

Literary Journalism in the Realm of Research

The Routledge Handbook of Magazine Research: The Future of the Magazine Form
Edited by David Abrahamson and Marcia R. Prior-Miller. New York: Routledge,
2015. Hardcover, 650 pp., \$205

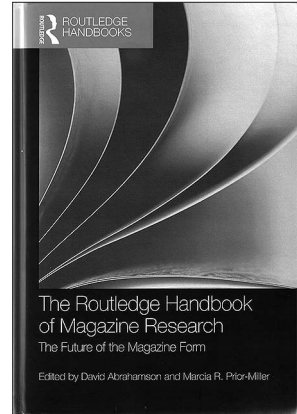
Reviewed by Amber Roessner, University of Tennessee, United States

American author and journalist Tom Wolfe may not have had a grasp on the origins of the New Journalism, but he was certainly accurate in his assessment of the role of magazines in developing the style of literary journalism, writes journalism professor Miles Maguire in the *Routledge Handbook of Magazine Research: The Future of the Magazine Form* (362).

Maguire's anecdote is apt, and considering the role that magazines have played in "nurturing the style of journalism that mixed fact-based reporting with the use of a range of literary devices" (362), it is fitting to see a chapter on literary journalism in the Routledge volume. It is natural that the subject matter was not overlooked by the volume's lead editor, David Abrahamson, the founder of Medill's Literary Journalism Seminar and an eminent voice in the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies and this journal, *Literary Journalism Studies*.

Abrahamson and coeditor Marcia R. Prior-Miller did not relegate literary journalism to a single chapter; instead, references to the subject matter are sprinkled through the behemoth of a 650-page volume. In the insightful chapter by esteemed memory scholar Carolyn Kitch, "Theory and Methods of Analysis: Models for Understanding Magazines," the former magazine editor and writer at *McCall's* and *Good Housekeeping* refers to the intent of scholars of literary journalism to examine, in the "well-traveled" path of Raymond Williams, the genre's "structure of feeling." Furthermore, she defines the primary goal of scholarship in literary journalism as the examination of the form, the "aesthetic elements that align it with literature as a form of cultural production," and the "cultural insights that such writing contains, its mission of conveying not only facts but also [citing current IALJS president Norman Sims] 'feelings, emotions, and expectations—the consciousness behind events and actions that can provide reflexive cultural insights into other times and places'" (14).

Later in the book, in Part V's "Pedagogical and Curricular Perspectives," the topic is taken up once more when Kim Martin Long, a longtime professor of English, considers pedagogical approaches to teaching long-form writing. Despite shorter attention spans and the rise of digital journalism, Long contends that long-form



journalism is still thriving, citing the resurgence of narrative nonfiction as a prime example. Unfortunately, she does not share insights into how long-form journalism and narrative nonfiction have been integrated in the digital landscape, nor does she provide data about the resurgence of its popularity, but this may have been outside of the scope of her research agenda. Instead, she shares valuable resources for those engaged in teaching the subject matter. For instance, she provides examples of numerous texts, including Jack Hart's *Storycraft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction*, that provide insight into constructing the best "literature of our time" (467).

The bulk of the content surrounding literary journalism, however, is relegated to Chapter 22, Maguire's "Literary Journalism: Journalism Aspiring to be Literature." In the eight-page section, he provides insight into the history and current landscape of literary journalism studies. Maguire rightfully acknowledges that the discipline is still consumed with definitional studies, citing IALJS founding president John S. Bak's observation that "nearly every book on literary journalism in the last twenty-five years at least has begun with an introduction that defines or characterizes 'literary journalism.'" Maguire contends that the lack of definitional consensus has contributed to a number of concerns for the discipline, most notably the stunting of "theoretical scaffolding to help support criticism and scholarship" (363). Furthermore, he contends that the lack of a concrete definition creates a climate in which one struggles to determine not just the quality, but what should be included as literary journalism. Some scholars of literary journalism would disagree with the limiting effects that definitional debate has had on the discipline, instead pointing to the lack of consensus as a sign of the "dynamic nature" of the field. Certainly, it has spurred some scholars such as Nancy L. Roberts to search for the "missing links" of literary journalism and to encourage scholars of the discipline to consider "household magazines and newspapers; letters, memoirs, and diaries; epistolary journalism; religious tracts; travel writing; and social movement, muckraking, and African American periodicals" as early antecedents of literary journalism.¹

Regardless of whether definitional concerns benefit or hinder the discipline, Maguire does a thorough job of mapping the landscape of literary journalism studies into definitional studies, process research, authorial studies, and media effects. As Maguire observes, the dynamic discipline encompasses studies of the ethical issues associated with literary journalism, such as Kathy Roberts Forde's *Literary Journalism on Trial: Masson vs. New Yorker*² to Pablo Calvi's and Thomas B. Connery's scholarship about the influence of literary journalism on Latin American and US cultures.³

Maguire concludes his chapter by considering the direction of future research in the discipline:

Given the innovative and even experimental nature of much of literary journalism, it is impossible to predict the future of the form. . . . But it is possible to sense that the scholarship has matured and is ready to emerge into a new phase, one in which less attention may be paid to extending boundary lines or claiming individual writers . . . while more energy is directed to bringing new methodologies to bear and erecting the kinds of theoretical frameworks that will allow for deeper consideration and appreciation of the works themselves (368).

Maguire is accurate about the “foolhardy” nature of predicting the future directions of a discipline, but he is likely safe in his assessment that future studies of literary journalism will expand beyond the boundaries of definitional studies and authorial studies—though these studies will likely, in my opinion, remain a fruitful area of inquiry—into a rich realm of theoretical exploration.

In the last instance, as Maguire accurately observes, magazines have contributed much to the development of literary journalism. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that magazine professors would champion the genre in a handbook of magazine research. With that in mind, it is only fitting that Abrahamson and Prior-Miller’s thorough and meticulously researched volume should find its way onto the bookshelves of professors, practitioners, and students at the undergraduate and graduate interested in the field of magazine journalism.

Notes

1. Nancy L. Roberts, “Firing the Canon: The Historical Search for Literary Journalism’s Missing Links,” *Literary Journalism Studies* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 82.
2. Kathy Roberts Forde, *Literary Journalism on Trial: Masson vs. New Yorker* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008).
3. See, for instance, Pablo Calvi, “Buenos Aires, the Suburbs, and the Pampas,” *International Literary Journalism*, March 2012, <http://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/section/international-literary-journalism>; and Thomas B. Connery, *Journalism and Realism: Rendering American Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011).