

Patrolling the Margins of Fact and Fiction

The Undeclared War Between Journalism and Fiction: Journalists as Genre Benders in Literary History

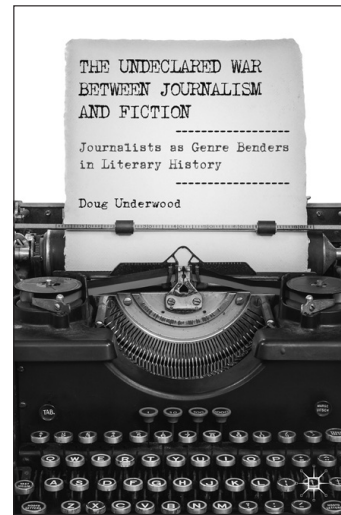
by Doug Underwood. New York: Palgrave Macmillan/St. Martin's Press, 2013. Hardcover, 250 pp., \$64.95

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When Norman Mailer's largely nonfiction book about the execution of killer Gary Gilmore, *The Executioner's Song*, won the Pulitzer in the fiction category in 1980, the award provoked a controversy among journalists, novelists, and critics. They had begun arguing in the 1960s, when New Journalists started using fictional techniques to enhance the storyline and pursuit of truth in their nonfiction. Mailer wrote that he was "enlisted then on my side of the undeclared war between those modes of perception called journalism and fiction" (1). Doug Underwood acknowledges Mailer's concept of a "war" between "the modes of perception reflected in journalism and fiction writing" (8), and therein lies the basis for the title of his book.

But as a former journalist and current professor at the University of Washington, Underwood does not simply take up the "war" on one side or the other. Instead, his scholarly side empathizes with Mailer's "vexation at getting people in the competing camps to appreciate how many important literary works have been created at the margins of factuality and fictionalization" (8). After acknowledging the fiction-versus-journalism paradigm, Underwood moves to a position where he can "champion blended forms of semi-fictional and quasi-factual writing, and honor the perspective of those writers who have come out of journalism but crossed genre boundaries in order to give expression to their authentic writing voice" (17). Underwood admires writers who were "obsessed with telling the 'truth' in their literature—whether it was in satire, fiction, nonfiction, or a blended version of these. Their impulse to expose and to dramatize the realities of life . . . took precedence over concerns about genre" (3). Like the writers that he admires, Underwood does not accept what Megan O'Rourke calls a "problematically rigid division of genres." Instead, he embraces her concept of writers as "genre benders" (19).

As he does so, he expands the concept in several ways. He relies on his earlier volume, *Journalism and the Novel: Truth and Fiction, 1700–2000*, in which he examines journalism's contributions to the literary tradition in the United Kingdom and the United States, to give historical perspective to his discussion of writers who chal-



lenge the boundaries between journalism and literary fiction. He also coins the term “journalist-literary figure,” which he uses in both books, to identify the writer who blends journalistic research methods with fiction writing techniques in the pursuit of good storytelling and deeper truths about life that are frequently prohibited from daily news writing. The concept of the journalist-literary figure who crosses genre boundaries and the rich historical perspective produce two of the many pleasures of reading Underwood’s book.

The journalist-literary figure represents Underwood’s arriving at a middle ground, along with other interdisciplinary scholars such as Shelley Fisher Fishkin and Mark Kramer, who seek common ground and understanding rather than a discipline-based position. Second, through his knowledge of literary history and the newspaper industry, Underwood brings a tantalizing and rewarding depth to his discussion of “Challenging the Boundaries of Journalism and Fiction” (chapter 1) and “Artful Falsehoods and the Constraints of the Journalist’s Life” (chapter 2). For example, he discusses Daniel Defoe’s transformation of the heavily researched tract *Due Preparations for the Plague* into a best-selling blend of fact and fiction, *The Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) with the same ease as he discusses the blending of fact and fiction in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* and James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. What’s more, his thirteen-year background as a daily journalist and his understanding of the roles of aesthetics, style, theme, and deep emotions (e.g. catharsis) in literature enable Underwood to lucidly examine Hemingway’s transformation from journalist to fiction writer, doubling down, for instance, on Hemingway’s multiple treatments of bullfighting in *The Sun Also Rises* and in *Death in the Afternoon* (chapter 3).

As the authors and titles listed above illustrate, Underwood emphasizes the contributions of male journalistic-literary figures. For example, he devotes chapter 3 to Hemingway’s transformation because other men, such as Thompson, Capote, and Wolfe, who popularized the New Journalism, were heavily influenced by Hemingway’s change of career and his prose. Underwood briefly discusses writers such as Willa Cather and Joan Didion, and illustrates some of his points with the works of other women, but the imbalance between men’s and women’s voices calls for a chapter on one or more influential journalist-literary women writers.

In chapter 4, “The Funhouse Mirror: Journalists Portraying Journalists in Their Fiction,” Underwood insists that journalist-literary figures, following the lead of Thackeray, Howells, Cather, and Dickens, “have offered up the journalist as a stock figure to be defined by many of the negative attributes that the public has come to associate with commercial journalism” (156). Underwood finds the typecasting so predictable that he identifies thirteen types of journalists-as-characters or caricatures, finding “provincial scribblers,” “jaded denizens of the big city,” and “cynical opportunists” to be common among novels by ex-journalists. In contrast, he appreciates the rarely found “journalist who really wants to write novels,” “the tough and hard-shelled victim,” and the “woman journalist who is thoughtful, sensitive, and resistant to the masculine and exploitative news gathering culture of the newsroom” (175–78). But why are so many journalist characters negative stereotypes? Underwood offers nine responses to the question, probably the most persuasive being that “many jour-

nalists actually do try to live up to the stereotype in their professional life,” and thus many journalist-literary figures drew on what they saw in at least some of their real-life colleagues (185).

An insightful interdisciplinary scholar, in the epilogue Underwood advocates for the study of hybrid forms of journalistic literature with a spirit of “generosity but discrimination” because:

[W]hen entering any discussion about the intriguing but precarious zone between factual and fictional writing, one looks for guideposts that we can trust a writer’s insights—the humanity of a Defoe, the irony of a Twain, the social conscience of an Orwell, the integrity of a White, the demonstration of the principles in the works of those and other journalist-literary figures that truth in the deeper sense mattered to them more than anything else (198).

And that’s what should matter to today’s writers and scholars as well.
