blue-collar road to the middle class just when the on-ramp shut down”—and Simon perked up. “That’s it,” he said.)

Steve Luxenberg, who left his spot as the editor of the *Washington Post*’s Outlook section in February 2006 to write a book, knows something about deep inner-city reporting: he hired David Simon in 1983, and he edited “Rosa Lee’s Story,” Leon Dash’s immersion-reporting classic in *The Washington Post* in 1994. Luxenberg’s three decades as an editor—especially the generation that has passed since Dash’s epic story on the intergenerational transmission of poverty—have not made him sanguine about that type of reporting getting any more column inches.

Luxenberg said that newsroom priorities go through cycles. For instance, after Watergate and CIA abuses came to light, he said, “we talked with too much chest pounding about the public’s ‘right to know.’ That’s not a phrase you hear a heck of lot in newsrooms these days. I’m not saying newsrooms are bankrupt morally, but poverty is just not a discussion they’re having right now. Now it’s self-preservation.”

Triage

It is a bit of a false dichotomy to portray Simon’s vision of capturing complexity and Marimow’s and Carroll’s record of effecting change as competing philosophies. Ideally we would do both. But in an era of “self-preservation,” it’s getting harder to do either.

The real Baltimore *Sun*—on Calvert Street, not a soundstage—insists it is still trying to do both. In the downstairs lobby, pictures of H. L. Mencken and *Sun* founder A. S. Abell hang high on a wall with accompanying quotes. Abell chides visitors about partiality and the “common good,” while Mencken muses wistfully on what a lark reporting can be: “It is really the life of kings.” On a visit in September to see *Sun* editor Tim Franklin, his assistant, Rosie, found me in the lobby and cheerfully accompanied me up to the *Sun*’s buzzing newsroom. Franklin has an endearing midwestern affability and projects confidence straight across the room. He insisted his paper can do “quality” work with fewer resources.

“I want people to look at the *Sun* in ten years,” he said, “and say it did capture that snapshot of that time in the city’s history, that it chronicled lives in inner-city neighborhoods, and told stories through the eyes of people living it.” Franklin would consider the *Sun* a success if that happens. *Sun*

reporters such as Julie Bykowicz, Annie Linskey, Stephen Kiehl, and Gus Sentementes have done vivid street-level reporting. Fred Schulte and June Arney exposed a colonial-era ground rent law that was being used to take homes away from thousands of city homeowners. Eric Siegel captured the complexity of urban blight in a brilliant series called “A Neighborhood Abandoned.” An affecting narrative by reporter Liz Bowie and photojournalist Andre Chung followed two homeless teens through their entire senior year of high school and received a passionate reaction from all levels of Baltimore society. “Let me first start off by saying I don’t read the newspaper,” wrote a nineteen-year-old student to the *Sun* in an e-mail. “Reading this story...made me look at life different.”

But as dedicated as the *Sun*’s reporters are, walls are falling down around them. Since Tribune Company took over in 2000, the *Sun*’s newsroom staff has declined from approximately four hundred to three hundred. (The Poynter Institute estimates that 3,500 newsroom jobs have been cut across the country during that time.) The *Sun*’s local news-hole has shrunk.

In Simon’s eyes, “You do less with less and more with more,” he said. “That’s why they call it more.” When I brought up “A Neighborhood Abandoned,” Simon agreed that it was exemplary work, but then pointed out that writer Eric Siegel—a thirty-year *Sun* veteran and precisely the kind of reporter Simon believes newspapers need to hold on to—took the last buyout.

Simon is highly amused by an irony he perceives in the press’s reaction to corporations’ slashing of newsrooms: that newspaper editors are now making speeches about the same economic forces—the triumph of capital over labor—that the press has been ignoring in their own cities for years. “What they should have been covering is now biting them in the ass,” Simon said. “We’ll see it in season five: Guys, you’re a little late. It happened to you, and it happened to the entire working class.”

Simon, like Franklin, wants his portrayal of Baltimore to be judged against the future, but his idea of the future is darker. *The Wire*, he says, is about the decline of the American empire. It might have sprung from a journalistic impulse, but he says he has moved beyond simple reportage. “Consider it a big op-ed piece,” said Simon, “and consider it to be dissent. What I saw happen with the drug war, a series of political elections, and vague attempts at reform in Baltimore.... What I saw happen to the Port of Baltimore, and what I saw happen to the Baltimore *Sun*—I think it’s all of a piece.” Should his premonition of the American empire’s future—more gated communities and more of a police state—come to pass and were someone to say he didn’t know it was coming, Simon said, it will at least be possible to pull *The Wire* off the shelf and say, “Don’t say you didn’t know this was coming. Because they made a fucking TV show out of it.” **CJR**

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