

A New and Important Voice

Pulphead: Essays

by John Jeremiah Sullivan. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011. Paperback, 365 pp., \$16

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To my mind, what makes literary journalism an exciting area for scholarly exploration is the tension between the two terms: “literary” implies aesthetics, character development, narrative techniques commonly associated with creative (read fictional) writing; “journalism” implies truthfulness, fact, newsworthiness. It is a necessary tension, for when one of the terms overwhelms the other, what we are left with may be very fine writing—it’s just not literary journalism. Or so it seems to me.

Which makes reviewing John Jeremiah Sullivan’s 2011 collection *Pulphead for Literary Journalism Studies* a most interesting one, as it reminds me why those conversations regarding definitions that occur whenever two or more scholars of literary journalism gather matter. Without a framework for defining literary journalism, even one that is contested in some quarters and is necessarily always evolving, we have no means for assessing the field’s development, or making a case for significant contributions, or recognizing new and important voices.

And what a voice Sullivan, currently the “southern editor” for *Paris Review* and a frequent contributor to the *New York Times Magazine*, *GQ*, and other publications, has. As the pieces collected in *Pulphead* indicate, he brings a novelist’s eye and ear to the subjects he tackles, highlighting what Tom Wolfe called “status details”—the military haircut of one Christian evangelist, the lump of snuff another one kept in his jaw, the “swollen, hairless torso” of a former reality show star, the way a childhood friend of the rocker Axl Rose “finished beers quickly” and always said “*Right* on.” He recreates conversations as if they were happening in real time. And the narration that encases these conversations is a lively mix of formal explanatory prose, colloquial diction, and free indirect discourse.

But the volume is not all literary journalism—essays, yes, as the book’s subtitle indicates, whose topics range from the very personal (a recollection of his brother’s near-death experience of and subsequent recovery from an accidental electrocution) to the historically obscure (a profile of Constantine Rafinesque, the nineteenth-century Turkish scientist who studied plant and insect life and Indian mounds, especially in Kentucky). The collected pieces appeared, “most,” we are told, “in substantially different form,” between 1999 and 2011, nine in *GQ*, two in *Paris Review*, and one each in *Harper’s*, *Oxford American*, and *Ecotone*, an interdisciplinary journal out of Wilmington, North Carolina, focused on “place.” By my working definition of literary journalism, I’d say half of the volume qualifies, and it is those pieces that are typically the strongest.

Take the one that opens the volume, “Upon This Rock.” Calling to mind such New Journalists as Tom Wolfe, or Hunter S. Thompson, or Norman Mailer, whose

1960 rescinded resignation letter to *Esquire* serves as the book's epigraph, Sullivan begins the piece acknowledging how he had envisioned this *GQ* assignment, reporting on a three-day Christian rock festival in Missouri, to be an easy one: "I'd stand at the edge of the crowd and take notes on the scene, chat up the occasional audience member ('What's harder—homeschooling or regular schooling?'), then flash my pass to get backstage, where I'd rap with the artists themselves. . . . Fly home, stir in statistics. Paycheck." What Sullivan hadn't counted on was how his own history—during his late teens and early twenties, he, too, had been a Christian evangelical—would meld with his experience in Missouri, eliminating the cool distance he thought he would bring to the assignment. When a man actually died of a heart attack right in front of him, the firm belief of a concert attendee ("Just pray for his family," she said. "He's fine") shook him to his core:

I went back to the trailer and had, as the ladies say where I'm from, a colossal go-to-pieces. I started to cry and then stopped myself for some reason. I felt nonsensically raw and lonely. What a dickhead I'd been, thinking the trip would be a lark. There were too many ghosts here. Everyone seemed so strange and so familiar (36).

It is this positioning, captured in its rawness, that allows us as readers to take the same trip Sullivan has taken, from ironic and passive outsider to, if not insider, exactly, at least a place of empathy and even admiration. Sullivan's identification with his subjects in this piece we perceive as entirely sincere.

While that sincere identification recurs in the pieces I would categorize as literary journalism, that does not mean Sullivan does not also reveal a well-honed sense of the humorously ironic. In "The Last Wailer," written initially for *GQ* and one of my favorites, Sullivan recounts his pursuit of an interview with Bunny Wailer, the last surviving male member of Bob Marley's Jamaican reggae band. Gently Thompsonesque, the story is held together with ganja. Early on Sullivan tells us, "It had long been a dream of mine to meet Bunny Wailer—a pipe dream, sometimes a literal one in the sense that I dreamed it while holding a pipe (280)." He and his Jamaican guide, L Lewis (the double "L," we learn, is a kind of intentional mistake), who refused to ease Sullivan's ability to find him at the airport by holding a sign with Sullivan's name on it, but who nonetheless was holding a sign—with someone else's name on it—when the two finally did meet up, decide at one point to procure "some good herb" for Bunny as a thank-you gesture. After procuring it, they decide they should test it, and in a brief break in the final interview, when Bunny goes to rest for a bit, he and L Lewis finish it up. That leads to what Sullivan describes as a "momentary hallucination" after Bunny returns:

Strange things were happening to Bunny's face as he spoke. Different races were passing through it, through the cast of his features—black, white, Asian, Indian, the whole transnational human slosh that produced the West Indies. The Atlantic world was passing through his face. I was having thoughts so crypto-colonialist, I might as well have had on a white safari hat and been peering at him through a monocle (303).

In this moment of attempted identification with Bunny at his Jamaican roots, we see an unbridgeable gulf, Bunny's ultimate unknowability. And that to a large

degree is the piece's important takeaway, itself an ironic reversal of the "identification with the Other" that literary journalism is often described as accomplishing. Sullivan recounts their last phone conversation, following a transcultural misunderstanding during a photo shoot, which ended in "a dark cloud of patois cursing." Sullivan explains, "I became an unanswered ring in the pockets of [Bunny's] marvelous suits"; he and *GQ* had "come from Babylon; [Bunny Wailer] sent us back there, to our garisons (306)."

In the book's other pieces of literary journalism, Sullivan takes on the early anti-Obama fervor and rise of the Tea Party, showing the nation's tensions to be an extension of tensions within his own extended family; describes a late Axl Rose concert by embedding Rose's story in his own memories of growing up "nowhere"; brings us to a New Orleans shelter after Katrina, gathering stories from the survivors and demonstrating both their resourcefulness and fragility; describes the post-reality show circuit of a former star of the *Real World*, which pairs beautifully with the book's final piece, the story of how Sullivan and his wife gave over their too-expensive home, purchased right before the economy crashed, to a television crew filming a teen drama called *One Tree Hill*, "one of the worst TV shows ever made (348)." By turns wry and sympathetic, well reported and beautifully stylized, these pieces offer a profound portrayal of contemporary America. But the book as a whole ends up feeling disjointed. There is no introduction articulating why it was these pieces Sullivan chose to bring together. And I wonder if that disjointedness isn't in the end related to the fact that half the pieces in the book are not literary journalism—an interesting idea to ponder as we continue to work on definitions.
