

Newsman's progress

Why Peter Jennings had to move to the States

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Condoleezza Rice thinks that Canada was just too quiet for the late, great Peter Jennings.

"I think he enjoyed the cacophony of America," explains the U.S. Secretary of State in a new book about the now-gone newscaster with the David Niven suavity.

"America," she goes on, "is big and complicated and noisy and difficult. Nothing about America is tidy. I suspect that he wanted to be a part of that untidiness that is the United States. Canada is a wonderful place, but it's a smaller and more homogenous population. There's something about American that is complicated. You either like its complications and its cacophony, or you find it overwhelming. And Peter liked its cacophony. He liked its complications."



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Despite Peter Jennings' love of his native Canada, in the end the U.S. was where he earned his stripes.

This somewhat complicated morsel? It comes in a chapter of the book *A Reporter's Life: Peter Jennings*, that centres around the U.S. citizenship that the Toronto-born Jennings finally got around to taking. In 2003. At the age of 65. Remember? Just two years before his too-soon demise.

About the anchorman's star-spangled banner conversion, Barbara Walters, his long-time ABC colleague who's clearly going to outlive us all, adds this: "I think Peter struggled for many years because he was a Canadian citizen and loved his country so much, and yet America was really where he earned his stripes, really. When he reported on events, if somebody wanted to attack him, that was his vulnerability?"

Considers Walters: "I think, because of this, Peter did more homework. He knew every Congressman in every district -- where they went, where they came from. You couldn't spring anything on Peter that he didn't know."

Indeed, what this oral history of the man makes abundantly clear is that Jennings always really had triple-citizenship: American, Canadian, and that land we call the Nation of Debonair. You could even say that he did for Smart, Urbane Anchorman what Clint Eastwood has done for Manly, Marble-mouthed Cowboy and what Serge Gainsbourg adeptly did for Smelly French Troubadour.

And although Lynn Sherr, one of the co-authors of this intimate portrait, starts it with a caveat -- "This book would have been anathema to Peter Jennings. I can hear

his usually well-honed skepticism now: 'A biography? Of me? Whatever for? Surely, there are many more important subjects?' " --it's clear this book does have a place for anyone interested in men of the renaissance sort and anyone just plain interested in current events.

Many of the sorts of media ubiquities you expect to show up in this book--Diane Sawyer, Dan Rather -- do, but others you don't expect do, too. Say, the legendary Lauren Bacall, who is seen crushing on Jennings here. "Kind of disarming" and a "touch of mystery" is what she subscribes to the journalist, who was both a friend and neighbour.

Stretching from his earliest days at CBC Radio to those late, dark hours in September, 2001 -- when Jennings stayed on the air for 17 straight hours -- this book is a terrific and sometimes poignant read. And the bits about his affinity with Bill Clinton? Particularly interesting. Theirs, obviously, was one of those classically alpha-male relationships, and George Stephanopoulos, the spin doctor-turned-TV host, does a nice job of summing it all up.

"President Clinton [and Peter are] both big guys, and they're both great talkers," he points out. "I think they knew that about each other, and frankly, I think they knew how to get under each other's skin. You could see that time and time again. You know when you play tennis with someone who's a little bit better than you and it brings your game up?"

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE RANCH:

Word has it that Mike Myers was at the Brunswick House in the Annex last week. All dressed up in his guru-garb.

AND ALSO:

The lives-spanning Shirley Mac-Laine touched down on the Diesel Playhouse on Blue Jays Way recently. She was there to check out the show Jewtopia! And, later, after the show, the take-no-crap Oscar-winning dowager-seductress even went backstage and visited with some of the cast, which includes Second City's Matt Baram and Canadian Idol's roving reporter Dave Kerr.

MacLaine, by the way, was in these parts recently for the new KevinWallace-produced Anne of Green Gables prequel that's underway. She's in it! - Peter Jennings: A Reporter's Life is published by PublicAffairs (\$33.50)

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