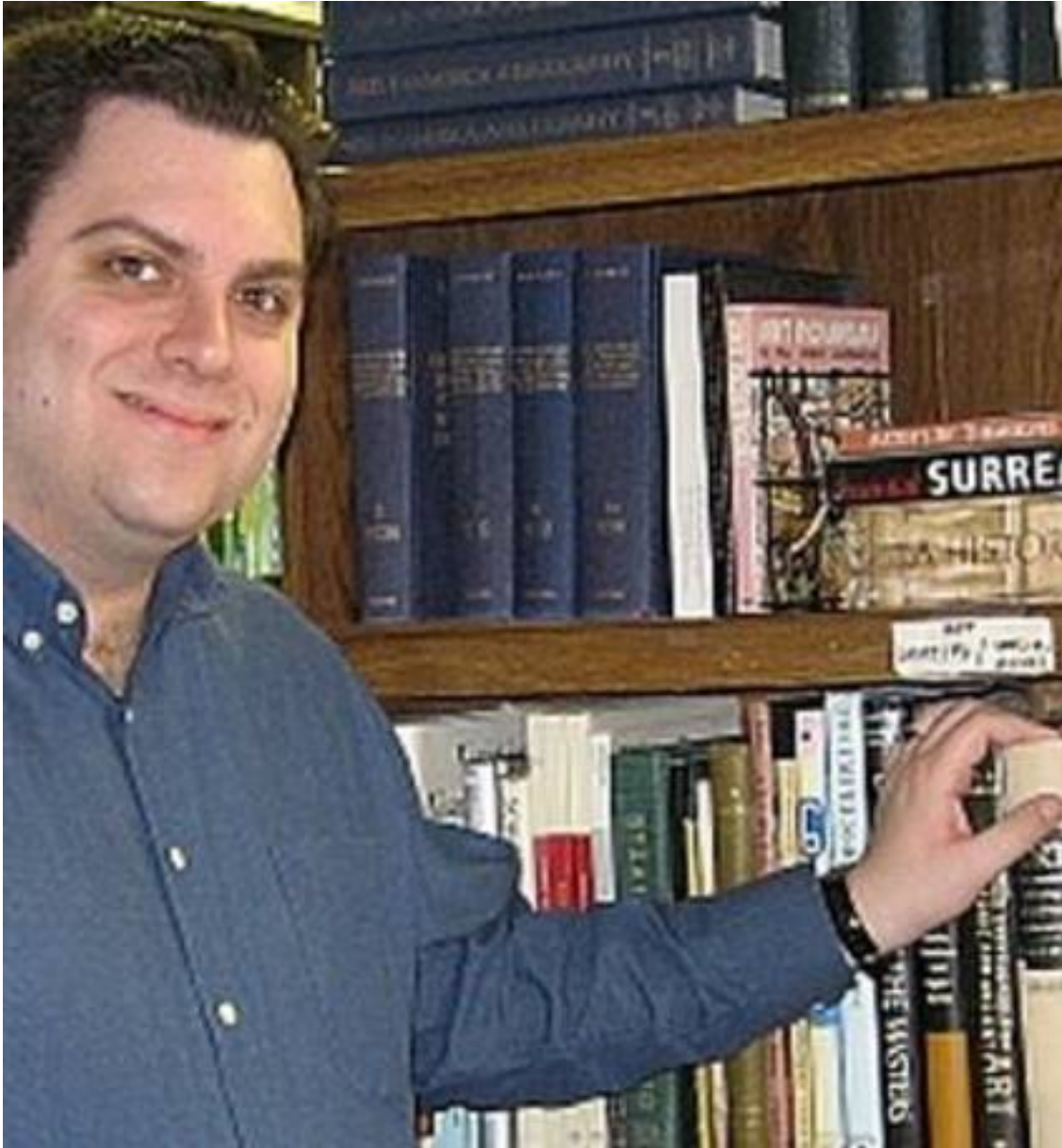


Interview with Marc DiPaolo

Marc Edward DiPaolo (June 02, 2008)



What makes Italian-American Man tick? If you care, read on...



An Interview with Marc DiPaolo

By Mary Thacker (mary.thacker@hotmail.com)

I had been in his office a few times before, so to be seated across the room from Marc DiPaolo, flanked by Spider-Man and Indiana Jones posters on opposing walls, was a familiar scene. This is someone I have questions for, I thought to myself as I balanced my notepad on my leg and wandered down into my bag for the tape recorder. I found it and placed it on the desk, shifting my eyes up to pass over a black t-shirt with yellow chicks that read "Chillin' With My Peeps." I immediately laughed and said, "I like your shirt." Appropriately, it was charmingly paired with a blazer and sneakers, which I think is a trend right now amongst Hollywood, but I doubt he knew that. It's probably better he didn't.

A week later I was sitting at a table with DiPaolo's boss, the head of the department of English and Communications, asking her what it was about DiPaolo that got him the job as Assistant Professor in her department. She cited his many achievements, including his experience as a reporter, which aided in making him an attractive candidate for being what she wanted from teachers in the department: excellent teaching skills, well read literary background, and experience in areas of communications. "He also brings interests and experience in film, media, and popular culture...in particular super heroes."

Dr. DiPaolo earned his doctorate in English in 2004, his M.A. in English in 1999, and his B.A. in English in 1997. He specializes in Medieval studies, 18th Century British literature, Gothic fiction, journalism, and Italian literature. If there were to be an area of study for comic books and fantasy writing, Dr. DiPaolo would undoubtedly be the first in line to earn a Ph.D. in that too.

Before teaching, DiPaolo honed his writing skills as a staff news reporter and also freelanced for New Jersey TechNews and other publications.

Since adolescence, he has been writing novels, short stories, and essays for pleasure and entertainment as well as academia. It seemed natural for an aspiring journalist to interview someone who was at one time a reporter himself, but that wasn't the only reason I had chosen DiPaolo. Fall 2006 marks my third semester of taking classes from him, and I had always enjoyed his stories, reporter-related or not, and had questions. The following is classically DiPaolo-wordy, light-hearted, shrewdly entertaining, and euphorically honest. Enjoy.

What made you want to be a reporter?

I didn't know that I wanted to be one. I knew that I liked to write, and I didn't know what I could do with that talent. When I was growing up, everyone knew exactly what they wanted to do. In 5th grade everyone in the class wanted to be a dentist or a brain surgeon and I said, "Well I like to write and draw" and I didn't know what I wanted to do with those hobbies. Mom was very practical, and she said, "Well, I know you're writing novels and short stories and you have no agent, so you better become a reporter." And I was like, "I don't want to be a reporter. They're all mean and in the movies they're all bad guys. I have to ask people why they cheat on their wives and why they stole money and I don't want to do that." But then I became one and I was very glad I did because I was very lazy, and the deadlines made me work hard and refined my writing. It made me less shy, even though I'm still pretty shy, so I am very glad I became a reporter even though I didn't want to at first.

Do you think you fit in with the stereotypical reporter types who are more aggressive?



I found out that even the aggressive ones are secretly shy. I had said, "I'm shy, I don't know if I'm cut out to be a reporter." And all the reporters said, "We're shy too. We don't like that people seem to hate us." So I found I had all my kind of stereotypical notions tested when I became one. You know the idea that all the reporters in the same newsroom have the same politics? I don't think that's true.

What was it that drew you to teaching then?

When I was working as a reporter I was taking Sunday Masters degree classes in English, and I realized I was having more fun in the classroom than I was on the reporter beat. Even though I liked reporting – it was fun seeing my name in the newspaper and I felt like I was finally finding out how society worked – I just really liked being in the classroom because I felt like we were talking about real issues, about what motivates people, and what are the problems in society, and how we might all get along with each other. Meanwhile, I felt like the articles I wrote were just kind of addressing symptoms and not the core of the issues. I also felt like, as a teacher, I could sense what my words were doing. If I could see students in the classroom, and I could have a real sense of if I was helping or hurting people. But, as a reporter, if I just blow a story out there I have no idea what effect it has, if I'm doing good or bad. So I like the smaller scale and the deeper discussions involved in teaching.

Do you intend on remaining a teacher or do you have other career plans?

I like being a teacher; I think I'd like to stay one. I guess everyone who works in English or communications wants to have that great best seller. All the journalists want to be the next Woodward and Bernstein, and all the English teachers want to be the next Updike or Atwood. In my spare time I try to write autobiographical fiction or essays and see what happens. But I enjoy teaching.

What is your favorite thing about teaching?

I like to get to know students. There are always the students who are forced to take the class because it's a part of their core graduation requirements and they don't want to be there. But every semester there are at least four or five students who really seem to be responding. More than that probably respond, but there are four or five who make it clear that you're teaching them something, and they're teaching you something. These are the students I get to know well, and I love that. That kind of connection is especially important to me since a lot of my interests are introverted: reading and writing and other in-the-house kind of stuff. The social aspects of being a journalism teacher are really important to me, especially getting me out of my shell. I try to learn things from my students whenever I can. What have you been doing lately? What's the newest thing that I'm not up on because I'm out of it and I don't have cable? Then they're nice enough to tell me about how much they like Saw or Dane Cook and I check out Saw and Dane Cook and feel really guilty when I don't like them that much. But I try...

It's interesting that you're so involved and passionate about fiction writing, yet made a career in something very realistic like journalism. Is there a connection between the two?

Definitely. Fiction is still a way of trying to make true observations about the world, even if the story itself isn't technically true. Even if the story has dragons, or some obvious otherworldly element, the writer is still trying to reveal a personal insight or a truth about life and people and dreams.

In general, I'm not sure what is harder, writing a gritty, realistic story, or writing a fantastic, fictional story. I will admit, I used to be afraid of writing non-fiction, and the reporter job gave me the courage to write more realistic stories. When I was a kid I didn't feel like I knew people well enough to write realistic stories, so I hid behind fantasy stories. If I didn't understand something from the adult world



- like the tax code or prejudice or something - I'd set my story in a fantasy world without those confusing elements - a world without taxes or racial tensions - and that solved that. Now that I know more about people and the real world, I feel I can write about these issues. But I haven't outgrown fantasy. I like watching movies like Spider-Man, which are escapist, and movies like Junebug, which are realistic dramas. I also like writing horror stories and human dramas.

Actually, I feel like I owe a debt to fantasy stories like the Hobbit or the works of Poe because they got me interested in reading in the first place. They were fun. And I'm still interested in fantasy, horror, and science fiction. Now I enjoy looking back and trying to figure out how they appealed to me back then and why I'm still interested in them now. My dissertation advisor, Dr. Michaels, is irritated with me that I still like science fiction and comic books. I understand why. After all, I've read Paradise Lost...and I still read Spider-Man! Why didn't I leave Spider-Man behind? It is actually a question I'm trying to answer in some of the essays I'm writing: what is it in these kinds of simple guys-in-masks-beating-each-other-up stories that I still like? The uncharitable answer, from feminist literary criticism or movies like The 40-Year-Old Virgin, is that I'm still a big kid, but I think there's more to it than arrested development

Did you ever get to write personality profiles?

Editors start you off with obituaries and that's kind of profile-like but they're very boilerplate and very much the same from obituary to obituary, but I became very good at sneaking in fun facts and making the tributes more interesting. After a while, whenever there was any kind of profile to be done they'd assign me to it, but I had such narrow interests when I was younger that I didn't know half of the famous people they asked me to interview until after I interviewed them. When they said "We want you to interview Bobby Thompson, the man who hit the most famous homerun in baseball history, 'The shot heard 'round the world,'" I was like "I have never heard of him," because I never gave a damn about sports. But I met him and he was a really sweet guy and I got to interview him. He reminded me a bit of Jimmy Stewart. The sports reporters were mad I got that gig because they knew I couldn't really appreciate the full magnitude of meeting the guy. But I was glad I got the story and that I met him. And I know have a story to tell my friends whenever sports comes up as a topic.

When the editors found out that Elvira, Mistress of the Dark was coming to town - she's a horror film icon associated with Halloween - they figured "we gotta get Marc to talk to her!" because they knew I'm a horror fan. But to me horror is so ... natural?... that I didn't think to ask her a question that any reporter who was not a horror fan would ask her. When I went back to the newsroom, the editor asked, "what did she say when you asked her about the weird connection she makes with sex and death?" and I said "I didn't ask her that." The editor couldn't believe it. "Marc, she wears a teddy and lays spread out on tombstones holding skulls to her bosom!" I shrugged. "I never found that particularly strange that she did that." That was when they realized they'd asked the wrong person to interview her.

The worst people to interview are politicians up for re-election because all they do is say the same sentence over and over again. Because that's the one they want in print. And they don't trust reporters not to quote them out of context. So they speak like talking action figures to avoid accidentally giving reporters ammunition to use against them. So it doesn't matter what the question is. I say, "How was your day today?" The politician says, "Well, I find it an honor and a privilege to be able to serve the American people as an Assemblyman for New York and I pray to God every day that they will find it in their hearts to re-elect me come the fall." I say, "What's your favorite restaurant to eat at?" He says, "Well, I find it an honor and a privilege to be able to serve the American people as an Assemblyman for New York and I pray to God every day that they will find it in their hearts to re-elect me come the fall." I say, "Are you in favor of cutting taxes or against it?" He says, "Well, I find it an honor and a privilege to be able to serve the American people as an Assemblyman for New York and I pray to God every day that they will find it in their hearts to re-elect me come the fall." It was terrible.



Did being a reporter change the way you viewed politicians, or the country?

I think the thing that really was weird about being a reporter was that I got into all these neighborhoods I never would have gone to if I weren't a reporter. And I saw how poor people could get and how rich people can get. As I kid, I didn't understand class distinctions. I thought everyone had a semi-attached house in the suburbs like I did. And you see these terrible rundown buildings in the city that seem to be earmarked for minorities and smatterings of white college students. And then you see these \$100-an-appetizer restaurants in New York frequented by Wall Street executives and patrons of the arts, and you think "ah, these are the people running the country." It was more of an emotional, gradual change than one shocking moment, but it realigned the way I looked at everything, seeing for the first time such stark class differences, and injustices in housing 'for minorities.'

What advice do you have for new journalists?

Find out something that's important to you, and research it and bring it to the public's attention. While you're doing that and covering other stories be professional. Even if you get pressure to be sensationalistic, try to avoid it. The truth is more important than selling papers. And if you get heat from the average person on the street because they think you're a weasel since you're a reporter, then just be professional and deal with them the best you can. If you're yourself and you're good most people will respond to that and figure out you're "one of the good ones." Because I had a manner that people did respond to. I got stories that other reporters didn't because my interviewees would say, "Well you're a lot nicer than that last reporter, so I'll tell you a secret I didn't tell him." Being a bulldog doesn't always work.

The other thing I think is important in any job you take is to attach yourself to the people who are the most successful on the job, because the new person is always kind of seized upon by the lone wolf or the loser of the office because they've already alienated themselves from everyone else, and all they do is fill your head with gossip and bad stories about other people.

Actually, that's really true.

Isn't it?

I've already had that happen to me.

They go after the new person, because the new person is the only one who will listen to them. Because the newbie doesn't know any better. And, because these bitter veterans hate the job, and they're losers, they'll convince you (the newbie) to hate the job, too. You may wind up hating the job, but don't choose to hate it because some burnout convinces you to. Instead, attach yourself to the victors. They'll teach you how to really do the job right. And they'll teach you the right outlook. Although these "Winner" types may not seek you out right away. You may have to prove yourself first before they'll mentor you and promote you and give you the good stories.

Time for a big change of topic ... what is it like planning a wedding?

If I had some real money to pay for the wedding it would be a lot of fun, because I have all of these ideas about not having a boring wedding. But boring or not, it still costs more than I got. But the idea of going around and picking out a place to have it, and figuring out who we're going to invite is a lot of fun. I'm really impatient, so it's practicality versus eagerness. I'd like to be married tomorrow, because Stacey is so wonderful. But, practically ... it's probably going to be March, or spring, or something.



I wanna get a suit that makes me look as much like a Jane Austen character as possible. I'm really excited about that. Because at first, the clothes part, I really wasn't excited about that. But then I saw the Mr. Darcy costume and I was excited about that.

As for the ceremony. We want that to be special and original, too. I know I told Stacey I didn't want the same old church readings from the letters of Paul. You know, the one about "love is patient, love is kind" and "I am become as sounding brass." That stuff is heard way too often. At the same time, I don't want my wedding to be too trendy or so non-traditional it isn't recognizable as a wedding. I don't want it to be too carnival-like. I went to one at the Renaissance Faire and it was a little too cute for me. I said to Stacey, "You know I thought I'd like to get married at a place like the Renaissance Faire, but this seems tacky, somehow." She agreed and said, "Especially the belly-dancers and the fire-swallower."

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