

Essay

The Problem and the Promise of Literary Journalism Studies

by Norman Sims

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Contains my comments on **THE REALITY BOUNDARY**

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In 1974, the scholar James W. Carey called for a systematic cultural history of journalism. Something similar could be proposed today for literary journalism studies. “Cultural history,” Carey said, “is not concerned merely with events but with the thought within them”—the “study of consciousness in the past.” There’s a significance to Caesar crossing the Rubicon, he said, but we would be well served by reconstructing what Caesar felt as he crossed the Rubicon—“the particular constellation of attitudes, emotions, motive and expectations that were experienced in that act.” He called for historical scholarship that could move beyond a perceived journalistic progress toward factual accuracy and press freedom, and instead recapture the meaning of journalism in its own time.

Today, as a new journal and a new international scholarly organization dedicated to literary journalism begin, we encounter the problem of literary journalism studies. We have a growing interest in the scholarship of literary journalism not only in North America, where its strongest scholarly traditions have arisen, but also around the world. At International Association for Literary

Journalism Studies (IALJS) conferences, scholars from China, Turkey, Brazil and elsewhere have joined with North American and European researchers. The problem of literary journalism studies involves thinking about the important issues in the field. Bearing Carey's advice in mind, this essay addresses what I see as some of the pressing issues that could benefit from further study. They include adapting different forms of analysis to the particular qualities of literary journalism, elucidating the form's international nature and how it relates to different national cultures, placing the form within the context of a broad time frame for its history, recognizing the role that practicing writers of the genre can play in reflexive critique, and the promise of online presentation as a vehicle for the form. Finally, there is the problem of what I call the "reality boundary," which I will dwell on because I believe it is central to such scholarship.

While these issues are somewhat different from the ones Carey addressed, perhaps today we need to examine the forms of consciousness that created the form, and the origins of scholarship that we bring to the study of literary journalism. Until recent years in academic studies, little attention was focused on literary journalism. The scholars from the fifties and sixties that Tom Wolfe called "The Literary Gentleman in the Grandstand" considered journalism a lowlife form unworthy of representation alongside the novel and poetry. Returning the favor, literary journalists of the sixties such as Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, and Hunter Thompson expressed disdain for the community of literary scholarship. Wolfe went so far as to offend critics by suggesting that nonfiction might supplant the novel.

Many scholars started with the perception that such journalism was "literary" and based their scholarship of the genre on literary criticism and theory. That poses a potential problem. We must be careful that our

scholarship does not just mimic that of one sector of the academy. Given a comparative definition offered by Wolfe that literary journalism reads like a novel or a short story, we run the risk of not examining literary journalism on its own terms. Such a scholarship should emerge from an effort to determine what those terms are.

This is because the literary constellations we see in our night sky have no meaning when viewed from another galaxy. Traditionally, English and American literary scholarship rarely included literary journalism. It didn't matter how carefully structured, how complex the characters, how realistic or how revelatory of human truths, literary journalism was an invisible arrangement of stars. As Jonathan Raban said about a similar scholarly discrimination against travel writing:

In literature...the distinction between realistic fiction and the imaginative recreation of a real journey through life has been maintained with pedantic assiduity. The novel, however autobiographical, is *writing*; the book of travel, however patterned, plotted, symbolized, is just *writing-up*. It is a damnable and silly piece of class discrimination.

Today, the situation has changed a little. Literary journalism is taught at a number of universities, both in North America and elsewhere. Master's degrees are offered, sometimes in English departments under the name of "creative nonfiction," which avoids use of the term *journalism* because of the ancient bias. International doctoral dissertations on literary journalism are completed almost every year.

But the status of literary journalism in the academy remains tenuous. I once listened to a literary critic say that fact and fiction don't matter. In his world, the idea that you can't tell fact from fiction made some sense. When we're alone with a text, he said, our reactions are simply based on that text. Reading is reading.

We react differently, however,—or I do—depending on what we know. I felt differently about George Orwell when I heard that perhaps he never shot an elephant. It changed my reaction to “Shooting an Elephant,” one of his most celebrated pieces of literary journalism. I felt the same way when I studied Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* and learned that he had made up some scenes, particularly at the end of the book. Other critics, and Kenneth Burke was one, say you have to interpret a text using every scrap of evidence you can gather. Don’t believe for a minute that you can understand “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” unless you know something about Coleridge’s life, Burke said. In studying literary journalism and its relation to the world, I think we need to follow Burke’s advice.

This is one reason why we stand to benefit from a cultural approach that goes beyond any one disciplinary perspective (and I would emphasize here that not only are literary studies inadequate to the task at hand, but also journalism and mass communication studies are not solely adequate either). What follows are, I believe, some of the more salient approaches we might take at this time to literary journalism studies. Others will undoubtedly emerge in the future.

INTERNATIONAL STUDY

We need an international scholarship that recognizes there are different national manifestations. Despite all the North American scholarship on the subject, we should not conclude that literary journalism is only an American phenomenon. It appears in other cultures with variations in form.

For example, China has its own tradition that reflects “the particular constellation of attitudes, emotions, motive and expectations” of that society, to invoke Carey again. Chen Peiqin of Shanghai International Studies University said in her presentation at the 2008 IALJS conference in Lisbon, “Chinese Literary Reportage, *Bao*

Gao Wen Xue, designated as a literary genre in the 1930s during the Chinese anti-Japanese war, has been considered by most Chinese literary critics as the best genre to expose social evils, and to call for people to take actions against social evils. Chinese literary reportage has been closely related with social movements since its emergence.” She cited early classics of the form like Xia Yan’s *Slave Workers* and contemporary influential works such as Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao’s *A Survey of Chinese Peasants*, which won the Lettre Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage in 2004. Steve Guo of Hong Kong Baptist University wrote, “As a popular style of long form journalism, literary reporting has a stand-alone position in the Chinese press, typically written with its own style and evaluated in its own right. Perhaps more true in China than elsewhere, major conjunctions of social transition and policy shift all have their own defining masterpieces of literary reporting.” In Russia, according to John Hartsock, the history and development of the equivalent has both native roots and was influenced by the international proletarian writers’ movement, especially the contributions of the German and Czech writer Egon Erwin Kisch in the early twentieth century. The development of the distinctive Russian literary “reportage” continues today in the examples of such contemporary reporters as Svetlana Alexievich and the late Anna Politkovskaya, who also won the Lettre Ulysses Award in 2003.

Examinations of literary journalism from several countries suggest they follow their own cultural pathways and do not merely imitate the American models. We need to include those international forms of literary journalism, with their variations, as a corrective to the focus on North American literary journalism. We could use more studies of writers such as Edgar Snow in China, V. S. Naipaul, and the latter’s brother Shiva Naipaul, just to name some English-speaking literary journalists.

International forms that are akin to what we call literary journalism often put more stress on social usefulness than on artistry, which may be one of many marks that distinguish them from the North American varieties.

In addition, we could use a lot more translations into English of literary journalism published in other countries. The strictly English speakers among us are impoverished by our lack of access to works of literary journalism from China, Russia, Portugal, Brazil and other parts of Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe. It is hard enough to get fiction translated, let alone journalism.

BROAD HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

In the United States we finally understand that literary journalism has a long history. Moreover, it now has a foundation in scholarly studies because of the efforts of many dedicated scholars over the last couple decades.

I believe we should base the history of literary journalism on a broad time frame—not assuming that all literary journalism descended from the New Journalism of the sixties, for example. Here, the journalism academy has been as guilty as any other, in part because of what Carey dealt with: a view that the present is our culminating achievement.

We need to connect the works produced to the culture and the context of their time. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, even though it is a novel, can be studied as contributing to the literary journalism of its time, especially as the form was navigating through the era of Muckraking journalism in the United States. Similarly, some scholars might deny Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* as literary journalism because he made up a few scenes (or more), but a more nuanced reading would see his reporting, ambitions, literary skill, and innovations as important to the development of the form within the standards of the sixties.

LEARNING FROM WRITERS

Along the same lines, we might break down the wall that divides scholars from writers, and recognize that writers are just as knowledgeable and skilled in their own ways about their work as are the scholars who view it from a distance. We can learn from each other. Writers triangulate their efforts to achieve accuracy, using their own notes, second opinions, fact-checkers, and multiple perspectives. The writer knows how the work was reported, the meanings that were consciously built in, and the techniques that went into creating it. These are concerns shared with scholars.

THE PROMISE AND PERIL OF ONLINE

In today's world, many are asking how literary journalism will play out on the Internet. The Internet has already revived documentary video production, which in time may lead to forms of video and multi-platform literary journalism on the Web. Literary journalism requires immersion reporting, accuracy, careful structuring, and a lot of labor, no matter what medium is used. The creators of literary journalism need sustainable revenues if they are to produce professional work. So far, the Web has not brought forth a new economic model that will pay for the production of a labor-intensive form such as literary journalism. Nonetheless, technology makes possible new connections and new discussions, and these topics should attract our scholarly attention.

THE REALITY BOUNDARY

We often fail to mention, perhaps because it is taken for granted, that literary journalism begins with the reality of the world as we find it. All of its subject matter refers to that world. In trying to understand the centrality of this issue, literary journalism can be seen as a genre surrounded by other related forms of literature. We can imagine literary journalism in the center of a design, say as a ceramic tile connected to other tiles. There are

borders between literary journalism and the surrounding forms, which include autobiography, fiction, science writing, conventional journalism, and history. Sometimes a writer can stray over a border without damage—say into science writing or history. But when the writer crosses the border into fiction, it triggers a hunt by the guardians of journalism. Those guardians have made life miserable for writers like Truman Capote, who crossed the line from literary journalism, and for conventional journalists who became fabricators, such as Jayson Blair of the *New York Times* and Stephen Glass of *The New Republic*. Fiction—and sometimes autobiography and memoir, I might add—is separated from literary journalism by the reality boundary.

Literary journalism that keeps to its side of the reality boundary creates unique problems for readers, critics, and scholars. The American literary journalist Tracy Kidder provides an example. After Kidder published his book *Old Friends*, which was about two residents of a nursing home, a novelist and critic reviewed the book in the press. She said in her experience old people were not as nice as the ones Kidder had portrayed. She seemed to imply that Kidder's characters would be more believable if he had made them more edgy and difficult, in other words, like a crabby and self-centered elderly person that she may have known.

Nothing quite like this had been suggested in Kidder's long career writing literary journalism, including books such as *The Soul of a New Machine*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, *House*, and *Among Schoolchildren*. He spent a year researching the nursing home in *Old Friends*, including many weeks spent in the company of the two old men who were the leading characters. Looking at the review, Kidder shook his head and commented that in journalism you have to deal with the world as you find it. Later he told me, "The beauty of a novel is that evil seems explicable, and you should get the feeling of seeing a character in the round. Life as you

encounter it as a journalist is a lot messier than you'd want it in a novel and evil isn't always explicable. It's a little frustrating." Clearly, Kidder would never change the world as he found it to make the story conform to his imagination of how the world should be, or of how a character might be improved to better suit a story line.

Reviewers are not always the same as literary critics. Yet this example strikes me as a case of two smart people, who were both familiar with the issues, facing each other across the reality boundary.

John McPhee, a realist literary journalist who usually avoids taking a first- person role in his many books, told me how he views his own work: "You've got a professional writer whose milieu seems to be real people, real places, factual writing..." Some literary journalists emphasize the writer's perspective, but it is nevertheless a perspective on the world as they find it.

Norman Mailer commented on the connection of standard journalism with "fiction" in a much more sophisticated and post-modern way after covering the 1960 Democratic National Convention in the United States. Mailer compared conventional journalism to fiction (or to literary journalism, take your pick):

Indeed, the real premise of journalism is that the best instrument for measuring history is a faceless, even a mindless, recorder. Whereas the writer of fiction is closer to that moving world of Einstein. There the velocity of the observer is as crucial to the measurement as any object observed. For fiction probably makes the secret assumption that we learn the truth through a comparison of the lies, since we are obliged to receive the majority of our experience at second hand through parents, friends, mates, lovers, enemies, and the journalists who report it to us. So our best chance of improving those private charts of our

own most complicated lives, our unadmitted maps of reality, our very comprehension, if you will, of the way existence works—seems to profit most if we can have some little idea, at least, of the warp of the observer who passes on the experience. Fiction, as I use the word, is then that reality which does not cohere to anonymous axes of fact but is breathed in through the swarm of our male and female movements about one another, a novelistic assumption, for don't we perceive the truth of a novel as its events pass through the personality of the writer?

Mailer believed that what he observed gained meaning as it was filtered through his own psyche. And therefore it could have no meaning for the reader outside of that psyche. So why not examine the psyche that had filtered the experience along with the experience itself? Fair enough. But bear in mind that his encounters with real people, such as John F. Kennedy, were at the heart of his report. He knew that the political convention existed and that he could report it accurately—"I would endeavor to get my facts as scrupulously as a reporter. (At least!)" Mailer said—and, supporting his ironic jab at standard reporting, his writing kept to the reality side of the boundary.

"Reality" has taken a hit in academe since the early twentieth century when scholars started to describe differing perspectives and to challenge the validity of terms such as truth, reality, and objectivity. All that was good, even if overdone. The study of literary journalism, however, involves the efforts of skilled writers who speak about the reality of the world as they find it, and who write about people located in time and space with real names and real lives. As Mas'ud Zavarzadeh noted, what takes place in literary journalism "are actual phenomena in the world accessible to ordinary human senses and, unlike the contents of fictive novels, exist

outside the cover of books. The subjectivity involved in all acts of human perception of the external world does not deny the phenomenological status of the experiences transcribed....” We have to acknowledge the efforts of literary journalists to adhere to the reality boundary and not reduce it as just another rhetorical exercise.

James Carey once mentioned that all parents encounter religion at the point when they need to reassure a child crying in the night by saying, “It will be all right.” We encounter our fundamental literary interpretations in a similar way when a child, watching a movie on TV, asks, “Is this real?” We should not respond to the problems of literary journalism by ignoring the difficulties presented by the reality boundary. At minimum, we should interpret a work based on the consciousness and culture of its own time, not just that of our own.

Memoir suffered considerable damage most recently when James Frey’s book, *A Million Little Pieces*, was exposed as a fraud. Frey strayed over the reality boundary from memoir to fiction, prompting the literary journalist Gay Talese to pointedly and forcefully tell a gathering of Goucher College MFA students that “Nonfiction means NO FICTION!” Memoir has been a tool often used productively by literary journalists, but when a memoir steps across the reality boundary, then it is no longer literary journalism. Memoirists such as Madeleine Blais and Walt Harrington have coined the term “reported memoir” to indicate a form that maintains its verifiable contact with the real world. David Beers, editor of *The Tyee*, an independent online magazine (<http://thetyee.ca>), calls it “the personal reported essay.” Autobiography has similar difficulties. We can reasonably be skeptical that people will be honest and truthful about themselves. If we discover that an autobiography or memoir—or, heaven forbid, a work of journalism—is embellished or faked, we react negatively.

It makes a difference to us. Fundamentally, we feel cheated.

Fiction begins life in a different place on the other side of the reality boundary. To be sure, fiction writers often believe that they are conveying a reality, too. I would not disagree with that. But the reality I'm discussing here is the one Kidder alluded to, that in the phenomenal world—the world of time and space—reality does not always conform to how we believe it might in a conventional fictional model. We assume that we can discover the difference. Fiction creates an imaginary world and seeks emotional truth, but it has no firm requirement for the troubling details of the real world, as does literary journalism. Its nursing-home residents can be mean or nice depending on the writer's narrative needs.

The other surrounding forms—history, science writing, and conventional journalism—are separated more by their intentions and formats, and they share a requirement for factual accuracy.

I would suggest that a cultural approach to literary journalism studies needs a scholarship that can grapple with the issues of reality that I've examined here. Literary journalism speaks to the nature of our phenomenal reality *in spite* of the fact that our interpretations are inevitably subjective and personal.

CONCLUSION

As the international scholarship on literary journalism expands, and especially with a new journal, this seems a good time to think about a wide variety of approaches to literary journalism studies similar to the cultural studies that James Carey called for in journalism history.

Can we develop a scholarship that is culturally sensitive to the way the craft is practiced not just in different

countries but also in different historical time frames? Can we take into account the artistry of writers, and their relationships with readers? Can our scholarship expand upon analysis derived from the study of fiction and create one that takes account of the reality boundary as I've identified it?

Carey's call for a cultural history of journalism fits well with literary journalism because it is a form of journalism that also seeks to understand feelings, emotions, and expectations—the consciousness behind events and actions that can provide reflexive cultural insights into other times and places. Some scholars are already working in this vineyard. We can only hope that more scholars will study literary journalism on its own distinctive terms.

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