



powered by Google

The Times

[News](#) | [Sport](#) | [Careers](#) | [BUSINESS Times](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Columnists](#) | [Multimedia](#) | [Sunday Times](#)

Page 1 | [News](#) | [Insight](#) | [Business Times](#) | [Sport and Soccerlife](#) | [Lifestyle](#) | [Magazine](#) |

[Login](#) | [Register](#)

Site last Updated: **Jan 15 2009 7:55PM**

Career Junction

Journeys with a forgotten master

Travel Writing

Published: Jan 11, 2009

Tracy Barnett hopes the West will discover this roving observer.

Seven years ago, I was studying in Cartagena, Colombia, with a group of Latin American journalists at the writing institute founded by Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

The teachers of the Fundacion de Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano extolled as a model the man they called the world's best journalist, Ryszard Kapuscinski.

This surprised me greatly since I had never heard of him, despite having received two journalism degrees from the oldest journalism school in the US. What surprised me more was that every person in the room seemed to agree.

Kapuscinski, it turns out, was present at virtually every major Third World revolution and civil war of the last half century. He'd travelled widely and lived in Africa, Latin America and Asia, risked his life and been jailed countless times and witnessed the fall of European colonialism throughout Africa. He was a leader, along with Marquez, Norman Mailer and Truman Capote, of the Nuevo Periodismo or New Journalism that I learned about in school (but his name was absent from my Anglocentric reading list, as was that of Marquez, to my detriment). The idea of New Journalism was to incorporate the techniques of literary writing development of characters, plot, theme, conflict, what amounts to basic good storytelling into the time-honoured craft of journalistic reportage.

So Kapuscinski belatedly went onto my must-read list. Life being what it is, he remained on my list rather than my night stand until I began preparing for my recent trip to Tanzania. I always seek to read the literary masters of a place when I travel there, and I cast about for the best writer to accompany me to Africa.

So it was that The Shadow of the Sun came along, and I read his stories of exploring Dar es Salaam in those days when British colonial bureaucrats were packing their bags and cheerful Tanzanians were assuming offices heretofore reserved for Europeans. His subsequent chapters on getting lost in the Tanzanian bush, having a mechanical breakdown with a nonmechanical driver in the middle of the Sahara, contracting malaria in Kampala and tuberculosis in Dar es



Storyteller: Ryszard Kapuscinski pioneered incorporating the techniques of literary writing into journalistic reportage. Picture: Reuters

“What is essentially important to a reporter: respect for another man, his dignity and worth”

Article Tools

[Print](#) [E-Mail](#)

Save and Share

[BOOKMARK](#) [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [LinkedIn](#) [StumbleUpon](#) [Google Plus](#) ...

Salaam, and living in the slums of Lagos provided an enlightening and entertaining backdrop to my less eventful two-week sojourn.

In the bookstore at Jo 'burg's OR Tambo International Airport, I found Kapuscinski prominently displayed. *Travels With Herodotus*, his last book before his untimely death in 2007, joined *Shadows of the Sun* in my travel bag. This brilliant and heart-filled retrospective traced his journey from a child too poor to buy shoes in war-stricken Poland to his first trip abroad as a rookie reporter.

My heart goes out to him, alone in the New Delhi airport, entirely ignorant of Hindi and nearly so of English, with no idea of where to go or what to do. "I was quite unprepared for this journey," he writes. "I had neither names nor addresses in my notebook. My English was poor. I was not entirely to blame, though my sole desire had been to achieve the unachievable to cross the border."

On his way out the door, his editor gifted him with a copy of *The Histories*, perhaps the world's first travel writer, Herodotus of Halicarnassus. That text accompanied Kapuscinski on his first trip abroad and throughout his life, becoming the window through which he interpreted the world.

Kapuscinski endeared himself to me as a trustworthy observer of African history, and indeed of human events more broadly. I can think of no better way to describe him than to use his own words, as he described his mentor at the awards ceremony of Lettre International, an organisation he and German author Gunter Grass helped to found to promote literary reportage across the globe:

"Herodotus comes across as a man open and full of good will towards others, making contact with strangers easily, curious about the world, investigative, hungry for knowledge ... His attitude and bearing show reporters what is essentially important to a reporter: respect for another man, his dignity and worth. He listens carefully to his heartbeat, and the way thoughts cross his mind.

"So reportage work carries a significant responsibility. Plying our trade, we are not just men of writing pursuits but also missionaries, translators and messengers. We do not translate from one text into another, but from one culture into another, to make them mutually better understood and thereby closer, even friendlier to each other. The way a reporter describes China, for example, will, consequently, determine his readers' attitude towards China and the Chinese. Likewise with Brazil and so on. That is why you do not forget the human and humanitarian results your reporting triggers."

Kapuscinski leaves nearly 30 books of literary reportage, travel essays and poetry (only nine of which have been translated into English so far, but I am optimistic that will change) and countless contributions to magazines and newspapers.

So many thanks to you, Ryszard, in whatever faraway lands you now explore. — ©(2008)
The New York Times

