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OPINION

LOOKING BACK

Nora Ephron Anticipated Our Narcissism

As part of a series marking The Times's 175th birthday, Times Opinion asked writers to revisit previously published articles. In 2008, Nora Ephron wrote an essay for The Times arguing, well, nothing. Here, the actress and comedian Ellie Kemper annotates Ms. Ephron's original article.



BEN HICKEY

175

A series exploring 175 years of eyewitness journalism from The New York Times.

Four or Five Things You Don't Know About Me (2008)
By Nora Ephron

THE other day I was walking down the street and I realized that everyone was wearing earmuffs. I myself was wearing earmuffs at the time, but that wasn't the reason I noticed all the other earmuffs. I noticed them because I happen to know that I personally started the trend of earmuffs.[1]

I began wearing them at the age of 21, when you could barely find a pair in a store, which doubtless was one reason no one wore them but me.[2]

The only ones for sale were made of felt, came in two separate bits and hooked over your upper ear and then snapped against your head. They were inadequate thermal protection compared to my current pair, which are made of fake fur; but they were far superior to being outdoors in winter without anything at all over your ears. I had serious fantasies that by wearing them, I would start something, fashion-wise, and now it seems I have.[3]

It's true it's taken a while, 45 years to be exact, but earmuffs are definitely catching on, and it's because of me.[4]

Seeing all those earmuffs reminded me that there are a number of things about me that people may not be aware of, and this may be the time to set the record straight. For instance, I am the only person who seems to know what Charles Dickens died of. In his biography of Dickens, Fred Kaplan writes that Dickens died of a brain hemorrhage after several years of somewhat puzzling symptoms; but it was clear to me from reading the Kaplan book that in fact Dickens had a case of multiple sclerosis and all his other illnesses were collateral to it.[5]

I almost called up Mr. Kaplan to tell him my diagnosis (which, by the way, I managed to make on the basis of no medical knowledge whatsoever), but then I thought about whether he wanted to hear this, from a total stranger, his book already being in print and all, and I decided, probably not.[6]

I'll tell you something else I know that no one else does: Joe Kennedy was not a bootlegger.[7]

When Prohibition was ending, he made a deal to import White Horse Scotch into the United States, but he had nothing whatsoever to do with the illegal liquor business before that. I can't tell you how many people I have told this to, some of them very important, and yet the myth persists. All sorts of biographers and journalists casually insist that Kennedy was a partner of Frank Costello and Al Capone during Prohibition. It's so not true![8]

And I happen to be an expert on the subject. I spent several years of my life researching a book on the American liquor industry. I finally came to my senses and never wrote it and even returned the advance to the publisher (for which I deserve a plaque). But I'm left with a huge amount of information on the subject, most of it only moderately interesting, including this important fact about Joe Kennedy that no one seems to care about but me.[9]

Frankly, I'm not even sure his own family cares. How ironic is that?[10]

One last thing about me I'd like you to know is that I invented the concept of authenticity. I did.[11]

I first began talking about it when Ed Koch was mayor of New York. For many years, Mr. Koch could do and say just about anything and still keep getting elected. Why? I'll tell you why: he clearly believed what he said he believed. And that was all anyone cared about. In short, he had authenticity, and it trumped politics. Obviously I'm not saying that no one before me had ever said the word "authenticity," but I promise you that no one had ever used it in connection with politicians, and no one was ever so repetitive on the subject: I have mentioned this theory to just about everyone I have had dinner with for the past 30 years, and it almost cost me my marriage because spouses can live through only so much repetition.[12]

Now, of course, it's everywhere; you can barely get through an episode of "Hardball" without some talking head blathering about authenticity and I never get the credit.[13]

Incidentally, I am at work on a weight-loss regimen that involves eating chili con carne twice a day, a theory about the Clinton marriage that is going to change the way everyone sees it and a campaign to stamp out the fish fork. Stay tuned.[14]

1

This happened to me the other day, only with layered outfits instead of earmuffs. Scrolling on my phone, I suddenly realized that everyone on my feed was dressed in layers. And I don't mean, like, a cardigan over a blouse. I mean thoughtful base layers, intentional overalls, dresses over tights, sheer skirts over denim shorts, all sorts of different textures, and lots of vests. I knew in that moment that my idea had finally caught on!

2

I started dressing in layers when I was 5 months old and it was cold outside. I grew up in the Midwest, so you can imagine it was cold outside a lot. My mom would put a sweater over my onesie, adding a coat and a little baby scarf once we started getting deeper into autumn. By winter I was in all the layers you could imagine, including a hat.

3

Later, when I started dressing myself, I continued to favor layered outfits. Not so much in the summer, when it was hot and humid (Missouri in July, yikes!), but in the winter, when it was snowy and cold. Sweaters over turtlenecks. Parkas over sweaters. On really cold days, jeans over long johns. I was keenly aware of what I was doing (trying to stay warm) — but I also could not help but notice how chic I was. I dreamed of being spotted at Dillard's, maybe by a fashion photographer, maybe by the editor in chief of YM. And now, finally, everyone from Zendaya to Kendall Jenner is dressing in layers!

4

Same thing with me, but more like 30 years, and with layered outfits instead of earmuffs!

5

Wait — she was joking, right? Nora Ephron was so smart and so confident that I wonder if part of her *did* believe that her theory about Charles Dickens was correct? For that matter, maybe she *did* sort of think she should get credit for wearing earmuffs way before they were in vogue?

6

Nah, she was poking fun at herself. She didn't actually think she knew more than a bona fide biographer of Dickens. But also: Maybe she low-key did?

7

I mean, I had no idea what she was talking about, so I did my own research: I guess that after Joseph Kennedy Sr. died, a lot of mobsters piped up that he had participated in bootlegging operations during Prohibition. But when your source is Frank Costello (major crime boss!), you should consider the source.

8

Side note, did you know Joe Kennedy supposedly offered each of his sons $1,000 if they didn't drink alcohol until they turned 21? Like a Trump account, sort of, but for sobriety.

9

Further reading on the subject revealed the main propagator of this bootlegger rumor to me. Guess who it was? Al Capone's piano tuner. That's not a joke! That's what his biographer said!

10

As I continue to wonder which parts of this essay Ms. Ephron was serious about and which parts she was writing tongue-in-cheek, I also realize that she might not have cared which parts I take seriously and which parts I interpret as a joke. And I love the idea that she was writing to amuse herself above all others.

11

Social media had not yet exploded when Ms. Ephron wrote this essay in 2008, and it's pretty great how she anticipated our individual narcissism here. "I did!" "I did!" "Me!" "Look what I did!"

12

I have a concept of my own that I would like to share. It's about baggage claim. Let's all create a bigger perimeter around the carousel. As it is now, we all crowd in extremely close to the carousel. You can't see where your bags are, much less grab them, unless you are one of the pushy few who elbow their way to the front of the carousel. If we all stood back six feet, maybe 10, we could fit everyone in the circle (oval?), and then we could just step forward to get our suitcases when we see them.

13

Don't we all have a concept (like my really good baggage claim idea) or theory that we have shared hundreds of times with our friends or significant others? And then, suddenly, we see that concept out there living in the world? Don't we all want a little credit for coming up with it first? I think this is a relatable feeling, and Ms. Ephron was sort of joking about being the first to come up with the idea of authenticity in politics — but also claiming that she came up with the idea of authenticity in politics.

14

Personally, I think she was being serious about two out of three items here. But I'm not going to tell you which two. You might think she was joking about all of them or none of them. I'm not sure that she cared.