



Susan Greenberg (left) and Julie Wheelwright, editors of “Literary Journalism in Three Dimensions.”

Scoping Out the Ethics of Literary Journalism

“Literary Journalism: Ethics in Three Dimensions”

edited by Susan Greenberg and Julie Wheelwright. Special issue, *Journalism: Theory, Practice, Criticism*, vol. 15, no. 5 (July 2014)

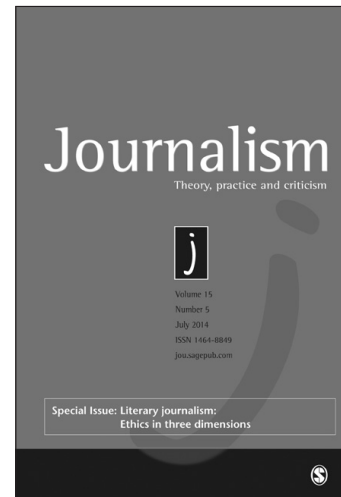
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Any collection of articles or book chapters by various authors on a general theme more often than not turns out to be a mishmash of ideas and theoretical approaches on wide-ranging specific topics. Regardless of what the editors say in attempting to bring coherence to the mix, the articles or chapters seldom strongly hang together; such collections tend to promise more than they deliver. Such is the case with the articles in this special issue of the scholarly journal *Journalism*, which considers the ethics of literary journalism.

This doesn't mean that these ten articles aren't worthwhile or valuable or stimulating. They are. But rather than fully developed considerations of the ethics of literary journalism, they struck this reviewer as solid explorations of various aspects of literary journalism, with some ethical issues raised but superficially considered.

As with most examinations of literary journalism, the articles raise questions about the meaning and nature of literary journalism, which is an ongoing discourse, as it should be, and probably will see no end, which is fine. In their introduction, Susan Greenberg, University of Roehampton, London, a familiar name and face in IALJS, and Julie Wheelwright, City University London, say that literary journalism can be “summed up here as narrative writing that makes a truth claim about people, places and events.” Indeed it does. I very much believe that literary journalism is and should be a big umbrella, so to speak, with room under it for many approaches, styles, and types, which implies a rather broad definition. This definition, however, *might* be so all-encompassing that the term “literary journalism” becomes meaningless.

And the collection naturally reflects that definition, with analyses of spy histories and narratives, journalistic accounts of historical events (specifically the 1981 Spanish coup), James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, the profiles of a highly regarded British theater critic, a book-length work on prison gangs in South Africa, confessional journalism and cancer columns, Middle East reporting/writing by a Dutch journalist and a British journalist, the New Journalism's influence on journalistic interpretation in the US, and two very different writers' use of first person, one a columnist who tended to focus on the personal and the other a journalist who conducted extensive



interviews with Nazis who ran death camps and with child murderers.

In their introduction, the editors are wise to ground their discussion in Norman Sims's "The Problem and Promise of Literary Journalism Studies," from the first issue of *Literary Journalism Studies* (Spring 2009, 7–16). They allude to the many conferences, books, and articles that have followed Sims's commentary and that first issue and they declare that this special *Journalism* issue is intended to "contribute to the debate and help move it forward, doing so through an ethics lens. The "three dimensions" reflected in the articles are the epistemological ("what tests of verification, falsification and experience do we set?"), the consequential (the impact on the public), and the challenge of balancing aesthetics and ethics, beauty and truth. According to the editors, the third dimension is especially relevant to literary journalism.

The disparate nature of the articles can be seen by looking at the volume's first article and one by John Tulloch that comes near the end. The "sources" in Greenberg's opening article, "The Ethics of Narrative: A Return to the Sources," is Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* rather than the Greek philosopher's *Ethics* (*Nicomachean Ethics*). Aristotle's contentions are built upon with a heavy dose of Kenneth Burke (*The Rhetoric of Motives*), a taste of the literary critic Wayne Booth (*The Rhetoric of Fiction*), and a large measure of Mikhail Bakhtin, thereby connecting her discussion to John C. Hartsock's application of Bakhtin in *A History of American Literary Journalism*. In other words, the opening article introduces a range of communication and literary theory and criticism.

In his article, the late John Tulloch provides a perceptive and insightful use of first-person point of view in journalism and literary journalism (frequently in the ten articles journalism and literary journalism are used interchangeably). Although he also refers to Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Tulloch doesn't ground his analysis in theory but instead uses Tom Wolfe's dismissal of first-person narration to explain how effective use of first person can contribute to "an authentic narrative voice." He illustrates this by focusing on two very different but equally effective examples of first-person narration in the newspaper columns and long-form nonfiction of Ian Jack and the writing and investigative reporting of Gitta Sereny, whose books include *Into that Darkness: From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder* (about the commandant of the Treblinka concentration camp), and *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth*, and *Cries Unheard: The Story of Mary Bell* (as a child, Mary Bell killed two children). Tulloch concludes that the "main ethical risk lies in misleading the reader about the status of this first person" and the "inherent danger that self-revelation will collapse the distinction between the creation and creator."

Both the Greenberg and Tulloch articles are effective, and practitioners and scholars will find Tulloch's article of interest and his ideas worth considering and discussing, but there is little to no connection between the two articles other than they both refer to literary journalism and to ethics. Tulloch's brief conclusion regarding ethical challenges in using first person is typical of the ethical discussion in most of the articles. That is, it points to the ethical dilemma or conflict that could arise but doesn't indicate exactly why it is an ethical conflict or how it might be resolved. Ethical conflict implies two equally desirable choices and the application of "ethics"

involves resolving that dilemma. Exploration of applied ethics in literary journalism clearly is beyond the scope of this collection of articles but it's important to acknowledge that while this group of articles is a good starting point for further exploration of the ethics of literary journalism, it nevertheless just scratches the surface.

Having posited this caveat, students and scholars of literary journalism nonetheless should read these articles because most of them either advance our understanding of literary journalism or call it into question.

Here are the other eight articles in this special issue:

- Rosalind Coward's "How to Die Well: Aesthetic and Ethical Issues in Confessional Diaries" contends that journalists' accounts of illness and dying are "highly constructed narratives" that "conform to familiar narrative tropes."

- Kathy Roberts Forde's "*The Fire Next Time* in the Civil Sphere: Literary Journalism and Justice in America 1963" studies literary journalism's role in "struggles for justice and freedom in democratic societies."

- Frank Harbers and Marcel Broesma's "Between Engagement and Ironic Ambiguity: Mediating Subjectivity in Narrative Journalism" investigates the "mediating subjectivity of the reporter" by looking at the Middle East coverage of British reporter Robert Fisk and Dutch novelist/reporter Arnon Grunberg.

- Richard Keeble's "Intimate Portraits: The Profiles of Kenneth Tynan" discusses how a literary journalist can be positive about subjects "without resorting to sycophancy," and introduces the concept of the interviewer as performer.

- Philip Mitchell's "The Ethics of Speech and Thought Representation in Literary Journalism" uses discourse analysis in analyzing the writing of Spanish journalist Javier Cercas.

- John J. Pauly's "The New Journalism and the Struggle for Interpretation" relies on archival research in arguing that the significance of the New Journalism "emerges only out of the close study of the institutional relationships that gave it life."

- Gillian Rennie's "Making a Prison Narrative Personal: Jonny Steinberg, the Gangster and the Reader" uses Steinberg's *The Number* to explore that author's "construction of himself as a reliable narrator" and its impact on the reader.

- Julie Wheelwright's "Beyond the Spooks: The Problem of the Narrator in Literary History" explores the challenge of evaluating sources that are "inherently compromises" by focusing on her own television documentary on a Soviet agent.
