

Katy Tur's must-ride roller coaster of a memoir

By **Hugh Hewitt** September 13 at 4:59 PM

Perhaps no individual journalist was more affected by the 2016 presidential election than NBC News's Katy Tur. Now she has published a memoir, "Unbelievable: My Front-Row Seat to the Craziest Campaign in American History." The book is a must-read for many audiences, but most especially young, would-be campaign reporters. Tur's book is a warning that journalists now and henceforward, are — willing or not — going to be participants in all future campaigns.

Full disclosure: I am a contributor to NBC and MSNBC and host of a show on the latter, and found Tur to be a thoroughly professional and wonderful colleague when our paths crossed during 2016. Those crossings were infrequent: Tur was rarely at one place for long, like the other "road warriors" from all the networks. Donald Trump's pace shamed some young people for its constant motion, but Tur kept up easily, living out of carry-ons for more than a year.

One night we did cross paths was in Cleveland for Trump's acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention. That night I kept one eye on the nominee and one eye on Tur at her stand-up position beside me on the arena floor because, as the book reminds, Tur would often be an unannounced surprise guest star in the reality show that was Trump's almost wholly unscripted campaign. On any given day, he might suddenly invoke her in his speeches, usually for a critical aside though occasionally for a compliment. It was very possible that July night that the nominee might refer to Tur again. Thus Tur's book is both a memoir of a reporter covering the campaign and a journal of a participant in it — unwilling and unexpected as that latter role might have been.

Trump changed many fundamental rules of presidential campaigning, but none so thoroughly as the conventions governing campaigns and political journalists. Tur's role, like that of Megyn Kelly and every other journalist with a "Trump tattoo," as I call them (and I've got a couple), may have marked the first time such a role was cast in a presidential campaign, but it won't be the last. Indeed, it will be a feature, not a bug, in future contests.

That which gets rewarded gets repeated, and Trump's reward for berating elite media on an almost daily basis in 2016 was the White House in 2017. That won't go unnoticed by possible Democratic nominees, either. They may lack Trump's studied ruthlessness in attacking media figures (and his seeming ability to compartmentalize his public dressing-downs from his private bonhomie toward the media), but expect some Democratic candidates to target some reporters to be "center-right" in their beliefs. Because they were on the receiving end of the scolding, many in the media haven't yet reached the objective assessment that, as a tactic of campaigning, it was remarkably effective.

Indeed, “Unbelievable” is a primary source for future historians because Tur was a part of Trump’s strategy to channel the heart of the country’s disdain for media elites. At one point, when Tur intervened to stop the abusive heckling of a CNN colleague by a couple attending a Trump rally, Tur was both protective of her colleague and aware of how weird the haranguing was. (“The thing is, they don’t look like cruel people.”) Tur’s mini-theory on the source of the growing gulf between Middle America and elite media — that Americans generally don’t like conflict and reporters must feed off of it — is intriguing, but while she has a number of such provocative asides, “Unbelievable” is best read as a reminder that it really did happen that way, we aren’t all crazy, it was that crazy.

And it isn’t going to change. In fact, 2016 was just the warm-up. We all fear some sort of a replay, but in the world of journalism, of the attack on the GOP congressional softball team by a deranged Bernie Sanders supporter his summer. That theme of the new vulnerability of reporters to online and occasionally physical menace is part of the foundation of “Unbelievable.”

So you can add Tur’s book to the shelf along with Hillary Clinton’s new memoir and Jon Allen and Amie Parnes’s “Shattered.” All of these books and those that follow will need to wait for historians to collect and assess them. I’m fond of telling audiences that if broadcast journalism had a concussion protocol like the NFL’s, we veterans of 2016 would all still be in it. But Tur has shaken off the blur and blown away some of the fog and put down some key moments of the roller coaster that was 2016. Enjoy the ride again.

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