

## Obit.

A movie about obituary writers? What could be of less interest... Hold your horses, because “Obit.” is a fascinating look into one of the essential bastions of journalism as it is practiced in *The New York Times*. In defining their work, one writer claims that obituaries “have almost nothing to do with death, but everything to do with life.” Another one of the obit writers paraphrases that thought early in the picture, saying that the death of a notable person involves about a paragraph of information in an obituary; 90 percent of what the article contains is the celebration of a person’s life, usually a positive narrative that defines that person.

The documentary film, compiled most effectively by director Vanessa Gould, follows ten or more members of the obit staff (the largest in newspapers), beginning with one of the best, Bruce Weber, as he commences his research, as they all do, by talking respectfully with the family of the deceased to get the details right. Weber’s search, in fact--on a once prominent government official--becomes a leitmotif for the film as he takes all day to craft a personal story and makes his deadline.

Other veteran *Times* figures prominently featured are writers William McDonald, head of the unit, Margalit Fox, and William Grimes, as well as the seen-it-all Jeff Roth, the archives clerk, keeper of the paper’s massive morgue. All of the writers interviewed are articulate and even philosophical about their work, confirming that you should be of a “certain” age with certain life experiences to really craft the arc of an obituary, i.e., you have to have lived a life to define another’s, especially in the typical 500 words.

Many of the stories of individual obits are intriguing or surprising. Such as the rush to capture overnight a meaningful narrative of an event-filled life when a popular celebrity dies suddenly, such as Michael Jackson or Robin Williams. In such cases, the paper’s archives surely serve, but it is finally the writer who must make an expansive life cohere. One story described is also singular: a prominent aviatrix of the 1920’s was last written about in the *Times* in 1933, and, when she died unknown in this century, the obit writer had to go back to the morgue and that 1933 column to fashion a story of a woman whose singular achievement happened many decades earlier.

“Obit.” makes a trilogy of fine *New York Times* documentaries along with “Wordplay” from 2006 and “Page One” from 2011. It is a fine addition to that line. (*The film is unrated and runs 95 mins.*)

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