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## Terrible Truths

**Paula Bock**

**Whether he's headed** for Angola, the Arctic, Oman, Beirut, Myanmar or Somalia, it takes Robert Semeniuk only 10 minutes to pack.

Everything fits in a stowable roll-a-board and a rucksack: his pup tent; three '70s-era Canon F-1 metal camera bodies tough enough to hammer nails; three lenses; dozens of rolls of Fuji "Velveeta" slide film shucked of plastic canisters and stowed in Ziploc bags; a few nondescript shirts and pants; a tattered nylon photographer's vest; Keens and running shoes; dog-eared family photos of his 12-year-old daughter, Raya, and his wife, the accomplished musician Ruta Yawney; checkered keffiyeh scarves to swaddle gear and pad camera straps so they won't chafe his neck.

"The more experience I have," the 58-year-old says, "the less equipment I need." In a perfect world, Semeniuk wouldn't lug any gear at all. "It's really about the relationship with the people. My ideal photograph would be one that I can keep in my head."

He always shoots on manual. Film, not digital. Doesn't carry a light meter. Stopped using them years ago when his camera's internal meter broke and he realized he understood the light on his own. Doesn't bother with mosquito repellent or malaria prophylaxis (except in antibiotic-resistant areas) because he's already survived a dozen bouts of malaria and dengue. Long ago, while photographing Chinese/Indian military operations in Tibet, he cut his foot on glass and had to stitch it without anesthetic or antiseptic, instead relying on raw garlic to cleanse the wound. These days, the photographer totes a medical kit containing heavy pain killers and sutures. He usually buys a mosquito net and cooking pots *in situ*, then gives them away before returning home.

Semeniuk, who lives on Bowen Island, B.C., has witnessed the pain and strength of ordinary people in overlooked places for three decades. Many of the causes he's long championed are just now becoming chic as global health and global poverty surface in the collective consciousness. He's a photographer with ancient equipment, ahead of his time.

Global warming? The Inuit of the Arctic are now among the first cultures hard hit by global warming. In the 1970s, Semeniuk lived with Inuit hunters for two years on assignment for National Geographic, documenting the impact of modern life on aboriginal people. For five months on Canada's Baffin Island, he camped with Paulosie Attagatalukutuk's family of nine in a 12-by-12-foot canvas tent, where "the only privacy was when I closed my eyes."

He never mentions how cold it was, only the people. "They live on that edge of what's habitable in the world. When I see them now, they have 15 times the suicide rate, they're mostly drunk, huge addiction issues, and I say, 'Here's people who are masters of adaptation, and look at what we have done with them, and we're doing the same thing all over the world.' "

Land mines? Even before the International Campaign to Ban Landmines won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997, Semeniuk delved into the issue, spending five years with amputees and de-mining experts in Mozambique, Cambodia and Afghanistan. It's



ROBERT SEMENIUK

For three decades, photographer Robert Semeniuk has documented the pain and strength of ordinary people around the world. This 1994 picture of a young Palestinian boy playing soldier is part of Semeniuk's series on children and war.



amazing, Semeniuk says, how deplorable becomes normal when people have no other choice. He recalls barefoot children in Memba, Mozambique, playing soccer on a mined field even though several youngsters had already been injured there. "Why worry about land mines," a child told him, "when I never worry about stepping on poisonous snakes?"

Children of war? Semeniuk was in the trenches with kid soldiers in the Burmese jungle back in 1986, two years before a military crackdown killed more than 10,000 protesters. A few years later, he explored war trauma on the psyches of Palestinian children growing up in the Gaza Strip.

He was on the ground in lawless Somalia before UN peacekeepers arrived, when the rest of the world had eyes only for Yugoslavia's demise and ignored the African crisis.

Semeniuk's current epic is a years-long personalization of world health issues. In spring of 2005, he pitched his tent next to the shack of a single mom in Botswana, documenting AIDS and dislocation among the San Bushmen of the Kalahari, who have a 40 percent HIV-infection rate.

He spent last fall in Ethiopia photographing suffering caused by trachoma, a disease borne by flies, which is the world's leading cause of preventable blindness.

Future segments will focus on malaria among the war displaced in Burma; diabetes among Canada's First Nations people; tuberculosis in Russian prisons; obesity in America; river blindness; snail fever; elephantiasis.

Why global health? "I've spent my whole life traveling around to places where it was mostly poor people," Semeniuk says. "And most poor people are 'dis-eased' from many perspectives. The first time I saw a land-mine victim in Burma, 1987, a Karen (hill tribe) kid, he ended up dying from *malaria*. I thought, 'Jesus. It's a bad deck that they're playing with.' It was so in-my-face, the disparity between those people who were healthy and those who are not."

Semeniuk's pictures have been used by nongovernmental organizations including the United Nations and World Health Organization, published in newspapers and magazines worldwide, featured in 15 solo exhibitions.

And yet ...

"This guy has done incredible work for a generation, and not enough people know who the heck he is!" says Dan Lamont, a Seattle-based photojournalist and board member of Blue Earth Alliance, a nonprofit that supports photographic projects on threatened cultures and environments, including Semeniuk's world-health work.

Semeniuk hasn't been discovered big-time because he's Canadian, Lamont believes, and also because the photographer gravitates to complexity rather than headlines.

His subjects may be dramatic, but they're not necessarily the cause du jour. "They're the back story. There's a lot of need to cover the story that leads to the bad things that happen. What if we'd been paying more attention to the back story in Darfur the past few years?"

**Three Inuit hunters**, their caribou suits frosted by wind, recline on Arctic ice taking their tea. So foreign, this shivery setting, but their body language looks familiar, as if they were neighbors sprawled in the living room watching a movie. These hunters live on the other side of an enormous cultural chasm, yet seeing them through Semeniuk's eyes, you feel a connection.

Next, the Somalian children in a shot-out Kismayo warehouse. Their bony limbs and withered skin make you flinch, no surprise. But what makes you weep is the tenderness with which the starving brother holds the fragile baby, the sweet curve of their



ROBERT SEMENIUK

Maputo, 1996 | In Maputo, the capital of Mozambique, street children live off the torn city's garbage and sleep in shelled-out condemned buildings. At worst, they are dangerous urban predators; each has a long history of abuse. Many were child soldiers, rounded up by the guerrilla organization RENAMO and forced to commit atrocities during an extended civil war. At best, they are innocent bystanders caught in horrors few understand.



ROBERT SEMENIUK

Gaza City, 1994 | "Palestinian children play a game they call Arabs & Jews," Robert Semeniuk says. "They mimic what they saw every day in the intifada," the uprising of Palestinians against Israeli rule. "Doctors at the Gaza Community Mental Health Program call this post-traumatic play. It is about children repeating the trauma, unexplainable events, over and over, in an attempt to understand what is not understandable to children."



cheeks, the lingering human touch. Their mother warns Semeniuk not to leave food because people with guns would come and kill them for it.

Then there's Nanke. Nanke and her sister Anna in front of Nanke's scrappy tin shack in the slanting light of early morning, jawing about their kids, their no-good men, the mother and church that abandoned them after they contracted AIDS. Their people, the San in Botswana, have been forced from their desert homeland and resettled into camps they call "places of death." The upheaval is at the root of surging alcoholism, malaria, TB and AIDS.

Semeniuk stayed with Nanke for more than two months. "It became a problem when she wanted me to buy her booze. *Nanke, I understand where you're coming from, but I won't contribute to your alcoholism.* She made her own cheap beer out of sorghum to sell, so by 3 in the afternoon, she always managed to be drunk. Frankly, I thought it was a really appropriate response to her situation. I wasn't putting any blame."

In Semeniuk's photo, a cast-off beer bottle rests in the rippled sand; Anna listens intently to her sister, chin cocked; the laundry has been folded.

Everyday life in extenuating circumstances. Small moments in a vast landscape. This is Semeniuk's forte.

"It takes time, and you have to be present," says Gary Fiegehen, a Canadian photographer who has also done work with First Nations and who, with Semeniuk, helped found On the Ground, a nonprofit that supports documentary projects. "If you're going to get to know them, they have to get to know you. It's a give-and-take."

Semeniuk immerses himself in stories, living with a family, sharing chores, eating what they eat (raw seal blubber, steaming caribou marrow). He shares family photos and trades parenting tales. He tells about past hurts: his brother's suicide; the time his best friend got his girlfriend pregnant. "They start seeing themselves in you and you start seeing yourself in them, and people are familiar, and it's a safe place to be." Sometimes, he doesn't take out his camera for two weeks.

"What drew me to his work was his incredible dedication to breaking down the stereotypes," says Jason Houston, picture editor at Orion, a nonprofit magazine that published Semeniuk's Inuit photos in May.

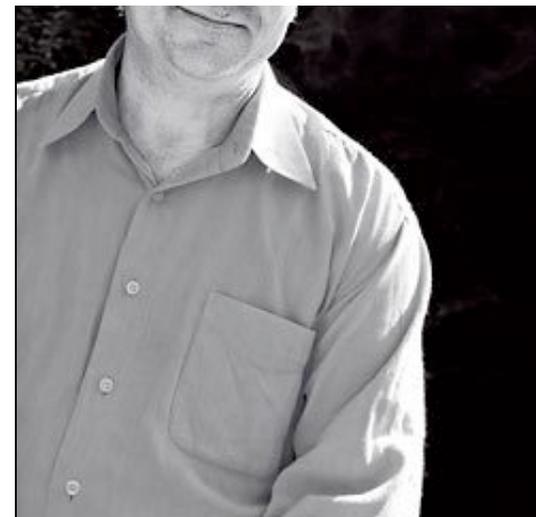
"If you're trying to make a living as a photographer, it's a lot safer to photograph things people expect. Pretty things, stereotypical things, archetypal things: Igloos, dog sleds, polar bears ... He shows the temporary tents they live in when they're hunting on the ice and the more established towns you never see portrayed. He shows family dynamics and how people are connected to their land."

**Balding, with** smudged glasses and a papa-bear paunch, Semeniuk could easily pass for a government bureaucrat (which he briefly was) or a pre-teen dancer's proud dad (which he is) or a missionary (he's not, but African villagers have told him he looks like one). Certain days, you might even mistake Semeniuk for a casually dressed stockbroker, a thought that horrifies him; he'll rant about that later on.

Semeniuk grew up in Big Valley, Alberta, a village of 350 people, "the redneck capital of Canada," he says. "Cowboys and oil. Half-ton truck with an Easy Rider Rifle on the rack. Sunday afternoon, we'd go shooting gophers for fun."

His father was mayor, chairman of the School Board, hotel owner, insurance salesman, rockhound. His mother ran the hotel, painted and did pottery. Now 85, Vera Semeniuk recalls her son, the third of four children, as determined and a perfectionist.

Growing up in the hotel, the children met all sorts. "In our house," Vera says, "it didn't matter who you were or what religion, how



RAYA SEMENIUK

Robert Semeniuk



ROBERT SEMENIUK

India, 1988 | A boy waits on the platform of the train station in Madras, India, selling dried coconut to train passengers. Hundreds of thousands of people live along the tracks in India, scrounging a living off the passengers and scabbling for garbage.



old, or what color. Everybody's got a life."

Semeniuk's family moved to Edmonton when he was in high school. He was a good student with a wild streak. The highlight of his teen years was a two-week road trip to Tijuana, Mexico, with three friends. They picked up hitchhikers, hookers, Hell's Angels. They told their parents they'd gone to Okanagan. "Great adventure," he says. "Freedom, freedom, freedom." He wanted more.

After graduating from college, Semeniuk earned a master's degree from Toronto's York University in environmental studies (cultural ecology) and human geography, doing his fieldwork mainly with the Inuit in Igloolik. While there, he helped out a National Geographic photographer who told Semeniuk to call if he ever came to Washington, D.C. After grad school, Semeniuk served two years in Ottawa as an environmental assessor for the federal government, a job he parlayed into trips to the Arctic, Brazil and Washington, D.C. There, in 1976, he visited National Geographic's headquarters. He showed his Inuit photographs; they offered a two-year contract.

Semeniuk has been a freelance photographer, essayist and advocate ever since, a career that enables his lifelong "love affair with anxiety." He worries a lot about money, especially since the freelance rate hasn't changed in a decade, yet there's no other vocation he'd consider.

"It's my therapy," he says, and his way of "being a voice for people who don't have a voice."

In person, Semeniuk is not the quietly contemplative guy his work would suggest. He broods, rants, curses. He's also charming, provocative, utterly honest and preoccupied with injustice. He cries often.

Less than five minutes after welcoming me into his octagonal island home, Semeniuk was on a roll about "American Idol," poor-quality print reproduction, missionaries, celebrity culture, people who whine about late ferries and bad-hair days ("I just want to drop them in Angola"), glossy magazines focused on "tits and ass and selling gas-guzzling SUVs and Viagra ... "

Does he not publish in some of these same magazines?

"I am as much in the cesspool as anybody else," he says. "If you read a newspaper, you're guilty of chopping down the forest. If you ride an airplane, you might as well drive a Hummer for a whole year."

"**People either** really like Bob or they are repelled by him. He's kind of the noble bard, telling it the way it is, and he doesn't care who he offends in the process," says Steve Smith, a biologist and former wilderness guide in the Canadian Arctic. "He carries the world's sorrows on his shoulders. At the same time, he passionately loves to be out in wild nature."

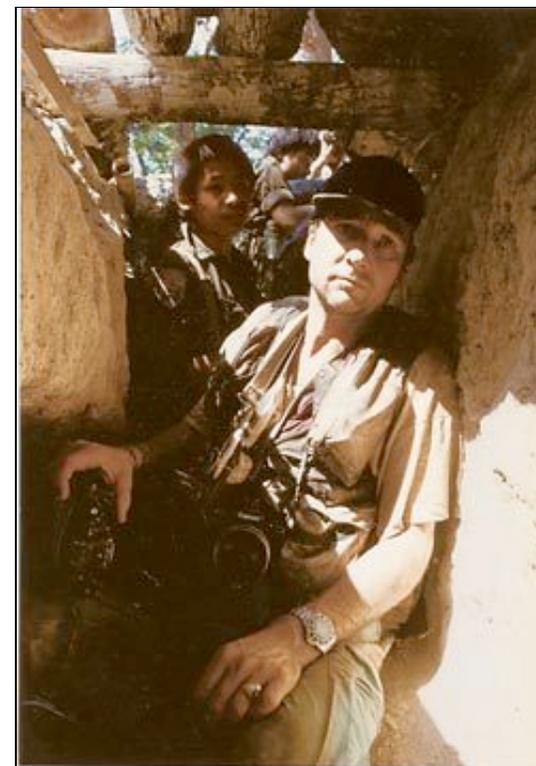
Smith recalls how Semeniuk's enthusiasm spread when their tour group stumbled upon a dead beluga whale that had washed ashore. Its skin, *maqtaq*, is an Inuit delicacy. "Bob jumped up with his pocket knife and started cutting off little pieces of skin and blubber, eating on the spot and coaxing everybody to try some. They all did."

War surgeon Christos Giannou, of the International Committee of the Red Cross, whom Semeniuk shadowed for two months in Somalia in 1992, says the photographer was zealous to a fault: "Bob travels around the world and sees a great deal of suffering. He



ROBERT SEMENIUK

Cambodia, 1996 | Land-mine victim Kanh Soma, 36, lies in pain at Battambang Civilian Hospital in Cambodia. Soma, injured by a homemade anti-personnel land mine, is one of hundreds of people maimed or killed by land mines each month in Cambodia. "The poorest of the world's poor -- those who have no choice but to tend their animals and fields, fetch water and firewood -- are the ones who suffer most from land mines," Semeniuk says.



BJORN SVENSSON

In the trenches during Burma's civil war in 1987, Semeniuk got up close and personal with child soldiers and the putrid smell of death.

... Semeniuk in 1977, says the photographer has seemed to a family. Bob never made the news and does a great deal of searching. He wants to get that into the public domain, and that's a good and important thing ... There were a number of occasions when I had to tell him to put his camera down and hide it. A question of security; some people with guns are nervous about cameras ... What I remember most is his curiosity, an empathy. We saw people who were starving, children who were injured. He would come up to me later and say, 'What will happen with this child?' I, as a surgeon, have to have a certain amount of detachment. So I told him: This child will probably die. And he asked, 'Why?' "

Off the coast of British Columbia, after everyone else had gone to bed on the research boat, Semeniuk and biologist Tom Reimchen would sip brandy and talk about economic systems, environmental contaminants, land mines. The David Suzuki Foundation had hired Semeniuk to document Reimchen's research on bears dragging salmon carcasses into the Great Bear Rainforest. Reimchen recalls an evening at a lodge that had agreed to let the researchers use its bear-viewing platforms to observe the night-feeding grizzlies. The lodge served dinner family style, Reimchen's research team seated alongside wealthy paying guests.

Reimchen: "Little conversations were happening around the table ... *How are your (stock) shares doing today?* ... The person next to Bob mentioned a company that was a major exporter of land mines. He probably had no idea what the company was producing."

"Bob says, 'I can't sit here.' He stands up and launches into a five- or 10-minute tirade, an extremely eloquent but very dark analysis of their personalities, basically characterizing them as the lowlife of the planet, people who didn't care whether companies made land mines or dog food. ... The owner basically told me never to come back." Longtime friend Dave O'Malley: "I can't tell for sure whether Bob was angry before he started venturing to the living hells of the world, or after. The problem is he finds beauty in the people, and he sees beauty trashed all the time."

**Every afternoon**, Semeniuk and his Belgian sheep dog-border collie, Luna, walk the shore of Bowen Island, gleefully ignoring the "No Trespass" signs of property owners. Semeniuk carps about the malicious influence of Rambo in the Philippines among vigilantes armed with M-16s who cut off heads at roadblocks in the name of democracy. "Rambo would do anything for democracy," he says, "but the guy was a killer!"

Man and dog scramble over huge granite boulders covered with moss. "I take it all personally. When you kill babies, I take that personally. When you rape women, I take that personally," he says. "The budget for world health is 2 percent of what was spent on the military last year. ... The world should be up and screaming over that, and they're not. How do you motivate people out of their apathy? It's too easy to change a channel, drift off, everybody making money. We're all spoiled rotten."

Salty waves gently roll smooth rocks. Even here, in the most peaceful of environments, Semeniuk can't let go of the world's horrors. Vipassana meditation helped for a while, he says, "but like anything else, when you start feeling better, you stop doing it." The photographer laughs, but just for a moment. He's focused on something else, far away, something only he can see.

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ROBERT SEMENIUK

Inuit, 1976 | Semeniuk photographed Inuit caribou hunters as they stopped for tea on the ice of North Baffin Island in the eastern Arctic. Though they live half a world away, they seem familiar in Semeniuk's pictures because he immerses himself in their lives, showing us "family dynamics and how people are connected to their land," says Jason Houston of Orion magazine.



ANDY AWA

When Semeniuk was on assignment for National Geographic in the 1970s, he lived with Inuit hunters in the Arctic for two years, documenting the impact of modern life on these aboriginal people. The Inuit have been among the first to be hard hit by global warming as permafrost and ice caps melt, damaging hunting and a culture based on snow and ice.

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ROBERT SEMENIUK

Ethiopia, 2006 | Keddar Mengi, 45, has returned to Sister Genet Bogala's clinic to have stitches removed after surgery to correct the painful effects of trachoma, a highly infectious eye disease that can lead to blindness. Trachoma is one of several diseases Semeniuk is documenting in a project called "Personalizing the World Health Crisis."



ROBERT SEMENIUK

Ethiopia, 2006 | Sister Bogala performs trachoma surgery on Sherefa Ali, 30, while Keddar Mengi, 45, waits outside for his turn with the field nurse. Nearly 2,600 such surgeries were performed in the Gurage district of Ethiopia in a recent 10-month period, Semeniuk says.



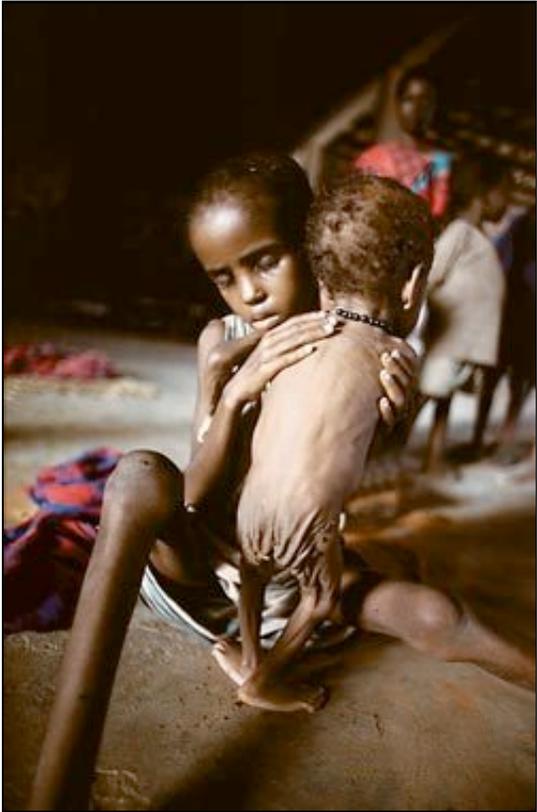
ROBERT SEMENIUK

Botswana, 2005 | Lennah Nanke Mothimit, 38, (right) visits with her sister, Anna, in Botswana in 2005. Nanke contracted AIDS in 1999 from a rapist. One of the few women in D'Kar who is open about her HIV status, she is estranged from her mother, ostracized by the church and abandoned by the fathers of her children. In spring of 2005, Semeniuk pitched his tent next to her shack for several weeks, documenting AIDS and dislocation among the San Bushmen of the Kalahari, who have a 40 percent HIV-infection rate.



ROBERT SEMENIUK

Afghanistan, 1996 | In Kabul, 9-year-old Wazir Hammond requires prosthesis refittings every six months as he grows. He rests against a wall of sandbags that protect the local hospital against rockets, shelling and bombs. In 1996, an estimated 10 million land mines polluted nearly 500 square kilometres of land in Afghanistan. This picture was part of Semeniuk's five-year project on land mines.



ROBERT SEMENIUK

Somalia, 1992 | In a shot-out warehouse in Kismayo, a withered young woman with two dying children tells Semeniuk she is afraid to accept food because "the people with guns come and kill us for it." She walked here for more than a week, with no food, hoping to find some, and there was none. In quiet moments, Semeniuk often cries, "more than any photojournalist you'd ever want to meet."