



A working week in the life of Rob McGibbon, freelance show business journalist and author

sevendays

19.02.04

Bank: the 15-step commute to the home office is as smooth as ever. No door jams or leaves on the landing. At 8.01am I assume control of my freelancing empire amid multiple surfaces of the TV screen. And this is it for the rest of the day, folks. Break yourselves for the thrills of my week.

Freelancing: it's a weird one. The amazing freedom it brings can be like you are in the Alps while everyone else is on the Tube. But, equally, you can feel that the work and his distant half cousin are at the party of the year while you're in solitary at Belmarsh. Most days are a mix of the two.

Add 'showbiz' to all that and you've got a recipe for — if I may humbly quote that great celebrity sage — insanity.

Every morning is spent on a book. I'm trying to finish. It's based on a diary written in 1914 by an English girl called Olive Higgins. She was 16 and began it as she set off for school in Paris, but she died tragically eight weeks later. A romantic comedy, it ain't.

This is a big departure after 12 books and 15 years of celebrity journalism, but I think of it as a kind of rehab — my spell at the Priory for showbiz hacks.

The book doesn't have a boy band in sight, but — three years in — there's no publishing deal or end to it either. Hey, my cold turkey is tough and, in true Mr B tradition, I'm doing it one line at a time. Afternoon, over the wall to the gym.

20.02.04

Work: to work. I have my best morning for ages and celebrate casting the movie version of this unfinished

book. Best to get these things sorted. I read the papers, e-mail checks, with some contacts, rejig a feature — world domination is moments away. A PR confirms two soap stars for a trip to Dubai, which is part of an ongoing celebrity TV reality venture. I write pitches for commissions. Tennis.

21.02.04

Research: at the Colindale newspaper library. A computer problem at home later sends me to a blind panic. All files of the magazine opus have vanished. During my meltdown a fast-moving chair takes a nine-inch chunk of plaster out of the wall. I then find everything on the, er, desktop. My IT department is run by an imbecile and the idiot in maintenance who will have to repair the damage is no better. Reboot from the stress by jogging.

Dinner out with a mixed bunch. Someone mentions I do showbiz stuff and one woman is beside herself: "Who's the most famous person you've met?" I reach for a yard of red to guarantee next-day ammonia.

22.02.04

Huch: Collect Sunday papers in a hood and flat spin onto the sofa. Do daily sit-ups there.

23.02.04

"Morning: everyone, good weekend!" Pure Belmarsh today. Agh, the frustration. I willfully distract myself with nonsense e-mails. A supportive note arrives from a friend who has risen to bracketless media heights: "You still alive?" I ban personal e-mail throughout the entire company so I can focus. There's a backing track in

the office of wrist-slitters from tragic FM, then a mix of Beethoven numbers. I glance over the catalogue of his works. Jesus Christ — if I read all that, surely I can do this?

I do that work every freelance dreads — call the contributions departments of various publications. It reminds me of condoning a friend to go to hospitals. "Nothing on the system" is the freelance's flat-line tone and it sounds out from a few places. One payment is seven months overdue. No, really, any time before the coffin arrives is fine.

Much better news from elsewhere and I receive royalties for an updated biography I did on Eminem for Germany in 2000. The new edition is one bestseller. Accounts condition: out of ICU, full recovery expected.

I go to a meeting at a record company where everyone is hollow-eyed and wearing black. It's like being at an undertaker's. They show me photos of some boys they have recently embalmed and talk of single releases, books, percentages, publicity. It's like past lives regression and suddenly the misery of 1914 seems a happier time. Must get back in the programme.

Gym workout. Anyone would think I'm on standby for the Olympics.

24.02.04

Fall off the wagon to do interviews on the set of a drama series. The PR greets me close to tears — she hates the producer, the cast, her life. And



Olive's story: no comedy

probably me. Actor one arrives in full flight injuries make-up and tells me how much he loves everything. If he says "fantastic, mate" one more time, I would just put the makeup artist out of the room. Actress two: vulnerable. Actress three: scary. I feel like a counsellor, but I stroll on an exotic beach somewhere during a depressive actor

four while my tape machine gently weeps. I leave before the PR drags the security bloke in for a chat.

Still, a productive day. I return to OD1914 at MDF HQ. I get confirmation of two meetings at the London Book Fair. Ugh! Good news from a Sunday — a buy-up I have agented is a good and another idea has been taken by a daily. Hey, hey, the hills are alive...

Dinner with a senior newspaper executive who says I am a "self-congratulatory, glitzy toser". I miss these newroom employment sessions.

25.02.04

A broken sleep sees me start work at about 5am. Things go well, but by lunchtime I'm knackered and ready for a takeaway and a quiet night in.

Oddly, today is the 90th anniversary of Olive Higgins' death. It's crazy that her spark of life is consuming my career, but I wonder if a fitting irony would be that this book makes her famous. Maybe that anonymity will be the new bling. One thing's for sure: I'm gonna need rehab from this one, too. □

Next week: Adrian Wells, foreign editor at Sky News

backissues

Jon Slattery trawls the archives to look at what was making Press Gazette headlines in 03.94

Guild raps Howard for not talking

FACING THE MUSIC

The Guild of Editors had complained to Home Secretary Michael Howard about the lack of consultation on proposed criminal offences for journalists. The offences, suggested in the Calcutt Report, would have covered the use of blogging devices, and entering and taking pictures on private property without consent and carried fines of up to £5,000. The proposals were eventually dropped.

Milligan leak blame Westminster

STOCKING TALE

The police investigation into how details of the death of MP and former journalist Stephen Milligan reached the press traced the leak to the House of Commons. It rejected claims that the House of Commons — had been found guilty of details of Milligan's death — had been dressed in stockings and leathers by the police. In a final irony, details of the report were leaked to the press before it was released by Scotland Yard.

Citizen beats nationals on garden deaths

WEDDING PICTURE

The Gloucester Citizen had produced a special as the horrific story of the Fred and Rose West murders in the city was beginning to unfold as bodies were discovered in the "house of horror" in Cromwell Street. While nationals were paying up to £500 for blurred pictures of West, the Citizen had obtained a family wedding photo showing Fred, Rose and one of their children.

The battles of Hastings

NOT SO BLACK DAYS

These were happier times for The Daily Telegraph, which had been named Newspaper of the Year at the British Press Awards. Much of the credit went to editor Max Hastings for mod-ernising the paper. A bullish Conrad Black was quoted in Press Gazette stating: "We have faced an onslaught from The Times and we set two and a half times as many copies and at 160 per cent of the price. I've never heard of anything like it."

PAIN DEFENDS NEIKS HYDE

As ever, journalists were battling to protect their source but, at last there was some good news. Judge Sir Peter Goff had ruled that Neil Hyde, boss of the INS news agency, did not have to disclose the source of a secret broadband hospital report on the escape of two convicted killers. The judge ruled that the hospital authorities had not made out a case that it was in the public interest that the Hyde and INS should reveal their sources. The judgment was seen as reversing a trend which had seen The Independent's Jeremy Warner and D. Enginger's Bill Goodwin both fined for contempt for not revealing their sources. Hyde was recently in the news when he won a legal battle to get Thames Valley Police to return secretly seized telephone records of the agency.

UKPress Gazette

Tide turns for source security

Doubled punch for Times Weekend

Five comes alive

HIGH FIVE ARRIVE

BBC's new 24-hour news and sport radio Five, opened on 28 network. Radio Five Live, opened on 28 March. Phil Harding, editor, news, told Press Gazette of Five Live's style: "It's lessrazy than Radio 5, but more direct and down-to-earth than Radio 4."

MGM 'MANSION'

It was an historic month for MGM, which moved from its base near Fiver Street to Canary Wharf. In a five-page briefing, Press Gazette said the company said of the move: "The troubles of the Maxwell era and the practices that proved to almost crush one of the greatest companies in newspaper publishing have been left behind."