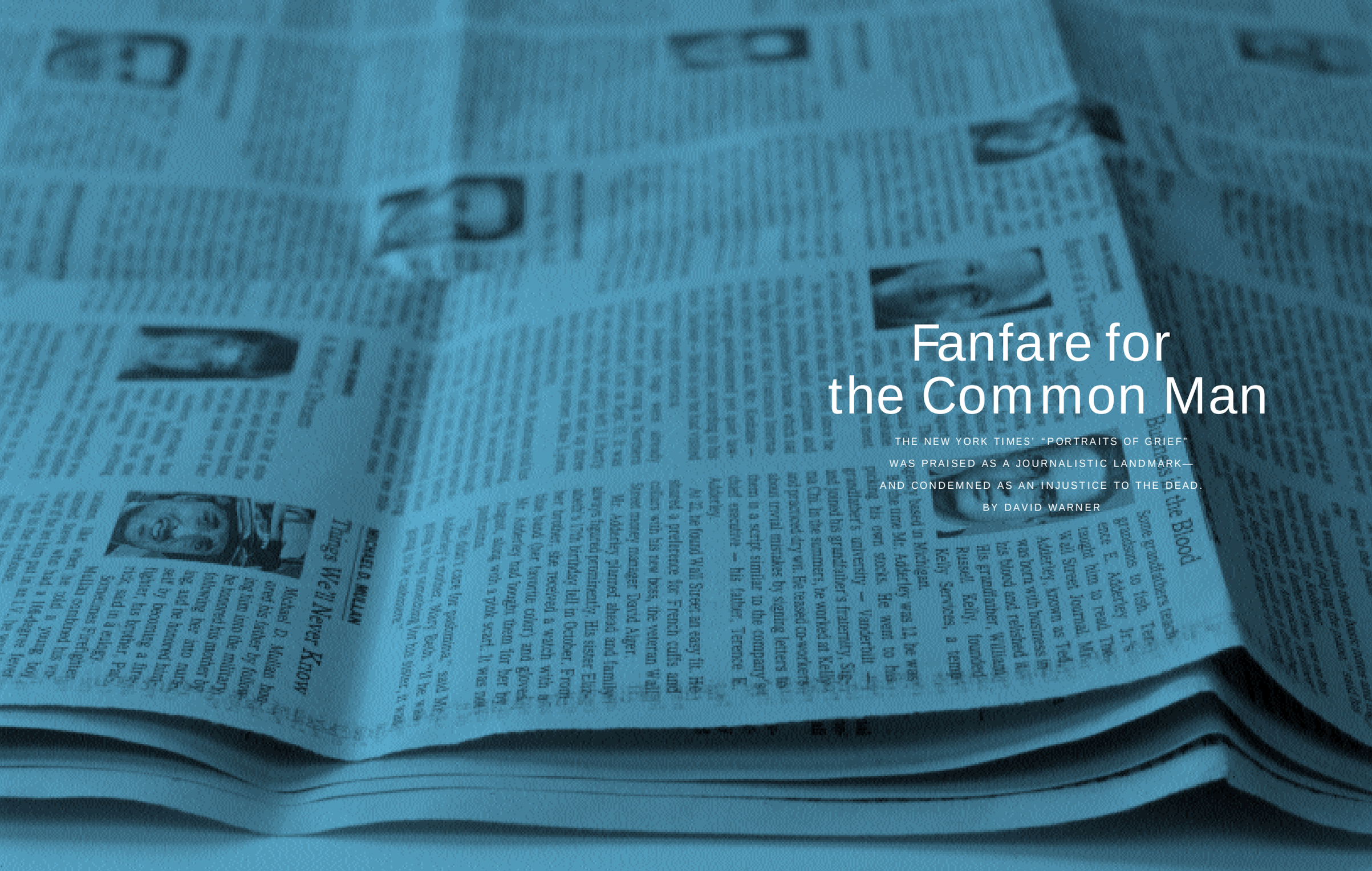

Fanfare for the Common Man

THE NEW YORK TIMES' "PORTRAITS OF GRIEF" WAS PRAISED AS A JOURNALISTIC LANDMARK—AND CONDEMNED AS AN INJUSTICE TO THE DEAD.

BY DAVID WARNER

FANFARE FOR THE COMMON MAN: "PORTRAITS OF GRIEF"
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"Janny DePalma, the *New York Times* reporter who wrote many of the 'Portraits of Grief' mini-obituaries of World Trade Center victims, has died."

Sad news, this. Surprising, too. Why was I was seeing it for the first time on Featurewell.com? You'd think it would have shown up in *The Times*.

"Friends and family members remember Janny as a lovable bundle of contradictions, a devoted vegetarian who could joke with her carnivorous friends."

Her "carnivorous friends?"

"A private individual for whom the spotlight was anathema, Janny nonetheless allowed herself to be dressed in alpine shorts and lederhosen as 15 couples roasted her to the strains of 'The Sound of Music' for her birthday last year."

Hmmm... Janny didn't sound much like your typical *Times* reporter.

"Janny was so cheerful, some teased, when she woke in the morning, birds chirped around her."

Oh. Got it. This was a *joke*.

A joke on, of all things, "Portraits of Grief." There was no Janny DePalma; the author of the parody, San Francisco–based humorist Tom McNichol, had simply combined the names of two actual *Times* reporters, both of whom are very much alive. And all the carnivorous friends and chirping birds and forced lederhosen? Taken verbatim from the portraits themselves.

Fans of the portraits, and there are many, have described the act of reading them as a kind of religious ritual.

Seeing the parody, I wondered: Had this sacred rite lost its status as sacred cow?

The Times' mini-tributes to the victims of the World Trade Center attacks began running on Sept. 15, 2001. By the end of the year, the paper had published more than 1,800 of the profiles, none of them bylined, each approximately 200 words in length. As of mid-August 2002, the paper had run close to 400 more, the frequency of the feature having gradually diminished to alternate Sundays.

Like many others who lived through that terrible day in New York, I began reading "Portraits in Grief" in order to understand just how much we had lost. The portraits were basically "about love," as one reporter put it, and so provided solace from the naked pain of missing-person fliers and regularly updated death tolls.

Reader feedback was overwhelmingly positive. *Times* Metropolitan Editor Jonathan Landman, in an interview with Poynter Online, said that the tributes drew "the most extraordinary response to anything I've ever seen in a newspaper." Janny Scott, who sifted through thousands of letters from readers in preparation for writing the introduction to the book "Portraits 9/11/01," quotes a typically passionate example from a South Dakota man: "Nothing—and I mean NOTHING—I have ever read in my life has moved me as much as these riveting windows into the lives of ordinary people."

Media response was nearly as effusive. The *Boston Herald* acclaimed "Portraits" as "one of the most remarkable accomplishments in American journalism." *Vanity Fair* photographed the series' writers and editors for its Hall of

Fame. Matt Lauer interviewed Landman on "The Today Show," and "Nightline" devoted a program to the project. And when *The Times* was awarded seven Pulitzers in 2002, more than any other newspaper, the victim profiles were mentioned in the citation for public service.

The backlash was probably inevitable.

First came grumblings that *The Times* wasn't the only paper commemorating the victims in such a fashion, nor was it the first; *Newsday* had instituted a series of memorial profiles, "The Lost," two days before *The Times* began theirs. And while *The Times* made a point of saying that the portraits were brief "snapshots" and were not meant to be complete obituaries, some critics complained that they focused too much on the sunnier aspects of the victims' lives, violating the tenets of journalistic balance. In January the *Wall Street Journal*'s Tunku Varadarajan condemned the portraits as "minihagiography," saying they did the dead "a ghastly, cloying disservice." Novelist Thomas Mallon, writing in the Spring 2002 issue of *American Scholar*, accused the "Grief team" of infantilizing the dead, turning them into "smile-button cyborgs." McNichol's parody appeared in July: Mocking the portraits in their own words (albeit out of context) was perhaps the ultimate insult.

It's true that the portraits were not exactly a new form. Whenever anyone started kvelling about the wonder of seeing "ordinary people" memorialized in *The Times*, I wanted to interject, "But what about Jim Nicholson?" The obit writer at the *Philadelphia Daily News* from 1982 to 2001, Nicholson was one of the first, if not *the* first, to democratize the form; as a result, he became the first obit writer ever to win an award for distinguished writing from the American Society of Newspaper Editors. His profiles, as compulsively readable as good fiction, inspired newspapers all over the country to tell more stories of everyday lives on their obit pages. The short form was nothing new, either. Barbara Stewart, one of the reporters who worked on "Portraits," wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review* that "the tradition of running short profiles of the victims of disasters, like plane crashes and fires, is probably as old as newspapering."

But this was of course no ordinary disaster. And the portraits were unlike any other previous tributes, because the lives they commemorated were lost in a tragedy unlike any other in American history. More than just honoring the dead, the profiles gave human scale to an inhuman event, helped readers comprehend an incomprehensible tragedy.

Still, as the year progressed, I began to feel a little compassion-fatigued by "Portraits." At the same time, I found myself steadily more interested in the passionate debate they continued to evoke.

Was this a watershed achievement in journalism or no kind of journalism at all? The harbinger of a wider cultural change—or a load of pandering claptrap?

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the newsroom at *The Times* was in chaos. Reporters were eager to write about the individual victims, but the nature of the disaster made it difficult for the city to confirm who those people were.

"Day after day I was on the budget as writing about the dead," remembers Scott, "and I could never do it.... I came in Friday morning [and said], 'If you can't call 'em dead yet, call 'em missing and just start writing short blurbs.'"

Christine Kay, an editor on the metro desk, suggested that writers focus on emblematic details rather than try to cover whole lives in 200 words. She took a small group of reporters aside, including Scott, and together they fleshed out the idea. Divvying up about 100 "missing" fliers between them, the reporters began making calls. Eventually the project grew to involve more than 140 reporters, some working on just a few pieces, some on hundreds.

Wendell Jamieson, an editor on the metro desk, was assigned to edit the section. He encouraged the reporters to vary their approaches, to let each person's story determine the narrative structure.

"There was no checklist of things you had to get in each one," says Jamieson, who estimated that as of spring 2002 he had edited about 1,800 of the short tributes. "The idea was they had to be different. If they all started off the same way readers wouldn't read them."

He cites the story of Gregg Atlas, a 44-year-old fire lieutenant profiled in the

issue of Dec. 24, 2001, as a successful use of unexpected perspective.

"We talked to this guy's whole family," he says, "but it's written from the point of view of someone who just talked to [him] once"—a young stockbroker trainee who met Atlas on the stairway of the north tower and helped the exhausted firefighter, who was joking about his age, carry his gear up 25 flights of stairs. The final image—Atlas sends the broker back down before resuming his climb, and when asked for his name says "Gregg Atlas" with a Charles Atlas–like bicep flex—completes the portrait of an aging hero with a sense of humor.

Each of the portraits "got all the things done you want a news story to get done," says Jamieson. It's just that they were "sometimes upside down, sometimes right side up. We tried to get away from any journalistic clichés."

Still, some repetition—and yes, some clichés—were perhaps unavoidable, in both the reporters' language and the survivors' quotes.

Size matters: "A gentle giant with size-16 feet"; "Everyone's Gentle Giant"; "he was the kindest, nicest, most gentle 6-foot-4 person there ever was."

Big laughs, wide smiles: "Her full-bodied, make-you-smile laugh"; "[his] laugh was a full-body production, a gut-wriggling giggle so convulsive that he almost couldn't breathe."

Real New Yorkers: "A New Yorker to the bone"; a "New Yorker through and through"; "an archetypal young New Yorker."

Sugar highs: "The youngest, the baby, the much-fussed-over little princess, and didn't she know it, with her winning smile, her spontaneous three-day jaunts to the Bahamas?"; "if the former World Champs drafted on the basis of heart, Brian Jr. would have been wearing pinstripes for a living"; "they had a happily-ever-after life that was the envy of all who knew them."

Of course, in listing all these not-so-*bon mots* out of context, I'm playing the same game Tom McNichol played in his parody: String together enough sappy encomia and the cumulative effect is to make all of the portraits seem, in Tunku Varadarajan's phrase, "quite, quite indigestible."

But context is important.

The headlines, for instance—"When In Doubt, Serve Tuna," "Bellybutton Melodies" and the like—have received a great deal of criticism.

"So your best friend dies in the World Trade Center and you see 'When In Doubt, Serve Tuna,'" says McNichol. "You think there's more to them than that."

Yet that particular headline is actually quite apropos. It's for the story of Alena Sesinova, a Czech émigré who loved America but never quite mastered English; who when she worked in Macy's cafeteria would serve a tuna sandwich to any customer she couldn't understand. "Bellybutton Melodies" is indeed an inordinately icky title, and not even quite accurate—the narrative tells how Thierry Saada, a Tunisian-born, Sephardic Jewish stockbroker from Paris, played melodies for his unborn child, and "talked" to him via his wife's bellybutton. But the story itself is nowhere near as light-hearted as the headline; it concludes with the bluntly tragic news that the baby was due Sept. 16, and that Saada's wife resisted going into labor in hopes that her husband would return.

There's no sentimentality in the telling of this anecdote. The reporter simply recounts the facts, and that's enough to punch you in the heart.

As these two examples indicate, not everyone killed in the 9/11 attacks fit a standard profile. Yet the reason the portraits have a certain sameness, the reason they make it seem as if everyone worked for the same few companies and lived in the same few neighborhoods, is that so many of the victims *did*: Of the 2,819 people lost, 658 (including Saada) were employed by Cantor Fitzgerald, or 23 percent of the dead. The fire department lost 343, or 12 percent; Aon Corporation lost 176, or 6 percent. Forty-four victims came from the same square mile on the Upper East Side, according to a recent report in *The New York Times*; In Hoboken, N.J. it is estimated that one out of 750 residents was killed.

Demographic similarities made it that much harder for reporters to make each portrait distinctive, particularly as time went on.

"The challenge is to make your 12th employee of the same company or agency stand out," says Tina Kelley, a *Times* staff writer who has written more than 100 profiles since November. "This week doing research I found two firefighters from West Islip." And, she adds, "In a city like this you're getting a lot of diehard Yankees and Mets fans. You have to go beyond that."

"*No one in these portraits* divorces, gets sued, acts like a real person," complains McNichol.

That's not entirely true. The darker sides of life do surface from time to time: There's a guy who "hit bottom in his early 20s from alcoholism"; another who "raised himself in a family of alcoholics," was divorced and is raising his sons on his own. But even in cases like these the good is given much more weight than the bad: The first man, we're told, went on to become a Fulbright scholar and study at the London School of Economics; the second was enjoying his work as a carpenter "and had fallen in love again."

And the daddies—almost every single one of them, it seems—are exemplary. In one portrait, a woman says that her late brother-in-law always told his employees to put family and faith before their jobs, prompting her to ask, "How often do you hear that—especially on Wall Street?"

Judging by "Portraits," you hear it quite a lot: "Despite his success he saved his finest work for home"; "he found his greatest joy in being with his four daughters"; "his children's ball games were sacred rites."

One family man's image has already been tarnished. In August, New York newspapers reported that a heroic Port Authority police officer killed in the World Trade Center attack had apparently been leading a double life. His profile in "Portraits" mentions his four children and the fact that he would have celebrated his 20th anniversary on Sept. 12. But another woman has come forward who says he is the father of her two children—and that on Sept. 10, when he told his wife he was spending the night at a police station in New Jersey, he was actually with her.

This is only one instance in which the whole truth is potentially much harsher than the rosy picture painted by the portraits. *The New York Times* reported in July that the staff of Cantor Fitzgerald, in order to "arm families of Sept. 11 victims in their fight for federal compensation," had compiled "a detailed accounting of the performances and prospects of the firm and its 658 lost employees." This document is colloquially referred to by victims' families as "the

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Book"; though not the kind of book you can buy in a bookstore, it still sounds like a bracing corrective to the glowing remembrances of perfect breadwinners in that other book, "Portraits 9/11/01" (which, with its alphabetized headshots, concise bios and benign intent, feels weirdly like an alumni directory).

According to the Book, some victims didn't have as much money as they'd pretended to have or did not have as high an earning potential as others who were lost. Everyone was *not* equal—and not everyone represented an equal amount of loss to the company. At least in financial terms, some people's lives *were* worth more than others.

Of course, that's not information that "Portraits" reporters would have been privy to. And the portraits could only be 200 words long. Obit writers like Jim Nicholson and *TheTimes*' late, legendary Robert McG. Thomas had considerably more space and the luxury of choosing their subjects, including some with colorful criminal pasts. (One of the most unforgettable obits I've ever read is by Nicholson disciple Robin Hinch of the *Orange County Register*; it's about a convicted murderer and the daughter who stood by him.)

But if the portraits cannot be and are not even *meant* to be complete appraisals of the lives being reported upon, do they qualify as journalism at all?

Salon.com contributing writer David Tuller, in a much-discussed letter to the influential journalism web site Jim Romenesko's MediaNews, said no:

"At times they have been genuinely moving, I'm sure they've been difficult and traumatic to report, and undoubtedly the families themselves have appreciated them tremendously," wrote Tuller. "Yet let's not confuse it too much with journalism. *The Times*' reporters have become experts at disguising some unpleasant and darker human characteristics—a desire to win at all costs, for example—as uplifting qualities."

Slate's "Chatterbox" columnist Timothy Noah, in a June 2002 piece about *The Times*' Pulitzer bonanza, agreed:

"The 'Portraits of Grief' may have constituted an innovative way to memorialize those who died in the World Trade Center attack, but they were not, Chatterbox would argue, journalism, any more than the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is journalism."

At *The Times*, the view from the top is that of course the portraits are journalism—though if you want to think of them as a memorial, that's all right, too.

"We set out to make worthy journalism, not to create a memorial," wrote Executive Editor Howell Raines in his foreword to "Portraits: 9/11/01." "If in the course of doing our jobs we created a monument in words to those who were lost, we are proud to have honored them and their families with our labors."

Journalism or not, the portraits reflected, for better and for worse, the unusual circumstances of their creation.

"This was pushing the boundaries of what journalism is," says Janny Scott, "and sometimes we slipped over the edge… I think in a small number of cases reporters ran [the portraits] by the families."

Yet she says there's no way the project would have been so generally embraced by the public if it had been done in a "cheesy" fashion.

"I don't think people were responding because we were making these people saints."

But what if some of these people *were* saints, or even just truly good people?

"There was a quote in some article in 1993 after the bombing," says Tina Kelley, "that if the World Trade Center had been [destroyed] they would have lost thousands of people and about 10 souls. That's not at all what I've found."

Forget whether or not the prose in certain profiles was too sugary. Just consider the lives, unadorned: the former star quarterback who ran a soup kitchen and worked in an anti-poverty program in Haiti; the elevator operator who took a bullet in his spine after trying to rescue an old man from thugs; the paramedic who made at least three trips bringing victims to area hospitals before reentering the south tower; the computer programmer who died in the collapse because he steadfastly refused to abandon his quadriplegic colleague.

Granted, the above men are exceptional. But there are countless other characters of less heroic dimension among the portraits whose lives nevertheless suggest a kind of goodness—the son who paints his parents' house over the weekend as a surprise, the husband who sees his wife through cancer, the practical joker who adored his teenage daughter and whose spirit was broken when she died of a brain tumor.

Okay, these would be even richer stories with ulterior motives and family feuds and maybe an infidelity or two—but even those realities wouldn't necessarily cancel out the good.

Critics objected to all the doting fathers and happy families (they're all alike, don'cha know). Apparently, readers *recognized* them. That's what Nicholson and "ordinary people" obit writers like him have heard over and over.

Like "Portraits," Nicholson's obits generated an outpouring of positive response from readers. "Thousands of notes—some just wrenching," Nicholson remembers. "People saying I was 'validating Dad's whole life.'"

His successor, Yvonne Latty, moved into the position after nine years of covering homicides and neighborhood issues, "sitting in living rooms listening to people talk about really hard things."

Now that she's writing about death from another perspective—reporting on

the well-lived lives that precede most deaths—she feels differently about the city, too.

"There are so many great people in the city, so many positive African-Americans—these men who work really hard so their kids can go to college, dads who are always there. You would never know these people existed [from the newspapers]. You would think every black man in Philadelphia is on crack or dead before 25. I realize now that I was seeing such a small part of how our readers live."

In the wake of the portraits' early success, there was much talk in journalism circles of using that success as an incentive to do more "ordinary people" stories in other parts of the newspaper.

"I have a theory," wrote Poynter Online editor Bill Mitchell in November. "The time is right for a sustained run of extraordinary stories about ordinary people, those stories that journalists love to discuss but so rarely produce." Frances Katz of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* echoed Mitchell's sentiment, calling the portraits "a remarkable testament to the fact that ordinary pleasures and a simple life are as interesting as the flashiest celebrity on 'Entertainment Tonight.'"

It could be argued, though, that the entertainment industry these days (including "Entertainment Tonight") is all *about* ordinary lives. Aggressively ordinary people vamp for the camera in TV "reality" shows, while various media outlets do their best to cut extraordinary lives down to size. The MTV hit "The Osbournes" bases its appeal on the revelation that "the flashiest celebrity"—in this case, a flamboyant rock star—is just an ordinary Ozzy. Bonnie Fuller, editor of the newly hot *Us* magazine, told *Newsweek* that readers want to know that celebrities are "just like us." Even the two novels that won last year's National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize, Jonathan Franzen's "The Corrections" and Richard Russo's "Empire Falls," center on resolutely ordinary people.

So to some extent the massive embrace of "Portraits" could be seen as another symptom of this trend—another version of "real life" packaged for a population eager to see itself in a mirror. When the portraits blur or distort that

authentic reflection—and they occasionally do—their value is limited. When they confine their palette to "pastels," to use Mallon's term, they not only can be parodied, they should be—if nothing else, for the mental health of the reader.

But when they manage to find what Janny Scott calls "that single startling detail," they do what all good journalism, and good art, does: They reveal, in a clear, unblinking light, some truth about the way we live.

It's interesting in this respect to consider "The Guys." A one-act play by Columbia University journalism professor and first-time playwright Anne Nelson, "The Guys" was one of the earliest theatrical responses to 9/11. In the original production, Sigourney Weaver played a journalist asked by a fire captain (Bill Murray) for help in writing elegies for the funerals of the eight men lost from his firehouse. While the dramatic action is spare to the point of stasis, the elegies themselves—and to an even greater degree, the captain's descriptions that inform them—are at once heartbreaking and enlightening. They move us because they capture the everyday details of each man's life.

The best "Portraits" did that, too.

But there's another element, rarely mentioned, that makes them invaluable.

It's true that no single one of these "snapshots" captures an entire life. But within almost every one of them, there is a snapshot, a brief but telling glimpse, of what happened on and around 9/11. And the most memorable of these—Gregg Atlas on the stairs, Delphine Saada delaying her labor, Abe Zelmanowitz standing by his friend in his wheelchair—do add up to a whole picture. It's a picture of devastation, of loss, of tragic coincidences and small acts of heroism. That is as valuable a monument to the people lost that day as any obelisk or memorial garden could be.

Is "Portraits" journalism? Who cares? The label is beside the point. The editor of *The Times* himself said that he'd be honored "if in the course of doing our jobs we created a monument in words to those who were lost." That's exactly what his team has done, and for the most part they have done it extremely well. Whoever winds up creating a memorial on the site of the World Trade Center could do worse than to take a page from their book.