

Note from the editor . . .



Today, there can be little doubt that there is a need for a scholarly journal dedicated to the study of literary journalism (and its variations), a discourse committed to what I like to call the “aesthetics of experience.” For much too long, scholars dedicated to this study have understood that there is a critical and cultural value to this once-neglected genre. The inaugural issue of this journal serves to demonstrate that this scholarship has come of age.

The need for such a journal is especially compelling now. We live in a time of dramatic change, not only at our respective local and national levels, but at the global as well. It is during such times that literary journalism has thrived because of a fundamental human need to try to understand at the more personal level the new complexities that are so much larger than us—and that threaten to overwhelm us. Among other reasons, the appeal of literary journalism derives from the fact that the human mind is wired to engage in inquiry into the world by telling stories in the conventional sense of “storytelling.” At the heart of “storytelling” is the symbiosis of narrative and descriptive modalities. What we’re talking about is a “narra-descriptive journalism” with literary ambition, or the capacity to prompt us imaginatively to consider and negotiate different possibilities of meaning. It is a genre that “tease[s] us out of thought,” to crib from the poet Keats. At the heart of such a genre, then, is cognitive self-efficacy or personal enfranchisement.

Literary journalism insists that we need to confront, however challenging, the phenomenal expression of our world. It needs to be examined by students in order to encourage their own sense of self-efficacy in dealing with the complexities of that world, as well as to understand its power for encouraging personal and social change (whether for better or ill). It also needs to be studied by scholars in order to illuminate aesthetic, critical, cultural, and historical contexts for not only students but society at large. Finally, in the complexities of a postmodern world where the image has come to vie with what was once a print world, literary journalism, because of its inherent appeal, needs to be studied for the sake of print literacy—whether on paper or in electronic form. After all, we now know that reading changes the physiological structure of the brain. And without those changes, we are the poorer in trying to understand and negotiate those shifting complexities we find so daunting, and that literary journalism so much better addresses at the personal level than, say, the abstract tract, the conventional news story, or the escapist illusions of the romance.

Whether we call it literary journalism, narrative journalism, literary reportage, reportage literature, literary nonfiction, creative nonfiction, the Chinese *bagao wenxue*, or the Russian *ocherke*—or call it by our personally negotiated terms such as “narra-descriptive journalism”—the reasons above help to account for why we need to engage in a scholarly study of this compelling discourse. Reading further, you will discover others.

—JOHN C. HARTSOCK