

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID SIMON, BY NICK HORNBY

“My standard for verisimilitude is simple and I came to it when I started to write prose narrative: fuck the average reader.”

Some things television is good for:

Catharsis

Depicting the “other” America

Pissing off the mayor

Three or four years ago, I got an email from a friend in which he described The Wire as the best thing he'd ever seen on TV, “apart from Abigail's Party.” Here was a recommendation designed to get anybody's attention. No mention of The West Wing, or The Sopranos, or Curb Your Enthusiasm, or any of the other shibboleths of contemporary TV criticism; just a smart-aleck nod to Mike Leigh's classic 1977 BBC play. It reeled me in, anyway, and I went out and bought a box set of the first series.

I'd never heard of the show. It wasn't widely known or shown here in the UK, although whenever a new season starts, you can always find a piece in a broadsheet paper calling it “the best programme you've never heard of,” and I didn't know what to expect. What I got was something that bore no resemblance to Abigail's Party, predictably, and very little resemblance to any other cop show. At one stage I was simultaneously hooked on The Wire and the BBC's brilliant adaptation of Bleak House, and it struck me that Dickens serves as a useful point of comparison; David Simon and his team of writers (including George Pelecanos, Richard Price, Dennis Lehane) swoop from high to low, from the mayor's office to the street corner – and the street-corner dealers are shown more empathy and compassion than anyone has mustered before. The hapless Bubbles, forever dragging behind him his shopping trolley full of stolen goods, is Baltimore's answer to Joe the Crossing Sweeper.

We talked via email. A couple of weeks later, we met in London – David Simon is making a show about the war in Iraq with my next-door neighbor.

(Really. He's really making a show about the war in Iraq, and the producer literally lives next door.) We talked a lot about sports and music.

– Nick Hornby

NICK HORNBY: Can I start by asking you something about the writing? How did you kick it off? All the seasons have had very unconventional shapes and paces to them, I think. Did you have something different in mind before you started, or did that happen during the creation of the series?

DAVID SIMON: I think what you sense in *The Wire* is that it is violating a good many of the conventions and tropes of episodic television. It isn't really structured as episodic television and it instead pursues the form of the modern, multi-POV novel. Why? Primarily because the creators and contributors are not by training or inclination television writers. In fact, it is a little bit remarkable that we ended up with a television drama on HBO or anywhere else. I am a newspaper reporter by training who wrote a couple of long, multi-POV nonfiction narratives, *Homicide* and *The Corner*. The first became the basis for the NBC drama of the same name; the second I was able to produce as a miniseries for HBO, airing in 2000. Both works are the result of a journalistic impulse, the first recounting a year I spent with the Baltimore Police Department's Homicide Unit, and the second book detailing a year spent in a drug-saturated West Baltimore neighborhood, following an extended, drug-involved family. Ed Burns, my co-author on *The Corner* and co-creator on *The Wire*, was a homicide detective who served in the BPD for 20 years and, following that for seven years, as a seventh-grade teacher at a Baltimore public school. The remaining writers – Richard Price [*Clockers*], Dennis Lehane [*Mystic River*], and George Pelecanos [*The Night Gardener*] – are novelists working at the highest level of the crime genre. Bill Zorzi covered state and municipal politics for the *Baltimore Sun* for 20 years; Rafael Alvarez, another *Sun* veteran, worked as a merchant seaman and comes from two generations of port workers. So we are all rooted in a different place than Hollywood.

We got the gig because as my newspaper was bought and butchered by an out-of-town newspaper chain, I was offered the chance to write scripts, and, ultimately, to learn to produce television by the fellows who

were turning my first book into *Homicide: Life on the Street*. I took that gig and, ultimately, I was able to produce the second book for HBO on my own. Following that miniseries, HBO agreed to look at *The Wire* scripts. So I made an improbable and in many ways unplanned transition from journalist/author to TV producer. It was not a predictable transformation and I am vaguely amused that it actually happened. If I had a plan, it was to grow old on the *Baltimore Sun*'s copy desk, bumming cigarettes from young reporters and telling lies about what it was like working with H. L. Mencken and William Manchester.

Another reason the show may feel different than a lot of television: our model is not quite so Shakespearean as other high-end HBO fare. *The Sopranos* and *Deadwood* – two shows that I do admire – offer a good deal of *Macbeth* or *Richard III* or *Hamlet* in their focus on the angst and machinations of the central characters (Tony Soprano, Al Swearengen). Much of our modern theater seems rooted in the Shakespearean discovery of the modern mind. We're stealing instead from an earlier, less-traveled construct – the Greeks – lifting our thematic stance wholesale from Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides to create doomed and fated protagonists who confront a rigged game and their own mortality. The modern mind – particularly those of us in the West – finds such fatalism ancient and discomfiting, I think. We are a pretty self-actualized, self-worshipping crowd of postmoderns and the idea that for all of our wherewithal and discretionary income and leisure, we're still fated by indifferent gods, feels to us antiquated and superstitious. We don't accept our gods on such terms anymore; by and large, with the exception of the fundamentalists among us, we don't even grant Yahweh himself that kind of unbridled, interventionist authority.

But instead of the old gods, *The Wire* is a Greek tragedy in which the postmodern institutions are the Olympian forces. It's the police department, or the drug economy, or the political structures, or the school administration, or the macroeconomic forces that are throwing the lightning bolts and hitting people in the ass for no decent reason. In much of television, and in a good deal of our stage drama, individuals are often portrayed as rising above institutions to achieve catharsis. In this drama, the institutions always prove larger, and those characters with hubris enough to challenge the postmodern construct of American empire are invariably

mocked, marginalized, or crushed. Greek tragedy for the new millennium, so to speak. Because so much of television is about providing catharsis and redemption and the triumph of character, a drama in which postmodern institutions trump individuality and morality and justice seems different in some ways, I think.

It also explains why we get good reviews but less of an audience than other storytelling. In this age of Enron, WorldCom, Iraq, and Katrina, many people want their television entertainments to distract them from the foibles of the society we actually inhabit. Which brings me to the last notion of why *The Wire* may feel different. The chumps making it live in Baltimore, or, in the case of guys like Price, Pelecanos, and Lehane, they are at least writing in their literary work about second-tier East Coast rust-belt places like Jersey City, northeast Washington, or Dorchester, rather than Manhattan, Georgetown, or Back Bay, Boston. We are of the other America or the America that has been left behind in the post-industrial age. We don't live in LA or go to their parties; we don't do what we do to try to triumph in the world of television entertainment by having a bona fide hit, and meeting the pretty people and getting the best table at the Ivy. Shit, the last time George and I went to the Ivy on a road trip, we waited 45 minutes for a table and then were announced as "the Pelican party." We don't belong there and we don't need the kind of money or the level of Zeitgeist required to belong there. We hang out in the Baltimores of the world, writing what we want to write about and never keeping one eye on whether or not it could sell as much as a drama that had, say, more white faces, more women with big tits, and more stuff that blows up or squirts blood real good.

Our impulses are all the natural reactions of writers who live in close proximity to a specific American experience – independent of Hollywood – and who are trying to capture that experience. And that too is an improbability, given how insulated the American entertainment industry normally is. I don't mean this to come off as some snotty declaration of classist, pseudo-proletarian pretension, but it is what it is. I live in Baltimore. How many yachts can I water-ski behind in Baltimore harbor? Fuck it, I'm happy to be getting paid what I'm paid to make a television show about what I would normally write magazine articles and newspaper series and narrative tomes about. And the other writers feel pretty much the same.

So we are misfits, and while we hope the show is entertaining enough, none of us think of ourselves as providing entertainment. The impulse is, again, either journalistic or literary. Hope this helps and doesn't sound as wrought and pompous as I think it does. Forgive us for actually thinking about this shit; we know it's television, but we can't help ourselves. But as you yourself probably know from your love of music, sometimes even three chords and the right guitar solo and a good chorus can be pretty much everything.

NH: How did you pitch it?

DS: I pitched *The Wire* to HBO as the anti-cop show, a rebellion of sorts against all the horseshit police procedurals afflicting American television. I am unalterably opposed to drug prohibition; what began as a war against illicit drugs generations ago has now mutated into a war on the American underclass, and what drugs have not destroyed in our inner cities, the war against them has. I suggested to HBO – which up to that point had produced groundbreaking drama by going where the broadcast networks couldn't (*The Sopranos*, *Sex and the City*, et al) – that they could further enhance their standing by embracing the ultimate network standard (cop show) and inverting the form. Instead of the usual good-guys-chasing-bad-guys framework, questions would be raised about the very labels of good and bad, and, indeed, whether such distinctly moral notions were really the point.

The show would instead be about untethered capitalism run amok, about how power and money actually root themselves in a postmodern American city, and, ultimately, about why we as an urban people are no longer able to solve our problems or heal our wounds. Early in the conception of the drama, Ed Burns and I – as well as the late Bob Colesberry, a consummate filmmaker who served as the directorial producer and created the visual template for *The Wire* – conceived of a show that would, with each season, slice off another piece of the American city, so that by the end of the run, a simulated Baltimore would stand in for urban America, and the fundamental problems of urbanity would be fully addressed.

First season: the dysfunction of the drug war and the general continuing theme of self-sustaining postmodern institutions devouring

the individuals they are supposed to serve or who serve them. Second season: the death of work and the destruction of the American working class in the post-industrial era, for which we added the port of Baltimore. Third season: the political process and the possibility of reform, for which we added the City Hall component. Fourth season: equal opportunity, for which we added the public education system. The fifth and final season will be about the media and our capacity to recognize and address our own realities, for which we will add the city's daily newspaper and television components.

Did we mention these grandiose plans to HBO at the beginning? No, they would have laughed us out of the pitch meeting. Instead, we spoke only to the inversion of the cop show and a close examination of the drug war's dysfunction. But before shifting gears to the port in Season Two, I sat down with the HBO execs and laid out the argument to begin constructing an American city and examining the above themes through that construction. So here we are.

MF: Baltimore may have had more of an influence on me professionally than any other US city, now that I come to think about it. Certainly with *High Fidelity*, one of the things I was trying to do was cross Barry Levinson with Anne Tyler. Levinson, Tyler, *The Wire*, John Waters . . . None of these seem even to share an aesthetic, and yet there is an incredibly distinctive body of work that's come out of your city. I've never been there, although I'd like to visit. Can you explain how it might have produced this work?

DS: I'm somewhat at a loss to explain Baltimore's storytelling appeal. The interesting thing is that all of us are slicing off different pieces of the same city. My demi-monde is decidedly not the Baltimore of Barry Levinson or John Waters in terms of filmmaking, and none of us get close to the blue-blood districts of Anne Tyler's Roland Park. Laura Lippman moves all around the city, but her latest stand-alone novels are actually strongly referenced to Baltimore County, which is the suburban subdivision that actually encircles Baltimore city. She's been mining places like Towson and Padonia and Owings Mills, where a lot of the upper-middle-class wealth has migrated.

One thing that I do feel is that by getting out of the traditionally dominant locales of New York, Los Angeles, Washington, Chicago, writers stand a better chance of speaking to conditions that are reflective of a lot of less-than-unique or less-than-grandiose second-tier cities. New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington – these are unique places, by dint of their size, their wealth, and unique aspects of their culture (New York as financial, fashion, and theater capital, and as cultural icon, or Washington as the government city, or Los Angeles as the film capital of the country). Baltimore is a post-industrial city, wedged between D.C. and Philadelphia, and struggling to find its future and reconcile its past. In that sense it's like St. Louis and Cleveland and Philly and a lot of other rust-belt American places, and so stories from here have a chance of being about more than Baltimore per se. The storytelling here might be quite detailed in referencing local geography and culture, but it translates easily to elsewhere and therefore acquires additional relevance easily.

I imagine, acknowledging my general ignorance, that a story set in London is de facto a London story, applicable nowhere else in the UK in terms of environment. But a story set in Manchester might more easily resonate in Leeds or Liverpool or Newcastle or wherever. We play ourselves as unique, and, in truth, we value that which is genuine to Baltimore, but on another level we come across as Everycity.

NH: There's a little bit in an Anne Tyler novel, I seem to remember, where characters are confused about whether Baltimore is a southern or a northern city – that must help a bit too, surely, that ambiguity, if you're trying to avoid the kind of big-city inflection you're talking about . . .

DS: Yes, that line about the most northern southern city or most southern northern city is one known to all Baltimoreans. Maryland (and Baltimore) was very divided at the outbreak of the Civil War and President Lincoln had to arrest the state legislature and hold them without charge at Fort McHenry to prevent the state from seceding and going with the Confederacy. Shades of Guantanamo. The Eastern Shore (on the other side of the Chesapeake Bay) was pro-slavery, as was southern Maryland and much of Baltimore. Western Maryland was pro-Union. And the first Civil War casualties occurred on Pratt Street in downtown Baltimore as citizens rioted and

threw rocks at a Massachusetts regiment that was marching from one train station to the other to travel south and reinforce Washington at the start of the war. Oh, and John Wilkes Booth, who assassinated Lincoln, was a Baltimore native and his prominent family of actors, John Wilkes included, are buried downtown in Green Mount Cemetery.

To continue this useless history lesson, you may remember – from the point of view of king and country – that Fort McHenry was the place where our national anthem was penned by a fellow named Francis Scott Key, who was a prisoner on a British ship that was bombarding the fort during the War of 1812. You Brits had burned Washington and Philadelphia and you were set to torch Baltimore, having landed an army near the city. But unless the fleet could reduce the fort, the navy could not sail into the harbor and support the invasion. In the morning, the star-spangled banner still flew over McHenry and so we had something to sing at the beginning of sporting events, and the British army, having fought the Battle of North Point against Baltimore irregulars to a draw, re-embarked on His Majesty's ships and sailed away.

Which brings me to my ugliest moment as an American, one of which I am quite perversely proud. Years ago, I was touring the crypts of St. Paul's in London and we were shown all the generals who had the opportunity to be buried around Wellington. And this elfin little tour guide, who had as a young man stood on the cathedral roof during the Blitz and picked up incendiary sticks and hurled them away to save the edifice, got a twinkle in his eye and said, "You colonials might be interested to note the resting place of Major General Ross, who in 1812 burned your capital city." And so there he was. And his gravestone, as I recollect, declared: VICTOR OF THE BATTLES OF WASHINGTON AND PHILADELPHIA. ACTIVE AT THE BATTLE OF BALTIMORE.

If the ghetto dick-grab were known to me in 1985, I might've held on to mine when I uttered the following: "I'm from Baltimore. And I can tell you what 'active' means. It means we kicked his ass." An empty moment floated through the crypt, and the other Americans on the tour just about died. At that instant, I felt it was a good thing I didn't go on with what I knew, because Ross was actually mortally wounded at North Point by two Baltimoreans with squirrel rifles who crept through the brush and shot him off his horse, infuriating the British, who sent an entire detachment

of Royal Marines to kill the sharpshooters, named Wells and McComas. (They are buried under a monument in the heart of the East Baltimore ghetto and have streets named after them near the fort.)

“Quite,” said the tour guide, who mercifully smiled at me, vaguely amused. Or at least I like to imagine he was vaguely amused.

NH: I have to ask you about the casting, and whether the actors had any input into their characters. Because it seems to me that to delineate street-corner drug dealers as carefully as you have done, so that they’re not just some faceless and indistinguishable army of violent no-hopers, must have required an extraordinary amount of patience and ingenuity. Was it all in the script? How involved were you in the casting? I’ve been watching *The Corner*, so I know that you’ve worked with some of those guys before (it’s always very disconcerting, if you’ve watched *The Wire* first, to come across a crack-smoking cop/politician!). But what were you looking for? Are there many Baltimore kids in there? And how come you used so many English people?! I absolutely couldn’t believe it when I found out that Idris Elba, who plays Stringer Bell, was actually English.

DS: We cast very carefully, and I’m involved – as are the other leading producers – in every decision on every continuing role. We try to avoid those moments in which well-known actors appear onscreen and throw viewers right out of their sense of *The Wire* as a documentarian exercise. We don’t hire a lot of LA actors as a result; we lean more heavily on New York actors or even London stage actors, and wherever we can, utilizing actual Baltimoreans for small supporting roles. By having professional actors work off the real people, it makes the world we are depicting that much more improbable and idiosyncratic and, therefore, more credible.

In addition, the truth to the characterizations is that most, if not all, of the major characters are rooted in people that we know or knew in Baltimore – either through Ed Burns’s having policed them as a detective or taught them as a schoolteacher, or Bill Zorzi or myself having written about them. This is not to say there is a one-to-one ratio between real people and the fictional characters. A drug dealer might have attributes of two or three real-life counterparts, and we will steal histories from one trafficker and apply them to another, or mix and match. But it is rooted

in the real, which I believe leads to unique and idiosyncratic portrayals. A lot of it is already in the script and we generally urge our actors to stay on book. But the actors are also pros and they are making each role their own. Sometimes they offer an ad-lib which is an improvement or enhancement to the story and we keep it. Sometimes we push them back on book. But there is a producer on set for every scene to make that decision and ensure that the scripts are honored, and our actors are very professional, and, at this point, trusting, about the material.

As to *The Corner*, or even *Homicide* – it's true that once we find a strong actor, we remember that we did. And since these actors are active on the East Coast, we tend to utilize them where we can. Clarke Peters, who plays Lester Freamon, has spent much of his career on the London stage (he's doing *Porgy and Bess* there now), and we saw him in the Kevin Spacey revival of *The Iceman Cometh* on Broadway. Aidan Gillen we also saw on the New York stage. Dominic West put himself on tape from London and gave a wonderful read on McNulty, so we called him back. And Idris, as Stringer? He came in and read in New York and just nailed it. We won't discriminate against a British actor who gives the best read, regardless of what you fucks did to our capital in 1812. And of course one benefit of an English actor is that unless they've been overexposed in American media, it adds to the credibility of our simulated Baltimore, provided they can master the accent. Their faces are unfamiliar and therefore less likely to pull viewers out of the moment.

We start filming in late March [2007] and go to mid-August. That will be our last season. It's funny. It took American audiences four seasons to find us, but this last season, something happened and find us they did. By the time we're off the air for a few years, we'll be a hit. In the last couple months, both the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times Magazine* have asked to have reporters follow filming to write curtain-raisers for the fifth season, which won't air until 2008. We in Baltimore are used to being ignored. We are moderately disturbed by the trend, but we will try to make do.

NH: I'm really interested in your relationship with Baltimore – I mean, on a practical level. You've accused just about every layer of officialdom of corruption, idleness, vindictiveness, and so on . . . What has been the official response? Do natives write? And what does your press make of it? I

don't suppose any American city has ever had to deal with anything quite like you guys . . .

DS: The short answer is that those in the institutions depicted who represent labor or even middle management are by and large more likely to embrace the show than those people running things. The mayor – who is now our state's governor, having been recently elevated in last fall's election – pretty clearly hates the show. Initially, after the first season aired, he held up our permits and told city agencies not to cooperate with us, and in a subsequent conversation with me on the phone, said that Baltimore wanted to be “out of *The Wire* business.” I reminded him that before turning the pilot script in to HBO, I had lunch with him and his chief of staff and I told them that the next drama, should it be picked up, would be a much darker, much more realistic vision of the city and its problems. I told him that I understood that Baltimore had already had two bites of the apple with *Homicide* and *The Corner*, and that if he wanted, I could certainly set and film the story in any number of other rust-belt cities. This is true of course; the problems we are depicting are not unique to Baltimore. “No,” he said. “We're proud of the shows. Film it here.”

On being reminded of this, the mayor asked whether it would be possible to move the show to some other city. I told him that I could not relocate for the second season (we had already built our second-season sets and the Maryland Port Authority was cooperating in giving us locations for the dockworkers' arc) but that I would pick up and move to Philadelphia immediately upon completion of filming.

“Will the show then be about Philadelphia?”

No, I explained. We'd already established that McNulty and Co. were Baltimore cops and that the city depicted was Baltimore. “I'm stuck and you're stuck. We had this conversation two years ago when I asked you that day at lunch, remember?”

“So Philadelphia would get the money for you filming there, but it would still be Baltimore.”

“Exactly.”

Long pause, followed by: “I'll reconsider your request for filming permits.”

Then he hung up. To his credit, however, the mayor then became stoic and silent about the show, and the city agencies – which had turned uncooperative on us – suddenly did an about-face. And the Baltimore political and corporate infrastructure has been entirely professional for the ensuing three seasons of filming. I credit the mayor with a certain amount of maturation. We hear from beat cops, inner-city kids, drug dealers, longshoremen, lower-level political functionaries – those who follow it say they love it. That may not be everybody – after all, we’re only hearing from the people with whom we have encounters and maybe those who don’t enjoy or appreciate what we’re doing are being polite with us. But when Omar or Stringer or Bodie came out of their trailers on an inner-city film set, they were greeted with absolute affection and allegiance by the people living in those neighborhoods. There is a sense in the “other” or neglected America that there is finally a televised drama that encompasses the world in which they live.

Tellingly, after the first season aired and when the mayor was angry, the city council sponsored a resolution urging a publicity campaign to improve Baltimore’s image and citing the negative imagery of current television productions about Baltimore, of which there is only one. I had no problem with the city doing anything it wants to improve its image (including attending to its myriad social and economic problems, of course), and, privately, through the head of the state film commission, we urged the sponsors of the resolution to emphasize that positive action and divorce the measure from any reference, oblique or otherwise, to *The Wire*. Our argument being that government should not be in the business of commenting – as a governmental act, individuals can say what they like or dislike – on the value of any story told by anyone about anything. The sponsor ignored us and the resolution headed toward a committee vote.

I showed up at the hearing and introduced myself not as David Simon, executive producer of *The Wire*, or David Simon of HBO, or even David Simon, president of Blown Deadline Productions. I started out by saying that I lived on William Street in the First Councilmanic District and as a Baltimore resident, I objected to . . . Incredibly, I think they were surprised to see me at the hearing. I really think they believed I’d moved to Los Angeles or some shit. Anyway, I pissed them off even more with that performance, which likely led to the angry phone conversation with the mayor, as the

sponsor of the resolution was a political ally. But I figure when they fire the first shot across your bow, you should, if you can, fire one back.

NH: Every time I think, Man, I'd love to write for *The Wire*, I quickly realize that I wouldn't know my "True dats" from my "narcos." Did you know all that before you started? Do you get input from those who might be more familiar with the idiom?

DS: My standard for verisimilitude is simple and I came to it when I started to write prose narrative: fuck the average reader. I was always told to write for the average reader in my newspaper life. The average reader, as they meant it, was some suburban white subscriber with two-point-whatever kids and three-point-whatever cars and a dog and a cat and lawn furniture. He knows nothing and he needs everything explained to him right away, so that exposition becomes this incredible, story-killing burden. Fuck him. Fuck him to hell.

Beginning with *Homicide*, the book, I decided to write for the people living the event, the people in that very world. I would reserve some of the exposition, assuming the reader/viewer knew more than he did, or could, with a sensible amount of effort, hang around long enough to figure it out. I also realized – and this was more important to me – that I would consider the book or film a failure if people in these worlds took in my story and felt that I did not get their existence, that I had not captured their world in any way that they would respect.

Make no mistake – with journalism, this doesn't mean I want the subjects to agree with every page. Sometimes the adversarial nature of what I am saying requires that I write what the subjects will not like, in terms of content. But in terms of dialogue, vernacular, description, tone – I want a homicide detective, or a drug slinger, or a longshoreman, or a politician anywhere in America to sit up and say, Whoa, that's how my day is. That's my goal. It derives not from pride or ambition or any writerly vanity, but from fear. Absolute fear. Like many writers, I live every day with the vague nightmare that at some point, someone more knowledgeable than myself is going to sit up and pen a massive screed indicating exactly where my work is shallow and fraudulent and rooted in lame, half-assed assumptions. I see myself labeled a writer, and I get good reviews, and I have the same doubts

buried, latent, even after my successes. I suspect many, many writers feel this way. I think it is rooted in the absolute arrogance that comes with standing up at the community campfire and declaring, essentially, that we have the best story that ought to be told next and that people should fucking listen. Storytelling and storytellers are rooted in pay-attention-to-me onanism. Listen to this! I'm from Baltimore and I've got some shit you fucking need to see, people! Put down that CSI shit and pay some heed, motherfuckers! I'm gonna tell it best, and most authentic, and coolest, and . . . I mean, presenting yourself as the village griot is done, for me, with no more writerly credential than a dozen years as a police reporter in Baltimore and a C-average bachelor's degree in general studies from a large state university. On paper, why me? But I have a feeling every good writer, regardless of background, doubts his own voice just a little, and his own right to have that voice heard. It's the simple effrontery of the thing. Who died and made me Storyteller?

So yes, for the drug dealers and the cops, I spent years gathering string on who they are, how they think and talk. When we needed to add politicians, well, I covered some politics so I had the general tone, but we added Bill Zorzi, the *Baltimore Sun's* best political reporter, to the writing staff. When it came to longshoremen, we added Rafael Alvarez, a former reporter and short-story writer who had quit to join the seamen's union and whose family was three generations in the maritime industry. And the rest of us, myself included, spent weeks getting to know longshoremen and the operations of the port and the port unions, just hanging around the shipping terminals for days on end, so as to credibly achieve those voices. Again, what I wanted was that longshoremen across America would watch *The Wire* and say, Cool, they know my world. I've never seen my world depicted on TV, and these guys got it. And I feared that one of them would stand up and say: No, that's complete bullshit. So that never changes for me.

Which brings us back to Average Reader. Because the truth is you can't write just for people living the event, if the market will not also follow. TV still being something of a mass medium, even with all the fractured cable universe now reducing audience size per channel. Well, here's a secret that I learned with *Homicide* and have held to: if you write something that is so credible that the insider will stay with you, then the outsider will follow as

well. *Homicide*, *The Corner*, *The Wire*, *Generation Kill* – these are travelogues of a kind, allowing Average Reader/Viewer to go where he otherwise would not. He loves being immersed in a new, confusing, and possibly dangerous world that he will never see. He likes not knowing every bit of vernacular or idiom. He likes being trusted to acquire information on his terms, to make connections, to take the journey with only his intelligence to guide him. Most smart people cannot watch most TV, because it has generally been a condescending medium, explaining everything immediately, offering no ambiguities, and using dialogue that simplifies and mitigates against the idiosyncratic ways in which people in different worlds actually communicate. It eventually requires that characters from different places talk the same way as the viewer. This, of course, sucks.

There are two ways of traveling. One is with a tour guide, who takes you to the crap everyone sees. You take a snapshot and move on, experiencing nothing beyond a crude visual and the retention of a few facts. The other way to travel requires more time – hence the need for this kind of viewing to be a long-form series or miniseries, in this bad metaphor – but if you stay in one place, say, if you put up your bag and go down to the local pub or shebeen and you play the fool a bit and make some friends and open yourself up to a new place and new time and new people, soon you have a sense of another world entirely. We're after this: making television into that kind of travel, intellectually. Bringing those pieces of America that are obscured or ignored or otherwise segregated from the ordinary and effectively arguing their relevance and existence to ordinary Americans. Saying, in effect, this is part of the country you have made. This too is who we are and what we have built. Think again, motherfuckers.

And the only difference between what we're doing and a world traveler getting off the beaten path is that our viewers don't really have to play the fool. They don't even have to put their ass out of the sofa. They now have a sense of what is happening on a drug corner, or in a homicide unit, or inside a political campaign – and our content, if gently massaged to create drama, is nonetheless rooted in accurate reporting and experience.

And of course the last thing is that on some level, you have to love people. All different kinds. That seems to me a prerequisite for capturing dialogue well. Stand around and listen. A favorite story to finish: once Richard Price came to Baltimore to research part of *Freedomland*. We had

a murder case similar to the one he was writing and he wanted a tour, so that he could acquire more of the tone of the thing, I guess. So down he comes and we go around and research his case, meet the witnesses and the detectives and whatever. And because he's Richard fucking Price and I've loved his ass ever since *The Wanderers*, I just gotta show my shit a little. I was researching and writing *The Corner*, the book, at the time. So we drive over to West Baltimore and I start to show him the 'hood where Ed and I are gathering our stuff. And at some point I run into Gary McCullough, one of my main characters. And Gary, who had just copped and was high as a kite, is talking with us and he laughs at something I say, and says, "Oh, man, you is an apple-scrapple." Apple-scrapple being a particular Baltimore phrase in the African-American idiom meaning, well, a special dessert or special treat. Gary says it and I see this look cross Price's face and I think, for just a second, Oh, shit. Now he's got apple-scrapple. I hope he doesn't publish before I do or he'll beat me to it. Sure enough, when Gary departs, Richard immediately turns to me and says, "Apple-scrapple. That's a keeper."

Fucking writers.

Nick Hornby