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Remembering NPR international correspondent Anne Garrels

Fresh Air | By [Terry Gross](#)

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DAVE DAVIES, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Dave Davies, in for Terry Gross. Anne Garrels, the award-winning international correspondent who reported from conflict zones around the world for NPR and two TV networks, died Wednesday at her home in Connecticut from lung cancer. She was 71. Garrels was known as a fearless journalist who showed great empathy with the victims of war, as she reported from the Soviet Union, Tiananmen Square, Bosnia, Chechnya, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Iraq and Afghanistan. Her most heralded dispatches were from the war in Iraq in 2003, which earned her a George Polk Award, as well as duPont and Peabody Awards with others on the NPR reporting team.

Today we'll hear Terry's 2003 interview with Anne Garrels, when she'd written her first book, "Naked In Baghdad," about her reporting in Iraq. Terry asked her why she

decided to stay in Baghdad during the U.S. attack and how her reporting was

Now Playing

Remembering NPR internati

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

ANNE GARRELS: Well, first of all, I don't think any of us realized so many journalists would leave. There were about 500 journalists in Baghdad up until just a few days before the - President Bush's deadline. And it wasn't really until the last minute that we turned around and looked at each other and went, oh, my God, there are only 16 Americans left. But there was no question in my own mind that I should stay. I'd been there on and off from - since last October. And my gut instinct told me that I was going to be OK. I knew a lot of Iraqis, and I had an extraordinary Iraqi driver, fixer, translator, whatever you want to call him, who - while there were no guarantees of safety - I thought might be able to help me if things really got bad.

TERRY GROSS: I am one of your many, many listeners who thought, oh, my God, she's going to stay during the bombing. That's got to be dangerous. I'm worried. Were you not worried?

GARRELS: I was too - of course, I was worried. And there were moments that I was terrified. But I was too busy for the most part to be really scared. I had to file morning, noon and night. A lot of what I was dealing with was logistics, you know, hiding my sat phone from, you know, Saddam's thugs who were prowling the hotel, trying to get information. So, you know, curiously, you know, by the end of the day, instead of, you know, being terrified, I would just fall asleep from dialing fatigue or just exhaustion and slept like a baby through a lot of the bombing.

And, you know, looking back - I mean, of course, it's very easy to look back. The bombing was incredibly accurate. And we had already seen that in '91. I was never, in fact, scared of the bombing. I had seen in '91, again in '98, just how accurate it was. I was scared of being taken hostage by the Iraqis. That was a very real and palpable threat. But I figured there were other American and foreign journalists who are much more high profile than I. Working for NPR, I had sort of fallen beneath the radar a little bit. The Iraqis didn't really give radio much importance. I was not entirely correct, I have since learned. I did not fall as much below the radar as I thought I had.

GROSS: Really? What did you find out?

GARRELS: Well, I found out from the man I call Amer, who was my Iraqi driver, that, in fact, the Iraqi Information Ministry was coming to him a great deal at the end. They thought that I was CIA. I also since found - and he would sort of go, oh, she's just a lady. She's just a dumb broad, you know? Oh, God, no, you know? And what's more, you know, an old one.

GROSS: (Laughter).

GARRELS: You know, she's not doing anything. You know - right. I mean, just playing on every sort of Iraqi prejudice. And then I went to see somebody who had been sort of head of operations at the information ministry on a daily basis when I was just back in Iraq, and I asked him, you know, if I had, you know, been Pollyannaish about how much I was below the radar. And he said, yes, I had been a little bit. I had trouble getting into Iraq at the very beginning of March.

He said he would help me get a visa. I never got that visa. In the end, I bought a visa from the Iraqi ambassador in Amman for \$1,000. It was a valid visa - of that, there's no question. However, it did not have the imprimatur of the information ministry back in Baghdad. When I arrived, this particular man, Qadim (ph), looked at me - I mention it in the book - looked at me in shock. How had I gotten in? He then told me that he hid my file. He did not send it, as he was supposed to, upstairs. So certain people were not apprised of my presence in Baghdad.

GROSS: Anne, when you decided to stay in Iraq during the actual bombing, knowing that most of the journalists were leaving, did you feel, like, an even greater responsibility, a special responsibility, to do the most thorough reporting that you could because there were so few journalistic voices that were going to be able to report from the war?

GARRELS: Yes and no. I had always felt a responsibility, from October on, not to pull my punches. Some journalists were deliberately not reporting certain things in order to stay on. I figured there was - that was stupid. So I had seen my job from the very beginning as simply to try and document what Iraqis thought about their own situation from as many different perspectives as possible. You know, all of us covering the war had but a tiny window. My window was in Baghdad. I mean, none of

us had a - you know, had a picture of the entire war. I did not fully appreciate how, if you will, important my reports were. At one point, I said to my boss, you know, I really don't have anything new to say today. And he said, Annie, you don't understand. First of all, if you're not on the air, people will think you're dead. Second of all...

GROSS: That's true. People would be scared. I mean, as a listener, I could vouch for that.

GARRELS: And second of all, he said, people just want to hear what it looks like and feels like and smells like. You know, if there's nothing new, just say that. But, you know, you will be on the air every cycle. At that point, I think I then realized how important it was. And it - but it really wasn't until I got home because I was in a cocoon for the - you know, for the two months, really, I was in Baghdad with access only by satellite phone, that I - you know, the outpouring from listeners and their comments about what the broadcasts had meant. And that's, in some ways, why I ended up writing the book, just to explain what it had really been like because so much of what was going on I could not report because I would have hurt Iraqis. I would have hurt Amer. I would have put his life in jeopardy. So a lot of it was explaining, you know, how people had helped and what the process was.

GROSS: What's an example of something you can say now that you couldn't say when it was actually happening because it would have put somebody in jeopardy?

GARRELS: Well, very clearly, the way Amer worked with me. He told me things that...

GROSS: And this is your translator and driver.

GARRELS: Yes. I mean, from the very beginning, the first day he worked with me in October, we were driving out of the city, and we suddenly saw this massive crowd of people, hundreds and hundreds of people standing silently. You know, I had been in Baghdad 12 hours. I looked at him and sort of said, what's going on? And this was a test, our first test of a relationship to see, you know, what - how we would deal with each other. And he said political prisoners. This was, you know, a group of the families of political prisoners looking for people who had not been released from prison when Saddam let everybody - allegedly let everybody go. I mean, that was a

remarkably brave comment to make at that point. And from then on, he helped me, and he would tell me when he couldn't help me. During the war, when I was being watched very carefully and could not go out on the streets freely because the city was blanketed with security even more than it had been before the war, Amer would go out and look around. He would come back and tell me, you know, what was happening. On one occasion, we went to a bomb site or what the Iraqis said was a bomb site. I picked up some of the shell casings from the - the debris from the - whatever the explosive device was. Amer looked at me and he said, that is not an American bomb. That's an Iraqi anti-aircraft shell. I mean, that sort of thing - I certainly could not explain why I knew these things, how I was getting the information, how I was getting access at the time because he would not have survived.

GROSS: You write in your book that the fact that there were few reporters who stayed in Baghdad and that the absence of CNN and Fox and the other large American networks created an intimacy and a lack of hysteria in the coverage. Do you mean a lack of hysteria in what we were seeing in the United States? Or do you also mean that there was a lack of hysteria in the journalist community in Baghdad at the time?

GARRELS: Both because there's no question that my bosses, everybody's bosses, watch television. And often you're questioned. You know, hey; wait a minute, I saw this on television. And I think a key example of this is that the networks and television had just arrived when the - the famous moment when the statue of Saddam was pulled down in Firdos Square right outside the Palestine Hotel, not coincidentally. And, you know, those pictures were blazoned around the world as an example of - well, really vindicating the, if you will, the Bush administration. You know, here, the Iraqis were tearing down - joyously tearing down a statue of Saddam Hussein. Well, I saw something very different.

GROSS: What did you see?

GARRELS: Where I was standing on that square, I saw a few people joyously pulling down a statue. I saw even more standing around in shock, fear that the world they knew had just been turned upside down. A man stood next to me and he said, you realize the Americans are now going to have to take control and take complete

control. And we, as Iraqis, unfortunately, will resent that control. And, of course, that's exactly what's happened, except the Americans have not taken complete control, and the Iraqis do resent it, both, you know, for taking control and for not doing a good enough job. I mean, he summed up exactly the future.

And when I went back to the hotel room minutes later, Amer came up, and he had been weeping. And he said, this is not a good day for Iraq. He wanted Iraqis to overthrow Saddam. He wanted to know why they had not been able to. He wanted to know why the Americans were there. He didn't trust their intentions, even though he loathed Saddam and Saddam had hurt him, thrown them out of the military, I mean, you know, destroyed his career. You know, it was a far more complicated picture than the pictures showed.

DAVIES: Longtime international correspondent Anne Garrels speaking with Terry Gross, recorded in 2003. Garrels died Wednesday. We'll hear more of their conversation after this break. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF ALLEN TOUSSAINT'S "ROSETTA")

DAVIES: This is FRESH AIR. We're listening to Terry Gross' interview with NPR international correspondent Anne Garrels, who died Wednesday at the age of 71. Terry spoke with Garrels in 2003, when she'd published her book "Naked In Baghdad" about covering the war in Iraq.

GROSS: Let's go back to the time of the bombing in Iraq. That first night of the, quote, "shock and awe" campaign, where were you? What did you experience?

GARRELS: The first night, I was actually in the Al Rasheed Hotel. We had been sort of moving around and were looking for safe places and were being moved around by the Iraqi authorities. It was very confusing. And for, you know, for whatever reason, I ended up in the Al Rasheed, which I knew was not safe. We knew that there was a bunker underneath the hotel and that it could quite possibly be a target. But there I sat. And the deadline was - President Bush's deadline was 4 a.m. my time. I didn't sleep very well that night, obviously. And 4 a.m. came - nothing. It was a foggy morning. And the Iraqis then suddenly began to lit the - Iraqi troops lit fires all around

the city. And so these plumes of black smoke then created this - making - emerged and covered the city, making it that harder to see anything. The bombing then began at 5 a.m., but I couldn't really see where it was from the hotel, from any of the windows at the hotel. And as my husband is quick to point out, I'm also slightly sort of directionally challenged.

(LAUGHTER)

GARRELS: And so I got on the - I went on the air with Robert Siegel and, you know, tried to - you know, said that, you know, there's bombing. It wasn't - but most of it was anti-aircraft fire at that point. And it was very hard to distinguish what was what. And I couldn't really say what had been hit. You know, it wasn't the most elucidating of reports I've ever given. And so then I waited. And I was - then I was waiting to go back on the air when I got a phone call from another reporter who was in the hotel saying, you got to get out now. We've just got a phone call from the Australian Ministry of Defence who says the hotel is going to be hit. So I'm on the air with Robert. And I said, Robert, got to go. I didn't explain exactly why. So, you know, I gathered up my belongings and the sat phone and hurtled out of the hotel and then went to the Palestine from where I continued to report for, you know, the next six weeks.

GROSS: Because the phones were out by some point during the bombing and you had to file - I mean, you really needed your satellite phone. That was your connection to the world, and that was your reason for being there. Without your satellite phone, there's no point in being there 'cause you couldn't file.

GARRELS: Exactly.

GROSS: And there were a couple of times when the phone dropped - or I should say you dropped the phone or accidentally knocked it over. Did it ever go completely dead? Did you ever completely break it and have nothing?

GARRELS: No, but it's - only thanks to duct tape. That's all I can say. I think by the time I got home, I was completely wrapped in duct tape. I mean, the problem was that we weren't allowed to have our phones at the hotel. But I was not about to work at the Information Ministry, which was clearly a U.S. target, and that was where we were

supposed to keep our equipment. So we had all smuggled our phones out and brought them to the hotel. I had not - in addition to this, I had not registered my phone when I came in the last time because I suspected that they would be, you know, looking out for us and watching.

And so I spent most - I mean, an incredible amount of time, as I've said, you know, dealing with logistics - putting up the satellite phone, taking down the satellite phone so that they couldn't see it. I had to put the antenna - it's about the size of a - you know, the phone itself. When it's all folded up, it's about the size of a laptop. But the panels for the antenna open up, and you have to put it on the balcony. So - and I didn't want the authorities, obviously, to see it. So I would put it up, make the phone calls I needed to broadcast, and then knock it down again. The real problem was late at night when I was filing for All Things Considered.

GROSS: Which was 1 a.m. your time in Baghdad.

GARRELS: And the thugs used to go around the hallways at that time looking for sat phones. And they'd look to see, you know, lights under the doors. They'd knock. They didn't break in, as a rule. So, you know, hence, I broadcast naked in the great hope that...

GROSS: You need to explain the story...

GARRELS: Right.

GROSS: ...In case our listeners haven't heard it, for anyone who hasn't heard it.

GARRELS: Well, in a desperate attempt to buy time, I figured, OK, if I broadcast in the dark, they didn't see the light under the door. And if I didn't have any clothes on - they came and knocked - I could come and, especially as a woman, say, oh, my God, I was asleep, you know? Just let me get some clothes. And that might give me a few minutes to hide the phone. I had a dress laid out that I could just, you know, put on over my head - in the meantime, sort of try and dismantle the phone.

However, in my efforts to - I mean, people would call and say, they're coming around. They're coming around. And so I would, you know, grab the phone, try and dismantle

it. And in a couple of instances, I tripped over cords because I was in the dark. And on one occasion, the antenna smashed sickeningly onto the cement floor of the balcony. One of the panels blew off, and I just said, oh, my God, how am I going to tell NPR that I can't file? You know, what am I going to do? And then, I borrowed duct tape, put it back together. And lo and behold, it worked.

GROSS: And why couldn't you lie and say you were naked without actually being naked?

GARRELS: Well, for starters, I wasn't sure they would understand English, so I figured - I mean, the guards didn't. So I would have to open the door a crack, you know, poke my head out, and at least have a bare shoulder to reinforce the image.

GROSS: Right.

GARRELS: And it was a - I - you know, the things you do. It was, you know, clearly a feeble attempt at trying to hide the phone.

GROSS: Oh, I think it's brilliant.

GARRELS: I couldn't think of anything else at the time, I can tell you.

GROSS: I think it's brilliant.

DAVIES: Anne Garrels speaking with Terry Gross in 2003. Garrels died Wednesday at the age of 71. We'll hear more of their interview after a break. Later, Maureen Corrigan reviews a debut collection of short stories titled "If I Survive You." And Justin Chang reviews the new satirical comedy "Honk For Jesus. Save Your Soul." I'm Dave Davies, and this is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF RENAUD GARCIA-FONS' "BERIMBASS (FEAT. KIKO RUIZ AND NEGRITO TRASANTE)")

DAVIES: This is FRESH AIR. I'm Dave Davies, in for Terry Gross. We're listening to Terry's 2003 interview with former NPR international correspondent Anne Garrels. Garrels died Wednesday at the age of 71. Garrels reported from Iraq and was one of

only 16 American reporters who stayed in Baghdad during the American bombing campaign. She wrote about it in her memoir, "Naked In Baghdad." We'll also hear from her husband, Vint Lawrence. The emails he wrote to family and friends during the war were reprinted in the book.

GROSS: You write in your book that being a woman, an older woman, over 50 - men generally deal with me as a sexless professional, while women open up in ways they would not with a man. And you you're talking about being a foreign correspondent here. So do you think that being an older woman actually worked in your favor?

GARRELS: Absolutely. There's no question. You know, whether it was in - I mean, since 9/11, whether it was Afghanistan, where I spent many months, Pakistan, Iraq - no question.

GROSS: It worked in your favor in a very weird situation. You were getting 10-day visas when you initially got to Iraq. And the first time you had to leave, you had to take - you were told you had to take a mandatory AIDS test at a cost of \$200 in order to get out of the country.

GARRELS: And what's more, they were going to give us the AIDS test. I mean, it wasn't just, you know, pay for it. I mean, these guys were very enthusiastic that particular day. Or they figured they'd get a lot more money out of us if they appeared with a dirty needle. And I sat there going, oh, my God, you know? I do not wish to be punctured by a dirty needle. I was so sick of having to pay out, you know, masses of money to corrupt officials.

And I was looking at the board in front of me where in broken English it sort of said, dear passengers, women over the age of 50 do not have to have the AIDS test. Men over the age of 60 are exempt. Now, why you may say, the difference in ages? - but at which point I sort of raised my hand and said to the officials, excuse me, but, you know, I'm over 50. Check the passport. I was then traveling with a male colleague who was 45 and who had to pay up. And he was furious.

GROSS: So he paid up but didn't take the test.

GARRELS: Yes. We managed in the end.

GROSS: This is basically just, like, another bribery scam.

GARRELS: Yes. And it has always been interesting to me as to why you have to have an AIDS test when you leave the country. But anyway, that's another issue.

GROSS: So you had to do a lot in the way of bribing. Who pays for the bribe? Do you, like, expense that to NPR when you get home?

GARRELS: (Laughter) Yes. They - unfortunately, you don't get receipts for...

(LAUGHTER)

GARRELS: ...Much of this. And - but you just try to - I would say that NPR paid less than most news organizations.

GROSS: Right. Is there - does NPR give you guidelines like, you know, a bribe to avoid an AIDS test is worth \$300? A bribe to...

GARRELS: (Laughter) No, but maybe I should suggest - we'll have this - you know, this - a tally sheet. No. You just fly by the seat of your pants in every - you know, every situation is different, and the needs and demands are different. And getting a - you know - I mean, NPR - believe me when I said that I paid the - you know, the Iraqi ambassador - although I did have a witness, in fact, when I paid the - an outsider - when I paid the Iraqi ambassador a thousand bucks for my visa.

GROSS: This is a good reason why I think journalists might be a target for theft because if you're walking around with enough money to be able to bribe officials, it means you've got cash.

GARRELS: Yeah. And this is a real issue and something we're all - we - especially as soon as the war bombing was over and the chaos started on the streets - and, I mean, I came down one morning and suddenly all the Iraqi security is gone. The information ministry is gone. Everybody - every - you know, all of Saddam's people have just evaporated. And, you know, initial feeling was, yes. And then I went, oh, my

God. We're targets - because everybody knew we had thousands and thousands of dollars on us.

And, in fact, many journalists were robbed - are robbed - going in and out - up to this day - going in and out of through the western desert from Amman, Jordan. And, you know, I've warned my colleagues and - I mean, we all sort of do it the same way, that we keep \$500, you know, right out there, ready to give the robbers. Luckily, nobody has been killed so far. They're just after the cash. And you hide the rest of it in, you know, various places in the car and hope that - you know, a significant but not a - you know, God forbid NPR donors are thinking they're paying, you know...

(LAUGHTER)

GARRELS: ...A significant but not overly...

GROSS: Pledge now.

GARRELS: Yeah. Right.

GROSS: We have to bribe authorities.

(LAUGHTER)

GROSS: It's a good pitch. My guest is NPR foreign correspondent Anne Garrels. Well, this is a good time to reintroduce your husband, Vint Lawrence, who's with us in the studio. And he's a contributor to your book, "Naked In Baghdad." And he has reprinted some of the emails he sent out to friends and family about your whereabouts and your state of mind and health during the war. Vint Lawrence is an artist and has also done a lot of cartoons for The New Republic.

Vint, in your emails that you've said...

VINT LAWRENCE: Yes.

GROSS: ...In one of them, you make it seem like your wife, Anne Garrels, is very different when she's not functioning in her capacity as reporter. And you say that at

home she's slightly muddled, directionally challenged and technologically inept. Would you describe a little bit of the difference you perceive in her when she's kind of on duty and when she's off?

LAWRENCE: Yeah. Annie's got...

GROSS: Is this going to be embarrassing Annie?

LAWRENCE: No, no, no.

GROSS: OK.

LAWRENCE: She knows it, anyway. And she's got two gears. She's in a resting gear, or she's in battle mode. And when she comes home, she flips gears. We live two miles outside of a small New England town. There's really only one road between our house and the town. For you to make a mistake is really hard. However, comma, I have gotten a telephone call from Annie an hour after she left to go into town. And she says - this little voice comes on the phone, and she says, well, I think I'm in Torrington. And Torrington is in the opposite direction and about 30 miles away, 15 miles away.

So the sense that she really doesn't quite know - she doesn't carry a map inside her brain, or it gets shut off when she's at home. That's one thing. And the other parts of Annie are that she - technologically, she's got work to do. And I - this is one of the things which we love about her. But it is fascinating to see the transformation of what happens when she starts gearing up to go back out. And all of a sudden, all of that ineptitude, if you want to call it, drops away. And Anne becomes an enormously competent, steel-backed reporter. And - but they are two different people.

GROSS: Anne, how do you perceive that difference?

GARRELS: There are two different people in some ways. I mean, I - when I'm overseas, I'm alone. And it's 24 hours a day, seven days a week. When I come home, I become very domestic. I mean, I can rely on Vint finally for things. I mean, he's great at - It's a classic marriage. He's great at certain things, I mean, many things, most things, in fact. But I can, you know, I go into, you know, first thing I do when I get

home, I start moving all the furniture, touching everything in the house, clean the floors, you know...

GROSS: (Laughter).

GARRELS: ...Everything I don't do for months on end on the road, you know. I mean, I go from a completely lack of domestic, you know, life to, you know, just being at home and cooking. And - but he gets really a rough end of it because I come home, and for the first week, I'm usually, I mean, literally dead. I'm just exhausted. It - you know, I work up to the final ounce of energy that I've got. And, you know, frankly, as I get older, that gets harder. I mean, I get tired faster than I used to. And, you know, thank God the worst didn't happen in Baghdad. But, you know, you were constantly sort of braced for if it did happen and what you would do and how you would deal with it.

GROSS: How do you cross that threshold between the Anne Garrels who's at home and is directionally challenged and can get lost easily to the Anne Garrels who's going to Iraq for the first time to report on a war where you have to be, you know, incredibly self-sufficient and get around and have instincts? I know you have a driver there, but still, you need instincts. And that sense of anticipation when you're crossing the threshold from home...

GARRELS: Oh, I get scared every time I go on an assignment. I mean, scared that I won't do it as well as I want to. I mean, there's always just this incredible surge of adrenaline, you know, that - and it - boy, if that adrenaline goes one day, I don't - but, you know, that I'm not going to get it as right as I might be able to. And I don't write easily. I mean, still, it's a painful, torturous process for me to - I'm not a natural writer.

GROSS: Thank you both so much. And congratulations on the book. And, Anne, thank you for that extraordinary reporting from Iraq.

GARRELS: Oh, thank you.

DAVIES: Former NPR correspondent Anne Garrels recorded in 2003. She died Wednesday at the age of 71. The cause was lung cancer. Her husband, Vint

Lawrence, died in 2016. Coming up, Maureen Corrigan reviews a debut collection of short stories which she says has heart, wit and sweeping social vision. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF DAVID FRIEDMAN'S "LUNCH WITH PANCHO VILLA") Transcript provided by NPR, Copyright NPR.

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Terry Gross

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