



One out of Five!

The other day while myself and the Mokuhankan staff ladies were working on the construction of the cases for my prints, a phone call came in from a magazine reporter wanting to set up an interview. I took the call, making arrangements for a date later in the week, and when I returned to the work area, our conversation turned to the topic of newspaper and magazine stories on my work. After decades of being a professional printmaker, I have built up a very fat scrapbook of press clippings, and have to confess that in recent years, I haven't even bothered to keep up with clipping and filing them, as this sort of thing has become kind of routine.

It's not that I am all that blasé about interviews and publicity, but there is one aspect to them that I have to confess is sometimes a bit trying. Most such publications have a basically standardized format for each issue, and the 'human interest interview' is a very common item, in both newspapers and magazines. The newspaper story will take up X column inches, with a typical magazine story being a two-page spread containing a few photos of me and my work. The reporters who write these stories are 'trained', and invariably follow the same Q&A format, based on the standard 'who, where, what, when ...' approach.

The upshot of this is that the interviews - and the resulting stories - tend to end up all being exactly the same. By the time they get through those basic 'W' questions, they've pretty much got enough to fill their space, and it's "Thank you Mr. Bull; goodbye!" So when I receive a copy of the publication a short time later, I don't even bother reading it, because I know it will be so uninteresting to me.

(I have to mention one - important - thing. During the course of the interview itself, I take great pains to make sure that they catch none of my 'boredom' - I respond enthusiastically and cheerfully to all the questions, even those which I have answered a million times before. By agreeing to let them come, I have made a commitment to do the job properly, and I do so.)

But did you notice that when I listed the 'W' questions I left one out? The only such question that really has any interest to me (and I think to the readers too!) is the 'why' question, and this is invariably last on their list, and frequently overlooked. So in recent years I have developed a little 'trick' to ensure that I get at least a little bit of what I want.

As we sit down and begin the session, and they open with their first question (invariably 'How long have you been in Japan?') I cut them off politely, and say "Excuse me, but let's do this a little bit differently. Before you being asking *me* questions, let me ask *you* one." And I then follow with, "Have you ever *seen* a woodblock print?"

What follows next always follows the same pattern; they respond with an 'of course' type of reply. I smile politely, and then show them a couple of items that I have previously prepared. One of these is a colour photocopy of a woodblock print and the other is the 'real' thing. I hold them in a certain way, and the guest can almost never tell the difference. But when I alter the lighting - to allow a proper raking light to fall over the two sheets - the difference is immediately apparent, and I follow up quickly with a little talk about a woodblock print being a truly three dimensional object, and how this knowledge has been lost in our modern society, and how my work focusses on bringing this beauty back into our lives and etc. and etc. and etc.

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>

This stuff is *interesting*, and my eyes light up as I chat away. And if I am successful at communicating my enthusiasm, their list of prepared questions is ignored, and by the time our time is up we haven't even touched on those other irrelevant W points.

After this kind of interview, when the resulting story arrives, *those* I read!

David Bull
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<http://astoryaweek.com>