

Media Bulletin

Interview with Andrew Don, author of 'Virtuality'

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Andrew Don, editorial director of Don's Hard News, launched award-winning magazine SalonFocus and has written for outlets such as Financial Times, The Sunday Telegraph, The Observer, The Publican, Retail World, Chemical News & Intelligence, Press Gazette and Retail Week (among many, many others) over the last 25 years. According to Don, "when we are able to achieve mental stillness, great creativity can be unleashed". So why not be still, and read on to find out about his latest book, 'Virtuality'...

About your book:

Tell us a bit about your new book 'Virtuality'...

Virtuality is a novella that tackles, through subtle suggestion, the subjects of post-traumatic stress disorder, explored through war correspondent Jack Connors both in reality and in Virtuality. The book takes the reader on an exploratory journey through the central character's psyche and, in turn, on a voyage of self-discovery. Jack's journey is facilitated by a one-time play computer game which transports him to his 'Soul Zone', a time and place in harmony with his very essence. In his 'Soul Zone', Jack falls in love and finds everything he every wanted. But when he is ejected from the game and has to face the reality of life once more Jack desperately searches for a way back to Virtuality. It is not long before Jack starts doubting whether Virtuality existed, and even his own sanity.

What was the initial inspiration for writing it?

I got the inspiration for this book when I had a slipped disc in my neck that impinged on a nerve root. I was in excruciating pain and had a series of spinal injections. I was watching a film called 'Ladies in Lavender' and found a beautiful and wild beach scene so evocative and peaceful that, for a moment, I had no pain. It was in that perfectly still moment that the idea for 'Virtuality' popped into my head. I think it is when we are able to achieve mental stillness that great creativity can be unleashed.

That is what happened with me. Scenes from nature often help me achieve that state. For me, it is a bit like word association. When I see something beautiful, other words, or ideas, are triggered that might seem random but have some kind of link, however tenuous, and soon a story unravels.

Do you have any advice for others out there who'd like to get a book published?

Believe in yourself and your book, but have the wisdom to know when you've written a duff'un; dust yourself down and start again. When a strong idea comes let it ferment for a bit. Should you seek an established publisher do not take rejection to heart. It may not be that your book is no good. Publishers and agents are inundated with manuscripts and yours is just one on the slush pile. It is just as much luck as it is talent that the agents or publishers take a shine to your work. All writers have known rejection and the best ones have the last laugh when someone eventually sees the merit in their creation. In this modern high-tech world another route is the world of self-published ebooks that can get writers on 'virtual' bookshelves globally. It is up to them to make the most of the marketing to generate sales. I have used both routes.

Are there any writers you look up to yourself?

Off the top of my head, Kaled Hosseini, for 'The Kite Runner' and 'A Thousand Splendid Suns', Terry Brooks for his mastery of plot, ability to turn out one epic story after the other and totally absorb me in his fantasy worlds, and Martin Gray, the holocaust-survivor author of 'For Those I loved' who made me really understand the enormity and monstrosity of the Holocaust years before 'Schindler's List' came along. Anne Rice's 'Taltos' trilogy is beautifully evocative and combines literary skill with one hell of a story.

Do you have any other book ideas you'd like to see published in the future?

Yes, I have a filing cabinet full of scraps of paper, newspaper cuttings and jottings of ideas. Working seven days a week, most of them from 4am, is not conducive to turning out regular books.

But when I retire and open my donkey sanctuary in the Yorkshire Dales my life will be dedicated to prolific writing...and donkeys, of course.

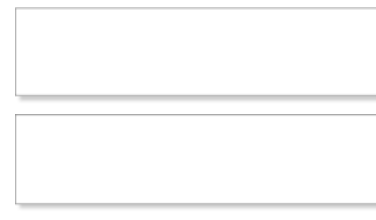
About your work:

How did you find time to complete 'Virtuality' while continuing to work on Don's Hard News?

At the time I did not work weekends – that only came about in July so I was able to make time then. Now, with the global economic situation so dire I have to put all my efforts into something that puts food on the table now, not tomorrow. There is a time for everything and the time I crave for my more creative endeavours will come soon enough.

Apart from writing this book, what have been your favourite writing assignments so far in your career?

I had a book published in 2005 by Bosun Publishing for the Stillbirth and Neo-natal Society called 'Fathers Feel Too' about the effect on men of losing a baby whether during pregnancy, at birth or soon after, which came from my own experience of this. It was writing this book that gave me semi-closure, although you never totally heal. I created a lot of my own publicity for this and I was particularly pleased with two full-page features I wrote for The Times on the book and the circumstances that led to it. I have also loved doing personal finance pieces for The Observer's Cash section – there was one time when I was doing these fairly frequently. I was also really pleased with two pieces I wrote on the appalling bureaucracy of the Statementing system for children with special needs – one for The Guardian and the other (a cover story) for The Independent's education supplement. But probably what gave me the greatest laugh in my career was coverage of Iceland Frozen Food's takeover of Bejam when I worked for Super Marketing, a once brilliant publication which is sadly no more. My late uncle, Laurence Don, was deputy editor of Bejam and when the Iceland board heard I had been seated on their table for an Institute of Director awards dinner the proverbial really hit the fan. Their PR explained that I was a journalist who had integrity and my



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the takeover of Bejam objectively, as you would expect. But it definitely has to be a highlight of my career because I still remember the horror that dawned on the Iceland directors when they thought I might be a spy in the camp.

What's your process when undertaking a new piece?

When it comes to my journalism the process is to fire off ideas and chase them up by phone. With everyone blitzed out by email, it can be a bit frustrating when no one gets back to you, but a phone call normally gets me a yes or no. I've always had great news-sense so am good at pitching an idea for a feature that has spun off from something topical – always much easier to sell.

Are there any other features, books or interviews you'd still love the chance to do?

I would give my right leg to interview Sir Bob Geldof. He's God. Sir Bob, if you're reading this...give us a call. Would love to interview Bill Clinton. I have a healthy disrespect for politicians but I'm full of admiration for the former US president for "not having relations with that woman". What a legend. I would have loved to have interviewed the late Sir Norman Wisdom. Ainslie Henderson, who appeared on the first series of Fame Academy in 2002 is a great character and singer-songwriter who should have had more than one hit single. I'd not only like to interview him, I'd like to be his pal.

About you and PRs:

Where do you source ideas for articles/features/etc?

My head, the day's news, tomorrow's news, life experience.

How can PRs be useful to you?

Answer the question and when I make a request on ResponseSource don't email me something that has nothing to do with what I'm writing about. The best PRs manage the needs of their clients without selling their souls.

How and when do you like them to get in touch?

I'm not prescriptive about this. What is more important is that you really do have a good idea. I really don't care if Cheryl Cole is using your hair product – no really, I don't.

Do you find press conferences, trips, parties and other events useful or an interruption?

I never go to these. I'm too busy making a living. My 4am starts mean early nights.

If you could make one change to the way PRs deal with you, what would it be?

Remember I'm freelance. You give me a good angle, I'll sell it. But if you send me a good idea for a story that you've already sent to the publications I plan to target, I look like an idiot.

About you:

What is the last film you watched/book you read?

I saw 'Meet Joe Black' again last weekend. One of my favourite all-time films that. Sir Anthony Hopkins is phenomenal. The last book I read was a self-help manual on time management. How I struggle, and Twitter doesn't help!

If you weren't working in journalism, what would you be doing now?

I would either be a full-time novelist and writer of screenplays, studying gorillas in Rwanda and working in a parrot sanctuary, ideally all three. Wildlife and nature are my life. In another life I'd come second in X Factor and go on to enjoy phenomenal success, riches and women (my wife's reading this over my shoulder and just poked me in the ribs).

If a film were made about your life, who would you choose to play you?

They are all dead I'm afraid: Brad Davis, star of Midnight Express, James Dean, or Sir Norman Wisdom. Mind you, with my 4am starts, my wife often tells me I look like a ghost... is anybody there?

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