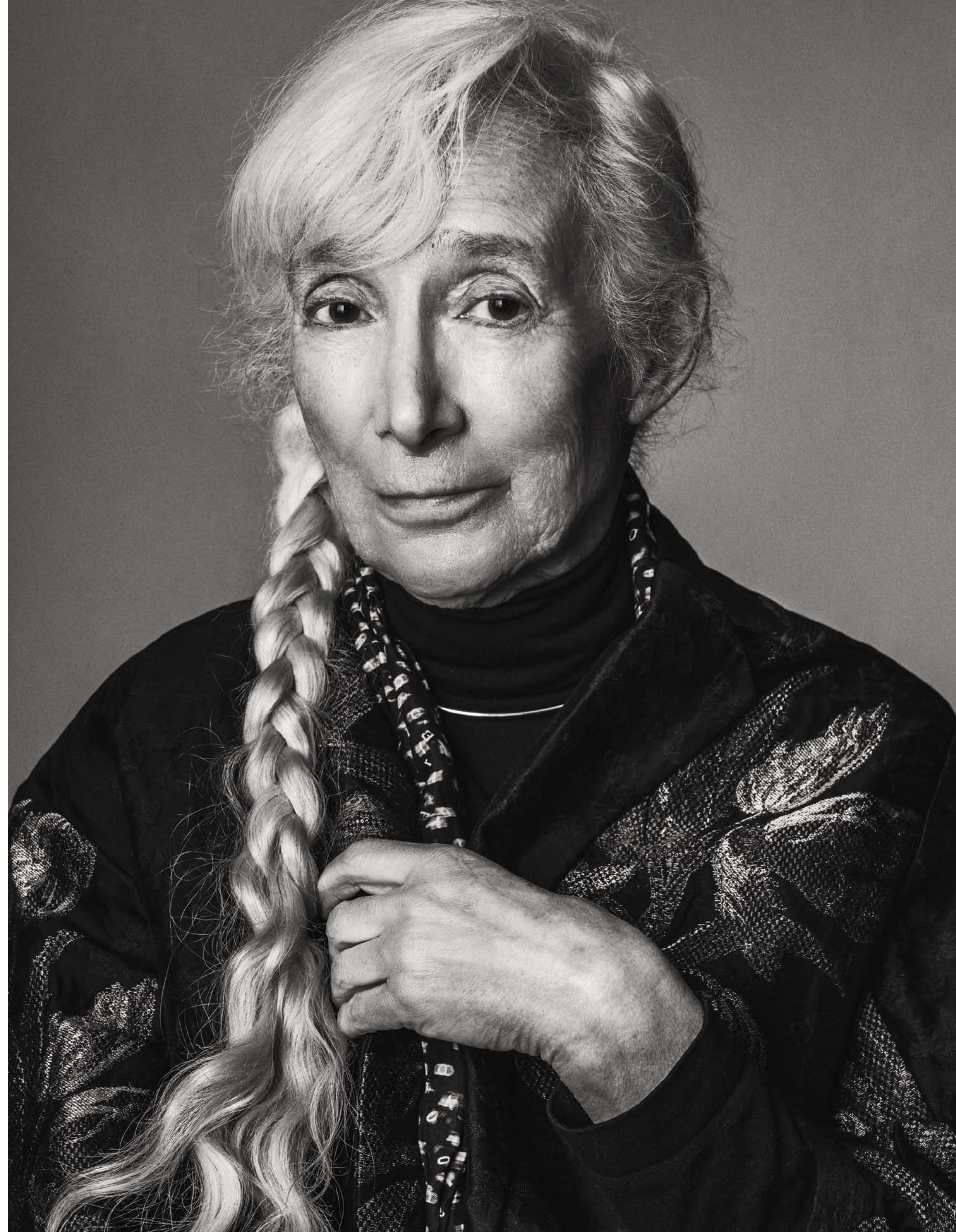
Renata
ADLER

OCCASIONALLY THERE ARE WRITERS TALENTED ENOUGH TO DEFINE THEIR GENERATIONS. BUT RARELY DOES ONE HAVE THE ENDURANCE AND ACUITY TO DEFINE HALF A CENTURY. FROM WAR ZONES TO WATERGATE, FROM HER EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIMENTAL FICTION TO HER NAVIGATION OF MEDIA AND LAW, RENATA ADLER HAS PROVEN ONE OF AMERICA'S LITERARY AND JOURNALISTIC MASTERS. AS THE RESURGENT APPRECIATION FOR HER FICTION CONTINUES, WE TALK TO HER ABOUT ALL THE PLACES HER WRITING HAS TAKEN HER—AND WHY IT'S CRUCIAL TO QUESTION THE GIVEN FACTS.

By CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN
Portrait SEBASTIAN KIM
Styling MICHELLE CAMERON

RENATA ADLER IN NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 2014. *COAT:* DRIES VAN NOTEN. *SWEATER:* TSE. *SCARF:* PAUL SMITH. *NECKLACE:* AESA.



Last year when New York Review Books republished Renata Adler's two novels, 1976's *Speedboat* and 1983's *Pitch Dark*, generations who hadn't been around to feel the turbulent wake they left on the literary scene the first time got a chance to be tossed around in the writer's explosive, sinuous prose. It is rare for novels to receive such a staggering reception twice—and equally rare that such brilliant books fell out of print to begin with. But perhaps part of the joy in these reissues lay precisely in the fact that a reader could feel that she or he had made a prize discovery, that *Speedboat* was both something new and something already certified as essential to the development of contemporary literature. (Evidence of Adler's influence could be found on the back covers, which ran portraits taken of her in the 1970s by her close friend Richard Avedon.) The feverish response was more than deserved. *Speedboat*, in particular, tosses aside safe narrative structures for the delirious all-around atmosphere of the social and intellectual worlds of a young New Yorker named Jen Fain. As with a magician performing a card trick, there seems to be no order to the shuffle until it dawns on the player that the magician has been manipulating the deck all along. Nothing adds up until it all does or, as Adler writes a third of the way through the novel, "When I wonder what it is that we are doing … the truth is probably that we are fighting for our lives."

Adler knew what she was doing. Long before *Speedboat* was published, the writer, who was born in Milan in 1938 and grew up in Connecticut, had been an eminent staff writer for *The New Yorker*. She joined the magazine in 1963 and began with book reviews. Her nonfiction quickly moved into cultural and political territory near and far. It is humbling to learn that she was only 26 years old when she wrote "The March for Non-Violence From Selma," a tense, panoramic exploration of the 50-mile walk that brought her to the front lines of America's evolving notions of justice, rights, and identity. Other lines were soon crossed—Vietnam, the Six-Day War, Biafra. But an expected "beat" is not Adler's style. She also penned critiques of soap operas ("I found that those two-and-a-half-year, open-ended narrative experiences define a lot of what I am and what I think"), popular music, and she was even a film reviewer in the late '60s for *The New York Times*. It's surprising to discover that Adler only attended law school at Yale in the late '70s, because she had already served as a speechwriter for the committee chair for the Nixon impeachment inquiry. Adler proceeded to investigate Watergate, complete with her own theory on the true nature of the Nixon scandal ("This has been an era of failed investigations") with such a sharp, unflinching eye for the fine print or faulty logic that it seems she had studied law and power structures from birth.

Adler became, in many ways, a fighter for the truth. Often that fight was directed against those in the media who were supposed to be ferreting out the truth and reporting the findings for us. That endeavor is brave, if not always popular. She never pulled a punch (her take on film reviewer Pauline Kael in the 1980 essay "The Perils of Pauline" might simply be the most well-known example outside of the industry). As Adler wrote in the introduction of her 2001 collection of essays, *Canaries in the Mineshaft*, "almost all the pieces in this book have to do, in one way or another, with what I regard as misrepresentation, coercion, and abuse of public process, and, to a degree, the journalist's role in it." In the banner of redeeming journalism, journalists themselves weren't spared, as Adler took on everything from the celebrity reporter to the celebrity anonymous source. Other war fronts loomed: Adler served the truth better than her favorability in reporting on two libel trials in 1984 where the media machines may have been at fault (1986's *Reckless Disregard*) and with her less-than-rose-colored evaluation of *The New Yorker* in 1999's *Gone*.

For a woman who was celebrated so young and consistently for her intellect and super-acuity, a tide shift eventually occurred where potential enemies could be found in competing bylines. To remove from context a line Adler wrote in 1977 about Watergate: "Everyone started covering his tracks in the direction most dangerous to him." Maybe the tracks led to Adler in this case, but it is a dismal form of journalism if, indeed, those who are willing to pry out the facts from the fictions or the blanket received wisdoms are reprimanded or silenced. What is the real account beyond the given verdict? This question seems, upon reading a lifetime of Adler's reporting, a constant, haunting one. Hopefully, with the resurgence of interest in her novels, so too will come a reexamination of her political, media, and social reports. New York Review Books plans to publish just such a collection of selected essays next year so that a new generation can evaluate the work of a journalist quarrying the romantic, illusive notions of some of the most significant events of the 20th century.

Today, Adler lives in Newtown, Connecticut, and it was to there that I drove in April to meet up with her over breakfast. By the time I arrived, she had already eaten. That served me well, because I could eat and Adler was free to talk. Lithe, dressed practically

"I THINK ONCE THERE IS CONVENTIONAL WISDOM OR RECEIVED IDEAS IN THE PRESS OR THERE IS UNANIMITY, YOU'VE GOT A DISASTER."

in jeans, a lavender turtleneck, and a button-down, and with her signature white braid cast over her shoulder, Adler seemed no less capable of taking on the 21st century as she did the previous one. What follows is a very tight edit from a very long conversation that could have continued on well into the dinner hour.

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN: What's your house here in Newtown like?

RENATA ADLER: It's a nice little house that used to be a cider mill. There's a little stream, a little waterfall.

BOLLEN: How did you find it?

ADLER: Actually, my mother found it, and I got it in 1978. I thought I was just going to come out and work when New York got too busy. But then many things happened. For one, it turned out to be too far to commute for weekends, so I started spending much more time out here. But then I sort of fell off the face of the planet and went to Boston …

BOLLEN: You taught at Boston University. What did you teach?

ADLER: One thing I taught was English literature and the other was journalism. I was part of the University Professors Program, which was supposed to be a very honorific thing. I told them I didn't want to teach journalism. I just don't think it belongs in the university at the undergraduate level. But I finally said I'd teach a course called "Misinformation," which turned out to be really fun.

BOLLEN: [*laughs*] Wow. Every undergraduate should take that course.

ADLER: It isn't disinformation but misinformation. The kids really got it. The kids got *so* good.

BOLLEN: Disinformation is purposeful; it's intentionally deceptive. Misinformation is more ambiguous and also maybe more dangerous because it aims for the truth … but it's still not true.

ADLER: Something is true or not true. And not true is more the standard today. One of the cases we tried in class was the Shoe Bomber. I said, "Look, if you've flown lately, you know what the seats in a plane are like. This guy was over six feet, and they say he bent down to set fire to his shoelaces. The next one of us to fly, see if you can reach your shoelaces."

BOLLEN: Was he in business or economy?

ADLER: Economy. So, of course, it turns out that's not the story at all. My students started looking into it. First of all, he wasn't bending down to set fire to his shoelaces—that's not a bomb situation anyway but a hotfoot. He actually put his sneakers in his lap and attempted six times to light his shoe laces. But this is how little anyone thought it was a shoe bomb: The flight attendant eventually carried the shoes to the cockpit. The flight was diverted to Boston, but no one was speaking of a bomb at all. The guy was a nut, no question of that. But the story just didn't make sense to me. The police take him off the plane, and later there's a big crowd of journalists waiting, and he shouts, "I hate America, I want Americans dead," or whatever it is that he shouted. And a reporter asked, "Did you have a shoe bomb?" He said, "Yes! Yes! I had a shoe bomb!" He said he'd been walking around on it for two months. Now, if that were true, it would be a shoe bomb nobody ever heard of. The students made a list of what each publication reported was the substance in his shoe. Then they got old pairs of sneakers, treated them the way each publication said it must have been treated, put in what would most resemble the powder described, and tried to walk on it.

BOLLEN: So basically your whole class was walking around with fake homemade shoe bombs. I really wish I could have taken this class.

ADLER: What we were doing, mainly, was reading stories on the front pages of newspapers and using them to ask: What is a fact? If you strip style away and fancy language, what was it telling you? And usually it wasn't telling you a hell of a lot. But in this case, it was telling you there was a Shoe Bomber. [*laughs*] But there are no bombs that would work the way it was described. Reid went off to prison and the story died, but the students had a piece they could really publish. It was sourced and everything. And suddenly I thought, "What am I doing? Everybody will hate them. They'll never get a job in journalism, ever!"

BOLLEN: Because you were encouraging them to counter the accepted story—the one their prospective employers had helped to cement.

ADLER: The story that had been accepted as fact, by everybody. This happened to [journalist] Ed Epstein years ago when he was writing for *The New Yorker* and the Black Panthers' lawyer said that 28 Black Panthers had been killed in a "genocide," and the press just accepted his assertion as fact.

BOLLEN: You mention this event in an essay on the Nixon scandal. The number wasn't really 28 but more like two.

ADLER: Ed is alone in doing what he does. He writes a piece showing that figure to be erroneous and it created enormous animus against him. He never gets a break again. Because you just don't *do* that—you don't correct the accepted story. They were against anybody who opposed what was taken as the received wisdom. Naturally, if your deadline is daily, there are going to be mistakes. But there are mistakes and then there are mistakes. You just

"I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN WHEN *SPEEDBOAT* CAME OUT. I THOUGHT, I BETTER BE IN LAW SCHOOL, BECAUSE WHO KNOWS WHETHER ANYONE WILL LIKE IT OR NOT."

FROM LEFT: RENATA ADLER IN HER OFFICE AT *THE NEW YORKER* MAGAZINE, 1967. ADLER AND JOAN DIDION AT THE ANNUAL CEREMONIAL OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS AND LETTERS, 1978. *PHOTOS:* JILL KREMENTZ.

can't say, "We stand by our story no matter what."

BOLLEN: Did you always want to be a journalist, even as a child?

ADLER: Oh, it seemed the height of what was wonderful to do. I actually came to it very slowly. I started off at *The New Yorker* reviewing stuff—just these little unsigned book reviews. Then Mr. Shawn [longtime *New Yorker* editor William Shawn] gave me longer ones. They always took me forever. With *The New Yorker*, you might write one piece and might not write again for seven years. It was always such an occasion when a piece you wrote appeared, and in a way you were stuck with whatever impression it left for as long as it was until you were next published.

BOLLEN: But you moved from book reviews to writing on a variety of topics—many of which really touched at the heart of 1960s: the youth and music scene on the Sunset Strip, contemporary art, Hare Krishnas in Tompkins Square Park …

ADLER: I remember the Hare Krishnas. Mr. Shawn asked me, "Why don't we have a column which will be called 'Other Events' and you can just review things that are other events?" I remember covering a contest for drag queens. I had these conversations with Mr. Shawn. "Would it be the right thing to do? Would it hurt people's feelings if we ran this?" But I chose a thing because it was something interesting going on in New York. Basically, if you ever discussed a piece fully enough or asked if there were any negative consequences, there was inevitably every reason not to do it—on any subject.

BOLLEN: One of your most famous pieces was your coverage of the Selma march in 1965.

ADLER: I remember asking Mr. Shawn if I could go to Selma, and he said, "Sure."

BOLLEN: Covering that kind of event seems like a reporter's dream—there you were walking to Montgomery alongside the marchers and Martin Luther King Jr. But at the time when you proposed going, was there an understanding of how historic it would be?

ADLER: There was a feeling it could have come to something or could not have, because there were so many different things going on. But it worked for me as a way of reporting because I can't do profiles. I can't do interviews. The structure is "This happens Monday morning and then at noon this happens …" So there was already a narrative. But you know, when I started on the march, I wore my heels, my coat, my gloves.

BOLLEN: [*laughs*] Were you having terrible foot pains after a mile? And freezing at night camping out in fields with the marchers?

ADLER: Well, no, but I was certainly an idiot. I mean, imagine, there I am, clearly an outside agitator from the North as far as people down there knew. I didn't get a hotel room, which was good because it meant I could follow the situation around the clock. Before we set out, Andy Young [Andrew Young of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference] did teach a very brief, hands-on course on what to do when someone's beating you on the head.

BOLLEN: Were you frightened?

ADLER: No. There wasn't a lot of doubt then about which side you were on. One of the joys of reporting in the South was that you knew immediately who was on your side and who to be scared of.

BOLLEN: That might have been one of the last times in American history where it was so clear who was on which side. In the introduction for your collection of essays from the 1960s, *Toward a Radical Middle*, you mention a sort of blurring of boundaries and easy negotiations: "From now on it is all … unsimple victories," you write. You discuss how it's impossible to have a romantic sensibility about the good fight as you could in previous decades. That had been irrevocably lost.

ADLER: It had been lost. I went to Vietnam, not for *The New Yorker* but for *McCall's*. Back then, *McCall's* would call young reporters and ask, "Under what circumstances would you do a piece for us?" I said as long as it was as far as possible from New York and something I couldn't do for *The New Yorker*. They said, "How about anti-Semitism in a small town in New Jersey?" I said, "No, that has two disadvantages. One is, it's something not at all far from New York, and secondly, I *could* do it for *The New Yorker*. And thirdly, I have no interest in it whatsoever." [*laughs*] They said, "Well, where, where would you consider far from New York?" I said, "Vietnam or Brasília." They said, "What if you did a piece that was not military and was not political." I said, "Perfect, because I don't know anything about either one. I'd just love to do that, whatever it is."

BOLLEN: I'm curious if they—or if you—had any reservations about sending a female reporter into a war zone. I thought there was a sort of chauvinism about on-the-ground Vietnam reporting.

ADLER: I don't think it was even a thought. I didn't give it one.

BOLLEN: So *McCall's* sends you, giving you carte blanche to find a story in Vietnam.

ADLER: Yes. At first there was one guy I wanted to follow around. He'd been there a long time. He was an American, he spoke Vietnamese, he had a Vietnamese girl, naturally, and he had been there in the days of what was then called "piano wire diplomacy"—sort of going out in the night and strangling people. But the editors said, "No, you wouldn't be doing him or yourself any favors." So I followed somebody else. It was a strange time. I met some wonderful journalists there. I was flying around in helicopters. The guy I finally settled on was someone who was the adviser to a province chief. The subject of my piece was mainly cockfighting. That's what everyone had in common: cockfights. And then when I came home, on the way back, I sort of bumped into the Six-Day War and wrote about that for *The New Yorker*.

BOLLEN: Bumped into! I know at the time you weren't a fan of New Journalism. In fact you wrote

about the danger of a reporter turning themselves into a central character and how they can manipulate the facts around their impressions. New Journalism has obviously become a prevalent approach to reporting. Did you feel in the '60s that you were trying to write against that popular wave?

ADLER: No, not against. I didn't care for New Journalism. In fact, I did sort of hate it. But it didn't have anything to do with me. There was nothing polemical about it. But since then, I do think there was an amazing decline in what was considered traditional journalism. We were talking about Vietnam. I think all of those *Times* reporters in the South were wonderful.

BOLLEN: But you see that New Journalistic obsession with the self—the advent of "me and my own position" reporting—as something that dilutes real facts?

ADLER: I think their notion of fact became unrecognizable. I was just thinking, "What does it mean to say that a fact is something with two sources? What is a source?" The source is a person who may well lie to you. Two sources are two people who may lie to you in concert. What is this mystique of two sources? Especially if you don't have to name them so no one else can ever find them. For me, the beginning of the end was Deep Throat.

BOLLEN: I want to get to Deep Throat, but first I want to ask you about your friendship with Hannah Arendt. How did you meet her?

ADLER: I met her through *The New Yorker*. Here's the thing: the new people always borrowed offices—I once had E.B. White's office and Katharine White's, and I once had an office next to Joe Mitchell—all of these heroes of mine. But I remember in '63, racing to Mr. Shawn's office after the Hannah Arendt pieces appeared [the "Eichmann in Jerusalem" series]. I said, "This may sound very peculiar, but I think Miss Arendt—or somebody—should quickly run something saying what these pieces say, and what they do not say, because they may be misunderstood." Mr. Shawn, to his great credit, did not treat me like I was nuts. He just sent me back to my office. [*Bollen laughs*] I bothered him about another thing—about Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* [the book came out of a series of articles in *The New Yorker*]. I raced up to his office to say, "This is everything that *The New Yorker* despises."

BOLLEN: Oh, right. You didn't like *In Cold Blood*.

ADLER: That really understates it. [*laughs*] But anyway, Mr. Shawn came to my office one day. This was after the book [Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*] came out, and the reaction had been incredible: There was a really corrupt piece in *The New York Times Book Review* about it. Mr. Shawn said, "Look, if you'd like to write a letter for the letters column, Miss Arendt would not mind if I edited it." So I wrote a letter, and he edited it and sent it, and the letters column was rigged in such a way that even letters that were pro-Hannah were anti-Hannah and vice versa. So Mr. Shawn came into my office and said, "You know, Miss Arendt would not object if we ran that piece as a 'Comment.' Would you mind?" *Would I mind?* So he did. Then he came into my office and said, "Miss Arendt would not mind having you to tea." We met at her apartment and we became great friends—with her and her husband. I speak German. I grew up speaking German. Hannah and I talked a lot. She sort of became a strict parent to me. I was scolded a lot for not finishing a Ph.D., not being serious, things like that. But she became a *real* friend. So I was very lucky in that way. When I say a "real friend," I wonder if she would describe it that way. Yes, I think she would.

BOLLEN: How did you break into your film-reviewing career at the *Times*? It seems to me an unexpected move after doing these immersive social pieces.

ADLER: Well, first they offered me a book-review column or something like that. I said, "Absolutely not. I can't do that. It takes me forever." But movies are different. The structure is pretty much "and then and then and then." It takes place through time. So they said, "If we offered you the movie critic's job, would you take it?" I said, "I don't know. I would have to ask Mr. Shawn." By then, I was so in love with everything to do with *The New Yorker*. So I went to see Mr. Shawn and asked if I could have a leave of absence to do this. And he said, "If you think I'm going to advise you to go to *The New York Times* … But, yes, you can have a leave of absence." You see, you got to write so rarely at *The New Yorker*. But at the *Times*, I got into the habit of writing regularly. It was an entirely different experience. I said to Arthur [Gelb] when I came, "What if I miss a deadline?" And he said, "You won't miss a deadline. It never happens at newspapers. Why do you keep saying you'll miss one?" So it didn't happen. And I realized the reason it didn't happen is that if you're writing a lot and publishing a lot and you have a regular plan, you may be embarrassed by one piece, but the only way out is to erase the last impression you left and write something else immediately.

> "IS IT POSSIBLE THAT ALL OF HISTORY IS BACKWARDS? IT COULD BE THAT THE STORY AS WE KNOW IT IS OFF BY THIS OR THAT MUCH."

ADLER AT RICHARD AVEDON'S SHOW AT MARLBOROUGH GALLERY, 1975. *PHOTO:* JILL KREMENTZ.

BOLLEN: You've said that the year when you began reviewing, 1968, wasn't a banner year for film. I noticed that you gave *Rosemary's Baby* a rather ho-hum review.

ADLER: Did I give it a ho-hum review? I remember liking it. I also remember liking a Miloš Forman movie a lot more than I said. There are probably many of those I would revise.

BOLLEN: More than a decade later, you'd write a terrific take down of Pauline Kael in *The New York Review of Books*, citing that this job of being contracted to review so regularly reduces the ability to write freely, to keep in play a major intellect in what is essentially a consumer-service piece. I wondered, after the Kael piece came out, did you ever run into her?

ADLER: No, I never did see Pauline after the piece, but I didn't before, either, except at a few screenings in 1968. But I guess we were not ever in any of the same circles. Not deliberately— that's just how it was.

BOLLEN: After your "year in the dark," you went back to *The New Yorker* and soon after wrote a piece on Biafra. Strangely, I don't think a lot of Americans today know about that civil war in Nigeria.

ADLER: I wanted to go there even before the *Times* job came my way. It was very hard to get a visa. So I was at the *Times*, and Mr. Shawn said things like, "Are you coming back or not?" And [*New Yorker* art critic] Harold Rosenberg said, "Everyone else has sold out to popular culture. Are you going to keep doing this?" So I came back. There was a question about other people going to Biafra but Mr. Shawn didn't think it was safe.

BOLLEN: It seems very unsafe.

ADLER: Well, it was, but it didn't feel that way. I made it as far as the coast but I couldn't get a visa. I thought, "I'm going to have to go all the way back to *The New Yorker* and say I didn't get in." But suddenly, my application for a visa came through from Joint Church Aid [an international, interfaith effort delivering relief to Biafra]. So we flew in on these aid planes. That was amazing. I remember reading instructions at the *Times* for what you bring when you go to Biafra. I bought all of this stuff from Fortnum & Mason in London. They also said to bring a lot of Scotch.

BOLLEN: Why? To trade when you got there? Or to help deal with what you saw?

ADLER: Beats me. There was nobody there when [*New York Times* reporter] Eric Pace and I flew over.

BOLLEN: Did you have any sort of guard with you for protection?

ADLER: No, we just wandered around. It occurred to me that a lot of what I saw was staged for me. Because they wanted to look good. I mean, first of all, the Biafrans were right. They were on the right side. And nobody wanted to hear that.

BOLLEN: Because so many countries weren't backing them, presumably to get their hands on the oil.

ADLER: These guys were clearly the underdogs. And they were starving. I remember they very much wanted to convince me that they had a telex. And I don't think they had a telex. They wanted the world to think that they could still communicate, which, come to think of it, they couldn't. For instance, I carried Eric's piece back on the plane to London so that he could file it to the *Times*. If they had a telex, I wouldn't need to do that.

BOLLEN: And this is, again, *The New Yorker* giving you the freedom to find a story.

ADLER: I remember before I went, [author and *Times* journalist] David Halberstam, who was not a giant fan, putting his arm around me at a party and saying, "That's what the world needs right now, a piece from you about Biafra."

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 125)

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN IS *INTERVIEW*'S EDITOR AT LARGE. *OPPOSITE:* RENATA ADLER, WRITER, ST. MARTIN, FRENCH WEST INDIES, MARCH 1978. PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD AVEDON. ©THE RICHARD AVEDON FOUNDATION. *COSMETICS:* CHANEL, *INCLUDING SUBLIMAGE LA CRÈME ULTIMATE SKIN REGENERATION TEXTURE FINE AND LE CRAYON KHÔL INTENSE EYE PENCIL IN 61 NOIR. HAIR PRODUCTS:* ORIBE HAIR CARE, *INCLUDING GOLD LUST NOURISHING HAIR OIL. HAIR:* BOK-HEE FOR ORIBE HAIR CARE/STREETERS. *MAKEUP:* KRISTI MATAMOROS FOR CHANEL/KATE RYAN. *PRODUCTION:* DAYNA CARNEY/MANAGEMENT ARTISTS. *RETOUCHING:* VISION ON. *DIGITAL TECHNICIAN:* NATALIA READ-HARBER. *PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT:* ZACKERY MICHAEL. *STYLING ASSISTANT:* MARIANNE DABIR. *SPECIAL THANKS:* TENTON STUDIO AND NICHOLAS DURING. *FASHION DETAILS PAGE 127.*

BOLLEN: He was being patronizing.
ADLER: Oh, there was no question. It wasn't the most courteous thing to say, but there I was, and I went. And I realized afterwards that there were so many things I hadn't understood.
BOLLEN: You're astonishingly observant. But I think what really stands out in your work is your thoroughness with research. You don't rely on style getting you through. You seem to pay such hyper-concentrated attention for an extended period of time. In the '60s and '70s, you wrote pieces on soap operas, which I don't think any other writer appreciates the way you did. I was thinking of your abilities to follow all of the plots and arrows of something like Watergate, and I wondered if the glacial and yet melodramatic pace of soap operas might not be training for such events like Watergate or the Starr report.
ADLER: That's very interesting. It's a very interesting notion of soap operas, too, because it's a rhythm and speed that can be understood only by the kind of journalist who's not pressed for time. That world just doesn't exist anymore. You can't do it for newspapers. But I remember when I wrote about the Sharon and Westmoreland trials—of all the things I think I ever wrote—that one made reporters most angry. Because, of course, nobody has time to read depositions if you've got a deadline to file that day. So I got these responses saying, "And she makes the ridiculous assertion that we could read each deposition …" Of course you couldn't read them. It takes months to read them.
BOLLEN: Maybe there needs to be some clearer distinction made between pieces that have to be filed in five hours and are vulnerable to error and those that were researched over months.
ADLER: I think once there is conventional wisdom or received ideas in the press or there is unanimity, you've got a disaster. I think it's an interesting First Amendment question, too, although I've never discussed it with [First Amendment lawyer] Floyd Abrams. I think when it says in the First Amendment "freedom of speech or of the press," they don't mean that the press is a form of speech or they wouldn't have singled it out. In those days, there was this very partisan press, sending its reports from the battlefields or whatever to its subscribers. And no journalist would've had a notion of himself or his paper as the objective, fair judge. I mean, you're meant to be out there because the deadlines make you scrappy, and somehow it will sort itself out. But it's not a form of speech. I think it's become an enemy of speech because if you're some individual whistleblower and you contradict the press, they'll get you. They'll wait 20 years, and they'll get you.
BOLLEN: In *Canaries in the Mineshaft* you mention the "journalistic oxymoron" of the rise of the "celebrity anonymous source." You went on to assert that the whole point of the First Amendment protection for anonymous sources—for the weak or vulnerable—has been flipped because the most public anonymous sources have become those in positions of power.
ADLER: This Snowden thing, which I don't know what to make of, comes to mind. If the NSA costs that much money and if they're so efficient, why did they not know that there was an Edward Snowden in their midst. So the [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan position that in a free society, in our society, we cannot have decent intelligence organizations … We're not good at it. Spies come in, they get corrupted, we're just not good at secrets, so let's not spend so much money on them. My admiration for Moynihan just grows over the years because he was so often right.
BOLLEN: How did you get hooked on Watergate? Or maybe *hooked* is the wrong word.
ADLER: No, that's the word. I got hooked on Watergate because of John Doar [special counsel to the House Judiciary Committee's Nixon impeachment inquiry]. He called, I think Christmas Eve of 1973, and said, "Now, you're a Republican, aren't you?"—which is a very peculiar thing to say to an old friend. I was a Republican, sort of, just for mischief, because I wanted to be the only Republican reporter in New York. He said, "You could be fair." I thought, "What?" [*laughs*] He said, "Come down here," so I flew down and he said, "This is a secret. Don't tell anyone. I want you to write the speeches for Chairman Rodino [Democrat Peter Rodino Jr., chairman of the House Judiciary Committee], and he may not take sides. No one down here may take sides." That was the "being fair" part. But I wanted to get the quote of the day every time he speaks, which wasn't so easy. But it turned out it wasn't so hard either. So we did that for a while. And he didn't know who was writing his speeches. Then there got to be more and more to do. There really wasn't much to the speeches themselves. It's like Deep Throat. Not only was there no Deep Throat, but he really didn't tell Woodward and Bernstein anything. Everyone contributed a little something to Deep Throat.
BOLLEN: You posit in one piece that during Watergate people wanted certain information leaked for their own advantage—in and outside of the administration.
ADLER: A very strange thing happened regarding Mark Felt [the number two official at the FBI at the time of Watergate]. When *Rolling Stone* asked Avedon to do an issue for the [country's] 200th anniversary, I was very depressed at the time and I was staying in my parent's barn in Danbury. That was before I had this house. You see, I get these lazy depressions and I don't do anything—for weeks or months or years. Dick said, "Look, I want you to help me on this because I think there's something wrong with their list." I looked at their list and said, "Yes, I think there's something very wrong with their list." It was a list of who they considered important.
BOLLEN: The power players in politics …
ADLER: Not just power players but people of interest. Dick said, "Would you help me with it?" So we came up with a different list. Also I'd already been through the impeachment inquiry. One name Dick didn't know was Mark Felt. I said, "Dick, I can't explain it, you just have to go down there and see him and you'll see why." He went down, and he was shooting Ronald Reagan as well. As with actors, often, there's this diagram of where his feet should stand, and Nancy sat there looking at him adoringly, saying, "Lookin' good, babe." Dick was a smart reporter too, in his own way. So there's Mark Felt, and Dick came back by helicopter and said, "I've never seen anybody like that in my life!" I knew Mark Felt, everybody knew Mark Felt. Mark Felt was a guy who was trying to get his name in the papers and he was sort of treacherous in every way, but he didn't know anything either! He knew absolutely nothing. If you remember Bernstein, he never said he met him. But then the quirk of the thing was that Dick said, "Now you write the captions." I was having terrible trouble writing captions for any of them. What are you going to say about [Nixon's secretary] Rose Mary Woods? So I said, "Why don't we just use what's in Who's Who?" So that's what we did. We called it "The Family." There came a moment not so long ago where somebody who bought one of the original series was labeling the photographs for an exhibition. And they put under Mark Felt "Deep Throat." I said, "Look, there's a real problem with that, because if you do that, you either have to assume that Avedon and I knew even then who was Deep Throat or something else." I think in all exhibitions from now on, he's going to be labeled "Deep Throat," which is hysterical. They had to drag out somebody because they were selling their collection to the Ransom in Austin, Texas. And even they said that they need something about Deep Throat to complete the collection. They had nothing on Deep Throat, so their immense good fortune—or Woodward's immense good fortune—was that Mark Felt was gaga at that point.
BOLLEN: Because he wouldn't or couldn't deny it.
ADLER: Woodward could write a book about Mark Felt and they dragged him out for a press conference and asked, "Are you, in fact, Deep Throat?" And he said, "Yeah." [*laughs*] Or whatever it was that he said. Or just waved. And that was it. I wonder how much of history is like that. I mean, the whole business of the flowerpot on the balcony doesn't make any sense if you're living in a courtyard, because it means that the guy would be seen coming into the courtyard. Meeting in a garage doesn't make any sense either. The business of the circle in the paper saying when they would meet. It turned out that, in that building, all [copies of] *The New York Times* were stacked, so it was random who got which newspaper. By the way, none of this is my reporting.
BOLLEN: It sounds like bad political-thriller writing. Or good political-thriller writing.
ADLER: It's bad thriller writing. Except for what Deep Throat said, "Follow the money," although Deep Throat didn't say that because he doesn't say it in the book. It was whatever writer wrote the movie lines [for *All the President's Men*, 1976]. But it is true, "follow the money." When I looked into the Nixon affair, the money led me to the Southeast Asia committee to reelect the President, which included [Republican activist] Anna Chennault.
BOLLEN: In the essay, where you posit that Nixon couldn't have been impeached simply because of Watergate, you make a case of following the money to South Vietnam and suggest perhaps the real impeachable conduct was that Nixon was being paid to stay in the war. I wonder, when that piece came out, were there any consequences? What was the reaction?
ADLER: [*New York Times* editor] Abe Rosenthal apparently called an investigative reporter into his office and said, "How come there's 16 things in this piece that I didn't know?" The reporter said, "Oh, we all knew them." So Abe let it rest, because what difference could it possibly make? But it was an amazing adventure of journalism.
BOLLEN: I know you and Avedon were close friends. How did you two first meet?
ADLER: I met him at a screening of *The Pawnbroker* [1964]. And then he and Evelyn [Avedon's then-wife] became friends of mine. He wanted to take my picture. I have a thing about pictures.
BOLLEN: There's a great one that he took of you in Patmos.
ADLER: We were vacationing there, a whole group of us. Anyway, Dick wanted to do a picture and a book of mine was coming out. I talked to a friend about it. I said, "Should I?" He said, "Look, you have to realize, Avedon can make you look like anything he wants. He can make you look like the most glamorous person on the face of the earth, or he can make you … You take your chance." So he took his picture and I was so mortified by it. He said, "You shouldn't feel that way. What's wrong with it?" In those days we didn't have terrorists in today's sense; we had hijackers. I said, "I look like a hijacker of a plane that I wouldn't want to be at the mercy of." [*Bollen laughs*] He said, "Don't worry about it. I've taken one of myself which is exactly like that." He put them both in a frame and they do look exactly alike. And I said, "Well, Dick, that's all very well. Now you look like a hijacker I wouldn't want to be at the mercy of either." And then we became friends. We helped each other a lot. He helped me much more than I could possibly help him, because he was Avedon.
BOLLEN: How did he help you?
ADLER: When he felt moved to make one look great, one looked great. Or as he put it, better than you've looked in your life. And then it got to be a joke about a photograph that would satisfy my mother. He knew my mother.
BOLLEN: New York in the 1970s was a pinnacle moment for the intermingling of writers, artists, thinkers, and high society. It certainly seems you moved in rarefied circles.
ADLER: Well, I've always been such a nervous person. I would think, "Oh, gee, I'm kind of lucky. Who'd have thought?" It really was quite fine, quite wonderful. But what ultimately happened was that I was shut out. Everybody was mad at me.
BOLLEN: That happened much later, though, after your book on *The New Yorker*, *Gone*, came out. Certainly when your novel *Speedboat* was published, there was a lot of excitement and praise in your direction.
ADLER: When *Speedboat* came out, I had just entered law school at Yale. I had meant to go to law school after college. And after the impeachment inquiry, I was interested in what evidence is to a lawyer as opposed to what it is to a journalist. I thought a journalist should know the way through that. I guess I didn't know what was going to happen when *Speedboat* came out. I thought, I better be in law school, because who knows whether anyone will like it or not.
BOLLEN: Obviously, fiction writing is very different from journalism. But *Speedboat* is like your nonfiction, in that each sentence has so much in it. There's no skimming or sweeping over the surface. *Speedboat* is a novel that demands constant focus.
ADLER: I didn't know how else to get from here to there. It doesn't really get you from here to there either, but it gets you from somewhere to somewhere. It just came out that way.
BOLLEN: A lot of people try to connect you with Joan Didion, I guess because you both do fiction and journalism. But your styles and tones are wildly different—your focal points are different.
ADLER: Yes, it's so different. I really love Joan. But I don't think either of us sees a similarity. Perhaps there is more with the nonfiction than the fiction. And sometimes people connect me to Janet Malcolm. I love what she does too, but it's also completely different. Could it be because we're all about the same age?
BOLLEN: What about Susan Sontag?
ADLER: This is an uncharitable thing to say, but I didn't get into Sontag much. I don't think we were interested in the same things or in the same way. With both Joan and Janet, I'm always interested in the things they're interested in, and in the way they're interested in them, although it's not my way.
BOLLEN: After the publication of first *Reckless Disregard* and then *Gone*, which upset a lot of people, did you feel as if New York publishing turned on you? You left *The New Yorker* for good in 2000.
ADLER: First, I always say, don't leave the institution you're with. If you don't have the institution, you've got nobody to protect you. You're totally vulnerable. Like a fool, I left *The New Yorker*. But it had been very hostile for so long that I thought, "There's no way I can stay." But I forgot what happens when you're out there on the streets. Not only do you not have health insurance, but you have no way to retaliate. Whatever you do write is over the transom even more. So that was a real mistake. I should've just stayed on and shut up.
BOLLEN: You mean, you would have preferred not to have written *Gone*?
ADLER: I didn't intend to write that book. That book was on the basis of a contract 10 years old. What happened was that other books had begun to appear about *The New Yorker*, and to my surprise, I was cast as this villain—by people who I thought liked me. Someone said, "The reason *The New Yorker* is in such a steep decline is because Adler bulled through those pieces about Westmoreland and CBS." And I thought, "*bulled*"? What kind of a verb is that? I couldn't bull anything through at *The New Yorker* anyway, and certainly it had nothing to do with the decline ... It had nothing to do with anything. There began to be all these pieces about the decline of *The New Yorker* in which I was a villain. Somebody said, "Renata just turned in a story so terrible and Mr. Shawn wanted to publish it right away, but fortunately we strangled it in its bassinet." I mean, even I noticed this was a very hostile environment. It had already begun. And I thought, "Oh dear, everybody is now signed up for a book of memoirs about *The New Yorker*, and they're going to pile it on, so I better have a book of my own." I was expecting some of the reactions that came true, but I wasn't expecting other things that came true.
BOLLEN: Looking back now, it seems like they really went for you, to the point where every defensive gesture on your part was read as another offense. I remember a term you mention in your Selma piece—activists are arrested for *resisting assault*. Did it feel like that?
ADLER: Yeah, that's right. You couldn't win that war. But I don't think that book occasioned all of the anger that was there. As it happened, it was sort of fortunate for me in a way that so much of the criticism was focused on my mention of Sirica. [In *Gone*, Adler referred to Judge John J. Sirica, who presided over the Watergate cases, as a "corrupt, incompetent, and dishonest figure, with a close connection to Senator Joseph McCarthy and clear ties to organized crime."]
BOLLEN: When *Speedboat* and *Pitch Dark* were re-released last year, you must have been happy with the positive responses. There's a whole new generation of fans.
ADLER: Happy? I was overjoyed. *Overjoyed* is the wrong word, but I was so pleased and surprised. And now they're planning to bring out a collection of my nonfiction.
BOLLEN: Would you ever want to write those deep-diving investigative pieces that you did in the past? Do people still write those kinds of pieces anymore? It seems like just what you said: Once everyone has agreed on the facts of an event, no one ever wants to revisit it and question its veracity.
ADLER: Can it always have been so? I mean, is it possible that all of history is backwards?
BOLLEN: You mean, that we've gotten the wrong story or wrong version of every historical event?
ADLER: Everything, yes. Have people always done that? It could be that the story as we know it is off by this or that much.