RENATA ADLER INTERVIEW
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Renata Adler
Author and Film Critic
Interviewed by Nancy Steiner
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START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Story Features

Kunhardt Film Foundation

CREW:

Ms. Renata Adler, take one.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Renata Adler

Author and Film Critic

How do you feel about writing?

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RENATA ADLER:

I've had writer's block for most of my life. In fact, in college, I had writer's block, but I have a friend or I had a friend, he passed away, who's one of the best writers I ever knew, Frank Conroy, who said it was like sitting down at

the keyboard and it came to him like sort of music in the stream of literature. So I don't know, but for me, it's very hard. It's very hard. I think it's very hard. Sometimes for a short passage, it's great. I mean, it's fun.

What do you do when you have writer's block?

RENATA ADLER:

I tend to go to bed for really long periods of time with depression and then I think this can't go on, it's really not good, and then I sort of pull myself together and I get up, and once, I wound up going to Biafra, for instance. I mean, that's quite far to go. Otherwise, to a beach, you know, just anything just to change where I am, change the routine of not writing.

What advice do you give to writers with writer's block?

RENATA ADLER:

'm so terrible about that, Nancy. I'm the wrong person to give advice to writers. That is, if you write and if it feels right to you, that's terrific. I find that I rewrite an awful lot. I mean, I rewrite so much that now, I guess I'm trying to write a memoir and stuff, and I find so many drafts of everything, not drafts because I start over every time, but sometimes I can't tell what the difference is. Obviously, something was so crucial that it had to be changed at once and I can't find it. I can't find it, but sometimes it's really so bad that I can tell the difference. So it's so different for every writer so far as I know.

Do you see yourself as fearless in your writing?

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RENATA ADLER:

If you're not used to being nasty in person, that the fearless usually comes if I've written a piece that is less than admiring of somebody who's powerful, right? Not powerful in the sense that people necessarily use it, but who has power over my life, for example. If I'm not… I mean, fearless, for example, you're not supposed to attack the press ever, nor disagree. I mean, if the facts are different that's just too bad, leave them alone, but it used to be. I mean, of course, life is so different now, but it used to be unforgivable to have disagreements with the press, seen as… as though it were one thing. I mean, there were always wonderful writers and wonderful reporters, but also there was a sort of consensus press and that's where the fearless came from because you're just not meant to disagree.

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RENATA ADLER:

I mean, I once did something about the correction section of the *New York Times* and it was actually, the corrections were hilarious, but they never corrected for anything that was substantial, and in those days, I'm talking about those days whenever they were. So that's where the fearless came from. I never had done a fearless thing. The question of what inspires fear, and I've never thought this before, but I think there's a kind of fear that shyness brings on. So the scariest thing is other people and the scariest, but somehow, whenever I've gone to cover a war or something, just by luck… First of all, it wasn't clear that it was… There was no sign. In Vietnam, there was no sign that there was war, except when somebody asked me to duck once, but I mean, I was flying around with these helicopters.

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RENATA ADLER:

I was allowed to stay with a guy who was the advisor to the province chief, and all they did is talk about cock fights, and there was an advisor there, a military advisor whose job was to spread poison so the leaves would fall off the trees so that you would see the enemy on the ground, and of course, all those guys got terribly sick and it's a terrible idea anyway, but there I was. So I thought, well, but nothing is going on here and here I am, I've missed it again, and then when I left, shortly after I left, the village, I mean, was bombed and ceased to exist, so that was that. So it was scary, but it didn't feel scary.

What did you learn from covering the Vietnam War?

RENATA ADLER:

One thing I learned, to my surprise, I mean, the minute I flew in because I'd read all these pieces about this terrible destruction that we were reeking and everything, I expected to find ruins and terrified people, and immediately is that we were losing and that we had lost, and this was 1967.

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RENATA ADLER:

I mean, nothing could have been clearer. I mean, you flew in and on your pan am jet and you flew around in helicopters, but I mean, it was so clear that we were losing and then, to my surprise, many of the women that I saw were pregnant. I mean, life was going on as though there were no war, but of course not. I mean, of course, for the people who were there, there was war,

but it just couldn't… The minute you flew in, so that all those anti-war pieces with their appeals to whatever they were appealing to, it's not what I saw when I flew in. I thought this could be a resort for all, and of course, it wasn't. It wasn't. I just didn't feel it. I was there by accident because McCall's was hiring young writers at other publications to write a single piece one way or the other. They said, would I do something non-military and non-political, and I said, yes, that would be just what I'd want to do, and they said, how about you go on a bombing mission and then you go and interview some people who were bombed, and I said, but the problem with that is that it sounds both military and political.

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RENATA ADLER:

And they said, I promise, this is what they said, "You'll think of something." So I did think of something and it was to follow this guy around and he had been practicing what they called piano wire diplomacy in the early days, and piano wire diplomacy was to sneak up behind people with a piece of wire and strangle them. So that was from early days. So that was a more dramatic time.

Do you think there were truths being presented differently about the Vietnam War during that time?

RENATA ADLER:

It seemed to me there was no possible reason for being there. I mean, it just seemed to me from the minute I flew in, I thought, what are we doing here? Nobody likes us, nobody. I mean, there was talking about winning the hearts and minds of the people. It got to be sort of a joke. I mean, if you look up in

the sky and there's somebody who might be bombing you, you're never going to forgive them even if they say they're on your side.

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RENATA ADLER:

I couldn't imagine. It seemed to me such folly and corrupt folly beside, because for instance, I was told that the SO trucks or whatever oil there was, that they had an agreement where they were never destroyed and the same, there was another thing like that, and I was told that the CIA was transporting drugs and I didn't believe it. I guess what I didn't believe in those days was that any Americans were corrupt, let alone official and then it turned out quite a number were, but meanwhile, people were getting killed.

Did you believe there to be corruption during the Vietnam War?

RENATA ADLER:

This is an aberration. I thought this is nothing like that. I mean, I never saw anything like that again, but it turned out to exist. I mean, I was a Republican. I mean, I wasn't a Republican, Republican, but I was a sort of a Rockefeller Republican. And so it wasn't as though I was very right wing or very left wing or very anything wing, but I couldn't understand what we were doing there. By the end, I guess there's this thing that I was working for the impeachment inquiry and after it was over—the Nixon impeachment inquiry— and after it was over, I mean, because it was very peculiar the way that worked, I thought, "Someday, there's going to be real grounds to impeach somebody." It didn't seem to me that strong with Nixon then, although that was the side I was on.

What was your experience of covering Nixon's impeachment and the Watergate scandal?

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RENATA ADLER:

That was such a fluke and that's what I found mostly, as old as I am, that some lives, it's planning and organization and mine is entirely fluke. So I make it no sooner make a plan, then it falls through, but things that happened by chance. So there was this character, John Doar, whom I met in Selma, who was legendary in the South. He was working for the Justice Department, and then… I mean, after all that was over, one Christmas Eve, I got a phone call. It was from John and he said, you're a Republican, aren't you? Which I thought is a peculiar thing to say, and then I said, yeah, and he said, you could be fair, and I thought, it's a very peculiar thing to say, and he said, could you fly down tomorrow morning?

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RENATA ADLER:

And so I did and then he said, "I want you to work for the inquiry." It's not the way… They keep comparing the Watergate hearings to the impeachment inquiry hearings, and of course, the Watergate hearings we had were not the interesting ones. The Senate ones, these were so boring and that was part of the idea. But anyway, he said, "You can write about this after it's over, but it's got to be a total secret that you're here." So my first assignment was to write speeches for Chairman Rodino. If I hadn't run into John Doar on the March for Selma and the other marches in the South, I wouldn't know him, and if he hadn't by chance been appointed the chief council for the Watergate inquiry,

the one that counted, the one in Congress, I wouldn't have had that job.

Do you think Nixon should have been impeached?

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RENATA ADLER:

I don't know. I don't know, but I— Yes, I guess I do, but because people hated him. I mean, people had grown to hate him, he couldn't govern anymore and so on, but one of the things that John said to me very early on is we are not going to do any investigating, none, which is an odd thing to say. The other was that no one could tilt, no one could express a view about whether he should be impeached or not, and that was the way he was going to proceed and he said, "I want you to write this chairman's speeches and I want them written in such a way that they get the quote of the day in the Times every time he speaks." And I said, "Well, John, it's kind of hard to get him the quote of the day every time he speaks if he's not allowed to say anything." And he said, "Will you handle that?" And then I said, "Well, how are you going to do it with 40 young lawyers, and none of them are allowed to tilt for or against, and you're not planning really to investigate? And they're not going to tilt? What are you going to do?" And I mean… He said, "You work them very hard and you don't tell them anything." And he said the same about the Congress people, and that's what he did. I mean, it really was very strange and nobody seemed to notice. They noticed it was boring, but that's all they noticed and then there came a day when people just had enough.

How did you get started?

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RENATA ADLER:

I sort of started out with no friends and no anything, and then I used to think… you'd know those people that you don't want sit next to on the subway. I thought if I only turned into one of those people that you don't worry about sitting next to on the subway. So I was not headed at all in a direction where I would ever meet anybody, and then people kept coming into my life or I into theirs and friendships developed and relationships developed, and then these fluke public phenomena that happened.

What was your introduction at *The New Yorker*?

RENATA ADLER:

I'd met in Paris, the secretary to S. N. Behrman, the playwright, and she had said, "Well, you ought to meet Mr. Behrman when you go to New York." So I went to meet Mr. Behrman and he said, "You seem sort of bored in graduate school. Why don't you do some work for me?" I get sent plays in French or in German.

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RENATA ADLER:

And they asked me to do them and I'm never going to do them and why don't I say I can't do them unless somebody translates them, and then you can get this job as a translator. So I was in graduate school and I was translating this incredibly boring play and then he said, "No, this isn't working. Why don't you go to New Yorker and see whether there's a job?" And of course, there was no job. So it's like that. It's all like that. One can work as hard as ever and get no

results, and then it seems when it's done nothing and, like, from out the blue comes something to do or be or to know. But in a way, you could say that life is so… I mean, nothing in that way, but I don't think so because the effort followed by the fluke… I mean, some people would say the fluke is not a fluke. It's a result of the effort, but it isn't.

What matters most to you as a writer?

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RENATA ADLER:

The prose and as much as you can say, as accurately as you can say it without being absolutely boring. I mean, it's nice if there's some life in there that has to do with the way the prose is and the thought is, and for instance, I can't do plots as a kind of essential thing in everything I read, I read for plot. I mean, everybody reads for plot. You want to know— Can't write plot. I suppose it's apart from my family, it's the thing that matters most and there's something about— but it has to do more with sentences than it should and with words than it should. I mean, it should have a more... Well, no, this is only true in fiction. That is, in nonfiction, I really do care if it's factual. In my sense factual or in what used to be the public sense factual. I like it to be factual and I like it to be not already extremely everybody's position one way or the other. So I'd like it to be new to the extent that anything can be new.

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RENATA ADLER:

I didn't think journalism should be taught at the undergraduate level at all, and when John Silver offered me a job in this university professors

department, which was mainly for top students, right? He said, “But well, you have to teach in more than one department. You have to.” So I said, “Well, not journalism,” and he said, “Yes, it has to be journalism.” And so I did and I said, “Only if I can teach this seminar called misinformation.” And he said, “Sure.” And it turned out, they were wonderful. We took… In the end, we took one case only, but that was one of the most wonderful… I mean, there's this thing in the courts when the jury does something that the judge is completely contrary to the judge's instructions. I think it's called jury nullification and they ran away with it. They just ran away with it.

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RENATA ADLER:

The way stories were set up in newspapers or in magazines at the time seemed to me just… I said let's look through some pieces that looked like news and let's strip them of everything except what is factual there and improve… I mean, in sent evidentiary. So almost everything fell away from every story.

What makes for a good reporter?

RENATA ADLER:

Curiosity. I mean, genuine, deep curiosity. Really good reporters are out there reporting events. I mean, the best reporters I've ever met, for example, were war reporters or those reporters out in the field. I mean, be on the model of the police blotter kind of reporter if they came up that way.

Which reporters do you admire?

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RENATA ADLER:

I can't think of any at the moment because they would be more generational, and now I've become just this completely different person who watches– who watches MSNBC and CNN, and nothing else because I'm just sort of fascinated with what goes on there, but there, there's a piece for somebody to write is the role of commercials in the dumbing down of everyone. I mean, I really think it's— Commercials has become— because you can't escape changing channels just to… but Rachel Maddow was a good reporter, and of course, she wasn't out in the field, so it's completely contrary to what I said before.

What makes a good writer?

RENATA ADLER:

It's so individual. You just know when you're reading one. Except I didn't know— It's often happened to me. I'm sure it's happened to you as well when I'm reading, I can't do it. I just can't read this thing right. Happened to me with *100 Years of Solitude* and I would get as far as, say, page 50 and I couldn't make it to page 51 and it just, every character seems to me the same and I just couldn't possibly, and then one day, I was in the mood and it's just so brilliant. It's unbelievably brilliant. So I don't know.

Which writers do you admire?

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RENATA ADLER:

Jane Austen and Joseph Conrad and Henry James, and maybe sometimes

Edith Wharton, and… I mean, it just goes along there a lot, and the ones that I would've said formed my life and formed my notion of writing, and I don't remember plot. I don't remember any. Do you remember stuff? I come across stuff and I just don't remember it. You can't recapture it by reading it again. It doesn't work. I mean, one of the ones— contemporary ones that genuinely means an awful lot to me is John le Carré because— and it's sometimes there, it was so hard to get into one of those… books in the series, but that was pretty brilliant. Of course, it's all plot, it's all character, all dialogue. The year is completely right. Everything is right, but it's hard to get into sometimes.

Why did John le Carré's writing matter to you?

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RENATA ADLER:

I really care... Here's a very key thing for me, but it's in another context, but it's very key for me. There came a period in my life and I think it continues when people are thinking of the writer and not the character in it. They're not in the piece. They're identifying with a writer and that's terrible. I mean, it's the end of… it doesn't work and I think it came from movies because the movie critics became so powerful that they started with the auteur theory and this and that, and you don't want, even with a movie, you don't want people identifying with the people who make it. You want them in it. All the characters are so exact. All the lines are so exact, and I guess the underlying truth, which I didn't expect to reach, I mean, you didn't know how it was going to end. This was volume after volume, but that… truth throughout is who is the betrayer and the betrayer's at the top. So often, the betrayer is at

the top. The arch villain is at the top.

How do you deal with grief?

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RENATA ADLER:

Grief is not… I mean, it's so inevitable. So I mean, when actually, the Queen of England said that thing, which I thought was hers, but turned out to be quote, but who cares. When she said, "Grief is the price we pay for love." I mean, that's just a wonder– Isn't that wonderful? And it turned out that she hadn't invented it, but she used it and… it certainly seems to be true. The question is, is it worth it, but I guess it's worth it. We have to all sort of live as though what we were taught as children were true, which it may well be, but it certainly hasn't seemed to me in my time.

Has the world broken your heart?

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RENATA ADLER:

I wish I could claim that. I wasn't that good a person that I could claim that, but it certainly disappointed my expectations. On the other hand, I've been so lucky. I mean, the flukes have been so lucky for me. So I can't really complain.

What I want to tell my son about the world

RENATA ADLER:

You have to trust the world. Where else are we? This is where we are. This is what we're given and then the question is, what do we do? How do we

behave? And still, all things considered, it's better to behave well and to behave decently… but that's about it. I mean, why? I don't know why. It just is. It's just better. It's not because we were taught that, but I'm very worried about that because I guess maybe every generation worries about these things, but memory.

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RENATA ADLER:

I mean, it used to be that from generation to generation, what held a culture together, not just a certain generation to that culture, but generation by generation was knowing certain things by heart like the nursery rhymes and all those things. Do children know those anymore? They don't know them. I don't think they know them. It's all new now. So, I'm not really qualified to speak of it, but I think it really marks the dissolution of a culture when people don't know some things that their grandparents, for no reason, knew by heart. Knowing things by heart, that– there's the thing that matters to me as a writer, for example, knowing things by heart. I'd much rather say knowing things by heart than memorizing things. I mean, memorize is such an ugly word and knowing… You know what I mean? That kind of thing matters to me.

Does human decency matter to you?

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RENATA ADLER:

Enormously. I mean, doesn't it matter to you? I mean, it's just such a glory, decency. I mean, people being nice to each other is just, whether sincerely or

not sincerely is just such a… it's just such a clearly good thing, though I don't know why. I mean, we still call it a good thing, but it is a good thing.

Discuss why you referred to yourself as an "outside agitator"

RENATA ADLER:

Because of Selma. That is when Mr. Sean let me go to Selma. I had just been reviewing books or something. I didn't know what to do, so I wore high heel shoes and nylons and dressed for it, and of course, first of all, it's not what you do for a march, but I thought that's what you do. So I arrived and that's when I immediately looked like an outside agitator. That's what it was. I didn't feel like an outside agitator. I felt like a fool, but as it turned out, that was all right because since I couldn't get into a hotel as an outside agitator, I had to stay with the marches, which was much better. I mean, spend the nights with them in the field.

Michael Wolff says your writing is most brutal towards journalism

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RENATA ADLER:

I'm not so sure I would take the word brutal, but I mean, it's his word. Certainly, I hope it in the sense that I hope it worked and it was not admiring how to put it. I really think it really is not that, but now, of course, everything's going to have to change. Journalism will have to change, law will have to change, everything will have to change. So who knows what we'll get?

Why were you critical of Pauline Kael?

RENATA ADLER:

I wrote a piece about Pauline Kael, who at the time, was not only the most famous film critic who ever lived, I think, but she also had become more famous than the films themselves and more of a star than the films themselves, and so governed the film world then that people were terrified of what Pauline's review would say. And also she was exercising power out there in the world in that it was appointments at universities, appointments as critics of this and that, and it had seeped into every other form of criticism. This kind of visceral, awful finding of what seemed like witticisms, but were just— So, and it had seeped into discourse generally and so I just thought this is not good.

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RENATA ADLER:

I wrote a piece and I was critical of her, and what I did was I, because I think it's the only kind of criticism that's likely to be fair or work is I just quoted her again and again and again, and so I would say there's this, and then I would give so many examples of this that not every editor would permit it. I got slammed. I got slammed and I got slammed oddly enough for cruelty, which I would've said was what I was writing the piece against, and I tried and there's a sentence in my piece that I regret just enormously. It is just a disgusting generalizing sentence and it followed Pauline to her grave and it will follow me to my grave, and it was intended— I mean, I would cut it in a minute, but it said something like everything she wrote, everything from beginning to end, every syllable is worthless.

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RENATA ADLER:

The reason I did this is one of the ironies of life. I don't believe in the subconscious much. So I don't think this was a subconscious, it's just an irony. I was trying to find something good so that it would be clear that I was fair because I was quoting her saying something wonderful in this book and I couldn't find it, and so I got mad at myself, and of course, then I got mad at her. I thought, why is there not something in here that I can find that I can show that lists at least.

How does a bad review affect your work?

RENATA ADLER:

The things that are frightening to me, I mean, I guess it's true. My limited experience of war and my limited experience of real risk or danger is not as fear inspiring to me as stagefright, for instance, or being interviewed or something like that. It's one's life as a person in the real world that is scary and not because somebody might be lurking beyond that corner, but for other reasons, for a form of shyness, which seems unlikely in my case, but there it was.

How would you describe yourself?

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RENATA ADLER:

I would describe myself as a fairly nervous, depressed person normally, but not always. I don't know. People know how to describe themselves? It's just a lot of things strike me as funny. A lot of things are interesting to me. I mean,

there's that to be grateful for. I mean, I'm not easily bored at all. I am bored by the idea of boredom as a form of art and whatever Warhol was doing and stuff like that. I don't get it, but that said, I'm not easily bored. I'm easily interested. I'm the sort of person who can never think what I want to say until it's too late. That's about it. It might occur to me when I get home. That's it.

How do you know when your writing is complete?

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RENATA ADLER:

I often don't, but once, I knew so clearly that it was the last sentence and the editor wanted to cut the last sentence, and I didn't want to run the piece if it wasn't going to have the last sentence. And that was the end, but that time, I knew for sure. Earlier, it happened to me. One of the few happy editing experiences that I've had is an editor who looked at my piece and he said, the end is here, and it was before the ending that I had, but I don't know when I know. It becomes time to know with— Nonfiction is always very different from fiction. I mean, nonfiction, it's when the argument seems to be made. I mean, you don't have to keep going on about it.

How do you see the relationship between the press and the government today?

RENATA ADLER:

I don't understand it today. I mean, for a while there, when it was sort of adversarial toward the, or it regarded itself as adversarial to the government, I found that it was inadvertently an instrument of government because by

using, say, the anonymous leak and so on, what would happen is some bureaucrat would call them and I mean, leaks were plants, but now, I don't know. I don't even think he can describe the press' unit at all at the moment. I don't read any newspapers, really. I just find myself watching those two public broadcasting things, which I never thought would happen. Even that is slowing down.

Writing about powerful establishments

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RENATA ADLER:

Pauline Kael was an example. I mean, she was the power in the field she was in, but it has happened to me. I mean, for example, it quite often happened with underground art. I would never attack whatever an underground artist is where a reputation is too frail, and it was true. It probably still is true that one of the ways to get a job as a writer was to attack somebody very powerful, and then the piece would meet somebody's attention, and they would hire you to do some small thing, and then you rose up. I don't know. It wasn't true in my case. I don't know that it's still true, but it was one of the ways it was quite common.

What was your motive for writing about powerful establishments?

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RENATA ADLER:

Pauline and I had the same editor at *The New Yorker* and he was a wonderful editor, wonderful person, and I was living alone in the country and I called

him up and I said, “Look, I've just been sent this book by Pauline Kael to review. Tell me why I should not write a nasty review of it.” And he said, “Because you admire her work,” and I thought, okay, and hung up, and I thought, that's right. I admire her work, and then I started to really find things I couldn't stand. So I called him again and I said, “Bill, I really don't admire her work anymore. I think it's awful. Tell me why I should not write this piece.” And he said, “Because you don't dislike everything about her work. She's not a limousine liberal.” And I said, “You're right. She's not a limousine liberal.”

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RENATA ADLER:

So we hung up and then this thing happened, which was this. I suddenly began to blame Pauline Kael and my not writing this review for my not writing anything I would really want to write. So I had no intention at the beginning of writing it, but of course, if I began to blame her, and it was certainly not her fault, and began to blame my not attacking her for my not being able to write what I'd really want to write, that's a pretty far out motive.

What was it like to be at the height of your career?

RENATA ADLER:

See, I wasn't famous in that way and Baryshnikov, I only sat next to him at lunch, so that doesn't really count, but Avedon is close to lots of people in different worlds, and I kept thinking, this is just so wonderful. I mean, for instance, Brooke Astor helped me a lot. I mean, she was sort of… I mean, my

own mother was wonderful, but Brooke was sort of a mother figure, and in fact, I went to visit Brooke with my mother at one point. Just the variety looking back, because I'm trying to finish my memoirs, looking back at who's in there, I just wasn't as aware as now. I mean, it was so diverse, the world that I was in, but I was never the center of it. I was just in it somehow.

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RENATA ADLER:

It just was surprising and it was individuals. It didn't feel like a world. It felt like individual friends. John Fairchild, who wrote a book, he was then editor of *Women's Wear Daily*, he said, "Things have come into such a sorry pass sort of in society that such people as," and I was one of them, "can be found at dinner." I mean, it was like that. So it wasn't a… No, it was just the people are still friends. People who are ever friends are still friends with the exception of one or two who are dead, as it happens. Yeah.

What did you think of Martin Luther King, Jr.?

RENATA ADLER:

Dr. King. Well, there was nobody like him. He was extraordinary. I didn't really know him. I was only, on occasion, near him because I was marching behind him more because that's it. That's it. I just, he changed the world and he had enemies on the left and enemies on the right.

What did you think of Deep Throat?

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RENATA ADLER:

Deep Throat, a fiction, demonstrably a fiction, but people like it so there it is. There was no Deep Throat. I mean, you can really prove there was no Deep Throat and it certainly was not… I mean, it's just a long story, but it's not even worth discussing anymore, but it's not Bernstein's fault, and Woodward has subsequently become quite a good reporter because people talk to him because he is so famous, but there was no Deep Throat and you can show it. You can go through the story bit by bit and you can see not only was there no Deep Throat, but there could not have been a Deep Throat, and as it happens, if you look at the story closely, he doesn't really tell you anything about the Watergate either.

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RENATA ADLER:

There was a fellow called Mark Felt who was when we were on these marches or wherever we were, an FBI person who wanted desperately to be in the papers. We knew him, and when Richard Avedon was doing a review of America for *Rolling Stone* in 1976 to celebrate, and so he was taking photographs of people and one of the people I put on the list was Mark Felt and he said, "Who is this Mark Felt?" Because everybody else, you can… And I said, "I can't explain it, but you've got to go and interview him. So you've got to go and take a photo." So there's a photograph in 1976 of Mark Felt among photographs of Kissinger and people who obviously mattered in every way, but no one had heard of Mark Felt. And when Richard Avedon took a photograph of me, he came back and he said, "Now I get it." The makeup of this, that, the other that's showing off the bit. He just got him as a character, but he was not Deep Throat. He couldn't have been.

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RENATA ADLER:

Okay. So here we go. So then there is this manuscript and there is this person who cannot be named in his lifetime. According to Woodward, he couldn't name this source because he promised not to name him in his lifetime, which is a very strange way to construct a fiction because of course, if you can't name him in his lifetime, you can that say anybody who's dead, that he was Deep Throat. So that's already a strange construction, but then, he meets, according to the book and the movie, he meets the reporter in, I can't remember, car, place and so on. But the thing is he does the most conspicuous possible things because, for example, he's supposed to have, he, Deep Throat, is supposed to have told Woodward that the times that they would meet, the way he would communicate is with a circle in Woodward's copy of the *New York Times* of a clock with the hands pointing a certain way.

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RENATA ADLER:

The only thing is two things, one is where Woodward lived then, Woodward being one of the authors, was a place that had a courtyard. So he would've had to come into the courtyard, but that's not… I mean, it's just an odd thing for somebody who wants to be deeply secret to do to communicate. I mean, it would be better to just say it, but this sort of definitive thing was the way people got their *New York Times* in that building was that the doorman piled them up on a chair beside him. So there was no way that Woodward would've known which one was his, if there was the circle, that kind of thing. See, I think that for me, that does it sort of, but everything is like that.

What do you want to be remembered for?

RENATA ADLER:

It would be nice if a book means something to somebody somewhere. That's happened to me sometimes, is they would say, "That mattered to me." And if that mattered, that's nice. That's about it.

What do you think your life is about?

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RENATA ADLER:

Gosh, I wish I had a clue. I have not a clue. I have not a clue. I'm just sort of a stray family person. Very much a stray. Not "astray", one word, but a stray person. Just wound up. I didn't expect anything along the way as it happened. It's kind of fun being a grandmother, which I wouldn't have guessed the way in which it's fun, and it was good being a mother, and it is good being mother. And I wish I could write… I'd like to finish my memoir, and I'd like to finish one more novel and I'd like it to have a plot.

What are you searching for when you are writing?

RENATA ADLER:

I certainly don't, for example, want to make things up. I don't really want to make things up. I have no desire to write science fiction. I'm not too fascinated by… Remember when these things that they used to say when they were praising children, that they had imagination, they had leadership, they had poise or whatever. None of those things are particularly… First of

all, there can't have been that many leaders. It would've been awful if everybody's using his imagination in the sense that they meant. Fantasy plays very little role, in my conscious life, anyway.

How was your experience covering the Civil Rights Movement?

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RENATA ADLER:

That was so moving an experience. I had not seen people together on the right side of anything. I think there must be something about what in certain circumstances is a mob and in other circumstances is not. And these were people… They were brave, they were right, they were selfless. You knew right away who was right and whom to trust. It's very helpful to know. It's not so common to know who's right. And here you knew immediately who was right. When I was in Selma, covering the march from Selma to Montgomery, there'd been previous marches, but this was "the" march, and people had come from all around to be part of that march. And they were admirable people.

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RENATA ADLER:

And then the local people, the local Black people who had the real courage to incur the wrath of the white establishment where they were, it was just so admirable. And it was so… and I was so lucky in that phase of my life to be able to be among people with courage who were right and who were underdogs, and who in those days, were winning. That's the other thing is to be on the right side when it's going to win. But of course, now there's a lot of

backsliding there about that.

What have you learned about America?

RENATA ADLER:

Less and less. It's just… I don't understand how this happened. It would be nice if the country could still be rescued, but those truths, that sounds so boring, like "No man is above the law and constitution", and we're fighting for the constitution, whatever I learned in law school, and "law is not of men"... It just rings so hollow right now. And to the extent it means anything to kids at all… My younger relatives… even to the extent that we know they're talking about, that's not what's in their heads and that's not what they want to live up to.

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RENATA ADLER:

My parents were refugees. And I remember my father saying even this during the war, about the British, "They will never give in" when there was the Blitz. It's almost like Ukraine. And one thing about this country is I thought, "It is so varied and powerful that every time a force that is… How to put it, is not for the good, comes forward and is frightening and seems as though it can destroy everything. The country is so powerful and so varied, it overcomes that." And for the first time, I'm so in doubt that it seems to me almost bitter. But not yet. Not yet. But there is.

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