



Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century

Edited by Norman Sims. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2008. Originally published New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. Paperback, 297 pp., \$19.95.

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The first challenge a reviewer faces is that of making sure that he or she responds to the book at hand, rather than to the book the reviewer would have written. When the book is a reprint—as in this case, a title in the Medill Visions of the American Press series, with a new, perceptive foreword by John C. Hartsock—the reviewer contends not only with the author’s original work, but also with the publisher’s judgment that the title is, indeed, deserving of renewed attention.

Sims’s volume withstands scrutiny on both fronts. *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century* made a major contribution when it first appeared in 1990, and now the Medill reissue—under the general editorship of David Abrahamson—reminds us of its centrality to the development of literary journalism studies. Although certain of the essays hold up better than others—a contributed volume is always a constellation in which some stars are brighter than others—this remains a charter document. In many ways, Sims’s book made it possible to teach literary journalism as a distinct genre. Now, it assumes an historic standing as a turning point in the discipline’s understanding of itself.

And the central question in the endeavor of literary journalism studies understanding was, and is, that of definition: the genre remains a slippery beast, and in recent history, seems to risk being absorbed into the umbrella term “creative nonfiction.” For a long time those who sought to identify literary journalism had to fall back on a variation of Justice Potter Stewart’s infamous remark on obscenity, that he might not be able to define it but he knew it when he saw it. Or they could fall back on the default answer that literary journalism was whatever it was those whiz kids called the New Journalists were up to.

This volume refutes any such facile definitions. To my mind, the most compelling reasons for reprinting this book are found in the five essays in part one, which broadly address the history of the genre; these chapters make it impossible to settle for the claim that literary journalism emerged full grown from Tom Wolfe’s forehead (a legend that Wolfe himself seemed only too happy to promote). A number of twentieth-century titans come under examination. John Steinbeck’s critical reputation has admittedly fallen like a stone off a bridge lately, but *The Grapes of Wrath* remains a formidable book. William Howarth’s essay shows that much of the novel’s power comes from its fruitful intertextuality with Steinbeck’s earlier practice as a

reporter and documentarian. He concludes that the 1939 novel “endures as literature because it sprang from journalism, a strong and vibrant mother.” Ronald Weber engages with Hemingway’s *Death in the Afternoon*, *The Green Hills of Africa*, and *A Moveable Feast* not as puzzling departures from the fiction but as assertions of Hemingway’s restless talent, and as palpably more personal than the novels and short stories. In what Weber calls the “fragile mosaic” of *Feast*, the blurring of fact and fiction is especially vexing. But that is one of the inescapable conclusions to be drawn from Sims’s collection: that boundary crossing is itself a defining attribute of literary journalism. (And, indeed, the permeability of boundaries is the explicit point of Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s essay in part two, “The Borderlands of Culture,” which considers experimental journalism from James Agee, Tillie Olsen, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Gloria Anzaldúa.)

Sims’s own contribution to the volume, “Joseph Mitchell and *The New Yorker* Nonfiction Writers,” is indispensable to anyone writing about Mitchell (who belongs on any shortlist of candidates for the title of the twentieth century’s finest stylist). The Mitchell enigma of non-publication rivals that of J. D. Salinger or Ralph Ellison, and Sims’s essay—based on the only interview Mitchell ever granted after *Joe Gould’s Secret* in 1964—opens one of the very few windows we have on the last three decades of the author’s life.

The essay that opens this historiographic section is Thomas B. Connery’s “A Third Way to Tell the Story: American Literary Journalism at the Turn of the Century.” Connery scuttles any residual thought that the New Journalists were, in fact, “new.” He retrieves journalism written more than a century ago that refused to limit itself to mere reportage, but rather, wove interpretation into the telling itself. The chapter calls our attention to such obscure figures as Adelaide Lund and Hutchins Hapgood, as well as to authors who are far better known for their work in other genres, among them the novelist Stephen Crane and the investigative reporter Lincoln Steffens. More important than the biographical annotation, though, is Connery’s insight that literary journalism is driven by an impulse to tell the story in a new way.

That impulse to try a different approach runs close to the surface in every essay here, both the studies of individual authors and the overview essays. Re-reading Sims’s volume, one gets the sense that the project of literary journalism has been a species of modernism, inasmuch as modernism, too, originated in the conviction that conventional ways of making meaning had failed. The literary journalist’s impulse to try something new, to set out to perturb our assumptions, appears everywhere. Hugh Kenner’s “The Politics of the Plain Style,” which looks closely at Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*, asserts, “Plain prose, the plain style, is the most disorienting form of discourse yet devised by man.” In Kathy Smith’s luminous chapter, “John McPhee Balances the Act,” she examines the ways in which McPhee’s strikingly measured and “poised” writing actually seethes with the subversion of objectivity. “When one calls oneself a journalist,” she reminds us, “one takes up a judicial position in regard to differentiating between fact and fiction.” McPhee, she shows, “constantly crosses and tests those boundaries.” And sometimes Sims’s contributors make the connection explicit. Fishkin says of her subjects, “The formal experiments they embraced were the sort of thing modernist poets tended to fool with; these four writers pressed them into the service of nonfiction.” In Mitchell’s conversation with Sims, he cites Joyce, Eliot, and Lawrence as literary inspirations. David Eason’s “The New Journalism and the Image World”—which, along with John Pauly’s “The Politics of the New Journalism” is the essay in this volume most concerned with the 1960s and 1970s—concludes that “the modernist school of New Journalism is a mode of excessive

speech that finds its home in the space between realism and relativism.”

And now we come to the point where the reviewer starts talking about the book he would have written...

The third section of *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century* stands apart from the rest of the book. It comprises a 1953 piece by Mary McCarthy, “Artists in Uniform,” an account of McCarthy’s encounter with an anti-Semitic army officer on board a train; a touchy 1954 essay by McCarthy, in which she objects to those readers of the original story who imposed a symbolic superstructure on what she insists were observed facts; and a 1976 essay by Darrel Mansell that persuasively takes issue with McCarthy’s *fervorino*, suggesting that she was not—and could not have been—as objective as she wants us to think. The idea of bringing together an original text and two diverging readings of the same is an excellent idea, and the three pieces more than repay reading, for anyone interested in issues of the creative process and issues of autobiography’s relationship to literary art (not to mention the disturbing issues of anti-Semitism and anti-intellectualism raised in the original essay).

But the problem is, I see no way to classify McCarthy’s piece as literary journalism. It’s a personal essay. This isn’t just a matter of “knowing it when we see it,” as Sims himself enumerated six traits of the genre in his 1984 volume *The Literary Journalists*. Specifically, immersion on the part of the author, attentiveness to structure, unswerving commitment to accuracy, a distinctive and sometimes subjective authorial voice, a sense of moral responsibility toward those who are being reported upon, and a sensitivity to symbolism and what Wolfe called “status details.” True, “Artists in Uniform” at least partially exhibits certain of these qualities, but what essay wouldn’t? This is not to say that the book’s third part ought to be skipped, but one cannot help but wonder if its inclusion in the original edition was not prompted by McCarthy’s star appeal, and to wonder if a more apposite example might not have been found for this edition.

Maybe this is a quibble, and a didactic one at that. We do not study literary journalism in order to parse its definition ever more subtly. We study it for the art of its practitioners; for the ways in which it inevitably involves us in larger discussions about subjectivity and objectivity, about the ethics of writing; and for the sometimes miraculous achievement of turning routine reportage into a high-octane discussion of epistemology and truth itself. *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century* deepens our understanding of all of these matters. It is a book that helped to frame and crystallize a scholarly conversation when it appeared in 1990. Nearly two decades later, we can greet this reissue as we would an old friend, one with whom the conversation continues as if it never left off. Welcome back.