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## Alumni Books

# Shedding Light, Graphically

Cartoonist Glidden travels restive Middle East to answer, "What is journalism?" | BY SUSAN SELIGSON



CARTOONIST SARAH GLIDDEN'S NEW FULL-length comic book follows her travels with a pair of her close friends, Alex Stonehill and Sarah Stuteville, both freelance advocacy journalists, as they make a documentary about the effects of the Iraq War on refugees in Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan, Lebanon, and Syria in 2012, the relative calm before the storm. Accompanying the group is the reporters' childhood friend Dan, a Marine veteran of the Iraq War whose reactions to returning to the scene of his deployment were being recorded by the two journalists.

Glidden (CFA'02) intended to define journalism through the travails of these reporters and filmmakers, who made the 2013 documentary *Barzan*. She gives us a journalistic account, in cartoons, of two months of observing her friends, both affiliated with the nonprofit online publication *Seattle Globalist*, at work in the field.

If readers are confused by the arrangement, so is Glidden. In *Rolling Blackouts: Dispatches from Turkey, Syria, and*

Sarah Glidden (from left) with filmmakers Alex Stonehill and Sarah Stuteville in Sulaymaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan, one of the locations in her graphic novel.

*Iraq* (Drawn & Quarterly, 2016), she chronicles her own shifting boundaries and doubts as the team pursues the stories of an Iranian blogger, a UN official, a taxi driver, and many refugees, including an Iraqi refugee, the subject of *Barzan*, deported from the United States.

Glidden's own cartoon likeness is often bemused or anxious, and an ominous tone pervades the proceedings, reflecting the conflict simmering under the surface. Although the quartet is never in real danger, border crossings are dicey and some sources demand anonymity. Some of the political, religious, and tribal underpinnings of these conflict zones defy the often-tidy explanations journalists demand. She depicts the conflict between her friends, ravenous for meaning, as they relentlessly question the unyielding, emotionally flat Dan.

*Rolling Blackouts* is spot-on in capturing both the passion and the narcissism of career journalists, and it conveys beautifully the hurry-up-and-wait nature of foreign report-

ing. As it pans in and out from sweeping aerial views (conversation wafting from a tiny airplane in flight; a refugee family dwarfed by snowy mountains at the Iranian border) to the claustrophobic (a talking head on *Al Jazeera*; an eyeball primed for a retinal scan), the book also affords a fresh perspective on misunderstood cultures.

Glidden's first full-length book, a graphic memoir titled *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less*, published by Vertigo in 2010, was named one of that year's best by *Entertainment Weekly*, and it won an Ignatz Award at the 2011 Small Press Expo. Her work has also appeared in *Syncopated: An Anthology of Nonfiction Picto-Essays* (Villard) and *I Saw You...: Comics Inspired by Real-Life Missed Connections* (Three Rivers Press).

*Bostonia* spoke with Glidden about the demands of creating a graphic nonfiction book based on field experiences, in often difficult conditions, and what it was like to report on the reporters, who are also her friends.

**Bostonia:** How did your friends Sarah and Alex feel about having you along on this difficult reporting trip?

**Glidden:** They were up for it right away. We had casually floated the idea for years, saying how it would be so cool to collaborate someday. When I started making comics in 2006, I thought it would be fun to adapt a story of one of their trips. But I wasn't there yet; I felt like just an illustrator. So we thought we'd do something more involved in the future.

**Did they set any terms beforehand about what you could and couldn't document?**

Every once in a while people would say things like, "This is off the record." But Sarah has made a career out of journalism, and they're very fair people. They knew it would be wrong to ask to approve anything. Sarah read the book, and she really liked it, though she found it hard to read things said in an emotional state.

**How did you record what was going on so you could draw it later on? How much sketching did you do in the field?**

This was a learning process for me. I took as many photos as I could. I was in Israel proper for my first book, so I was able to find a photo reference for anything I didn't take a picture of. But on this trip I wanted photos of streets, of details, like how the sidewalks are paved, and of all the people we interviewed. As far as drawings go, I didn't get to do a lot of sketches. I used a sketchbook for places where you're not allowed to take photos—all of the border checkpoints, for example.

**What did the experience teach you about the process, and what mistakes did you make?**

This project was a lesson in how not to be a journalist, in an organizational sense. I didn't have any method for organizing things. Most of the first year was spent transcribing tapes, figuring out structure and voice, organizing audio files. It was an exhausting process. I had to figure out the skeleton of the book, and I rewrote the first chapter 10 or 15 times.

**Do you write first and then draw, or the other way around?**

A lot of cartoonists write and draw at the same time. But for me, especially since this is based on actual dialogue, I worked from a script and nailed the writing down first. It takes me longer to write than it does to draw and paint. I go through a pretty long process of transcriptions, pulling quotes I think I'm going to use, printing them, cutting them up, and then putting them on the floor so I can see everything. From that I write a script so I can see in my mind what it looks like.

**It must be a huge challenge to pare down the text for a comic.**

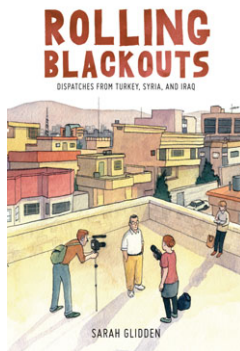
Yes. It's still pretty text-heavy. Nonfiction comics are tough because you do need to fit in a lot of information, and that's hard to do without making a 3,000-page book. Drawn & Quarterly gave me 300 pages, so I had to squeeze everything in. But I didn't want someone to open the book and say, that's too much text, so I tried to make some sequences more airy. You want to give people a break.

**What did you want to convey to people about this part of the world?**

I wanted to give people a sense of place in these books, especially with Iraq and Syria. We see things on the news, but people don't understand that there are cities with people living their lives. It seemed very obvious, but after I went to Syria, people were surprised to hear that Damascus is a big modern city, at least in 2012, and when you go to a café, it looks a lot like Starbucks—details that make a place look like our homes and unlike our homes. That was in my mind all the time. Also, with what's going on now, it's important to remember that the majority of the people we're so afraid of are just pretty much like Americans.

**What did you learn about journalism?**

Sarah would be the first person to tell you that she questions her own approach. For example, there was a lot of emotion involved in her interviewing Dan, her old friend, who returned to Iraqi Kurdistan where he'd fought in the war. Not



only was she trying to get to know her friend again, but she had an agenda, and pushed him to open up. At the time that was hard for me to understand. But since that trip, I've done some journalism on my own. I'm doing a profile of Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein, and I was following her on the campaign trail. They're not going to give you anything real. So I understood the frustration, the difference between them giving you a line and giving you what you want: to know, what does the person actually think, what does he ask himself when he goes to sleep at night?

**As you worked on the book, you were afraid that it may have lost relevance by the time it was published.**

The so-called Arab Spring started six months after we got back, and the resulting refugee crisis has now surpassed the refugee crisis in Iraq, which I had documented, so I questioned if it was worth making this book. But no matter what happens, the Iraq War is something our generation hasn't really reckoned with. Syria was a largely middle-class, largely educated country, and it's not the kind of place you'd think would turn into a war zone. In Damascus, we walked around remarking on what a stable place it was, with no idea that something like this could ever happen.

**Who do you envision as the audience for the book?**

I'm thinking of Americans my own age, and it was me, too, before I went on this trip. I think a lot of us have forgotten about the Iraq War: it's not our problem, and what goes on there is easy for people to ignore. It's still our problem, and Syria is an extension of that. I'd like my own generation to read it, and to look again at what happened to get us there.

**What are you working on now?**

I have some ideas for other books, focusing on immigration issues and migration in general, subjects that have gotten under my skin. And maybe I'll stick to home; there are so many issues in the United States that deserve attention.

## Theater

# And the Tony Goes to...

Veteran stage actor Reed Birney wins Broadway's highest honor | BY JOHN O'ROURKE



IT APPEARS THERE IS truth to the adage, “Good things come to those who wait.” After nearly four decades in the business, veteran actor Reed Birney

won his first Tony Award in June, for best featured actor in a drama for his performance in Stephen Karam’s moving play *The Humans*.

The recognition was hard-won for the 61-year-old Birney, who studied at the College of Fine Arts. He landed his first Broadway role in the comedy *Gemini* in 1977. But that early success was followed by many lean years, offset by roles in off-off-Broadway productions, occasional guest appearances in television shows such as *Law & Order*, and teaching gigs. Several times, he contemplated leaving acting altogether.

“There were many long periods where I was flat on my back with despair,” says Birney. But, he adds, “despair is the enemy, and you lose too

Reed Birney (from left), Sarah Steele, Jayne Houdyshell, and Arian Moayed in a scene from Stephen Karam’s Tony-winning play *The Humans*.

much of your precious life being sad when sad doesn’t help you one little bit.”

His fortunes began to turn around in 2008, when he played a ruth-

less journalist who rapes a woman in the off-Broadway drama *Blasted*, by Sarah Kane. Critics—and a whole new generation of playwrights and directors—took notice. He was then cast in a revival of William Inge’s *Picnic* in 2012, marking his return to Broadway after a 35-year absence. And, two years ago, he received his first Tony nomination, for his performance as cross-dresser Charlotte in Harvey Fierstein’s drama *Casa Valentina*.

*The Humans*, which won the Tony for best play, transferred from off-Broadway to Broadway in February. Charles Isherwood wrote in his *New York Times* review, “I have written many times of Mr. Birney’s excellence, but his perfor-