He's the editor of *The New Yorker*, but David Remnick is also one of the best profile writers publishing today. Here he talks about the secrets of compelling profiles—research, the "big dumb question" and telling details.

Interview by John Solomon

David Remnick is a modern master of profiles. Among his most recent works is *King of the World: The Rise of Muhammad Ali* (Random House), a study of the boxer as a young man. Remnick became editor of *The New Yorker* last summer after six years as a staff writer creating vivid profiles on subjects ranging from Gerry Adams to Ralph Ellison to Howard Stern. A collection of his profiles, *The Devil Problem: And Other True Stories*, is now available from Vintage in paperback. Before joining *The New Yorker*, Remnick served as *The Washington Post*'s Moscow bureau chief, and won a Pulitzer Prize for *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire*. He shared his keys to successful profile writing—listening and asking the right questions—in an e-mail interview with John Solomon.

**WRITER'S DIGEST:** What makes a good subject for a profile? Is there such a thing as a bad profile subject?

**DAVID REMNICK:** In short fiction, you very often have a single character who learns something, endures something, changes somehow. The same would hold true for an ideal profile, otherwise you're in static ground. An example, for me, was Elaine Pagels, a brilliant scholar of religion who endured the death of a child and her husband, and through those unspeakable experiences changed, even in her work.

**WD:** Do you approach each profile similarly or is each one different?

**REMNICK:** I approach them all the same in the sense that I set out to learn as much as I can, get as much time with the person as possible, etc., but I approach them knowing that they are people, not statues, people who have different demands, quirks, personalities, moods.

**WD:** How do you research your subjects?

**REMNICK:** My research comes from everywhere: the library, secondary source interviews, interviews with the subject, travel and just plain thinking. Remember these are profiles and not biographies; you can't stuff your
profile with every fact and notion: again, as in short fiction, you must choose, you must think (or I do, anyway) in terms of story and narrative but without cheating the essential reality of the person.

- WD: How do you elicit information from your subjects?
- REMNICK: I "elicits" information by talking to them, by asking the same questions more than once, by asking the big dumb questions and not trying to talk too much.
- WD: Do you use a tape recorder or notebook?
- REMNICK: Both. I often tape interviews when it's appropriate, or seems to be, but I've learned over all these years that it's often better to take notes.
- WD: How do you observe and write descriptions?
- REMNICK: I write by seeing, by taking notes (my memory is too selective to depend on the way some seem to depend on their) and I write description by sweating and trying again and again to reach a balance between inclusion and exclusion, saturation of detail and selectivity. The details should be telling but also true. The overt attempt at symbolism etc., in nonfiction is the surest way to step on your own heavy foot.

- WD: How do you develop your theme?
- REMNICK: I don't think about themes. Themes sound to me very schoolmarmish (man's inhumanity to man, etc.) and I avoid them like rats. What emerges emerges.
- WD: What do you do when you get little or no access to a subject?
- REMNICK: When I get little or no access I panic, struggle, do the best I can, report like crazy "around" that person (which often brings out his or her shell, quite frankly).
- WD: What is the most important ingredient in writing a good profile?
- REMNICK: The most important: profile is very often voice, capturing a way of talking and self-expression on paper; this is hard to do and the tape recorder does a tiny percentage of the work.
- WD: What makes a good profile writer?
- REMNICK: Kenneth Tynan or Gay Talese wrote great profiles because they were patient, they did not depend on the 45-minute interview with celebrity X, scatter the clips on the desk, and start whaling away. They went places, they listened, and then they listened again and again. You see that in Tynan's profiles of Louise Brooks and

How Remnick Does It

Maybe you've never heard of the scholar Elaine Pagels, and maybe you don't like what you've read about Marion Barry. But David Remnick's skill as a profile writer brings people to life. Here are some examples from *The Devil Problem: And Other True Stories*, a compilation of some of his work.

**Describing Elaine Pagels:**
At fifty-two, she has a mild, earnest appearance (a rounded, friendly face, windblown blonde hair), and yet in conversation she is absolutely fierce, focused, picking apart the careless question, delighted by the unexpected one. When she delivers her lectures for an undergraduate course on the New Testament — Monday and Wednesday mornings at ten — she does not much pace the room as prowl it. Pagels radiates so much intensity that you somehow imagine a fast burning cigarette in her hand. There is none. She does not smoke. She smolders.

**Giving Voice to Ralph Ellison:**
In a modest apartment overlooking the Hudson, at the weld of northern Harlem and southern Washington Heights, Ralph Ellison confronts his "work in progress." He has been at this for nearly 40 years, and rare is the day that he does not doubt his progress. He wakes early, goes out to buy a paper on Broadway, reads it, and, when he has exhausted the possibilities of the Times and the Today show, when the coffee and the toast are gone, he flips on the computer in his study and reads the passage he finished the night before.

"The hardest part of the morning is that first hour, just getting the rhythm," Ellison says. "So much depends on continuity. I'll go back to get a sense of its rhythm and see what it will suggest, and go on from there. But very often I'll sit in the morning by looking back at the work from the day before and it ain't worth a damn." When that happens, as it does more frequently than he would like, Ellison will turn away and stare out the window, watching the river flow.
Johnny Carson or Gay Talese on Floyd Patterson and Frank Sinatra. They listened.

**WD:** Are there writers of profiles who have influenced your work?

**REMNICK:** Oh, yes, definitely: Tynan, Talese, John McPhee, Janet Malcolm, Joseph Mitchell, A.J. Liebling, Mark Singer, Joan Didion, Michael Herr, Janet Flanner, Tom Wolfe, Lytton Strachey (his *Eminent Victorians*). But “influence” sounds too grand. I *learned* from these people and still do.

**WD:** How do you recommend that a beginning profiler gets started?

**REMNICK:** By reading the above writers over and over and then adding to the list and then trying it yourself. The younger writer ought to try writing shorter pieces first, the way a young pianist ought to try the Chopin preludes before the Beethoven sonatas (too grand an analogy but you see what I mean) to get some control of description, movement, wit.

John Solomon is a freelance journalist who writes on media, politics and sports for *George, Sports Illustrated* and *The New York Times* (among other publications.)

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**Story Starter:**

**Writing Profiles**

Now it's your turn to try profile writing, using the tips David Remnick outlined.

**First,** pick someone you know well as a subject—a child, a friend, a spouse. Jot down a few notes about what you know about him or her and what you find interesting.

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**Next,** arrange a 15- to 20-minute block of time convenient for both of you to chat. Prepare the questions you want to ask, including Remnick's “big dumb question.” For example, why does your friend who works with computers all day refuse to read e-mail at home? Make a note of your big dumb question here.

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**Next,** during the interview, make notes about the person's mannerisms and the setting. Does she run her fingers through her hair? Does he bridge his fingers on his nose and pause before answering your questions? Does the floor creak as you pull your chairs closer to the table?

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**Finally,** write a 300-word profile of the person, then share it with them. If appropriate, also ask someone else who knows the individual to read the profile and ask if it is an accurate reflection of the person's personality. Ask what they would do differently.

Details make compelling profiles. The more information you can skillfully weave into profiles, the better.

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