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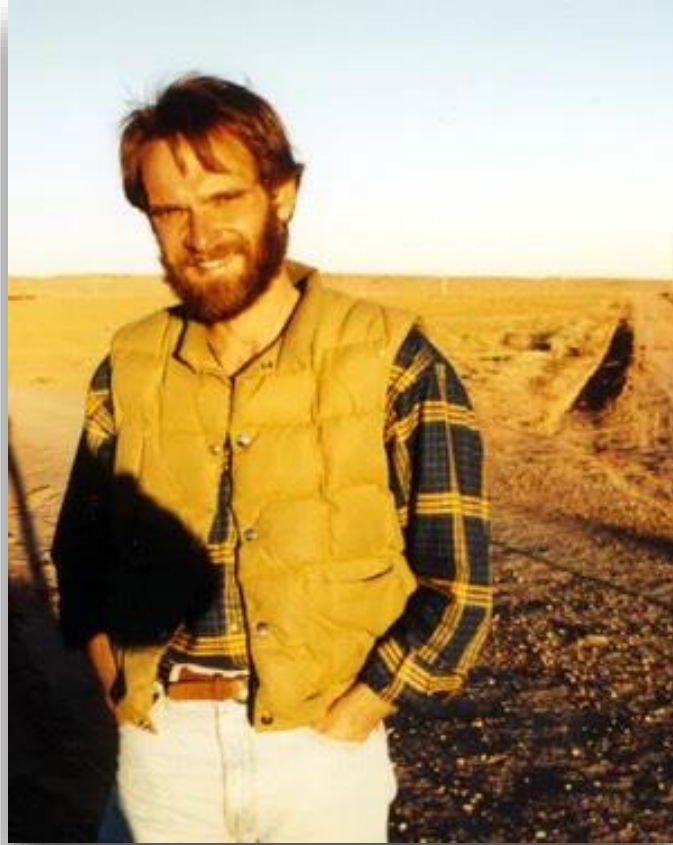
PROGETTO "PASSIONS:
RILIEVO INTERNAZIONALE"

INTERVISTE A PERSONALITÀ DI

Referente del progetto: Prof. F. MITRANO

Alice Bommarco
interviews

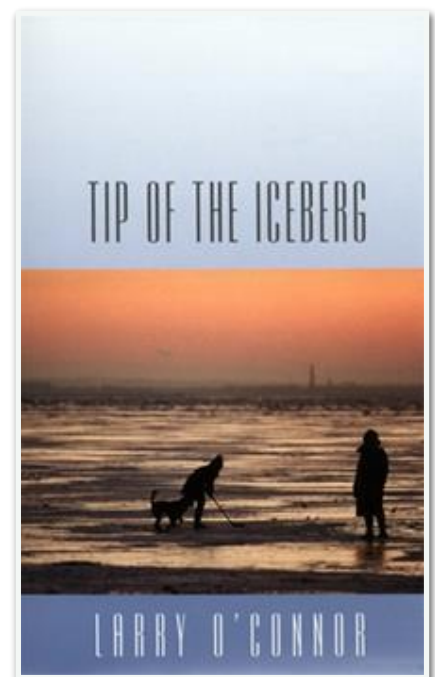
Larry O' Connor



In April 2021 I had the pleasure of interviewing Larry O'Connor, author, essayist and editor for the New York Post's Business section. Larry O'Connor was born in Owen Sound, a small city in Ontario, and, after travelling extensively around the world, in 1989 he moved to New York to pursue a career in journalism. He devotes his life to his work and his family, and this year he has accepted an editing position for the Opinion desk of the New York Times.

I had the opportunity to discuss with him his first book *The tip of the iceberg*, a memoir on his life related to the unknown story of his dad; this work presents also a parallel succession of stories about the far North and its myths, that lends depth to the narrative.

Larry and I talked about his profession and what it takes to pursue this type of career.



The *The tip of the Iceberg* is a memoir focused on your life, influenced by the unknown story of your dad. At the end, in the acknowledgements, you thank your family. What did they think about your book?

I read this book in a hometown bookstore, a lot of people came, because it was a sort of event in the a small town in Canada. I was reading this book, my parents were there and I was trying to read in such a way I can find material that was not difficult to read, I read not very well, I was nervous; and then I went back to my father and I said “What did you think?” and he looked at me and said “Do you have any idea about who came to this reading tonight? There was a doctor, a lawyer, a politician...”, he was so proud that he even didn’t care about the unpleasant things I may have written, it was a nice result.

When you read this book you can fall in a sort of stream of consciousness; it’s a very personal book. Had you ever thought about stopping and not publishing it?

I’ve never had the thought to not publish this book. They say “if you don’t offend your family or your country you’re not a real writer, you are not really going into the deepest parts of what you want to say” even though it was very personal and there were feelings involved, at one side I made the decision that it was a book that wasn’t at any end mean, that it was a book that ends with a boy understanding where his father comes from, and I understood that I could talk about it in that way. In this book there wasn’t the possibility of me being seen as a bad guy, but being seen as a sensitive writer.

I really loved the sections about your story and about Inuit myths; what kind of research did you do? Before this book, were you already interested in those types of legends?

I was already interested in Northern places. The job I really wanted to have was where Inuit are, in far North. I specialized in broadcast rather than newspapers; I started to work in newspaper but my training in college was in broadcast, and this was going to be a radio job up there. I didn’t get the job, but I’ve never stopped thinking about the far North, I dreamed of being up there. I think it’s true about Canadian writers, they dream about the north. For my researches I read everything I could; there’s a friend of mine, his name is Howard Norman, he is a writer about esquimo’s myths and legends, he was very influential too, because his book was the story of the original founding myths. I think that people don’t know these stories and, for me it felt very much like something to reflecting on my own.

Your book dwells on the motif of cold weather. To you, how much can the place and the environment where you grow influence your life?

I think I learned a lot in the researches of this book about some of my behaviors treats. My wife, who is Ukrainian and jewish and comes from Chicago, has connections with her family that are very different from the connections that I have with my family. In terms of my behavior I become aware of times when I was very silent, when I wasn’t in touch with my feelings. I wrote in the book that we are about interiority, the idea of the “inside ourself”, but that sounds like a good thing like meditation, you are going to be in charge, right?

I think of the Italian culture for example, that I love like jewish culture, but it terms of my culture it’s more like the American puritans, they don’t talk, I understand them, it’s where my ideas come from. When get out of that place I’m much more connected to people in the way you are in Italy or in Jewish.

You were born in Canada, and then you moved to New York, far from your family, a whole new reality. Were you scared? What did you expect from New York?

I was uncertain about what was the right thing to do, to leave everything behind (1989), because I didn’t have family or any professional connections when I moved to New York, I was a young man. The most important thing that I did in terms of feeling good about that move was in 1983-84, because I travelled the world; I took a bus across the United State, I went to Los Angeles and I got a plane, and I went to Daiquiri and south Pacific on my own. My parents would say that I was different than my siblings, from the earliest age I was the adventurer. After this great experience I came back to my life I think I was going to be that person, always look for something different, to break free. But I don’t leave behind, I think that home is something you carry with you. My parents are still alive, I call them every day.

The Gulf war (1990): in an article you wrote that you had never been in a country in a state of war until that year; how did you experience this historical moment?

When I wrote that article was the period in the Toronto Globe and Mail, at that time there was a lot of outrage in Canada. I was new at the United States, and I was very troubled, when you said before “are you scared about moving to New York?”, well I was probably more scared at that moment. I like politics so I remembered that there were politicians in the United States that voted for 1991 war, and I didn’t know who I could stand with, and my family felt in the same way. It was hard because I love my family and my work. There are times when I don’t love what my country does, so I have to find a way to make peace with that.

Oriana Fallaci in her book *An interview with history* said that journalism is an extraordinary and terrible privilege, it corrodes you from inside with complex of inadequacy. Every time you are afraid of not having enough eyes and enough ears when something happens. Do you agree with her?

It’s a difficult question to answer to, in particular during this week, because I started my new job in the New York Times. Just thinking about the people that I talked to during the orientation, I heard so many voices and opinions, and each one feels to me like it’s coming from they could have quoted Fallaci about what’s like to be a journalist, they could have in every time they spoke. I was so enchanted to be in that company. I believe that we are too small as humans to be able to get the full story, but that’s the task, and that’s what the best journalism is, and also what the best newspaper is, and New York Times has the reputation to do that, it worked a lot on that.

Is it difficult for a journalist to remain impartial when he writes about reality?

I’m gonna say, and that’s because I wanted to be a news paper person for a long time, a lot of people don’t grow up with the idea of what they’re going to be, but for me this work seemed right to me. There are a lot of people that I remember more. There was one man in particular we were really close to, I remember his comment about this question and he said that when you’re doing your work the only thing that you should have in your pocket is a library card so you can read a book because when you do your work and you’re thinking about the readers you don’t want to bring your personal and political feelings; and I like that Fallaci would feel the same way, you know that what you are doing is keeping in mind that your reader comes from every walk of life. My job is to be impartial and I think that I do the best I can to be professional and impartial.

If you should give three essential tips to be a journalist, what would you say? And why?

Three tips is an hard question. I think that task primarily comes from a personal place, it’s not that much about whether or not you find writing to be easy or that you may be somebody that isn’t actually a good writer. I think that the main thing is curiosity, and many people who I respect and men that asked me questions like this come from that place from the beginning; because curiosity is fundamental, like a baby who is never tired to learn, you have your child mind, everything is new and you have to find the way to get trough answers, curiosity is one thing that you have to the point that you won’t stop.

The other thing is: are you a person of faith? because I think of journalism had expressed public service has been something that you join in, that’s really important that you stay on the right side of, potentially now with social media, thanks to you can read anything you want about anything, but a journalist go further, they have faith in the truth, you can have any kind of religion faith but you have to have at some level of faith in the importance of truth.

Finally I would say: do you want a solitary life? Do you want to be in your own head as writer? I wrote a memoir and it’s not a work of journalism, so I think that’s really important question to ask for a young person trying to find what to do, and journalism is something in that you’re collaborating, you’re working with many people, you might be a solitary person and says “my ideas are right”; but good journalism is about 20 people getting together at one story and coming to the best possible result and you have to be a person who does it with the inside of your head, and think “I got all the answers” and you have to be the person who says “I need a team” to bring up the better product.

From the beginning of your career to these years a lot of things in the communication area have changed; what do you think about the use of social media to circulate information? Are they useful or dangerous?

I think they have limited usefulness. I think that social media can be dangerous, particularly women stories that are just breaking. There’s a lot of bad information and fake news, so that can lead to all kind of things

that we have seen, where evil goes into groups. In America the action of polarizing people beliefs is often based on half truth or lies or things that just promote somebody's agenda, and that's not good.

How do you imagine the profession of the journalist in a few years?

I think that's one of the things that I was interesting in in terms of what makes me excited, the kind of ways in which we can still have a passion for journalism in a way in which social media are all around.

I was surprised that one of the fastest growing area in the New York Times right now is podcast, so audio. When I was hired New York Times there were a lot of people like myself, editors, but the people they were bringing in were theater people, audio people, illustrators, visuals, experts in graphic. For example climate change, what the best journalism companies, like the New York Times, are doing is showing to people picture and video of animals, they show with graphic show the movements of species, and that makes a big impact.

I'm encouraged to think that journalism is moving toward bringing in really good things.

Do you love your job? If you could go back in time would you change it with another type of career?

No I have no regrets. I made a choice to a certain time to say I wanted to have job where I could write my personal things, the things that I'm inside of. When I travelled the world was very important I wanted to be inside myself and be very happy inside there. When you talk about collaborating and be a journalist, and being a successful and professional journalist you're giving up the personal more than I wanted to. So I want to work in the morning on my work and then to the newspaper work I devote the second part of the day.