

A CONVERSATION WITH LAURIE HERTZEL

What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

Perhaps the biggest impetus was a discussion that took place a few years ago on the electronic bulletin board at the *Star Tribune*. A copy editor posted a message wondering why the word “employees” was misspelled on one of our doors. It was spelled “employes.” But I knew that back in the old days, newspapers often used simplified spelling, to save space, such as “cigaret” instead of “cigarette.” So a lively discussion sprang up about other newspaper traditions—no whistling in the newsroom, the early Sunday paper being called the bulldog, and others. And it occurred to me that it would be a good idea to somehow preserve this history, which was fast disappearing.

How long did it take you to write *News to Me*?

It took just about a year. Maybe a little longer. I wrote in the mornings, I wrote at night after work, and I wrote on Sunday afternoons. I also used almost all of my vacation time to work on the book. My husband and I rented a cabin up north for two weeks, and I wrote every morning and then hiked every afternoon. I came back with 6,000 words—that gave me a good start.

What challenges did you encounter in writing the book?

Well, the biggest challenge was time. I got the book contract the same week I got a new job—as books editor at the *Star Tribune*, a job that requires an enormous amount of reading (on my own time). And so for a full

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year, whenever I was reading I worried that I should be writing, and whenever I was writing I thought I should be reading. It was a stressful year.

What do you like most about *News to Me*?

I like that people have told me that it’s a fun read, and funny. I think it’s a real privilege to be able to make people laugh. I also like that many, many people—primarily women—have identified with the whole “accidental” part of the book,

and I love hearing their stories of how they, too, fell into their lives and careers by chance.

What was your journey to becoming a published author?

I have always written, all my life. I grew up in a family of writers and readers, and wrote my first “book” when I was still in grade school. (It was called “Balloon Magic,” and it was a total rip-off of Edward Eager’s *Half Magic*.) I started sending short stories out to magazines when I was 13, and my father was deeply impressed—far more than I was—when I got a personal letter from an editor at Harper’s, kindly rejecting my story and suggesting other markets. I have published short fiction in literary journals, and I have written two other books of nonfiction. And, of course, many, many, many newspaper and magazine pieces.

Minnesota Book Award Categories:

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- General Nonfiction
- Genre Fiction
- Memoir & Creative Nonfiction
- Minnesota Novel & Short Story
- Poetry
- Young People’s Literature


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News to Me:
Adventures of an Accidental Journalist
by Laurie Hertzell

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News to Me



SUMMARY

News to Me is the story of Laurie Hertzell's journey into the bustling world of print journalism in the mid-1970s, a time when copy was still banged out on typewriters by chain-smoking men in fedoras. The book chronicles Hertzell's 18-year career at the *Duluth News-Tribune* that began when journalism was a predominantly male profession. Major events took place during her time at the paper, including the Congdon murders, the establishment of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, and the rise of Indian treaty rights.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the book's main themes?
2. Describe the author's style of writing. How did her tone and use of language affect your experience of her story?
3. How might the author's career at the newspaper have been different if she was a man?
4. What did you learn about Duluth, and did your perception of the city

change by reading *News to Me*?

5. To what extent was the author's development as a journalist "accidental," and in what ways did the author shape her career at the paper?
6. In what ways did the book confirm what you thought about the newspaper business in the 1970s and 1980s, and what did you learn that surprised you?
7. In the 1980s, daily newspapers were big, newsrooms were bustling, and everybody read the paper. What are your views of how this industry has changed?
8. The author's father used to say, "Memory is a slippery thing." What are your expectations when you open a memoir? Do you expect it to be the literal truth?
9. The author has said, "It takes a lot of research to augment memories that are 20 and 30 years old." What kind of research might the author have done in writing her book, and what research would you undertake in writing your story?
10. What would an appropriate title be for your memoir?



ABOUT LAURIE HERTZEL

Laurie Hertzell grew up in Duluth where she spent nearly twenty years at the Duluth News-Tribune as a newsroom clerk, librarian, feature writer, news editor, and columnist. Her journalistic work has won numerous national awards, and her short fiction was honored with the Thomas Wolfe Fiction Prize. Hertzell is currently the books editor for the Star Tribune and is co-author of They Took My Father: Finnish Americans in Stalin's Russia.



Learn more about the author and her work at www.lauriehertzell.com or www.lifewiththreedogs.blogspot.com.



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