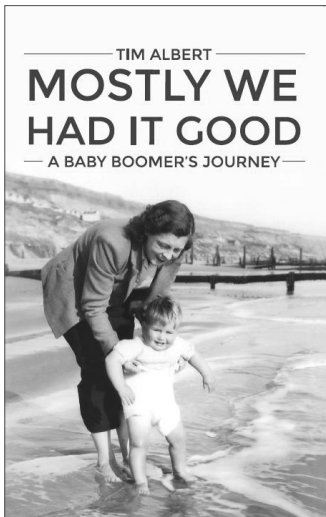


Book review

Mostly we had it good — A baby boomer's journey

Albert T, 2017. Elbow Publishing, ISBN 978-0-9574090-6-4 Paperback, 235 pages, £8.95.

Available for purchase through <https://www.timalbert.co.uk/books/mostly-we-had-it-good/>



Tim Albert is well known to the many journal editors who attended his illuminating training courses or read his several books on medical writing. Now he has written a memoir.

The book is divided into decades spanning the 1950s to the 1990s. Each section is subdivided into a series of very short chapters, a pleasing arrangement. The baby boomer's journey starts in a time before computers,

mobile telephones, and pugnacious media reporting. Albert was born into a privileged family who sent their sons to a private Catholic boarding school. After this experience, he trudges through his early days as a local reporter in Devon until rubbing shoulders with the big boys in Fleet Street — but a few career near misses deprive him of a staff job at the *Guardian*. Instead, he moves into health care journalism and becomes editor of the British Medical Association's in-house journal. Finally, he sets up business as a trainer in manuscript writing, before turning to teaching editors better ways of running their journals.

What makes the book particularly appealing is Albert's knack for bringing out the funny side of things and his evocative turns of phrase. For instance, his school's lavatory block is pictured as its digestive tract, with its spinal column, an enclosed cloister, starting a few yards away. During a lull in employment he worked as a secretary, when the reader is carried with a chuckle through the succession of visits he receives from male staff to glimpse such a singularity using excuses as flimsy as where to find a fresh paper clip.

Albert's fierce dislike of pomposity, not only in text, is palpable. He shies away from his family's politics, denigrating the self-congratulatory attitude of the British upper classes in the 1950s: "We valued duty, loyalty and hard work. If we happened to live 'up the hill' that was because we deserved to; the poor remained poor because they lacked the drive to be otherwise." While he shows empathy for the poor families seen during his stint in the Bahamas living away from the tourist gaze in small wooden huts, roughly the size of his brother's garden shed in a London suburb.

Although Albert's presentation of himself is self-deprecating, he is principled and many a time, both as a reporter and an editor, damages his prospects by speaking out and refusing to toe the line. His allegiance to his chosen career faltered when he reported on an air crash which killed 37 people in 1973. His angle was to write about the communities affected and hold his fellow reporters to account, "Within hours of the crash, several hundred journalists ... descended on the small communities. Stories emerged of children being given tissues so that they could cry for the cameras, and a reporter loudly phoning his copy through from a public telephone in the middle of an open-air memorial service."

These are minor niggles. Quite so many details of what the author's named colleagues later achieved could be spared, while in a couple of places further explanation is warranted. For example, rather than just it being extremely tenuous, it would be interesting to learn what the trainer's acronym B GUNNAR EDG RAF (R) actually stood for and why a house vendor's son punched Albert in the testicles. More than a page devoted to how to calculate Gunning's Fog Index is a low point. Otherwise the book delivers a delightful account of an endearing character's ordinary life with its joys and tribulations, one of which is living with the unpleasant illness ulcerative colitis.

Anyone who has experienced the rampant changes in working practices and society since the 1950s will enjoy reminiscing with Albert's lively writing style. Editors and trainers will commiserate with him, sharing the frustrations the author encounters and maybe getting some tips. Those who would like to see readily understandable academic text will certainly relish Albert's insights from training. Among the gems is a comment from a researcher: "I don't know why you keep banging on about messages ... A lot of what we write doesn't have one." "Quite", Albert concludes. Suggestions that a group of doctors use simple words instead of longer alternatives met with protests that the text would be like a *Janet and John* book. The Department of Health responded to a cold call offering a course with, "Why on earth would anyone here be interested in effective writing?" Exactly.

Elise Langdon-Neuner
a.a.neuner@gmail.com