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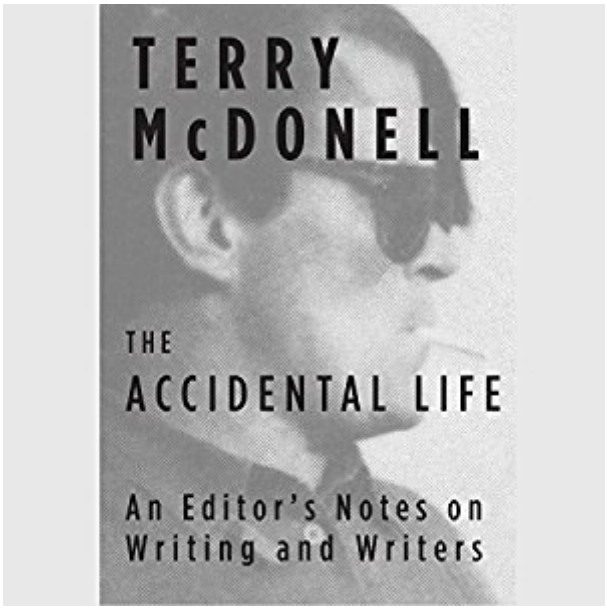
The Accidental Life: An Editor's Notes On Writing And Writers



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Synopsis

A celebration of the writing and editing life as well as a look behind the scenes at some of the most influential magazines in America (and the writers who made them what they are). You might not know Terry McDonell, but you certainly know his work. Among the magazines he has top-edited: Outside, Rolling Stone, Esquire, and Sports Illustrated. In this revealing memoir, McDonell talks about what really happens when editors and writers work with deadlines ticking (or drinks on the bar). His stories about the people and personalities he’s known are both heartbreaking and bitingly funny - playing "acid golf" with Hunter S. Thompson, practicing brinksmanship with David Carr and Steve Jobs, working the European fashion scene with Liz Tilberis, pitching TV pilots with Richard Price. Here, too, is an expert’s practical advice on how to recruit - and keep - high-profile talent; what makes a compelling lede; how to grow online traffic that translates into dollars; and how, in whatever format, on whatever platform, a good editor really works and what it takes to write well. Taking us from the raucous days of New Journalism to today’s digital landscape, McDonell argues that the need for clear storytelling from trustworthy news sources has never been stronger. Says Jeffrey Eugenides, "Every time I run into Terry, I think how great it would be to have dinner with him. Hear about the writers he’s known and edited over the years, what the magazine business was like back then, how it’s changed and where it’s going, inside info about Edward Abbey, Jim Harrison, Annie Proulx, old New York, and the swimsuit issue. That dinner is this book."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I enjoyed this book a lot for its nostalgic look back at the 1970s era of literature, with big names, big ideas and a literary celebrity and culture that's difficult to relate too. To Terry McDonell's credit, he was essentially a power-playing kingmaker during that era, who could make (and I assume break) the careers of many writers, and yet he comes across quite humble. This is not a memoir to settle old scores, or even look back with regret; it describes what it all added up too.The humbleness should not be surprising since an editor is supposed to remain in the background - but while McDonell doesn't really go into it here, I've noticed the LACK of editors in so much recent writing, and boy can you tell the difference when they're not there.I do wish there had been more focus on the editing process itself - not in a textbook style, maybe, but to give the reader a little bit more insight into his process. There's some of that - but a reader should be prepared for most of the focus to be at the people of that era: George Plimpton, Jim Harrison, Hunter Thompson and many others. These were Writers with a capital W. I'm trying to think of a good "Sunset Blvd" comparison for 2016 - "I'm still big - it was the words that got small." Which in this internet age, is not a big leap.Any reader with an interest in the writing culture is going to appreciate this book. Any fan of literary gossip will also like this book - to me, the most compelling chapter described a meeting with Steve Jobs, where Jobs was openly dismissive of regarding magazine publishers as true partners - he had all the power of access and deliverability and to him the content seemed irrelevant. I understand why Jobs would feel that way - that the technology (iPod, iPad, whatever) is more important than what you're watching/reading on it, but it does seem a very shallow way of looking at the world. And yet, whether Jobs is gone or not, that's the world we seem to live in - the content is not the point, but an entertaining distraction to fill empty minutes UNTIL the point, that a 10K longread is no different than "Angry Birds."Solid book on the writing life - good gift for any reader of magazines like Esquire or Rolling Stone who is interested in seeing the culture those magazines, for a time, existed in.

In Terry McDonell's "An Accidental Life," he takes us on a tour of the magazine business, writing, and lives of many, many writers and editors, covering several decades of his experiences at as many as thirteen magazines. I very much enjoyed reading about people like Hunter S. Thompson, George Plimpton, Peter Matthiesen, Tom McGuane, P.J. O'Rourke, Steve Jobs, Eugene Hemingway, and so many more - about their writing, their often tragic personal lives, and the drastic changes that the magazine industry has faced as technology evolved.Some subjects McDonell pursues in detail include the business aspect of writing (including approximate pay scales then and now;) more about style; designing magazine covers, choosing photographs, and writing headlines;

women’s magazines; the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issues and accusations of sexism; political pressures at various publishing companies; and some very heavy duty socializing.I found that somewhere in the middle of the book, the reading pace slowed down a bit, and I wished that there was more discussion of writing (four and a half stars!) however, the pace sped up considerably toward the last third or so, and I found the final ten or so chapters absolutely riveting.HIghly recommended to those interested in writing, these writers, and the evolution of the magazine industry over the last forty or so years.

The Accidental Life: An Editor’s Notes on Writing and Writers is a collection of essays from Terry McDonell that cover his four decades of work as an editor and the celebrity authors he worked with. From George Plimpton to Hunter S Thompson, it is fascinating to read these vignettes that offer a glimpse into the heyday of print journalism. I was concerned that this might be too technical - that the editing process itself would be the focus of McDonell’s musings but instead he lets his subjects - the writers themselves or those that were the subject of articles, such as Steve Jobs - carry the reader along on a fascinating journey behind the scenes of the work of some of the most prolific authors of our time. I especially liked the chapters on McDonell’s time at Sports Illustrated working with what I think are some of the best writers of my generation - Frank Deford, Rick Reilly and Tom Verducci.McDonell is more than just an editor - he is a talented storyteller with tales that anyone who appreciates literature will savor.

As a writer who had the good fortune to have Terry as my editor at Esquire, I can recommend this fine memoir for its insight into the magazine world of the 1960s thru the 1990s, as well as for the grace with which he profiles so many of the giants of an era now past. It would be hard to find so many fascinating, demanding, rebellious, crusading fine writers in America today, not because they don’t exist but because, by and large, magazines haven’t the pages or money to assign articles with style and intensity. Terry is himself a very fine writer and has been around the block a lot, and his own story mirrors the wonders and follies of a half century of American society, from the Vietnam War to the Hell’s Angels, from the madness of endless war to the craziness of the drug culture. This should be required reading at J schools everywhere.

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