

Deborah Fryer

Extreme Filmmaker



Ever since she was ten years old, Deborah J. Fryer thought she was going to be a professor when she grew up. But after completing a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature and Classics at Princeton University in 1993, she realized that she could take her research, writing, and language skills beyond the ivory tower and have a lot more fun.

She took a job as Senior Editor of a documentary film distribution company, where she researched and translated over 120 scripts (from French, German, Spanish and Italian) on subjects as diverse as science, medicine, anthropology, architecture, art, physics, religion, literature, history and ship-building. This initial taste for documentary whetted Deborah's appetite for more. A year later, she made a bold move in order to live her dream: she quit her job, and relocated to Cambridge,

Massachusetts, a hub of documentary film production, in order to break into the field.

After a humbling 6 months collecting unemployment, filling headshots, fetching coffee, and other menial tasks, her enthusiasm, creativity and spark paid off.

She got a foot in the PBS door in 1995, and has worn almost every conceivable hat since: research assistant, production assistant, transcriber, associate producer, field producer, producer, writer, director, assistant editor, cinematographer, props mistress, location scout, location coordinator, foley, business manager, script consultant, continuity supervisor, translator, snake-wrangler, and sloth-handler.

Her work has appeared on PBS, NOVA, Frontline, MSNBC, History Channel, Discovery Channel, Travel Channel, HGTV, and Turner's Superstation. In addition to an impressive list of film and video

credits, Deborah is a published photographer and writer, and an accomplished teacher (she has taught German at Miami University, Latin at Columbia University, expository writing at MIT and creative writing to inner-city teenagers).

Her facial features, startling green eyes and dark hair resemble that famous photo of the Afghani girl on the cover of National Geographic, but once she starts talking about her philosophy of life and filmmaking, you realize this is a young woman who is certainly not afraid of anything much, and lives a very adventurous life.

You have lived and worked all over the world. Tell us about some of your favorite projects.

The very first show I worked on, in the field, was for Discovery Channel. It was about ancient sky-watching. We were up at dawn shooting Mayan temples in the Yucatan and filming sunrises and sunsets in Canyon de Chelly and Chaco Canyon in the Southwest. I kept pinching myself that I was being paid to learn about this amazing architecture and anthropology. Another show that was really fun was one I associate produced for NOVA called "Roman Bath." We lived in Turkey for about 6 weeks and reconstructed a Roman bathhouse using just the tools, materials and technology that would have been available in antiquity. It was an incredible experience to get to live in a mountain village and work with a local construction crew.

What about films you have made in the U.S. Do any projects in particular stand out for you?

There were two that changed me in a very deep way. I field-produced a film for Frontline called

"Assault On Gay America." We traveled across the country exploring the roots of homophobia. We interviewed Matthew Shephard's parents and Jerry Falwell, visited a maximum security prison where an inmate was on death row for violently and brutally murdering a man just because he was gay, and we visited schools where gay teenagers told us about their harrowing experiences. Working on this film made me look at my own beliefs and assumptions and judgments, and I realized that deep down we are all the same, we all want to be loved, we all want to be heard.

The other film that was profoundly moving was a 2-hour special called "Fear And Dying In America" that looked at end of life care in this country—both hospital and hospice care—and raised the question of what happens after you die. I had never seen anyone die before, had never been in the presence of anyone dying of ALS, or in the end stages of metastatic cancer, or seen a suicide gunshot to the head. Confronting so much death was terrifying and fascinating and hard, but it was also a remarkable opportunity for me to look at life and see how precious and fragile it is. Just one breath. That's all that separates us from them, in the end.

It sounds like you have been exposed to some extraordinary experiences. Do you have a philosophy about filmmaking?

I believe everyone has a story to tell: a story that needs to be told by the teller, and a story that needs to be heard or thought about by the listener. I see my job as being a vehicle for these stories to be told and to be heard. I think it is my responsibility to do as much of my research ahead of time.

Learn the facts, talk to the experts, get to know as much as possible about the subject in advance. But once I get there, I try to let the on-camera experts tell their own stories. I don't want to put words in their mouths. It's their story. I want to let them tell it the way they want to tell it. I'll ask questions—and sometimes they are hard, uncomfortable questions—but I do not control the answers. Also, every location presents a unique set of circumstances, challenges, and obstacles to getting the best possible footage—maybe there is a lighting problem, or access problem, or too much noise, or an uncooperative person blocking the shot ... it's Murphy's Law in the field. Whatever can go wrong will, and the best you can do is be prepared for it and be psyched when you get something amazing you never planned for.

Can you tell us some of your inside tricks of the trade and tips for getting the perfect shots and best quality interview?

Open your eyes and your ears. Do not judge, just watch and listen, with all your heart.

Do you pick your documentary subjects, or do they pick you?

I feel lucky in that I have been able to work on topics that feel important to me: the environment, health care, social issues, population, science, history. Projects have fallen into my lap that interest and compel me. Every long-form documentary I have worked on has reached out and grabbed me once I got into it. But I also—like every other producer, I am sure—have voluminous files of topics I would love to make a film about if only I could find the funding to do it.

Tell us about your writing. Are you working on any scripts, essays or stories right now?

I have been writing a lot of nonfiction essays lately about my travel experiences around the world. Some of these pieces are "behind the scenes" stories from the field,

for example, what it was like to traipse through the rainforests of Panama searching for howler monkeys, or what it was like to live in the Turkish village as a white, non-Muslim woman and get a haircut. Some other stories are about my personal adventures—climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro, diving in Zanzibar, nearly getting sold into the White slave trade in Tunisia, watching cremations in India. I write in a very visual, colorful, cinematic way, so in a sense, each travel piece reads like a little movie of my life.

What do you like to do in your spare time, if you have any?

I try to write a little bit every day. I also have a daily yoga practice that is very important to me. It keeps me grounded, centered, flexible and open-minded. I also play cello and paint kids furniture with dragons and elephants and mermaids and other fanciful stuff on it. And I swim. I do some of my best creative thinking and writing underwater.

What is your best advice for someone just starting out as a filmmaker?

Be persistent. Don't give up. The worst thing people can ever say to you is "no." And if they say no, so what? Because one day, someone is going to come along and say "yes!"

Good point! Positive thinking. So what do you have planned for future projects, in film or otherwise?

I would like to publish my nonfiction essays. I would like to continue making documentaries about worthy topics. Film is such a powerful medium for reaching people, making them think, opening their hearts and minds. I hope I can continue to do that for many years to come. ■

Elizabeth English, SCREENTALK staff and features writer, founder/director of the Moondance International Film Festival <www.moondancefilmfestival.com>, which is known as The American Cannes, and Mermaid7seas Productions <www.mermaid7seas.com> is a produced screenwriter *Losing Julia* and *Papou & Yiayia* and script editor/consultant.

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