LIVE from the NYPL presents "DEAD from the NYPL"

The Perverse Pleasures of Obituaries

ANN WROE, MARILYN JOHNSON, and DANIEL OKRENT

Instigated by Paul Holdengräber

October 27, 2008

Trustees Room

LIVE from the New York Public Library

www.nypl.org/live

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening. My name is Paul Holdengräber and I'm the director of LIVE from the New York Public Library. Tonight it is a pleasure to present to you "Dead from the New York Public Library." John Crutcher of Bloomberg Press, who is cosponsoring this evening, will provide you with a proper and timely introduction to tonight's event. John oversees the *Economist*'s book line in the U.S. and has helped make

dead come alive as a program tonight. I'm also grateful to the *Economist* for lending their hand—"the paper," as it is referred to—and I'm happy to know that the paper is thinking of helping us with a long life of LIVE events. A round of applause for the *Economist*.

(applause)

Also a round of applause to our fabulous wine sponsor, Oriel. They are a wonderful purveyor and distributor of fine wines. **(applause)** Aristophanes inspires them to sponsor us. He said back then, "quickly bring me a beaker of wine so that I may whet my mind and say something clever." **(laughter)** Join their e-mail list, please, so that they may offer you wonderful wines for lovers of fine conversation, so thank you to Oriel.

(applause)

Please stay on for the wine reception following the conversation as well as for the book signing. 192 Books is with us as always, a fabulous independent bookstore. We love them. **(applause)** Before the book signing and the drink, you are here to ask some hard questions about life and death to our distinguished guests, Ann Wroe, Marilyn Johnson, and Daniel Okrent. Questions, please, rather than rants. **(laughter)** A mic will be passed around. And now to introduce them properly, and the evening, ladies and gentlemen, John Crutcher.

JOHN CRUTCHER: It's a great pleasure to be here and Bloomberg Press is very happy to be cosponsoring this. This particular project has been the most fun I've had in publishing in some time and as we've sold *The Economist Book of Obituaries* into the marketplace, I always feel guilty about describing it as fun, but I think it is—obituaries are for many of us a guilty pleasure—they're an easy way to learn about people, to learn about a time. And many of them are indeed quite fun. Some of them are quite sad. They are of the famous, the infamous, and sometimes of the not well known, not so well known, who tell us a great deal about our times and times past.

We have a wonderful group of people, but first I want to talk a little bit very briefly about Paul. Paul Holdengräber, for anybody who hasn't been here before, and who didn't realize it when he just did that—Paul's a force of nature, and I quickly discovered that working with him and I think it is more than fair to say he is very, very good for books and ideas in New York City.

So I'll go alphabetically. Marilyn Johnson is the author of *The Dead Beat: Lost Souls, Lucky Stiffs, and the Perverse Pleasures of Obituaries*, published by Harper, quite successfully, I mayadd. She set off when she worked for *Life* Magazine, as she put it, she set off with tributes, Princess Diana. She did a special fifth-anniversary sendoff for Jackie O. and she's now working on a book about librarians, writing much of it and researching much of it right here in the New York Public Library.

Dan Okrent is clearly a man of many talents. He was the first public editor of the *New York Times*. He's the author, therefore, of *Public Editor #1*. His book *The Great Fortune: The Epic of Rockefeller Center* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in History, and if that wasn't enough, this really makes me feel guilty as a nonparticipant in life. He appeared in Woody Allen's *Sweet and Lowdown*, was a commentator in Ken Burns's documentary *Baseball* and is for many most famous for inventing rotisserie-league baseball. He's also collaborating with Ken Burns on a history of Prohibition where Dan will be writing the book and Ken will be doing the documentary and Dan will of course appear as part of the documentary.

Ann Wroe is the obituaries editor and briefing editor of the *Economist*, the paper, having previously been American editor and books and arts editors. She's cocreator, I would have called her coauthor, but there are a few other contributors to this—she also published *Economist Book of Obituaries*. She's by training a medievalist, which quite naturally and logically led her to work for the BBC. **(laughter)** In addition to her wonderful obituaries she writes in a longer form. She writes biographies, including last year's quite wonderful *Being Shelley*, and a book *Pontius Pilate: The Biography of an Invented Man*, there's a great subtitle—all of which are published by Random House in various divisions.

There's a wonderful line in Marilyn's *The Dead Beat*. It says: "Death is an unstable element. Will it loft somebody's reputation or pull the ripcord? Read the obit and find

out." Now let's bring our distinguished panel up here to talk about how obituaries are made—

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: When a good day for me begins by looking who died, in the morning I wake up and I see, online now mostly, but not only, who died and if a lot a people that I respect or people that I'm learning to discover through the obituary have died, I consider it a good day. It sounds vaguely perverse, but we will find out that perhaps it isn't, and that many people here in this audience share that passion. Going back home just recently, by home I mean to my parents' house—My father just turned ninety, sixty-five years of marriage and seventy years of continuous work. His greatest, I think, his greatest sense of self really comes from having worked now for seventy continuous years. The first thing he gave me when I arrived back in Brussels, where they live, is this wonderful obituary that now we know you wrote—because until recently, until the book was published, we wouldn't have, because the obituaries in the *Economist* are anonymous and it is a fantastic piece on Martin Tytell.

Martin Tytell, for all of you who don't know, I can't imagine many of you wouldn't know, but Martin Tytell was the last surgeon in New York of typewriters. He could fix any typewriter and there are wonderful, humane, extraordinary, and I even wore my cufflinks tonight, this one says Escape, **(laughter)** the wonderful profile you did of Martin Tytell and there's a wonderful notation in it of Ian Frazier, who comes to see

Martin Tytell about ten years ago because on his typewriter he is missing an umlaut and Martin Tytell produces a drawer filled with umlauts. Now why—why—I mean, you only have fifty-two dead people to choose from a year—

ANN WROE: Yes, it's true.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why did you choose—since it's once a week—why did you choose Martin Tytell?

ANN WROE: I couldn't resist Martin Tytell simply because I love typewriters and I love also the sense of ages that are passing and last representatives of an age or other. The idea that there was one last person in New York who could find that little bit for a typewriter ribbon, or could find a key for a typewriter, it was magical to me. Because I think obits are a chance to escape into completely different worlds, and different obsessions, if you like. The fact that this chap, as you say, Paul, had a drawer full of umlauts, and he had a shop which was filled from top to bottom with different fonts of alphabets the world over and this is fantastic stuff to me and I would rather have done him than any number of more famous people, I think, who'd died. Sometimes my choices are quite whimsical, if I can get away with it. Sometimes I can't. Ronald Reagan dies or someone and I don't have a choice. **(laughter)** But if I have one I will go for someone like that. It was just gorgeous to be able to bathe in nostalgia for typewriters. Daniel must feel the same.

DANIEL OKRENT: Well, first of all, I would like to say I'm not qualified to be here. I don't *write* obituaries, I *read* obituaries. I hope one day to be in one. **(laughter)** In fact, John's kind introduction mentioned at the end this matter with rotisserie league baseball, which is an embarrassment that I've been living with for almost thirty years and my wife argued that when I took my job at the *Times* as public editor it was so that that would be the lede of the obituary rather than rotisserie-league baseball. I don't think it's going to work.

I find what Ann says about Martin Tytell is very meaningful to me as a reader and as an appreciator of obituaries. The death confirms the life. Martin Tytell didn't exist for the readers of *The Economist* until you confirmed him with that. It reminds me of what a friend of ours said on the death of Kurt Cobain, she said that she was glad that he died because had he not died, she never would have known he had ever lived **(laughter)** and the lives that jump off the obituary page in the *Times*, which I've been reading the first thing I read everyday and I have been since I was teenager, are lives that have filled my life.

MARILYN JOHNSON: Can I also say that the idea that obituaries are uncool, that that's an uncool desk to be sitting at, is completely false. I think that's an impression that a lot of people have, but the editor of the obits page at the *Washington Post* was arguing this and saying that people were, you know, looking down their nose at him from the National Desk and he said, "They're covering the dog at the White House and I'm burying an era."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So in the introduction to the book of obituaries that has just come out, you mention that the *Economist* now considers the obituary pages among the liveliest.

ANN WROE: Yes, that is true. It's true that for many, many years the *Economist* didn't go near obituaries.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: A hundred and fifty years.

ANN WROE: A hundred and fifty years.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That's a lot of life—a hundred and fifty times fifty-two, that's seventy-five hundred people they didn't cover.

ANN WROE: That we missed, yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That's a lot of catching up.

ANN WROE: That's a lot of catching up, including Gladstone and God knows who. I think we felt in those early years that it was too much a page about personality and we rather shied away from that. But since then, there have been a number of pages about personalities introduced in the *Economist* and this was one of the best to do, I think, and

it's just turned out, an excellent Page 2 to bring in and there's now—I mean, far from being uncool, as Marilyn said, there's now kind of sometimes almost physical fighting to get to write an obituary. When Yeltsin died, I had five offers of all the people who had been Bureau Chief in Moscow, suddenly on the phone saying, "Yes, I want to do that one, please, please let me." And they are just such fun to write. They are in no way—Well, I won't say they aren't *ever* sad, they are if it's someone young or if it's someone you feel just hasn't fulfilled themselves, but most of the time this is a life that's full and it's the obit's as a celebration of it or an entertainment built round it in a way.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But most of the lives you cover in this particular book of obituaries are people who died rather old.

ANN WROE: That's true, yes.

DANIEL OKRENT: That's often the case.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It is. You make a good point.

DANIEL OKRENT: You were mentioning, Paul, about the hundred and fifty years of obituaries that the *Economist* did not run, and there's something real to that. When the *Times*—the great newspaper strike of 1963 and into I think part of 1964, a lot of people

died, but their death was never confirmed by the paper. And if you look at the—you can go online and see the first edition published at the end of the strike had three pages of two-paragraph obituaries, many of them of people who would have been two-column obituaries, and we have a friend, Ben Sonnenberg, Jr., whose father was a very important figure in New York, but he never really died because he died during the newspaper strike.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: When was the first obituary written?

MARILYN JOHNSON: Well, there's speculation that it was a notice nailed to the door of a pub during the Black Death.

DANIEL OKRENT: That's cheerful.

ANN WROE: And it was the obituary of the landlord or who was it?

MARILYN JOHNSON: It was somebody who, you know, sat on a barstool ordinarily but was not going to be occupying it again. I mean, I don't know. The—you know, in England, it came about—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Because one wouldn't imagine that the lives—that Plutarch's Lives are obituaries.

MARILYN JOHNSON: Or Lives of the Saints—I mean, those are obits in a way.

ANN WROE: In a sense they are, yes.

DANIEL OKRENT: The distinction between the obit and the tribute, I think, is a meaningful one. And in fact the English newspapers and the *Globe and Mail* in Toronto, it's a very, very different form from what we see in the *Times*.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What is the difference? Because ever since I—

ANN WROE: Respect or lack of it I think, sometimes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Respect or lack of it.

ANN WROE: Yes, I think there's a reverential tone about American obituaries.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why?

ANN WROE: I don't know why. I just know that at a certain point Britain's obituaries got cheeky **(laughter)** and they decided, you know, this business of never speaking ill of the dead was passé, and you had to feel free to speak of the dead—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Precisely.

ANN WROE: 1985—

MARILYN JOHNSON: 1986.

ANN WROE: I didn't know you could date it that precisely.

DANIEL OKRENT: There's also the matter that in American papers the illusion if not reality of objective journalism, of fairness, says you're not supposed to have opinions about the person, we simply put forward the facts of the person's life. On the other hand, I do think it's true that this is more and more the case at the *Times*. I know that Bruce Weber, the angel of death, is in the room, I don't know whether Bill Grimes is also—but what I think that what they've both been demonstrating in the *Times* is that it's an opportunity to be a writer, the way that most people who are covering straight news don't have the opportunity, so even though it may not be filled with the cheekiness and the insult, you do, I get a sense of what these people think about the person they're writing about because they're very good at it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Your book was going to be called *A Sparrow Flight*. Why?

ANN WROE: Yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's a marvelous story.

ANN WROE: Yes, this goes back to the story in the Venerable Bede about a sparrow flying through a banqueting hall, flying out of the dark through a lighted hall and then flying out of another window and this was a metaphor for human life. And I've often played around with this image, because I think the sparrow hasn't necessarily come in from the dark. The sparrow's possibly come in from the light and then gone to a murkier existence and then gone out and finds the light again. I mean, that's my personal philosophy, at any rate. And what is there in this dark hall, or this place the sparrow flies through just for a brief moment? I always feel there's some moment in the hall where the sparrow kind of realizes what it's there for, and that in every life there's a moment when the subject realizes what it's going to bring to the scene, and I think most of the obits I've done, I've found some little incident in the life or some theme that seems to illuminate the whole progression through earthly existence.

There's a moment, for example, Karlheinz Stockhausen, the composer, when I did his obituary I found out that when he was a child he used to carry a little hammer around in his pocket all the time and he'd knock things and he'd love hearing the reverberation they made and that went through all those years—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Or Luciano Pavarotti, the same—

ANN WROE: Yes, Pavarotti, the same, that there was a moment when he just suddenly jumped on the kitchen table and sang. He was about six years old and it's a wonderful

scene because his family all applauded him wildly for doing this and in that moment you could feel that he had decided, “right, performing is my life from now on.”

DANIEL OKRENT: I’m trying to imagine Pavarotti doing that at sixty.

(laughter)

ANN WROE: Yes, unfortunately for the table.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Trying to imagine that particular table.

DANIEL OKRENT: The obit would have been for the table if that happened.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, you know, I was very struck by that comment that comes again and again, about the *key*, the *moment* you look for and I want to address everybody on this very issue. Carlo—the great historian Carlo Ginzburg—talks about the crucial moments in one’s life, and this is what he says: “I’m skeptical about the teleological approach that sees sort of a straight line going from the childhood of an individual to his or her maturity. I may not be able to recognize the crucial elements in my life, so I’m not the best judge. If I think about my life and about my choices as a historian, the question I put to myself or in fact to anybody else is which choices were the crucial ones?” And so the question then becomes: Is the obituary writer the person who in

some way susses out, is able to discover, to imagine, to see, what was hidden for the life when lived?

ANN WROE: Gosh, I think that would be too presumptuous, to say that's what we do, but what I'd like to fix on is your idea of the straight line. I think it's interesting that if you would take a life from birth to death and just follow it straight through in chronological order, which some obituaries still do, I think that is not the way to capture a life at all. I think you do have to home in on certain points in it. There will be one or two incidents that will really illuminate the whole thing. I think it was Virginia Woolf who said that it might be possible to write a whole life out of one tiny incident, maybe even just two minutes, and I think that might be true. There is going to be some moment in a life that will suddenly make sense of the whole thing and you could extrapolate from that to bring in other elements in the life and I feel that's—it's important to get away from chronology.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Get away from chronology, Marilyn?

MARILYN JOHNSON: Yes, absolutely, the dreadful chronology, which drags down the marching facts, which weigh down so many obituaries and they're an important part of it. They're an important part of it not only for the people's family, for the genealogical—for the genealogical people who follow and for the historic record but in terms of a read, in terms of a narrative, they really get in the way. And there are some newspapers that have figured out how to—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The life gets in the way, you are saying?

ANN WROE: The facts get in the way—

MARILYN JOHNSON: The facts of the life, the train—

ANN WROE: The facts are not the life.

MARILYN JOHNSON: You know, the awards, you know, the years that they graduated from this place or that place. You know, those are things that you have to get through in order to get to the stories and to get the sense of the breathing, living person and that's what you're trying to do. You're really trying to bring someone back to life and if you don't get at that sense when you finish an obituary of "I know what the essence of that person was," if it's not breathing, then it has failed in some sense.

DANIEL OKRENT: I'm going to make a case for chronology. I wasn't intending to, but you set me up.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why not?

ANN WROE: Why not?

DANIEL OKRENT: Two cases. First, I find that the lives of the people that we know on the public stage, we no longer know them when they step off the public stage. I think this is particularly true of athletes and entertainers. You know the athlete from the time that he or she is twenty to forty perhaps, the entertainer to fifty to sixty. Well, what did Ginger Rogers do in the remaining thirty years of her life? And learning that is a really a reward. The public life we might know, but we don't know the life that comes after it. And then there are those lives that take these turns and where chronology suits them.

I won't read this entire obituary, but it's I think a model, it was written by Bob McFadden, the great, great rewrite man at the *Times*, about a man named Amory Bradford, who happened to be a general manager at the *Times*. He worked at the *Times* for many years. I will skip through and get to the key point. With that name, he was the direct descendent of the second governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, he was Andover, Yale, Yale Law School, Army intelligence, and he went to work at the *Times* and he was picked by the newspaper publishers to be their spokesman, their negotiator, during the great newspaper strike that I was speaking about before. And it talks about how, to get a sense of him, "the Publishers' Association chose Mr. Bradford as its point man in negotiations with Typographical Union Number Six and its president, Bertram A. Powers. They were natural enemies from the start. Mr. Powers, a high school dropout, was a tough, relentless negotiator, the embodiment of a gut fighter, up from the streets. Mr. Bradford, an Ivy League aristocrat, impeccably dressed, and six feet four inches tall, was accustomed to snapping orders at pliant subordinates. One top-level mediator said

that Mr. Bradford brought an attitude of such icy disdain into the conference rooms that the mediator often felt he ought to ask the hotel to send up more heat." **(laughter)**

Then so, he then, his career crashes after that at the *Times*, and he leaves, and he's a consultant to the Ford Foundation, he's an executive at the Scripps Howard newspapers, he has a job a the Commerce Department, he's one of the people in the early years of the Nixon administration who set up the Environmental Protection Agency and then we learn. "In later years, Mr. Bradford acknowledged having become a jobless alcoholic. He began psychiatric treatment, quit drinking, and radically changed his lifestyle. He began studying massage and psychotherapy at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California." **(laughter)** Wait. **(laughter)** "The last time he attended a reunion in the thousand islands with his fellow Yale Skull and Bones members one remembered Amory lounging in the nude while they sat on the beach in their trunks. In fact, he went nude for most of the day. From 1978 to 1982 Mr. Bradford lived in a van, traveling in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, occasionally revisiting Esalen. He practiced Gestalt therapy and he and his wife Laurene also taught massage. In recent years he had been writing his memoirs. In a statement he composed for his own obituary, he said that his 'final years were intensified by the practice of Siddha Yoga meditation, taught by Swami Muktanada, to whom he had been introduced by his daughter.'"

Now, wow, second acts. **(laughter)**

ANN WROE: That's a great second act.

DANIEL OKRENT: And this so easily could have been a very perfunctory, here's what he did in his public life, and that's what we mostly get, but going into the part of the private life that wasn't on stage is what makes it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why is it a model for you?

DANIEL OKRENT: Because of that, it takes me beyond what I might already know. I mean obviously, when I read the great obits of—was it a McG about the man who invented kitty litter, one of the great, great obits. I never knew that anyone ever invented kitty litter.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Someone had to.

(laughter)

MARILYN JOHNSON: Several did, actually.

DANIEL OKRENT: I thought it evolved **(laughter)** and so I knew nothing about this man so it was great to read that. But when I'm reading about a public figure, even a public figure whose life may be as small as Amory Bradford's, it's what I *don't* know—what is that aspect of personality and character and experience that we did not experience when he was on the front pages of the newspaper?

ANN WROE: I agree with that. It's a good point. I was thrilled to find out when I was doing Arthur Miller's obituary—and this was one that caused me great pain because I had to do so much reading in such a short time—but I found out that he was very fond of carpentry. When he wasn't writing plays, he was being a carpenter, and he was building rooms, houses, all sorts of things. But to my mind that was the key, actually to him was rather than the writing of plays—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Carpentry.

ANN WROE: —was the construction—because his plays are so wonderfully constructed, this is what strikes me about him and when you know that this is also a man who sort of fits joints together and looks at how, you know, wood fits at an angle into this and that, and what will support what, it throws a whole new light on the playwriting, so I was quite keen to spend at least a paragraph on the carpentry.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And also what you read strikes me as very significant and important and, Marilyn, you talk about this in your book, is the importance of humor, the importance of humor in the obituaries.

MARILYN JOHNSON: Well, the death is dispensed with in a phrase or a sentence, it really is not a huge part. It's the occasion of the obituary but it's not the content of the obituary, the substance of it. Except I will say that I read a lovely obit the other day in

which a woman's long decline in the hospital, the hospital room was called "her last salon," and it was very nice, but for the most part we do not deal with the death, and very little with the decline. The rest of it is *life*, the rest of it is humor, the rest of it is, you know, whatever makes up that life, sometimes it's tragedy, but it is so wonderful to be surprised on the obits page and that *is* a page where you are frequently surprised. You know the ending—it's always bad ending, bad ending, bad ending **(laughter)** and yet there is so much. I know people who read the obits page and whether they actually have a belly laugh or not, they put the page down and say "I feel alive now."

ANN WROE: Sure, it's not necessarily a bad ending. We don't know the ending.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, actually you deal with the ending nearly not at all, I noticed. You sometimes don't—I mean, it's a bad ending. The best line I remember about that comes from my mother. I was using talcum powder one day and my mother said to me, "you know, talcum powder's very bad for you, Pauly, you really shouldn't use it." And I said, "really, why?" And she breathed, and she looked at me and she realized that this was perhaps an overstatement, and she said, "You know, Paul, living is dangerous and the outcome is always fatal." **(laughter)** And it is true, I mean, but you in your obituaries what I noticed is that unlike the *Times* obituaries, or other papers, you seldom mention how people died or what caused them to pass into the next world.

ANN WROE: Only if it's something extraordinary or you know, some sudden death, someone too young.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You consider it not important.

ANN WROE: Not important at all, no.

MARILYN JOHNSON: It's British. That's the British bias. The British—they're disgusted by—they're disgusted when we put the details in the obits. No, I've heard this.

ANN WROE: I don't think it's disgusting, I just really don't think it's important, when you only have a thousand words, you don't want to spend it on—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So you don't think it's British, particularly.

ANN WROE: Not particularly. I think it might be me. We do get letters saying, "Why do you never say what people die of?"

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It was striking.

MARILYN JOHNSON: They're all from America.

(laughter)

ANN WROE: They are all from America, as it happens.

DANIEL OKRENT: This was an issue in my job as public editor, where people came to complain to me about everything. But "you're invading privacy to say why the person died." And then the contrary one, this was of course a much bigger issue in the eighties and the early nineties, when people died of whatever euphemism was for AIDS. It was reported it was pneumonia, it was complications of cancer, it was . . . And there was quite a bit of controversy in the journalism racket about "we're not telling the truth here if we know something else." When does that private portion of a person's life—does it stay private after the person dies if he or she does not want it there? Susan Sontag died when I was at the *Times* and very, very controversial because there was no mention of her survivors and she was believed to be, many people insisted so, to have been in a long-term relationship with a woman, a well-known woman, but the family wouldn't confirm it, so is that the *Times*'s job to tell you or not? People were offended that they did not.

ANN WROE: Marilyn, you were talking earlier about people's drinking problems and whether these were ever owned up to in obituaries.

MARILYN JOHNSON: And suicide is a problem, too. I've read obits that said, you know, "You know, we took her to treatment, we kept taking her to treatment, and it just never took." And it's fascinating to read that in an obit, because it's real as opposed to, you know, "convivial," and "always had the door open," **(laughter)** which they could have said for the very same person.

DANIEL OKRENT: Could we ask the guys who do this for a living what—Bruce, talk about what's the *Times*'s policy, or your personal policy on—

BRUCE WEBER: As far as I know, there is no policy, I think of it as the news reporting, mitigated by the fact if, you know, if the family is going to feel uneasy if we print it—I think there is no policy at the *Times*. I think it's almost always a question of if we can find out, we print it. If it is important to the—if the cause of death is somehow pertinent to the life, we'll make a greater effort. If there is some reason that the family doesn't want to tell me how the person died, what am I supposed to do? Reach through the phone and strang—threaten them with their own death? I mean, there's not—There isn't much I can do. I always ask and sometimes you can tell that they're kind of *formulating* the cause of death on the other end of the line. But there really isn't much you can do. You ask and if you get the information, you report it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The French philosopher Blaise Pascal once said that "no one dies so poor that he does not leave something behind." And I feel that your obituaries, the ones you have chosen to—the people you have selected for the pages of the *Economist* illustrate this quite well, whether it is Martin Tytell to some extent, but also the man who invented not—what was it?

ANN WROE: Kitty litter.

DANIEL OKRENT: Kitty litter.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Kitty litter.

DANIEL OKRENT: I love the way you say that.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You know, whenever you'd like me to say it.

(laughter)

DANIEL OKRENT: Please, please.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Kitty litter.

(laughter)

DANIEL OKRENT: The fellow in Philadelphia who writes obituaries.

MARILYN JOHNSON: Joe Nicholson.

DANIEL OKRENT: I think this is a great—why don't you talk about him a bit?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Talk about him. I'll come back to the noodles after that. But talk about Philadelphia before talking about noodles.

MARILYN JOHNSON: Well, a very interesting thing happened in the eighties in Philadelphia when the *Daily News*—one thing, when the Philadelphia *Daily News* decided they would start doing obituaries. Now the Philadelphia *Inquirer* had been doing obituaries for quite some time and they did a great job sending off the former mayors and the various celebrities. They decided, since they were the people's paper, that they were going to write obituaries of ordinary people and they got a man, Jim Nicholson, who had been a tremendous investigative reporter, and had been a bit down on his luck lately and he decided yes, indeed, this was a task that he would take on. He began by writing these long obits of people like a grandmother who had never held a job in her life and whose hobbies were playing poker and eating cereal. He would do a long obit about a plumber and include in it several—

ANN WROE: Not Joe!

(laughter)

MARILYN JOHNSON: But he made it interesting! He approached it as investigative reporter. He asked hundreds of questions, interviewed multiple people, and wrote it up like it was the most incredible drama. So you would finish reading this obit of a plumber and you would know how to unclog your toilet, **(laughter)** you would know something

about the hopes and dreams of this person, and you would have a real sense of them almost more as a character in a short story than as, you know, an ordinary newspaper reader and in fact that's what he talked about. He did this for nineteen years and he said, "I felt like I was burying the newspaper readers." Thank you, Paul.

ANN WROE: I think that's absolutely fantastic. I would love to write obits like that of ordinary people and the closest I can get to it is when someone suddenly dies who remembers some particular world and they're only remembered, they're famous because they've survived.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You do write about that—

ANN WROE: Yes, when I can, I do.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I mean, when you do—I mean, for instance, one of the most moving obituaries in this book is the obituary about Marie Smith; maybe you can say something about her. Because I think it was, it is a haunting obituary and it pays—and you say at one moment that you're particularly taken by paying tribute to the last survivor, the last witness, and in this particular case she was witness to what?

ANN WROE: Well, she was the last speaker of the Eyak language in Alaska, one of the Inuit languages, and the reason I was fascinated by her is simply that a language is a world and if you lose a language, every language you lose, you lose a worldview, a

particular way of looking at things, and so I wanted to find out about this language, really. I looked everywhere; it's almost impossible to find out anything about it. But I used every word I could find of the language. For example, there were thirty or forty different words for different bits of a spruce tree, and I thought no other person would have looked at a spruce tree quite like that. So I wanted to paint the whole landscape in as many words of this language as I could find.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And in that way there is a connection because the plumber is one form but you were in some way smuggling into that obituary words—in some way the obituary there was a form of saving, of saving the language from oblivion in some sense. In the thousand words you have—

ANN WROE: Yes, we must try and understand it. The person who didn't thank me for doing that was the woman who reads the audio *Economist* **(laughter)** when she found these completely incomprehensible, unpronounceable words, all full of glottal stops and things, and she had no idea how to proceed at all. But that was something I really did enjoy doing. Another one that I loved was the last cavalryman on the Western Front. Which to me was extraordinary. I mean, this was the last man who rode into battle as people had ridden into battle since Xenophon's day on horseback kind of right into the guns and it was amazing to me—this ordinary man who'd signed up when he was too young, because I find often, I've done two or three Great War survivors now. All of them joined up too young. And that makes me feel so—such an extraordinary sort of sadness for these people. We know what a ghastly war that was but for them it was release from a

humdrum job of some sort or other—they couldn't wait to get there. And we found photographs of them to illustrate the obituaries, smiling you know, as they signed up. And of course they lived to tell the tale but somehow they're spokesmen, they're eyes that remain from that whole generation. I find that very moving.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let's not forget noodles.

ANN WROE: Oh, noodles.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Because that's a very interesting common—

ANN WROE: Common thing. The noodle man, the Japanese inventor of the dry—the pot noodle. That was good fun to do.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That's why I was thinking of the litter kitty—

ANN WROE: Litter kitty!

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You know, because it's also, you wouldn't think that this been invented. But the way you tell that story and that man's disappointment up to that moment.

ANN WROE: It was very difficult to create pot noodle, apparently. You know, he went through many, many experiments—I mean, it's now such disgusting stuff, but it went through many iterations and almost more than the noodle man, I loved the man who had to invent—the first man who invented nondairy frozen topping. And I really wrote that obituary just because there was the greatest photograph in the world of this man. There were five of them, all with kind of 1950s slicked-back hair and suits, all standing round this bowl of frozen dairy topping with this gloop coming off a spoon. I loved that photograph so much. But this is all human endeavor, you know. I love the amount of time it takes people to make the perfect noodle or the perfect toping and the number of failures they have and they keep going. I mean, this is better for me than a great general or a great politician.

MARILYN JOHNSON: This is a better history of our times than almost anything you can think of.

ANN WROE: The politicians are dull much of the time.

DANIEL OKRENT: Russell Baker once wrote in his column on the editorial page he did really an obit for an actor I think his name was Jack Liu. He was Chinese American but was coming into his prime as an actor, at the right age, during and after World War II and he paid dying Japanese. He was committing harakiri or he was flying a kamikaze plane and he died in forty films.

ANN WROE: Oh, that's great.

DANIEL OKRENT: What a life.

ANN WROE: It's wonderful.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let's talk a little bit about timing and the different ways in which—obviously we can turn to some of the colleagues in your field to compare and contrast what they do and what you do and to what you have researched in your book so well. I was interested to read that the morgue as it is referred to at the *Economist* is rather empty. You only have seven or eight dead people waiting to die.

ANN WROE: Yes, that's true. By comparison, the *Daily Telegraph*, which is a provider of marvelous obits in Britain has eight hundred, almost, on the stocks and I'm sure the Times must have a thousand.

MARILYN JOHNSON: Fifteen hundred. Thirteen hundred.

ANN WROE: We have seven and one is Saddam Hussein who's somewhere, he's still there for some reason. **(laughter)** I think we were taken by surprise by Saddam Hussein.

DANIEL OKRENT: Marilyn and I worked together in the early and middle nineties. I was the editor of *Life* magazine and Marilyn wrote these tributes and at *Life* we specialized in death and we always four or five special issues ready to go of well-known and ideally beloved figures who had "entered the zone," as we called it so that when they died we would be able to say, "run the presses." One of them, and as the editor, it was my job to pick who they were. One I inherited was Bob Hope and then Bob Hope kept living.

ANN WROE: They always keep living. The morgue is a place you survive.

DANIEL OKRENT: His fans had all died by the time that he died, so he never got his special issue. But we tried to be get in advance.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But if we go back to this notion of what it means for you to write without that resource, you must approach your subject quite differently without the backing of so many possibilities from which you could easily choose. You—in some way, your choices are—perhaps made differently.

ANN WROE: They might be. You're flying by the seat of the pants a bit.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What does that mean in this case?

ANN WROE: I'd like to decide on an obit the Friday before, but as it turns out it's not until Monday morning that I can really confirm who I'm doing, so then there's sort of a frantic day and a half of actually—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Is that all the time you usually have?

ANN WROE: Yes, yeah.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So take us through how you get about doing a couple of obituaries in recent times. How did you go about, for instance, writing about for instance Martin Tytell, because you hadn't met him.

ANN WROE: No, I hadn't, no. I think I simply saw. I probably spotted it in the *Times* first of all, the *New York Times*, and thought, "Gosh he sounds great," and then the thought will always go through my mind, "Gosh, but if the *New York Times* has done it and this is a New Yorker, is there any point in the *Economist* now doing it, can I do anything better than this?" And I often think, "No I can't," and I won't do them.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So there's a competition between various—

ANN WROE: There's a feeling of competition, yes, definitely. It's the same with the *Daily Telegraph* in Britain, which specializes in colonels and old Army types **(laughter)** and also in decadent aristocrats. It has this fantastic line in really wild, eccentric people

who go and live in the Bahamas and bathe in champagne and I mean you simply cannot beat the *Telegraph* at some of those things, and I just admire them and I decide I can't go there. Otherwise, gradually I'll start to think about the character and I'll go and read as much as possible of what they've written about themselves or interviews they have given because what I most want to do in an obituary is get inside the head of the character and try and see the world as they saw it and, if I can, try to almost use their language and look through their eyes even though it's not always a very pleasant experience, I think it's important to have that empathy. Because we may not be running appreciations—we're not—but I feel also there's got to be a slight understanding of what this person thought they were doing when they were alive, and what they thought they were bringing to the world, what good or bad they were aware of doing, and bringing that to readers, it's important.

MARILYN JOHNSON: It's a literary process. It is very much a literary process. And if you're on a very short deadline, if you're at a newspaper, and most of the people that I interviewed for my book are newspaper writers who—they don't have the luxury of several days to think of them and they're not thinking of them as a character. They have a couple of hours to pull together something that makes sense and breathes. If you have a little bit more time, which is what the kinds of obituary tributes that I was trying to do and that you do beautifully in a thousand words—you are—it is a literary endeavor and you are really trying to bring a character to life and wrap it up in a literary way. You are, yes, and I don't think it's an accident that you called him a character. I mean, I really think that as many literary flourishes as you can use and as many skills as you have—all

your chops—it's one of the things that weighs on you when you sit down to consider a life and try to make it come together and that is you have to use everything you know and all of your skills. It is not something you can really fake your way through.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's interesting and we'll come back to the notion of getting into the character and getting into what one might call the voice, sympathy you feel. What made you write about Alex the African gray? Science's best-known parrot died on September 6, 2007, aged thirty-one. I mean, I did feel for him.

ANN WROE: Yes, you feel for the parrot, and many of you here will know the kind of famous Monty Python dead parrot sketch and I think that can't have been entirely out of the picture. This wasn't my idea, this was the science editor at the *Economist* who came running upstairs and said, "Do you know this parrot's dead?" It was wonderful. He wrote a very nice piece because this parrot had actually been taught various skills and I think he'd been taught to count to five and was nearly counting to seven when he died.

(laughter)

DANIEL OKRENT: Ah, if only he had lived longer.

ANN WROE: Right, but I think why not? Why not do nonhuman subjects if they're important. I was almost tempted to do a cat called Humphrey, who was famous in Britain. He was a Downing Street cat. Various prime ministers came and went from Number Ten

Downing Street and the cat went with Number Ten and saw many a prime minister come and go and, you know, I think his view of life would have been a fascinating one.

MARILYN JOHNSON: And why didn't you do him?

ANN WROE: I don't remember why. It may been I was on holiday. I know I was on holiday when London killed off the Routemaster bus, the real proper double-decker bus, which Londoners still lament to this day, and I'd like to have done the Routemaster, so I'm still thinking there may be some nonhuman subjects out there.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I want to go back to the notion of voice and sympathy because in a way what you're trying to do is the work of—to some extent the work of a historian. What the great French historian Jules Michelet said that the historian's role is to make the silences of history speak and in some way in writing some of your other books, the book on Shelley, for instance, you—there is a kindredness, one might say, between the work of the biographer and the work of the obituary writer and I'm wondering where you see the bridge between those two functions.

ANN WROE: The bridge, to my mind, is simply in trying to get inside the head, inside the *mind* of someone else. You have to—I think you really have to climb in there and try and see things as they were seen by—I mean, in the case of Shelley, in the latest biography, that really was quite a trip for about four years, trying to climb inside *that* head, but I would much rather try to make that effort to be in there, *exhausting* as it was,

it was completely exhausting and punishing, because he had read so much, and because he voyages spiritually, I mean he goes to places I could not have imagined and I just had to hang on for grim life with him and sometimes I feel that, too, with the obituary characters. You have got to try to get into their worlds as far as you can and that way the life will become *your* life just for that moment. I mean it's a process of total immersion—that you will with luck you'll manage to, as you say, bring the person alive through almost becoming them. Yes, it's sort of two days being somebody else. It's very intense.

DANIEL OKRENT: And I think there's a connection on the other side as well. The well-crafted obituary is a resource for a future biographer or for future historians. I'm writing a book about the twenties, I've been working on it for four years, set in the twenties and to know people long dead who were not huge in, you know, in the national life who had not been the subject of biographies. The only place one can go is often obituaries and one of the great difficulties about writing about particularly figures in New York from that period is that the *Herald Tribune* was much, much better at obituaries than the *Times* was; the *Times* very straight, you know, just the facts, the facts, the facts. Of course all the *Times* is online and the *Herald Tribune* you have to open envelopes at NYU and they fall apart in your hands but I think he fine obituaries written today by people at the *Times* and people at the *Economist* and the *Telegraph* and the *Globe and Mail* in Toronto, which does a very good job there—essential documents, they will be primary sources for future historians and biographers.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Marilyn, what constitutes a significant life?

MARILYN JOHNSON: Any life, I would say. I mean, seriously.

ANN WROE: I would agree.

MARILYN JOHNSON: I mean, seriously, I really—I challenge you to find someone too boring to write a great obit of.

ANN WROE: I think that's absolutely right. It's true.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Are you feeling worried?

MARILYN JOHNSON: I just thought about, yeah, what that might entail. But I, no I seriously—I'm totally with—I mean, I'm fascinated by the celebrity obituaries that I read. I'm fascinated by—I mean, really politicians can be very boring, but if you read the politicians in the *Globe and Mail*, they're fascinating. I would think businesspeople would be terrifically boring, but the business obits that I read in the *Wall Street Journal* are fascinating.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But you also have said that you—you felt you needed to move away from the world of celebrity obits, that they ended up—you found them tedious—

MARILYN JOHNSON: No.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I mean the notion of fame, I'm always reminded of that line of Rilke, who said that "fame is the sum of misunderstandings that gather around a new name," and that in some way you wanted to get away from that world, no?

MARILYN JOHNSON: I definitely wanted to get away from—I hate interviewing celebrities, I just hate them and—

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You just hate them.

DANIEL OKRENT: They say very nice things about you.

(laughter)

MARILYN JOHNSON: You know, it's very difficult to actually get intimate with someone who is a celebrity anymore and be able to write something that's real. You're

writing something that has been so rehearsed, you're getting so little access as a writer, it's not—it's not very fun to write and it's been done over and over. You know, how many things have you read about Madonna, and it's hard to find something new to say. I loved, on the other hand, writing celebrity obituaries. I loved sending them off. **(laughter)** It seemed like there was—you know, that *that* was a competition that mattered, being able to imagine the twentieth century without Princess Diana, that was—you know, and everybody in the world, in fact, I'm sure many of you in this room wrote Princess Diana tributes, it seemed like everyone was. And so you have to—you're forced to think of something different to say. What I do not like are the obits that have been sitting in the morgue for many years, you know, getting dusty and gray and sitting there. They're so considered, they're so fraught, they're so weighted, and they don't have any of that juice that something that's written on deadline by somebody who's in a bit of a panic—

ANN WROE: It's true, that gives them their buzz, it does. But I just wanted to add to what Marilyn said about celebrity. They may be very unsatisfying lives somehow to have to do, but behind the celebrity often there's another story, which is really fascinating to try and find. I wrote the obituary of Anna Nicole Smith in the *Economist* and there was someone being a celebrity if you like.

DANIEL OKRENT: Did she quote Rilke as much as Paul did?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yes, yes.

ANN WROE: But also here was a really sad story of someone—she was just a short-order waitress in Texas, I think. And she wanted to be like Marilyn Monroe and she was just never going to be like Marilyn Monroe and it was such a story of failed longing to be a celebrity that I thought I simply—I simply *had* to do her and in fact she was suggested to me by people at the New York office who were in love with her and her huge pneumatic personality.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I don't know if you understood what I was saying, but you talk about her breasts with gusto, I must say.

ANN WROE: Well, I do because I thought I had to. In fact, I had a couple of paragraphs about them in the obituary where I put Breasts upper case, you know, capital letter for Breasts, because they were such an important part of her. But there you are, it was entertaining. And it was kind of wild young men who had suggested that I had got to write about her. But on the other hand, what a sad story when I got inside it. So part of it was kind of enjoying it in the best sort of end-of-the-pier way and then again feeling a great sort of sadness about the life. So that was one that was a nice balance to have to do.

DANIEL OKRENT: Kind of an entirely different direction on the question of the significant life.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Please.

DANIEL OKRENT: One of the things that I'm sure happens to everybody who has ever worked at the *Times* for more than a day is that for the rest of one's life you are called by people who say, "My doctor's cousin's brother's nephew died last week and the family wants an obituary in the *Times* more than anything. It confirms the life. What can you do to get it in?" Unlike the *Economist* where there's one a week, the *Times* has—there's an accordion of space there. It was a very—it was the case certainly when I was working at the paper, but it continues. I get calls like this at least once a month, that I would *know* somebody who would make it possible and there's a wonderful euphemistic way of saying "no" that I've heard many people at the *Times* use, I'm quite certain it's not policy, but it's an easy way to say "no," which is to say "if the person was never in the paper when he or she was alive, they're not going to get in the paper when they're dead." Now, I don't think that was true about Mr. Kitty Litter, in fact, but it's very—it's obviously wrenching, any death, to one's—to the loved ones, to the survivors, but this longing for the certification of an obit in the *Times*, for people who live in greater New York, particularly, is extraordinary and deep and abiding and I believe that there's been to the *Times*'s financial benefit, at a time when the *Times* needs financial benefit, there's been a corollary to this in the paid death notices, in the lengthier and lengthier paid death notices, which have changed and if you read them, they are now usually very poor facsimiles of newspaper obituaries, but there's clearly the effort that *this* is what we have to preserve the life and to confirm the life.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Since we're in a building that mattered greatly to her, you also did an obituary of Brooke Astor, but you felt that she was not enough for that single obituary.

ANN WROE: No, there was a very happy chance for an obituary writer that Brooke Astor and Leona Helmsley died more or less in the same week, because they were such a fantastic contrast with each other. I mean, I don't have to tell any New Yorkers how they were different. I mean, Brooke Astor was such a wonderfully aristocratic figure, full of manners and breeding and in every way the sort of perfect philanthropist, and Leona Helmsley, this rather loudmouthed, nasty, what's—I'm trying not to say "rhymes with rich," but with her snappy little dog that she carried around in her purse, and this kind of thing, and to put those two side by side was great, so that was a double-header that I did with the two of them and it was just marvelous to kind of pile on these delicate adjectives with Brooke Astor and I was comparing her to mice and china and all sorts of things and then you could paint the picture of Leona Helmsley as a sort of tart figure. That was really fun to do **(laughter)** and yet I felt at the end that both of them had been sort of—they'd both been generous to New York and in the end I felt like being kinder to Leona because she had had a bad deal in a sense from the press, everyone was laying into her and she was very much the sinner to Brooke Astor's saint and yet when you looked in terms of how many hospitals she'd supported and so on, you know, they were equal helpers of New York, so I tried to end on a note of making them more or less equivalent, but it was enormous fun, that one.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The last line if I remember it well, it ends by saying that one was a saint and one was a sinner, more or less.

ANN WROE: Yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: When you go out in the morning and pick up your *New York Times* you look at the page of the obituaries. What are you looking for and what delights you in reading those pages?

DANIEL OKRENT: Well, it's changed over the years. I think that when I began reading it, it was learning about people and people's lives. Now I'm figuring out the average age of the people who died.

(laughter)

ANN WROE: Yes.

DANIEL OKRENT: The last two days have been great, ninety-nine, ninety-five, ninety, and ninety-nine, it's an average of ninety-six-point-three, which is, I feel, fabulous and now it's getting to the point where how many were younger than I am and so on and so forth. It's—I look for two things, actually. First, it's, you know, what is the lead obituary and I'm going to read it no matter who it is and then obviously people I know about and

know something about, but one of the other things I love to do on that page—I do look through the death notices to see if I can find the person that *should* be an obituary that they haven't found yet and that they'll get to two days later. It happens pretty frequently and I guess that they have to scout it as well. It's an unhealthy obsession, but it's rewarding to me.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Marilyn, unhealthy obsession?

MARILYN JOHNSON: I think it's a perfectly healthy one. Or, you know, how could I say to this room of people it was an unhealthy obsession?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You can, you can just say it's an unhealthy obsession.

MARILYN JOHNSON: We're all in this together. It's not—the door has been locked and we must all own up to it. No, I think it's— I think we care about life and we care about—and we care about being surprised. I mean, it's the same news over and over again, really. It's very hard to get surprised on the front page, on the front section, in the Metro section, I would say eight days out of ten, you can find a nugget on the obituary page that will carry you through half a dinner party. **(laughter)** I mean, there's like all kinds of crazy things. We think—we think life is these simple—

DANIEL OKRENT: They died for our dinner parties.

MARILYN JOHNSON: The incredible instincts of the people who work on that desk at the *Times* and at some of the other fine obit pages for the telling detail, for the amazing anecdote, for, you know, the story of, you know, an escape from Russia that you've never heard before or, you know, I mean you never know what you're going to read on the obits page, it's the fantastic thing about it.

DANIEL OKRENT: One of the striking at the *Times* that the paper goes up online I think at ten o'clock the night before, but the obits do not—they make you wait until morning for them and I was talking to Bruce about that before and he said it has to do with systems, and I think that there's something more diabolical.

(laughter)

MARILYN JOHNSON: Tony Hillerman went up at five o'clock.

DANIEL OKRENT: Today, I noticed Tony Hillerman went up and I was coming here, and my God, the world has changed, but there's a withholding because there's this I think there's this, I think the surprise value that Marilyn was talking about—something you didn't know. You're not going to find it online cruising around to various sites, you're going to open the *Times* in the morning and you're going to find out about a person you had never heard of before.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How did you become the *Economist*'s undertaker?

ANN WROE: Oooh, well, I think I put my name down for it. I realized this was a lovely position to hold and when my predecessor Keith Colqhoun would go on holiday, I would do the obituaries and I thought, "this is the best thing I've ever done on the paper," and I'd been literary editor and U.S. editor and so on but having to write the obituaries I could write as I liked and there's not many places on a paper where you can do that normally and so I just went in to the editor and said I'd like to do it when it next comes up and that has happened.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What has been your greatest joy writing an obituary?

ANN WROE: Oh, I think it's that moment when you realize that you've hit the essence of the life that you're able to kind of write a piece that will begin with some—some incident or some remark or some little thing that will then take almost in a circular progression and you'll come back to it at the end and you'll create something that's really satisfying. I always plot how they'll go as I'm walking home on Monday night and Leicester Square seems to be the place that has the best vibe—as I go through the square, usually, something will click and then I'll think how it's going to be and it will turn out that way.

DANIEL OKRENT: Here I think it's the Port Authority Bus Terminal.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Thank you very much!

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: If we could bring up the lights in the room so that our distinguished guests can see you when you dare ask a question. And there are mics coming around.

Q: When did you first begin reading them, each of the three of you?

DANIEL OKRENT: I started when I started reading the *Times*. I grew up in Detroit and started reading the *Times* when I was a freshman in college and there they were. I don't think it became the first thing I turned to in the newspaper until I was at least twenty-two.

(laughter)

MARILYN JOHNSON: I did read obits occasionally before this, but in the mid-eighties on a Saturday in the *New York Times*—I've written about—I opened it up and the scientist who had isolated Vitamin C and the scientist who had isolated Vitamin K had somehow died within a day of each other and they each had substantial, incredible obits and so C and K and I just thought—I don't know, I'm still, like, stunned by that. I'm still walking around saying, "Do you believe it?" I mean, two guys connected with the

Grateful Dead, one who was a keyboardist with Jerry Garcia and their business manager and lawyer both passed away within a day of each other—I mean, you know, these things happen all the time, but this one really converted me.

DANIEL OKRENT: Jonathan Edwards and Thomas Jefferson.

ANN WROE: I'm trying to remember when I first read them. I think I've only ever read them regularly since I became obits editor, but I remember the Winston Churchill obit making a tremendous impression on me—I mean, it was just so huge, this obit in the paper. And there was a fabulous photograph—was it Winston Churchill?—I can't quite remember whether it was his or whether it was King George VI now. I'm just thinking of this picture of the three queens in mourning—this fabulous picture of the queens with their long black dresses and their black veils.

DANIEL OKRENT: It's George VI.

ANN WROE: It was George VI, not Churchill, yeah. That sort of drew me in to the drama of public death if you like, I suppose, but I still didn't read the obits page with any regularity until I began to feel that they were all competing with mine and now I do.

Q: Yes, I'm wondering if you feel that any obits in the last year or so have been really botched?

MARILYN JOHNSON: Who's died?

ANN WROE: Who's died, yes?

DANIEL OKRENT: With the two lead obits writers with the paper I read here in the room, I don't think I'm going to answer that question.

Q: Do you ever think about your own obituaries and how they'll be written and do you have any hopes you'd be willing to share about how they'd be written?

MARILYN JOHNSON: It's a no-brainer, come on.

ANN WROE: I must say the only thing I hope is that people don't go through it from—you know, go through my life from birth to death. And in fact it was that feeling very strongly that I hoped nobody would ever write my life from birth to death that's made me kind of jump chronology in my books and in my obits. I began to think it's just not the way—that if people want to know about me, that's *not* the way they're going to find me. I'm going to wriggle away from that. Because I think the soul—and I am very much a believer in the soul—and the soul gets away from any attempt to confine it and you've got to try and pin it down some other way and so I think everyone who dies, everyone who lives, is setting a challenge to everybody else who wants to comment on that life. You've got the most elusive thing in the world there that you've got to try and grab hold of, so I hope someone can do mine, but who knows, maybe not.

MARILYN JOHNSON: I'm not going to be here and I really don't care, but, you know, I just think it's—how can you resist? I mean, somebody who writes about obituaries is first of all tempting fate, you know, I mean, I really and I said when the book first came out, I said to my publicist, "if something happens to me, run with it!" **(laughter)** You know, it's like—It's just—

DANIEL OKRENT: I think about it constantly. **(laughter)** All I really care is that it's above the fold.

(laughter/applause)

Q: Question for Ann, maybe it's another way of asking the "botched" question. Have you ever received a piece of criticism about an obituary that made you think you'd got it wrong?

ANN WROE: Let me see. I don't know that I *have*.

MARILYN JOHNSON: Anna Nicole was not very popular.

ANN WROE: Anna Nicole was not a popular one at all, no, that's true, but that was because people imagine that the *Economist* should only write obituaries of people who are noble and worthy.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It was a choice, more, it was a choice of subject.

ANN WROE: They were shocked by that, I think.

MARILYN JOHNSON: And the Indian bandit.

ANN WROE: The Indian bandit, yes, same reason. They didn't like the idea that we should cover a bandit and I did a very nasty segregationist sheriff from Selma, Alabama, because I was trying to see the world through his eyes, and it read like a pretty racist obit in the end, because I wanted to give the voice of somebody I think, thank God, that people who are that deeply steeped in segregationism have gone, you know, that he is a representative, or *was*, of a world that's going. And so I wanted to bring his voice out and it was not a nice voice to hear, to be honest.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And that was a voice you were happy to bring to rest in some way—

ANN WROE: Yes, but it was important to hear it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: —whilst I imagine there's some obits you write when you want to continue writing the piece and keeping the voice alive in some way. And the notion of regret I think must come to bear in your work at times.

ANN WROE: Yes, it does with a feeling if a life seems to have been a bit wasted or hasn't been satisfactory to the person themselves, I don't know whether it's—I mean, I believe very strongly that the spirit continues. And therefore I can't feel that this is the end and as I write it, you know, the regret is more sometimes that people have made a real mess of having been through earth, if you like.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The sparrow's flight.

ANN WROE: The sparrow's flight, yes. And that's a shame, but wanting to continue the voice. I think it does continue whether *I* want it to or not.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You write, "I see my obituaries as progress reports on a life that continues somewhere elsewhere."

ANN WROE: Somehow.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Somehow elsewhere.

ANN WROE: Yeah, I think so. We don't know how, but I just believe that life is a continuum and never—life does not end, ever.

Q: And it is a job, and I've listened to how you create your job and I'm interested in how you distance yourself from it or after you finish the piece that will be printed for the world to read, do you have a time where you are in mourning or you have grief because you've personalized it, because you've been in touch with this person so intimately by doing this research to be able to tell about their life?

ANN WROE: I don't feel any grief, but maybe that is only because I have to get on with the next part of my work, normally, because, you know, I do edit other things on the *Economist*, so as soon as I finish the obit I'm on to the next lot of work that's piled on the desk, and so there's not much time to—I don't think of them essentially as sad things. I mean, Marilyn was making the same point. They're celebrations of life, they're bringing to life rather than the reverse. So if it's gone well, I feel a great satisfaction, having a great joy to have been with that person or sometimes it's true rather a disgust at having been with that person if they're not pleasant, but not regret, no. I feel the same sort of satisfaction as when you finish a poem or something because it is again, as Marilyn said, it is a literary enterprise, and to my mind it's got to end on the right note, and it's got to work as music also. I mean, writing to me has to be musical and therefore it has to be constructed almost like some piece of music and end in that satisfactory way if it's gone well.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Have you ever come across family members who have after reading an obituary that you have written, felt as though they knew someone of their family better than before the obituary? Have you ever gotten comments of that sort?

ANN WROE: Gosh. Well there've been one or two, but not *better* than. But I mean I blush to mention them.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Because of that moment of illumination that you are looking for is so rarely something that one finds during the lifetime. It seems as the owl of Minerva takes its flight at dusk, afterwards, retrospectively, one can see it.

ANN WROE: Well, I don't think I could do them as well as that, you know, to surprise members of the family. I am just very gratified sometimes that members of the family call me or say, you know, they'd really enjoyed it, and I think it's a—It amazes me when they say that, because I haven't known the person, I mean not in life, not personally. So it's a very great compliment if that happens and I am very grateful to them.

DANIEL OKRENT: I was the complaint department, so people would not come to me because the shirt fits, they would come to me because it doesn't, and it was one thing that was fairly common, not with extremely well-known people, but people who merited space in the *Times*, the family feeling not, well partly, "but you left out x, y, z, how could those are the important things," but including anything negative. If the person had a distinguished life but spent a year in jail somewhere along the way, that ought to be in the obit, but the *family* doesn't want it there and there's the notion of the insult of this permanent memorial bringing up that which we wouldn't bring up at the memorial

service itself, at the funeral, seems to be something fairly common. You guys who write them would know better than I, but I hear that quite frequently when I was at the paper.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It brings up the notion of what do we owe the dead?

DANIEL OKRENT: Right. Or, well, it's the conflict between "What do we owe the dead?" and "What do we owe the reader?" and I think that most people in this business land on the latter one.

Q: Good evening. I just wanted to tell you that I'm the nondescendent of my step-grandmother who lived to a hundred and eight. Mayor Bloomberg threw her a party and three months later she was gone. But I think the secret to her longevity was olive oil. My question this evening is really to the gentleman from the *New York Times* who I believe is over my right shoulder and I keep on seeing Stewart Mott's picture in the blog section of the obituaries. And I'm wondering why it is that he's so prevalent at this stage and I think it's been three months now since he's passed away.

BRUCE WEBER: It's simply because the next person for whom we have a video tribute has not yet died. **(laughter)** Art Buchwald was there—we are continuing to try to do these video tributes. They're a little bit tricky, as you might imagine. Some people, when you suggest to them that they might want to speak for posterity in front of the camera, they think you're crazy, so, I mean, we get a lot of different reactions to these

suggestions, but—and so the store of the video tributes is relatively small and the ones that we have they're still alive.

MARILYN JOHNSON: You'd be willing to do one of those, right?

ANN WROE: This raises another question with me, though. I've heard that there's a growing trend for people to write their own obituaries, and make sure that the paper runs their own obituaries. Do you get that much on the *Times*?

BRUCE WEBER: It doesn't happen.

ANN WROE: It doesn't happen. It's happening in Britain.

BRUCE WEBER: I mean, I'm sure they must ask, but it's—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The letter goes unanswered.

DANIEL OKRENT: They used to send them to me. Maybe somebody's intercepting them but in fact I'm still—what I was referring to before about the people who—because I once worked there, therefore I can help them get the obit in. They say, well we've already written it, can you send it on to the *Times*? Very, very common in my life.

BRUCE WEBER: That sort of thing does happen. But they say we've already written the obit, and I say, "well, sure, let us, you know, let us see it," and then we read it and write our own.

DANIEL OKRENT: Of course, no absolutely.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And a question here.

Q: Because you're speaking of literary enterprise and clearly the obit is a genre. What genre is it closest to? I was so struck that you said a poem. It's clearly not a minibiography, a biography implies time. Is it a mini-drama? What's the closest?

MARILYN JOHNSON: Short story. I think short story. Short, short story, yes.

DANIEL OKRENT: No journalism—Journalism is at best a facsimile of a facsimile of a facsimile of what really happens in the world, so that the writer and the editor making choices about the construction is inventing, not lying, but inventing, and so I think it does—it is probably closest to finely wrought fiction.

MARILYN JOHNSON: I make a case that obits are their own literary form and, you know, it takes several forms—the "real person" obituary, which is much more discursive, does not follow the structure that you read in the *New York Times* is a distinct form from the newspaper obituary, from the tribute, which is what Ann does, but I think it's its own

literary form and, you know, I'm sorry that more courses aren't taught in it in journalism school.

Q: I'd like to know how many people are actually working in the morgue at the *New York Times* and can we assume that at this very moment they're tinkering with the fourteen hundred lives?

BILL GRIMES: I think there's five full-time people who have the job of writing obituaries. Two of them are sitting right here next to each other and there's three others. The morgue is really just the library of clippings and—

BRUCE WEBER: We should make a distinction between the way morgue—the way the word morgue is being thrown around here tonight is not the way we're used to hearing it used—

DANIEL OKRENT: Take it easy, okay?

BRUCE WEBER: I don't mean to get excited but the subject is so dear to my heart.

BILL GRIMES: But as for that file of advance obits or that library of advance obits that you're talking about, people aren't sitting there right now tinkering with them. They're sitting in a quiescent state, waiting to be tinkered with and updated. I mean, I myself remember I wrote Studs Terkel's obit maybe ten or twelve years ago and clearly he's

written I don't know forty-five books since I wrote it, **(laughter)** so some updating has to be done at some point. But they have to be brought up to date—surviving relatives and we always list, they've scattered, or maybe some of *them* have died, or they don't live in the places where we said they lived, so there's all that kind of stuff has to be adjusted at the last minute.

DANIEL OKRENT: Don't you also often hear from other desks at the paper that this well-known figure in this field is very, very ill and may be dying soon and you yank it out then?

BILL GRIMES: Yes, yes.

MARILYN JOHNSON: I hear Elizabeth Taylor is going to live forever.

Q: Just to follow up on the morgue, you mentioned the *Economist* you only have six or seven people. Would it be appropriate to ask who they are?

ANN WROE: Now can I remember? I know one of them is the king of Nepal—King of Nepal, Saddam Hussein, Nelson Mandela, Michael Foote, the Labour Party leader in Britain. Gosh, who are the others?

MARILYN JOHNSON: Keith Richards?

ANN WROE: No. It's completely random. It's totally random. It's because somebody—

DANIEL OKRENT: Not the queen?

ANN WROE: No, and not Prince Philip and he is not looking well at the moment.

(laughter)

MARILYN JOHNSON: You heard it here!

ANN WROE: You heard it here. It's just completely random. It's somebody's sat down one day and thought I think I'll write an obituary of somebody just to put them in the stocks, and there are so many people we ought to do. But when I go to my colleagues and say, "Look, you know, we've really got to have, say, Teddy Kennedy."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Doesn't look good.

MARILYN JOHNSON: Margaret Thatcher?

ANN WROE: Well, we have got Margaret Thatcher, yes. We've got a huge production on her. But actual obits, I think my colleagues—please, will you just do me one? And they say, I mean this has come up before this evening, that they can't do it because they won't know until it actually happens what the feel is like on the day that it happens.

There will be a certain buzz, there will be a certain context, things will have happened, there will be events that have to be factored in, so they will—they actually refuse to do it until they're on absolute deadline. I can sympathize with that.

DANIEL OKRENT: Does it help if somebody dies earlier in your issue week?

ANN WROE: Yeah, definitely. Monday, Tuesday, yeah. I *pray* on Tuesday. **(laughter)** I don't want anyone to die on Wednesday. I keep the Grim Reaper at bay.

DANIEL OKRENT: Like in the world of sports, don't have the championship on Tuesday because *Sports Illustrated* goes to press on Monday.

ANN WROE: Yes, it's the same thing.

Q: It's been so interesting and I think my favorite part was about these tiny formative moments that can presage a life or illuminate a life, and I was wondering if—forgive me, it might not be the kind of question that you can consider while the bright lights are on you, but I didn't know if any of the four of you, including Paul, had an awareness of what such a moment would be for you?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The light is awfully bright.

(laughter)

MARILYN JOHNSON: I will say one of my favorite obits from the *Daily Telegraph* ended with the line: "He detested ratatouille and pesto." **(laughter)** And somehow, you know, it turned out, the editor told me, it was just one of the little facts that they had accumulated that was left over at the end and they just stuck it at the end, but it gave everything this, like—

ANN WROE: Brilliance. That's brilliant.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I mean, I can't top that. **(laughter)** I was just about to say something. We'll have one more question.

DANIEL OKRENT: I'm crazy about ratatouille.

Q: Thinking of the typewriter man, are there any people that you've sort of eyeballed that you think would be really interesting if they got close, you know?

ANN WROE: No, I don't ever have candidates in advance that I'm thinking of. I mean, that would almost be the look of death. No, I mean I just—I keep reading round the obituaries that other folks do, and they'll come forward, the ones that I really like. I must say it does sort of ring a bell as soon as there's someone who's likely. One of the ones actually I most regret that I couldn't do, was there was one man who had invented some little light aircraft which meant that he could soar among the eagles, and he was actually

observing eagles from flying among them and I thought this was the most wonderful one I could do and it appeared in the *Guardian* in London and then I looked at the little strap at the bottom and he had died five weeks before, and so there was no *way* I could do him. But, you know, something like that, I know immediately, that's somebody I've got to do but I couldn't from the great sum of human experience focus in on one or two, as I say, that would almost be the look of death, you know, you would feel you were singling out this person. You do feel a little like the Grim Reaper yourself, I mean, this is how your colleagues think of you, as death approaching.

DANIEL OKRENT: When Alden Whitman did it at the Times, and he did many, many advance interviews and he almost built a public persona on "here comes the Angel of Death," and I was a young editor at Alfred A. Knopf a the time and Alfred A. Knopf was still alive, and the day that Alden Whitman came to the office, everything stopped, and it was both a warning and an incredible compliment.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I've always been intrigued by that comment that you all know of Mark Twain's that "the reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated." There are also those premature obituaries that are filled—the literature of obituaries is filled with them.

MARILYN JOHNSON: We love it. I mean, and apparently there have been some people, some subjects of premature obituaries who have dined out on it for the rest of their lives.

ANN WROE: The long rest—

MARILYN JOHNSON: Cockie Hoogterp. I think her name was Cockie Hoogterp. And you know reports of, you know, "she has not yet been screwed into her coffin," she wrote in a postcard to the obits editor. They apologized profusely and then there was an apology that appeared on the obits page and then when she actually died, there was another obit, which meant that this poor woman had appeared on the obits page three full times. I mean, that's like really for nothing else.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Very, very great pleasure to have you here tonight. Thank you very much.

(applause)