

The Newswatchers

Word count: 2911 words

The father is in bed, beneath the white hotel bedcovers and blanket, watching the news on television while reading the news on the tablet. The room is all white, apart from some wooden pieces of furniture, like the nightstand and the TV stand, and the air conditioner is running at full power, making the room so cold that condensation fogs the windows. The son is lying on top of the covers on an identical bed a metre or so towards the door. He struggles to make himself heard over the television, which is turned to an excessively loud volume. He tells the father to turn the television off for a while. Just a minute, the father replies, I want to see the end of this. The son gets out of bed and walks to the window.

The father is obsessed with the news, specifically the news reported on television, pertaining to sports and sportsmen, celebrities, financial markets, large corporations and politics and politicians. He constantly watches television news programs, which the son can't stand. He can't stand these news programs his father watches, with their formal newsreaders, expert interviews, gaudy graphics and endless blather. That's the worst part, the verbal and textual blather, the sheer volume of language these news programs emit. Even when the television is muted, so much as a glance in its direction is enough to expose a passer-by to waves of textual radiation in the form of headlines staged boldly in the lower-middle area of the broadcast, miniature headlines scrolling in bars across the bottom of the screen, stock tickers and prices, charts, labels, quotes and dot point summaries, and that's to say nothing of the pictures that flare on and off at such breakneck speed that they elude comprehension. Words and images fill the air and thicken it like humidity, the son thinks as he returns from the window and lies down on top of the bed. While the father's bed is a nest of filth, a fortress of

crumbs, empty chip packets, chocolate bar wrappers and soiled tissues, the son's bed looks as if it hasn't been slept in.

A vortex of lightning-infested cloud drifts over the Coral Sea: Farmers Heartbroken As Cyclone Dolores Lashes Top-End. The storm has prevented the son from going outside for the past three days. He can't stand being in the room with the television tuned to one of these news programs, let alone actually watching one and subjecting himself to its drivel, but his father refuses to change the channel. Since arriving in Trinity Beach, he has hazarded hours of news emissions, doing who knows what damage to his constitution. The problem is worse now that the father's condition has deteriorated. Previously, it was possible to meet with him in a place without a television; now, whenever the son sees his father, there is almost certain to be a television nearby, and this television will almost certainly be tuned to one of those international news networks, which report round-the-clock in a fundamentally identical fashion and only vary in the colours of their graphics. Report is the wrong word, he thinks, since these programs don't necessarily report on anything. They don't necessarily inform about new happenings or further developments to ongoing situations; instead, they recapitulate events from the recent past, embellishing the facts of these events with discussion, interviews, theories and opinions in order to generate additional programming to fill their endless schedule. More than reporting round-the-clock, these programs generate news content round-the-clock, ceaselessly repeating and rehashing their message like fire alarms.

The sleek black television remote rests on the father's chest, outside the bedcovers. The son takes a book from the stack on the nightstand, opens to a page at random and begins to read, when the wind violently shakes the fogged windows, producing a loud rattle. The weather

was the father's ostensible reason for migrating to Trinity Beach. He likes this tropical climate and claims the son is just unlucky to have arrived in the middle of an unusually terrible storm. The son still doesn't understand the appeal of this tired resort, where the only activities available to residents are swimming and watching television. Although the rattling sound doesn't persist for a more than a few seconds, the father picks up the remote and increases the television volume. Noise bounces around the little box of a hotel room, reverberating off the white tiled floors and the white ceiling and walls. The son closes the book and returns it to the nightstand. If the son really protests and kicks up a fuss, as the father says, the television will be muted, but that's as far as it will go. It won't be turned off, not under any circumstances. The son stands, walks to the window, turns and returns to the bed.

The television remains on, even if they are talking. Even if they are discussing something serious and important, the father continues watching the television, reading the headlines as they flick past to see if one of interests him, in which case he'll interrupt the conversation, unmute the television and return the volume to the excessively loud level that it has be set at to for him to hear. And he might simultaneously be reading a news article on his phone or tablet. As they discuss something serious and important, he'll be watching the headlines on the television while simultaneously reading a news article on his phone or tablet, as if he were some high-ranking diplomat or financier whose career depends on his being cognizant of the latest developments in international affairs the moment they occur and is justifiably terrified of discovering a piece of information only after he and his son have finished speaking, which may be no more than a few minutes later given the speed with which these news programs regurgitate stories. The father will be lying in bed, beneath the covers and blankets, while the son lies on his identical bed, above the covers and blankets, pleading with him to return to Adelaide and go to the hospital or at least see one of the local doctors in Trinity Beach, if they

exist, when, quite suddenly he'll be interrupted by one of these smug American newsreaders – or, worse still, their frantic English counterparts – babbling about a foreign politician's resignation, a manufacturer of transistors declaring bankruptcy, an actress accused of stealing her neighbour's dog, or an upset in a cricket match between two former British colonies, and, to make matters worse, his father will not simply watch the inane report but talk about it as well, providing his opinion on the events under discussion.

He speaks in a booming voice, both to compensate for his poor hearing and to overcome the deafening sound of the television. Lying on top of the bed, the son feels like he's witnessing a dispute between two drunkards, whose voices grow progressively louder as they attempt to overwhelm each other with sheer verbal force. He stands, walks to the bathroom, washes his hands and looks at his face in the mirror. Even with the door closed, the sound of his father ingesting the news and expelling commentary on it is still audible. The father mocks the news, expounds on the news, belittles the news and bemoans the news. Despite having been here nearly a week, the son still doesn't know the nature or extent of his father's illness, his financial situation or his plans for the future. No matter what subject he brings up, his father invariably steers the conversation back towards the news, towards the stories reported in the news programs that he watches nonstop. He recounts the outcomes of sporting matches, political developments in Myanmar, an economic forecast and, worst of all, that endless fount of news dross, the British Royal Family. He recounts it so ceaselessly that there's no chance to interrupt. Even if the son somehow succeeds in forcing him to return to the original topic, the conversation quickly swerves towards another episode of the news show.

As he presses his face against the mirror in the bathroom, he hears his father talking, his babble mimicking that of the newsreader who is serving up yet another unappetising

selection from the news buffet. Unlike his father, the son isn't the least bit interested in so-called current events, which have as much to do with him as the events in television dramas and cheap novels, which may as well be derived from television dramas and cheap novels, it would make no difference. It would make no difference if the events that fill these news programs were entirely fictional, if the newsreaders had at some point grown tired of relating actual incidents and instead decided to read excerpts from novels, which are equally exciting and have just as much bearing on the viewers' reality, the son thinks as he leaves the bathroom and walks to the across the room to the window. Cold, smooth and dry, the floor tiles are more reminiscent of the lobby of an office building than a bedroom. Former Barrister Found Dead: Why Was He Alone? Communing from their home offices and studies, a trio of guests appear alongside the newsreader in equal-sized panels. The bearded academic occupying the furthest right quadrant endeavours to voice an opinion but is immediately interrupted by smug chuckling from the politician on the left, who is in turn interrupted by the indignant pundit to his right, who strongly objects to everything that was attempted to be said so far, dismissing it as classic left-wing nonsense. Alright, that's all we've got time for, thanks everyone for joining me, we'll have more on this later, the newsreader says as red and white cylindrical bars swarm the screen.

The news performers are as distant from their audiences as the knights and wizards in fantasy stories, although audiences may extract more benefit from the latter, who at least possess some admirable qualities, unlike the ridiculous hams on the news. The son hopes to never again learn about a foreign war, a general strike, the death of a musician, a politician's affair, a massacre in Baghdad or the Prince of Wales' racist remarks. Perhaps individually these events have meaning, he thinks as he stands at the fogged window. In fact, they certainly do. Individually, those events must have meaning, but that meaning is drained once they are

fused together, ground to pieces and sprinkled across the so-called news cycle. The news programming machine saps events of meaning to produce content for its shows. To fill their schedule, these news shows take events and strip them of everything that is poignant or devastating or humorous, rendering them no different from the melodramatic incidents that occur in soap operas; not a shred of meaning survives the conversion from fact to news. The son hopes to never see another of these programs again, but he knows that that's impossible so long as his father lives.

Returning to the bed, he tells the father to turn down the television. He wants his father to come home to Adelaide, where he'll be close to family and able to receive proper treatment. No sooner has he brought up the subject, however, than the father, having spied a headline referencing an epidemic ravaging Northern Africa, increases the volume and begins talking about how terrible the disease is and how lacking the U.N.'s response has been. The son doesn't care. He tells the father to turn down the TV for just one second. The father obliges, although he continues looking at his tablet, which is propped at an angle against his knees, and soon interrupts the son to read aloud from an article on one of the news websites he frequents, a story about a corrupt politician, whose brazenness and stupidity so amuse the father that he breaks into a laughing fit that quickly morphs into a coughing fit, forcing him to put the tablet aside and search the folds of the bed for a piece of tissue. Exasperated, the son gets out of bed and walks to the window. His father is still coughing as he wipes away the condensation. The rain seems to be disobeying gravity and falling from every direction, rising from the swimming pool while pelting its surface. Palm trees shake and rattle. Soggy fronds are strewn about the flooded paths and float together in the corners of the pool, forming loose rafts. He hates tropical weather and the incessant transitions it necessitates, the shifts

between extreme heat and extreme cold. The chilled air is almost certainly detrimental to the father's condition, but the room would be unbearably humid without it.

There is a metre of space between the window and the son's bed, then another metre between his bed and the father's and a final metre between the father's bed and the entrance to the bathroom. Without turning around, the son asks the father if he's alright. Still coughing and chuckling at the same time, the father says that he's fine, he's just in awe of the corrupt politician, whose brashness, he says, is literally breathtaking. The son groans in a way that is strictly reserved for his father. Ordinarily, he doesn't groan like this, that is, audibly; in fact, he hardly groans at all. It's only when he's with his father that he groans in this childish manner, the way children groan when their parents embarrass them. The son walks back toward the bed, pauses, turns and walks back towards the window. This is repeated several times at an accelerating pace. He walks to the bathroom, washes his hands and looks at his face in the mirror. Then he walks back to the window. The hole he carved in the film of condensation has already closed. Using the tip of his index finger, he draws a grotesque, grinning face on the glass and then wipes it away with his palm. The father unmutes the television, turns up the volume and launches into a mocking rant about the debate surrounding new climate change legislation in the European Union. It's a shame I won't be able to see the impacts of climate change, he says, I was really looking forward to some warmer weather. The son blows air through the side of his mouth, producing a quacking noise.

The news has even fewer implications for his father than it does for other viewers, he thinks as he leans towards the window. The local ramifications of these global developments – if there are any, which he doubts – will only emerge over many years, perhaps over many

decades or centuries. Generations of newswatchers will age and die before the ripples of the news have had a chance to overtake them, and, once they're dead, the news will continue without them. New events will be reported and the dead newswatchers won't be able to witness or comment upon them. New wars, new engagements, new victories, and new controversies will escape their awareness. If only the news would reach a conclusion, a denouement that eliminated the need for future instalments, then the newswatchers could die peacefully, satisfied with having absorbed the totality of the news. As it is, they'll go to their graves unfulfilled, knowing that new episodes of their favourite program will be broadcast in their absence.

The son presses his face against the cool window and a soft film of moisture coats his nose and forehead. He presses hard, squeezing his face against the glass. If he presses any harder, he'll push through the window and bring the storm into the room. Gusts of warm, wet wind will displace the artificially cold air and silence the television with their howling, and the drama of the broken window will temporarily supplant the relentless spectacle of the news. The headline bursts on to the screen: Tropical Terror: Horrifying scenes at Trinity Beach tonight as a thirty-two-year-old husband and father of two crashes through a sheer glass window. A reporter wearing a raincoat stands in front of the reception, shouting into the microphone to make themselves heard. A 3D computer-generated model repeatedly re-enacts the breakage, and special angles and zooms are used to demonstrate precisely where shards of glass impaled a featureless beige mannequin, which a floating label identifies as the victim. Grainy footage shows a stretcher being wheeled down a flooded path and lifted into an ambulance. We are still trying to understand the cause of this terrible tragedy and will update you shortly when we have more information... He pulls away from window. Visible in

the gap left in the condensation are sunken eyes, flabby jaws, and a retreating hairline. He will return to Adelaide in two days' time.

In between remarks about climate change, the father is still coughing. No longer as violent as before, the coughing is now a subdued, constant throat clearing, serving to punctuate his endless comments and giving the newsreader an opportunity to speak. The son wipes the moisture from his face and on to his sleeve and walks back to the bed. Lying down, he tells his father that this new legislation, which the newsreader is somehow still describing, sounds ineffective. The father laughs and coughs at the same time. What an understatement, he exclaims. The father launches into a rant about the legislation's many flaws and the absurdity of the debate surrounding it. A few minutes later, the son gets up and walks to the window.