

An Unauthorized Biography of the World:
Finding voice, making sense;
a book on oral history

Michael Riordon

We met on a dirt road in rural Alberta. The Greyhound let me off, and Robert – not his real name – arrived in his truck. I could hardly imagine a place more exposed, on a road that runs dead straight to the ends of the earth. “But at least out here,” Robert argued, “I can see who’s coming.”

I was gathering interviews for my second book, *Out Our Way*: gay & lesbian life in the country. When we made first contact Robert doubted that I’d find his story useful. “It’s nothing exceptional,” he said. “Still,” I replied as I usually do, “if you’re game, I’d like to hear it.”

Robert is a priest, the chaplain on an armed forces base about seventy miles from where we met, and he’s in the early stages of a sex change. This person could make history. Or, as he put it, “I could end up in that ditch there, with the shit kicked out of me. You never know.” And he didn’t think I’d find his story interesting.

In my work as an oral historian I often encounter people who doubt the value of their own stories. When we live long enough in silence, we can lose our voices. This is why I do much of the work I do, and it’s why I’m writing *An Unauthorized Biography of the World*, to help recover voices and stories that have gone missing, or been cut, from the official version.

Why me?

I grew up twice colonized, as a Canadian in the shadow of two empires – first the British, now the American – and as a gay boy/man. Not knowing any better, I swallowed whole the official version that I was fed: Canadians are nice, and we pander to imperial authority; homos are

perverts, sinful, criminal, and sick. I was a bad guy in my own story. Offered salvation through electric shock 'therapy,' I jumped at the chance. A few years later I came out, with an antipathy to electrical devices and a powerful need to tell my own story, in my own voice.

In the larger picture, I've come to believe that empires and tyrants hold power over us partly by their ability to command our attention. Backed by various forms of scripture, they overwhelm us with their stories and images, all majestically composed, and in time their version can easily seem more real, more compelling than our own. Well, not in my book.

As a writer, I've worked in a range of media – film and video, stage, radio plays and documentaries, books (three published) and articles. But regardless of the form, nearly all of it is driven by a passion to expand, amend or complicate the official version. I've recorded hundreds of conversations with, among others, Mozambican organic farmers, Bangladeshi feminists, traditional healers in Fiji, Guatemalan unionists, Metis uranium miners, and now a transsexual priest in rural Alberta. For me, each of these conversations adds another essential fragment to the evolving human story, our shared work in progress.

A few years ago a historian at Queen's University (Kingston, Ontario) invited me to speak at a graduate seminar – on oral history. Why me, I asked, I don't know anything about it. It's what you do, she replied. This was the first time anyone had so clearly named this consistent thread that runs through most of my work in the past two decades. Calling it a passion, she encouraged me to reflect on what it is that I actually do, and why, and to sort out the odd collection of skills I've developed to do it. That talk at Queen's led to others, and then to workshops and courses.

Now it leads to *An Unauthorized Biography of the World*.

The book

To weave this book I'll use the same person-to-person interview methods that the book describes; it will be, in a way, an oral history of oral history.

It will open with a look at the living roots of this work, the oral traditions of the First Nations, where stories are passed on that convey not only a people's history, but also its deepest values, its ways of seeing the world and being in it.

From this rich opening I'll search out a range of other situations where efforts to recover the past are having a significant impact in shaping the present. Examples:

In Newfoundland, poet/playwright Agnes Walsh makes theatre from the stories of outport folk (like herself) struggling to regain balance and meaning after the cod fishery collapsed.

In New York, Mercedes Caso documents the experience of undocumented Mexican-Americans who worked in the World Trade Centre; invisible before September 11/01, now they are ghosts.

In Hamilton, a fading steel-town in Ontario, tractor operator Ed Thomas – Fast Eddy Thomas, from his biker days – learned to read at thirty-seven, and now writes and publishes workers' oral history, in his spare time, at his own expense.

In Israel/Palestine, Israeli anthropologist Efrat Ben Ze'ev gathers stories of Palestinians forced to live three generations in exile in their own land. She's been called a spy by Palestinians, a traitor by Israelis.

In Cleveland, Ohio, Daniel Kerr interviews homeless people for his community radio program, to help support squatter actions and efforts by officials to criminalize people who are homeless.

In Peru, community organizer Diana Avila helps indigenous women prepare to tell their stories to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – under constant threat from military and paramilitary forces.

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An Unauthorized Biography of the World is a work-in-progress. I'm still searching, and would be happy to hear from people doing story-gathering work that fits the description I've tried to outline here.

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