



## DANIEL PEARL AWARD

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story

## HOW ROBYN DIXON, THE 2009 DANIEL PEARL AWARD WINNER, HANDLES THE JOB

BY JON  
REGARDIE

**R**OBYN DIXON has covered riots in Kenya and escaped gunfire in Grozny. She was on an airplane that nearly crashed and once, while on a dark road in Afghanistan, she and her companions were shelled by Taliban mortars.

"I've had a few cat's lives," says the winner of the Los Angeles Press Club's 2009 Daniel Pearl Award, which recognizes courage in journalism. Dixon's view of her experiences may be the understatement of the year: Cats fall from trees; they don't escape unscathed from all of the above.

What is almost as important as Dixon's ability to survive these harrowing encounters, is her passion for telling stories—brave stories, sad stories,

from Moscow, Dixon has gone beyond the horrifying events that too often define foreign journalism and instead told the stories of the people who live day-by-day, surviving through sheer force of will.

Her subjects have included a girl kept in a cow shed for 22 years, cyber-scamming Nigerian youth who use the internet to try to separate Americans from their money and a Rwandan woman who was forced into slavery by Hutu militias.

"At the heart of it is an intense curiosity I have to really know—to almost feel myself—what emotion the person I'm interviewing felt," Dixon writes in an e-mail interview from Johannesburg, where she is the South Africa bureau chief for the Times. "If I can feel it—the anger or pain—I try to preserve that feeling in my writing, so that my reader feels the essence of pain, anger or loss—or joy, too. That's what is at the heart of what I try to do: To help readers in the U.S. (and other places where the articles are re-printed) to know what it feels like to be someone on the other side of the world."

### A Girl From Melbourne

Dixon grew up in Melbourne, Australia. The daughter of a judge in the Victorian County Court and a mother who mainly worked at home, she originally wanted to be a doctor. An interest in journalism surfaced when she was about 16, and Dixon got a job as a "cadet," or "copygirl," right out of high school. The first piece she was paid to write was a one-paragraph brief for The Herald in Melbourne.

"My chief of staff took it apart," she says.

After doing everything from the night police beat to writing a TV column, Dixon took a position as a correspondent in Moscow. She worked for two Australian papers, the Sidney Morning Herald and The Age, before being hired by the Times in 1999.



Robyn Dixon covers South Africa for the Los Angeles Times.

strange stories, human stories—that the world would not otherwise know. In the six years she has covered Africa for the Los Angeles Times, and for the nine years before that in which she reported



It was in Russia that she began to show her penchant for digging into stories that not everyone wanted told and that most reporters were unable to get. She reported on the Kursk submarine disaster at a time when Moscow officials offered few details. She persuaded illegal seafood poachers to discuss the trade and to tell her how much it cost to bribe government officials. Her descriptions of the industry could be simple but harrowing: "In this line of work, death nibbles at your elbow like a hungry fish," she wrote in the 2001 article.

After nine years, she accepted the assignment to South Africa. Since then she has traveled across the continent reporting on a wide variety of topics. However, it is her work in Zimbabwe that stands out.

When she was reporting on the corrupt and violent regime of President Robert Mugabe, foreign journalists were not allowed in the country without a visa. Thus Dixon snuck into Zimbabwe—11 times.

"If I'd been caught I would have gone to jail," she says. "But after some local people told me I looked too much like a foreign journalist, I learned how to camouflage myself. I learned a nice smile goes a long way. I had a couple of close calls. I sometimes felt unsafe. A few times I slept in my clothes and familiarized myself with back exits in case I had to make a run for it at night."

Her reporting revealed a collapsed economy, a nation with 80% unemployment and a regime in which even government officials knew things were wrong, but were

too fearful or otherwise unable to force change. In Zimbabwe, Dixon explains, the danger "was a subtler, more insidious fear. You had to make a decision to defy that fear in order to get the story. A couple of times when I started to meet ruling party officials, base commanders and intelligence agents, I knew I was taking a risk. I wasn't sure how it would end up. But I felt the need to get inside the machine, which no one else was doing. And every time I took the chance, I learned a huge amount about what was going on inside the ruling party."

Dixon doesn't know where her next assignment will be. Although she has certainly earned the right to a desk job in some safe locale, it doesn't sound like she will take that option any time soon.

"I'm not looking for comfy," she says. "I'm looking for the interesting places. I love getting into people's hearts, absorbing their passions, telling their stories. The more interesting the place, the more interesting the stories. I also believe that somehow, telling stories of people's suffering or pain is important. I believe readers have the same innate curiosity and passion for people that I feel." 🌍

The Melbourne-born and raised Dixon says, "At the heart of it is an intense curiosity—to almost feel myself—what emotion the person I'm interviewing felt."



(left) Dixon on the beach in South Africa; (below) Meeting with Muslim family.