



Richard Lance Keeble, Orwell scholar.

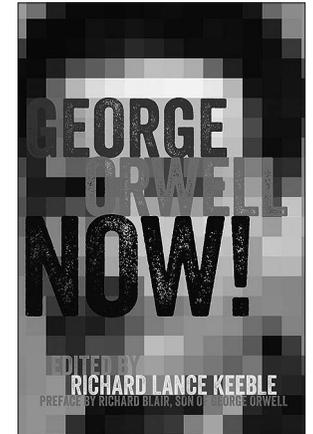
## Orwell in the New Century

*George Orwell Now!*

edited by Richard Lance Keeble. New York: Peter Lang, 2015. Paperback, 236 pp., \$40.95

Reviewed by Kevin Kerrane, University of Delaware, United States

This intriguing anthology almost lives up to the exclamation point in its title. At first glance, it looks like a sequel to *Orwell Today*, a 2012 collection with the same editor, Richard Lance Keeble, and several of the same respected contributors (Philip Bounds, Tim Crook, Adam Stock, and Keeble himself). The new volume also has the same central theme: George Orwell's continuing pertinence to contemporary discussions of politics and journalism. What distinguishes this anthology is its sharper focus on the surveillance of private citizens, on the international implications of Orwell's writing, and on the range of his work as a documentary reporter, a war correspondent, and a writer and editor for the BBC.



Keeble has been a mainstay of the Orwell Society since its founding in 2011, and he recently posted this tribute on the society's website: "Orwell the journalist has always been an inspiration to me—a model of a committed, radical, intelligent, witty, wonderfully imaginative writer who deployed the tools of journalism for their best purpose: as a crucial, morally urgent intervention in politics." In the anthology this journalistic emphasis is evident in Keeble's essay on Orwell's war reporting, which contrasts *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) with fourteen newspaper dispatches from France near the end of World War II. Whereas *Homage* is "a wonderfully confident piece of eye-witness reportage that embraces a wide range of literary techniques," Orwell's 1945 dispatches show his unease with an "objective" style. Philip Knightley, author of *The First Casualty*, a classic study of war correspondence, confirms this reading of the dispatches. In an email to Keeble, Knightley comments: "Orwell was feeling his way. He was troubled, diffident and insecure in his reporting. Should he allow his emotions full rein? Could he insert his political views? Could he refute the propaganda some of the others had been writing? He never found the answers."

In another discussion of journalistic personae, Luke Seaber focuses on the second half of *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) to show how Orwell, during his wanderings in England, was living among tramps "in order to have the experiences of doing so, not through need." And yet, by means of subtle rhetorical techniques, Orwell "was able to suggest to his readers that what they were reading was reasonably pure non-fiction." In a related essay, "George Orwell and the Radio Imagi-

nation,” Tim Crook begins by observing that Orwell’s literary and professional life spanned the radio age of the twentieth century (his death in 1950 coincided with the dawn of the television age), and that the “sonic realism” of Orwell’s early fiction and documentary journalism evoked the aural perspectives of radio broadcasts. Although Orwell described his later tenure at the BBC, 1941–43, as “two wasted years,” Crook argues that the germinal essay “Politics and the English Language” represents “the exposition of a radio journalism communicator.” Crook also suggests that Orwell’s engagement at the BBC with a wide range of story ideas and approaches may have sharpened his narrative methods in *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Two other essays examine those narrative methods from fresh perspectives. Adam Stock charts Orwell’s complex use of time in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and discusses the novel’s influence on such texts as Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*, and the movie *V for Vendetta*. Orwell’s successors, Stock says, “have engaged with the novel not only as a presentation of ideas or a means of invoking an atmosphere of fear and tyranny, but as a work concerned with the alienating experience of modernity.” Henk Vynkier, in a particularly well-written analysis, surveys Orwell’s fascination, in his personal life as well as his writing, with collectible objects. This “jackdaw” tendency led to incisive essays on such topics as boys’ weeklies, comic postcards, and crime fiction—and ultimately to the use of a junk shop in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as an apparently safe haven. The novel’s protagonist, Winston Smith, “has the collector’s keen awareness of the destructiveness of time and endeavors to salvage whatever remnants of the old civilization are still available to him.” In the bleak world of this novel, of course, Smith’s effort is futile (the shop’s proprietor is an agent of The Party), and Vynkier notes wryly that in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* “it is the collectivist, not the collector, who triumphs.”

The anthology includes several discussions of politics alone, in efforts either to calibrate Orwell’s exact niche on a left-right axis or to use his political views as guides to the contemporary landscape. From 1943 to 1947 Orwell wrote regularly for *Tribune*, a London fortnightly paper that supported the Labour government while providing a voice for “democratic socialism.” Paul Anderson, a former editor of the paper (1991–93), follows the lead of Bernard Crick, author of perhaps the best Orwell biography (there have been seven so far), in concluding that Orwell was “a pretty typical *Tribune* socialist.” By contrast, John Newsinger foregrounds Orwell’s articles in *Partisan Review* to argue that “he maintained his engagement with the far left and his belief that hope for the future lay with the working class.” In yet another political essay, Philip Bounds reframes a question that Orwell posed in *The Road to Wigan Pier*: Why is the British left so rhetorically ineffective, especially when addressing those who would seem to be natural allies? Bounds focuses on three sources of alienation diagnosed by Orwell—the left’s officiousness, its ambivalent commitment to achieving real change, and its uncritical embrace of modernity—and offers several revisions in the light of contemporary politics.

Exasperation with the “officiousness” of leftists seems justified by Florian Zollman’s polemical essay “*Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 2014.” Zollman asserts that the dys-

topian societies envisioned in Orwell’s novel “appear to have come into being” in supposedly democratic Western nations. Using lines of argument developed more cogently by Noam Chomsky, Zollman says that the so-called democracies govern at the behest of a business elite—which he equates with “The Party.” Even when advancing his strongest points, such as the existence of a permanent war economy in the United States, Zollman undercuts them with sweeping (and clumsily written) generalizations unworthy of an Orwell scholar: “Similarly, the threat of Islamist-related terrorism has been manufactured, its root cause—Western foreign occupation of Muslim lands—is largely denied.” After Zollman summarizes Edward Snowden’s revelations and the attempts to prosecute Julian Assange, it’s no surprise when he asks: “Does not all this suggest that the Big Brother, surveillance-dominated society described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is with us today?”

A more reasoned analysis appears in the anthology’s opening essay, in which Peter Marks surveys the development of surveillance studies as an academic field, noting that some scholars regard *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as irrelevant or distracting because our consumer society is based on Big Data rather than Big Brother. In an amusing aside, Marks suggests that Orwell’s nightmare vision of constantly being watched has a depressing alternative in the modern “need to be seen,” as described by the cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek: “today anxiety seems to arise from the prospect of NOT being exposed to the Other’s gaze all the time, so that the subject needs the camera’s gaze as a kind of ontological guarantee of his/her being.” Ironically, this phenomenon is epitomized in an international TV franchise entitled *Big Brother*.

To Keeble’s credit, the anthology includes a section on “International Perspectives,” reflecting the global interest in Orwell’s work. Shu-chu Wei demonstrates striking similarities between *Animal Farm* and a collection of short stories, *The Execution of Major Yin* (1976) by Chen Jo-hsi. The author, a Taiwanese who lived in mainland China during the Cultural Revolution, became fixated—as Orwell was—on the gap between socialist ideals and brutal political realities. Cross-cultural insights also inform an essay by Sreya Mallika Datta and Utsa Mukherjee, both students at Presidency University in Kolkata, India. Datta and Mukherjee explore interactions between the colonizer and the colonized in the novel *Burmese Days*, and in the essays “Shooting an Elephant” and “A Hanging,” emphasizing “ambiguity” in Orwell’s portrayals.

A companion piece, Marina Remy’s study of *Burmese Days* and *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, takes ambiguity to the level of obfuscation. Remy cites a half dozen fashionable theorists (Homi K. Bhabha, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Terry Eagleton, Johannes Fabian, Emmanuel Levinas) without bringing clarity to either one of the novels. And some passages in this essay resemble the kind of academic prose that Orwell skewered. For example, according to Remy, the plurality of voices in Orwell’s writing “can point to another form of dialogism in the interstices of certain pre-emptory and authoritative statements, thus furthering the novels’ reflection on coercive, oppressive and authoritarian systems which blur the face of the other while attempting to supply some of the otherness and the communication which these systems constantly seek to deny.”

*Orwell Now!* opens and closes with brief but enthusiastic commentaries by Richard Blair, Orwell's adoptive son, and Peter Stansky, emeritus professor of history at Stanford—both attesting to the continuing relevance of this complex and versatile man of letters. In the 1970s, when Stansky and William Abrahams published two biographical studies—*The Unknown Orwell* and *Orwell: The Transformation*—the author's widow, Sonia, denied access to some documents and withheld permission to quote from others. As Blair notes, Sonia's death in 1980 led to much greater freedom for biographers, publishers, and filmmakers. And as this anthology shows, the field of Orwell studies remains vital—in more ways than one.

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## An Oddball Ride on the Gonzo Train

*I Am Sorry to Think I Have Raised a Timid Son*

by Kent Russell, New York: Knopf, 2015. Hardcover, 284 pp., \$24.95

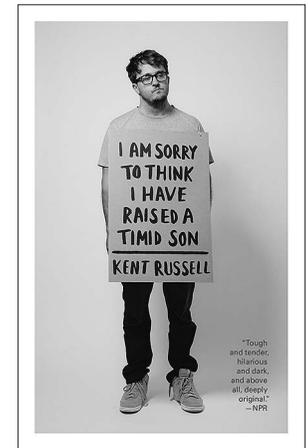
Reviewed by Brian Gabriel, Concordia University, Canada

Gonzo lite seems the best way to describe Kent Russell's collection of nonfiction adventures and reflections. Unlike Hunter S. Thompson's full-bore, self-focused, sometimes suffocating gonzo style, Russell picks and chooses an effective mix of self-assertion, intrusion, and observation that makes *I Am Sorry to Think I Have Raised a Timid Son* a book worth reading.

The words in the book's title are credited to frontier legend Daniel Boone, who is said to have used them to admonish his soldier son for not being brave during a Revolutionary War battle. The son would die under his father's command. The Boone story comes early in the book and, while not quite foreshadowing, it encapsulates what the reader will discover in the relationship between Russell and his father, a former Navy lieutenant. Indeed, this book is a father-son tale loosely connected by pieces of Russell's oeuvre that have appeared in *Harper's*, the *New Republic*, the *Believer*, and elsewhere. Thematically, they are linked because the stories, as well as the author's life, involve alienation, scarred masculinity, or a combination of both. (So, what is it about the wounded male psyche? How it distorts and contorts a man's reality.) Just as Russell tries to reconnect with his father, his stories have him trying to connect with his subjects. This creates tension, and it is this tension that brings focus to the stories.

Each of those pieces has merit and can take a place at the literary journalism table. "Ryan Went to Afghanistan," the first chapter, introduces the book's main characters and establishes that this book is about men and their relationships. (Women do not figure prominently in the book except as nonessential ornamentation.) It's a book about male intimacy, not physical but emotional. When Russell writes to his childhood friend Ryan, who is fighting in Afghanistan, that he loves him, the author finds himself with a familiar internal struggle that many straight, white men have when they express affection to men with whom they are closest. "[W]e'd never been sentimental about anything," Russell writes, feeling compelled to take the next step: "I closed by telling him that I loved him, because I did, and I'd never said it before. I didn't want to miss what could be the last chance to say it." Thus, the book's premise is established.

Still, the book isn't all brooding; it's mostly a lot of fun. Among the stories, "American Juggalo" details Russell's failed attempt at going gonzo while taking the reader on an incursion into the profane world of a rock music festival gone mad.



Started by the founders of Psychopathic Records (that should be a clue), the four-day festival promised, “You’ll meet people, make future best friends; you’ll probably get laid.” The author was lucky to escape after only three days with his life and dignity intact: “On my way out of the grounds, four hitchhikers ran into the path of my rental car. I did not slow down . . .” “Artisanal Ball” is a sweeter, kinder story where Russell showcases the world of young Amish men who like to play baseball and illuminates their otherness with a sensitive understanding of their closed community. He also profiles Dave, a man who owns his own island and believes (Western) culture has turned everyone into “marshmallows.” When Dave gets visitors, he never shuts the hell up. Finally, “Mithradates of Fond du Lac,” recalls the eccentric characters in John McPhee’s “Travels in Georgia.” Here, Russell gets drunk with Tim, a man whose vocation seems to be to absorb and survive the bites of the world’s most deadly snakes. The title refers to King Mithridates, the poison king, who fought the Roman Empire and took poisons to acquire immunity against any assassination attempts by poison. Of course, Tim is not a king, but he’s what Russell calls a “self-immunizer,” someone who is part of a group described as a “far-flung community of white, western men.” This exploration of Tim’s world is also a deeply researched piece of science journalism.

These stories are about outsiders, and Russell feels like one too, especially when it comes to his father. He hopes to reconcile this during a two-week visit to his parents. The Talmud teaches, “When you teach your son, you teach your son’s son.” Russell’s grandfather was one tough guy and so is his father. Russell is not (particularly), and this complicates things. When Russell arrives at the airport and jumps into his father’s still rolling car, his father gives him a beer and complains about picking him up, “This is a pain in the ass for *some* people, you know.” The father can only communicate through exasperation and frustration, but his son doesn’t hold it against him. As a character, the senior Russell is a loving but isolated man who might just love his children too much. In these connecting vignettes, all dated like diary entries, he challenges his father, trying to get the old Navy man to see things his way. Not going to happen. And that’s OK. As the *New York Times* book reviewer Ben Greenman put it, “What’s really saluted here, what’s really bright and stripped bare, is the son—and his father—both trying to see, both newly unafraid to be seen.”

So, if a denouement exists it comes when Russell remembers how, as a child, he would climb into bed with his sleeping father to be close to him. “I have spent a lot of my life trying to regain this power [to be intimate with his father],” he writes. A few words later, just as Boone admonished his son with “I am sorry to think that I have raised a timid son,” Russell’s father exclaims after learning his son is going to be a full-time writer: “I was thinking, You have chosen, by my estimation, a pretty shitty life for yourself.” Unlike Boone who left his son to die on the battlefield, Russell’s father thanks his son for saving him by making him a responsible man. “You are, if nothing else, my son.”

One critic complained that *I Am Sorry to Think I Have Raised a Timid Son* was a book with many parts that never quite added up to a whole. Maybe so, but if readers can just relax and enjoy the oddball ride that Russell takes them on, the whole becomes quite clear.

## A Graphic Memoir from Kashmir

*Munnu: A Boy From Kashmir*

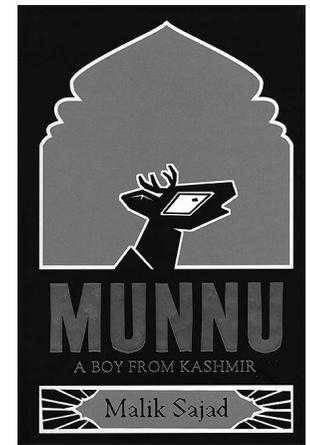
by Malik Sajad. London: HarperCollins, 2015. Hardcover, 352 pp., \$26.99

Reviewed by Punnya Rajendran, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, India.

Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* initiated the tryst between comics nonfiction and testimonies of human rights violations. The thirty-six-year-old graphic novel looms over Kashmiri cartoonist Malik Sajad’s graphic memoir, *Munnu: A Boy From Kashmir*, as a formidable stylistic predecessor. In *Munnu*, Kashmiris are depicted as anthropomorphized hanguls (an indigenous species of deer on the brink of extinction due to habitat destruction by army settlements). This silent massive borrowing of strategy, not dismissible as merely artistic homage, is a weak point of entry into the text. Readers are left wondering about the rationale behind establishing such strong generic ties and the subsequent risk of being mistaken as a pale imitation. However, *Munnu*’s visual grammar, in its many presumptions and political vantage points, weaves in and out of the *Maus* universe in remarkably subtle fashion.

Hanguls and mice offer a contrasting interrogation of humanity. While the hanguls are picturesque creatures of beauty, mice scuttle down sewage lines. A rhetoric of conservation and exclusionism, as opposed to extermination and abjectness, dominates the figure of the hangul. While mice represent Jewishness as a racial constant, the rest of Spiegelman’s “natural” food chain (dogs, pigs, and rabbits) are tied to nationalities. By contrast, the Kashmiri hangul is a supranational category pitted against a world of human beings, conflating Hindus, Muslims, and indeed anyone whose state of domicile is the valley of Kashmir regardless of religion, race, or ethnicity. This taxonomy dismisses the Hindu-Muslim dynamics of the conflict as well as a Kashmir-versus-India framework. The crude angular figure of the hangul, frozen in non-emotive and unindividualized woodcut style, confronts its human Other in *Munnu*—it is Kashmir versus the rest of the world. The narrative is both a retreat from as well as a beckoning to this Other world, a world that may otherwise mediate with Kashmir exclusively in the format of “breaking news” or not at all.

In fact, much of Sajad’s memoir is a narrative quarrel with certain dominant journalistic habits that for decades now have been relegating the humanitarian crisis in Kashmir to India’s “internal affairs.” Consider its concluding episode. Armed with a solar-powered torch received as a gift from the ambassadors of the European Union, political cartoonist Sajad (aka *Munnu*) plunges from a meeting inside the brilliant



interiors of a luxury hotel into the darkness of the Kashmir Valley. He walks into the rape by two men of a mentally disabled vagrant woman inside an auto-rickshaw and, thoroughly helpless, leaves the spot in silence. This moment of sexual violence caps Sajad's highly personalized map of Kashmir's political machine, yet it is one in which there are no overt political agents at play: no separatists, no army, no militants. The entire episode, rendered in hauntingly black panels, violently cleaves Kashmir along gendered lines. To this point gender has been accorded merely passing reference, making the closing scene all the more surprising. This is the nucleus of Sajad's approach to Kashmir as a narrative task, an issue of "news" versus the "normalcy" of everyday life in the valley. The rape recorded here will never grab the headlines in India, or even in Kashmir. It is swallowed, just as *Munnu's* final pages are, in the chaotic darkness of civil strife, a nonissue amidst greater political battles. At the center of this depiction, therefore, is a question of journalistic imperative: What constitutes "news" in a conflict zone, and what is the praxis of its communicability?

Apart from this, the cornucopia of political opinions that have spilled out around the Kashmir "problem," the body of academic scholarship and literary works about it, and the rise of an "expert" culture regarding Kashmir, are all strongly rejected by *Munnu*. The text is marked by a survivor's awareness of the different ontology of a conflict zone (as opposed to an official war bookended in time), and the reconstitution of personal narratives and micro-histories required in order to exhume it. Therefore, on several occasions, the narrator places side by side the frequent funerals of friends and neighbors he has attended, and his recurrent nightmares as a child about funerals. The images of both events, one taking place in reality and the other unfolding in Munnu's subconsciousness, are sutured into a continuum of experientiality. "They say Mustafa had been killed again," says Munnu in his dream, an empirically null statement underlining the moribund repetitiveness that has sunk into the Kashmiri sense of being.

The most remarkable feature of *Munnu* is that it does not mince words regarding the political integrity of Kashmir. The text finds its voice among a slew of violent incidents that characterize Munnu's coming-of-age. The militants, the Indian Army, as well as the Hurriyat, are equally implicated in the text. The narrator relates with a straight face the crossing of disillusioned youngsters across the Line of Control to receive arms training in Pakistan. As an incident in the text reflects, this equivalence does not sit well with Kashmir's separatist leaders, who take Sajad to task for his perceived unfaithfulness to the cause. Sajad's narration sympathizes not with one political cause as opposed to another, but with the singular spectrum of violence experienced by civilians in the valley. This is graphically marked by three iconic events: identification parades, crackdowns, and curfews. While Kashmir crops up in Indian media mostly in relation to terrorist attacks and the seditious tendency towards separatism, the book revives the subtext of humiliation and human-rights violations that make up everyday life.

*Munnu* is narrated in the third person, a curious choice of perspective for a graphic memoir. Unlike the narrator of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007), one of the doyens of the genre, who says, "This is me," at her cartoon self in the opening panel,

*Munnu's* narrator is a distanced presence that says, "That is Sajad," to Munnu's cartoon self in the first panel. Jared Gardner, in "Autography's Biography, 1972–2007" (2008), his formal analysis of autography as a genre, identifies this distantiation as an important locus of meaning making. The narrative voice straddles a timescape across which subjectivity is distributed. By means of this distantiation, in Gardner's words, the comics form "explicitly surrenders the juridical advantages of . . . testimony . . . refuses any claims to the 'having-been-there' truth, even (or especially) on the part of those who really were. The split between autographer and subject is etched on every page." Gardner argues that this split is at the crux of comics nonfiction as a narrative strategy.

In *Munnu*, the existing narratorial split is duplicated by the almost unnecessary third-person narrator, its notable effect being the transformation of a memoir into "objective" reportage. This device intensifies the spectatorial links between the text and its reader, and the identification of the author on the book cover with the cartoon subject is rendered schizophrenic. *Munnu* is watched rather than being the narrator of the story. An agentive role is consciously traded for that of a passive object. Some of the narrator's concluding lines strike light here: "If it still stings, don't seek forgiveness from God. Draw, confess your guilt, write a story." Narration is penance for the guilt-ridden survivor, located in the interstices of a layered subjectivity. It is also through these interstices that journalistic "facts" are dropped in favor of an ostensibly innocent experientiality.

## A New Englander Comes Home to the South

*Deep South: Four Seasons on Back Roads*

by Paul Theroux. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015. Hardcover, 441 pp., \$29.95

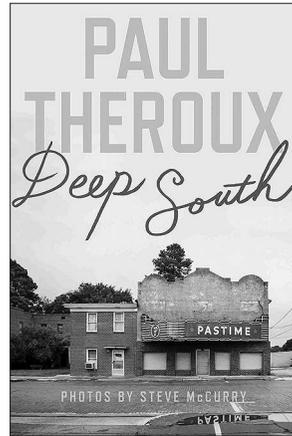
Reviewed by Doug Cumming, Washington and Lee University, United States

When the greatest living travel writer in America, now in his seventies, finally leaves off exotic lands to spend a couple of years traveling in the United States, you get to re-experience the lifelessly familiar as fresh and vibrant and true. For example, airport security. You are “an alien at home, and not just a stranger but someone perhaps to be feared, a possible danger, a troublemaker if not a terrorist—the hoo-ha, shoes off, belt off, no jacket, denuded and simplified and subjected to screening while tapping your feet, eager to get away; all this while still in a mode of predeparture, scrutinized, needing to pass inspection before you can even think of the trip ahead.”

But Paul Theroux’s four coilings through the Deep South’s backcountry avoided airports. Each trip begins with driving from his Cape Cod home into the Carolinas and beyond. In one of these preliminaries, he again rescues something from the oblivion of your repeated experience, Interstate 95, and irradiates it with his magic. The route becomes one long tunnel. “The potholed chute of I-95 is hectic, unpredictable, dangerous and bleak, cavern-like and confining, at times like shuttling through a sooty culvert . . . a journey like a trip through a mine shaft where the air is so thickened by the murk of pollution that even the open road is like a tunnel.”

Exploring the American South, Theroux knows the tracks left by artists and writers before him. With courtly respect he cites several, including: James Agee, whose *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* begins with the black and white photography of Walker Evans, while *Deep South* ends with the color photographs of Steve McCurry; Erskine Caldwell, whose wife Margaret Bourke-White’s photograph of a Georgia chain gang is evoked as Theroux talks to the black female guard of unchained prison workers; painter Thomas Hart Benton, whose *America Today* mural includes a panel also called “Deep South”; and Theroux’s mentor Sir V.S. Naipaul, who executed a thinner version of this same literary project twenty-five years earlier, *A Turn in the South*.

There is risk in this pilgrimage. A world-besotted traveler and famous author (who almost no one had heard of wherever he went in Dixie) has no business bringing old New England righteousness to judge the folkways of a defeated, tacky region. He knows that. Theroux adopts a cheerful, innocent role with the sometimes hilari-



ous drollness that reminded me of filmmaker Ross McElwee’s 1986 Southern romp *Sherman’s March*. Theroux enjoys the freedom of the back roads, is astonished at the beauty of the land and the seasons, and admires the courage of community-agency do-gooders he seeks out. He attends every gun show he finds, and small Sunday morning church services, putting aside intellectual snobbery. But neither can this brooding loner censor his conclusions as he thinks and asks again and again about race, poverty, the myths of Southern literature, and why these forlorn American places seem more despairing and backsliding than any impoverishment he saw in Asia and Africa. The depths of the Deep South are Third World, with “something weirdly colonial” about the shabby motels where he stayed, thick with the fragrance of Gujarati cooking from owners predictably named Patel.

Theroux is a “literary” writer in that he ranges through an alien world immersed in literature and writing. After thirty works of fiction and sixteen of nonfiction, *Deep South* is a meditation on writing as well as a homecoming and road trip. It is buttressed with three critical “Interludes,” one that proposes that William Faulkner’s originality is partly his passive-aggressive revenge on too many years as an uncomplaining Hollywood scriptwriter. Another bridge essay is a good detoxing of Southern fiction. But the book is more reporting than meditating—about seventy percent material to thirty percent “writer’s genius,” to use a Tom Wolfe ratio.

How does Theroux capture such fine dialog between himself and folks he meets? “I’m passing through. I’m from Massachusetts.” “What church are you affiliated with?” How accurate are the full paragraphs inside quote marks? A few years ago, he described his method to an interviewer in London: “I have a small notebook and I make notes all day. I don’t have a tape recorder. I take notes. Then at night, I write up my notes, write up the day.” He has a good ear—with renderings like, “Ah mo put my trust in Jesus” and “Nemmine”—but doesn’t overdo dialect. The scenes are novelistic; the characters reappear in another of the four seasons. This is an experiment in cyclical travel writing, returning to people and places he met before, perfect for a culture that asks, “When are you coming back?” and means it.

You wish there were a hundred more reporters like this abroad in the land taking notes, writing them up. Most places he visits turn out to be scenes of news long since abandoned by the reporters and now followed up by this patient observer. In Money, Mississippi, where young Emmett Till broke the racial code he didn’t know, the store of that violation is swallowed in vines. In Brinkley, Arkansas, where an alleged sighting of the mythic ivory-billed woodpecker made national news in 1983, Theroux spends time with an African-American doctor who is trying to reverse land loss among black farmers. In Dover, Arkansas, where there was a mass murder in 1987, Theroux spends the day with a cranky old part-Cherokee woman who outshoots him hitting beer cans with rifle shot.

There is a much bigger story he is following up. Back in the late 1980s, singer-songwriters were noting a profound loss of hope in small towns across America. While Bruce Springsteen was singing the poignant “My Hometown” (“They’re closing down the textile mill across the railroad tracks/ Foreman says these jobs are going boys and they ain’t coming back”), songwriter Greg Brown lamented:

*I don't have to read the news, or hear it on the radio  
I see it in the faces of everyone I know  
The boards go up, the signs come down  
What's going to happen to our little town?*

It got worse, after NAFTA and the presidency of a former Arkansas governor whom Theroux wants to blame—up to a point. *Deep South* comes around to moral judgments that are not so much New England's as they are the earned judgments of a dedicated writer who has given himself here to long visits in a generously mellow mood.

When the South was more visibly poor and hurting, between the World Wars, a Sears and Roebuck executive named Julius Rosenwald donated his fortune for schools and scholarships to help. Theroux finds a decaying Rosenwald school in Alabama that a transplanted California woman is trying to restore, without much support from locals or big foundations. Today, philanthropists who are “benevolently concerned with poverty and deficiencies elsewhere” (as Theroux chides repeatedly) could use this book as a guide to a host of small-scale worthy causes all over the rural South. There is another South, of course, a region of reviving cities and political power that the writer avoids. This brings him to a conclusion that is so wrong it's laughable: the South, he writes in the end, “has been held back from prosperity and has little power to exert influence on the country at large, so it remains immured in its region.” But there is a real South he has discovered, a region not found in all the books he cites, a South in fact without books or readers to speak of. It is a South just waiting for other writers and other generous spirits to find, following Theroux's example of listening, observing, and bringing it into shimmering existence on the page.

## Punjabi Fiction, or History, or Both?

*The Fall of the Kingdom of the Punjab*

by Khushwant Singh. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1962; Hyderabad: Penguin/Viking, 2014. Hardcover, 200 pp., \$22.99

Reviewed by Sudha Shastri, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, India

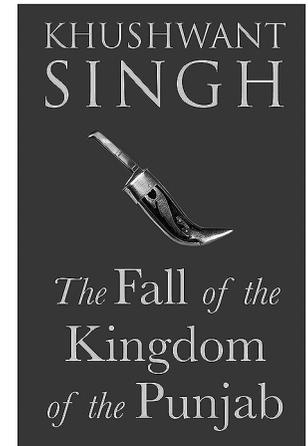
In the “Author's Note” to *The Fall of the Kingdom of the Punjab*, Khushwant Singh acknowledges the institutions and people who helped him along his journey in writing this book. He also includes a brief summary of its contents: the book “tells the story” of the ten years after the death of the legendary hero of Punjab, Maharajah Ranjit Singh in Lahore—then a part of undivided India and now of Pakistan—in 1839. What seems a routine prefatory message merits attention because it problematizes the issue of what genre to place this book in. Is it fiction or history? Or is it both without being a historical novel?

For one, the author's claim that “every character and incident mentioned in this narrative is based on contemporary historical records” notwithstanding, the objectivity that is an integral part of a journalistic report can be influenced by the author's personal choice between several accounts of a given historical incident.

Thus, within the severely colonial/nationalistic dialectic of British versus Indian, Khushwant Singh's occasional inability to interrogate his own choices—at least explicitly, on the pages of this book—tends to tilt the balance towards “literary” and away from journalism. In the tenth chapter, for example, the confrontation between the Punjabi Sikhs and the British is described, twice, within nationalistic discourse: first in the sentence, “the nation began to rise in arms”; and later, “thus did a local rebellion become a national war of independence.”

The pertinence of “nation” to describe the battles is questionable, since until 1857 no national identity was observable amongst the various kingdoms that ruled different parts of India. They may have united in attacking a perceived common enemy, the British, but this was hardly sufficient to make them part of the same nation.

The specific instance cited has other problems. Less than a page later, Khushwant Singh reports that Lord Dalhousie, while declaring war against the Punjab, was indulging in equivocation, since Maharajah Dalip Singh and the majority of the regency council, who were also a part of the Punjab, had not revolted against the British. In making this observation he fails to see the inappropriateness of his own choice of the word “national.” How can an uprising be “national” if the Maharaj and his council were themselves not a part of it?



Periodically, Khushwant Singh alerts us to the awareness that history is not authoritative. We may be tempted to speculate that it is perhaps not so different from fiction. While describing the first war against the British by Punjab, he notes that it is “still uncertain as to when exactly the Durbar army crossed the Sutlej.” Following this statement come sentences with phrases such as “according to some Indian historians,” and “according to British records.” The recognition that accounts of the past are determined by who recites them is thus a tacit presence here.

Another example of this lack of authority is the recording of Nao Nihal Singh’s death. The author foregrounds different historical accounts of this incident before deciding in favor of the British version—as documented by Alexander Gardner, not the official British report. This move not only indicates differences among the British, but also displays the author’s objectivity in choosing a British writer to denounce a British action. In choosing Gardner’s version he cements this move, as it “is accepted by many serious historians, both English and Punjabi.” Agency—the recognition that the author’s role might explain a prevalent passive voice throughout—can never be discounted.

Discussing Maharajah Ranjit Singh’s army, for example, Khushwant Singh comments favorably on its modernization and discipline. Later in the same paragraph, he says that despite the shortage of money “the iron discipline imposed by the Maharajah” prevented the troops from mutiny. The very next sentence, “[T]he seeds of indiscipline had however been sown and Ranjit’s successors had to reap the bitter harvest,” does not clarify who was responsible for the collapse of discipline, or how it happened. It is possible to infer from such instances that the author was aware of the limits of historical knowledge and the tentativeness required while attributing causes to historical events.

Similarly, while describing the adventures of Rani (Queen) Jindan, Khushwant Singh states, “[A] certain Prema was charged with the design to assassinate the British Resident [a diplomatic officer] . . . and it was suggested that the Maharani was an accessory to the plot.” While he recounts future outcomes by claiming that Lord Hardinge advised the resident to ignore this “plot,” even while Lord Hardinge was keen to get rid of Jindan, he does not clarify who set whom up in the first place.

*The Fall of the Kingdom of the Punjab* is well attempted, but it suffers from a lack of distance and perspective with respect to the larger significance of events. On the flipside, it records minute details with a lot of attention, and also traces the lives of the principal characters till the end. But the positioning of this historical trajectory—in hindsight—makes it a potential site for trying to understand a colossal event that came to pass less than a decade later: what the British called the Sepoy Mutiny, which broke out in 1857 and was of sufficient gravity to call for the transfer of power over India from the East India Company to Queen Victoria. This understanding is absent in the book.

That the Indians played as much a role in the conquests made by the British in India is acknowledged with self-criticism by Khushwant Singh in his repeated use of words like “traitor” to describe betrayals from within. At the same time, a certain eagerness to stress the bravery of the Sikhs is evident in his recall of Shah Mohammad

and Lord Gough poems in praise of Sikh warriors. It may be possible to attribute this eagerness to his reluctance to be as judgmental about the several traitors within the Punjab who were responsible for its downfall as about the British. Take, for instance, a sentence like, “[T]he prospect of loot induced many of the tribesmen to come in on the side of the British,” and compare it with, “[T]he British attitude towards an ally who had not only helped them to win the war in Afghanistan but was allowing his territory to be used by alien armies as if it were a common highway, is an example of ingratitude the like of which would be hard to find in the pages of history books.” Together they represent a clear bias along with no redeeming irony.

In the final analysis, *The Fall of the Kingdom of the Punjab* leans on the side of fiction and authorial imagination in its anecdotes and dialogues, even as it rests firmly on history while excerpting from texts and local newspapers such as the *Punjab Akhbar*. It tells a story of intrigue, conspiracy, and murder in a power play, but in its crowding the canvas with characters, and insufficiently distinguishing their individuality, it suffers from being a generic portrayal of any brave kingdom’s fall rather than a specific place, at a specific time, in history.

## Author Struggles to Solve Linguistic Triangle

*In Other Words*

by Jhumpa Lahiri. New York: Knopf, 2016. Hardcover, 256 pp., \$26.95

Reviewed by Giovanna Dell'Orto, University of Minnesota, United States

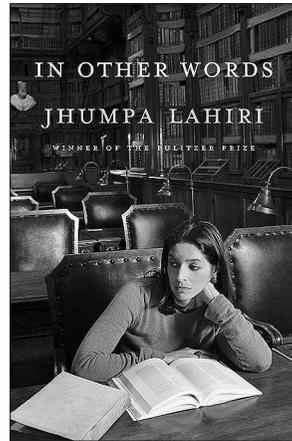
The premise of Jhumpa Lahiri's autobiographical book is both enticing and wildly ambitious. The acclaimed anglophone author writes of her passion for, and struggle to learn, Italian in that language itself, leaving the page-by-page English translation to a professional. The result, however, ends up reading like her Italian: contrived, stilted, and ultimately utterly uninteresting as a piece of writing and as a story—"parole, parole, parole," nothing but words, to quote a catchy 1970s Italian song.

Full disclosure, bilingual in English and Italian, I grew up with the latter but the entirety of my professional literary output, both as a scholar and as a journalist, is in English. I am fluent in two other languages, and have studied five more, so I am biased by both profound love and humble respect for the power of languages.

*In Other Words* traces Lahiri's fraught relationship with three languages: Bengali, her immigrant parents' native tongue; English, "the language of my previous books," as she revealingly writes, in English, in the author's note; and Italian, which she came to love during a first visit to Florence in 1994. More trips and multiple teachers later, Lahiri moved from the United States to Rome, and there she started writing in Italian only, calling it "a risk that I feel inspired to take."

The "triangolo/triangle" chapter, worth reading as a stand-alone essay, explores Lahiri's wrestling with all three tongues—not only in fluency and literary expression but in the emotional reverberations. The tension is palpable as Lahiri describes what amounts to her sense of exile from all realities she experienced. Bengali, which she needed to excel in to please her parents, she felt, "died" after she started reading. English, which she had to master "per sopravvivere all'America" (which literally means "to survive America," but is more suavely if incorrectly translated as "to survive in America"), was a traumatizing "stepmother." And Italian? Italian was "a flight from the long clash" between the other two, a way of carving a new path.

Strikingly, the languages themselves are barely portrayed in the book. The reader is told nothing that makes them come alive, nothing of their different rhythms on the page or in the ear, and nothing of their inextricable link to intersecting and varied ways of thinking, reading, and engaging the world. Arguably, what is most captivating about learning another language is to open a window into a foreign life, to get a



more intimate glimpse of its mysteries and realities through an idiom's idiosyncratic flow. Yet Italy and Italians are conspicuously absent from *In Other Words*, aside from perfunctory descriptions of foggy bridges in Venice, jogging in a Roman park, and strangers and acquaintances passing judgment on the author's fluency.

In fact, it is hard to imagine a book that reveals less about its author's encounter with the world, even the group one would guess she must have some intimate rapport with—her family. Of her children, the reader learns that two exist because they become a metaphor for her attitude toward English and Italian. There is slightly more on her husband: his proficiency in Romance languages and his name make him a natural in Italian speakers' eyes and ears. He is also, source of further alienation for the author, who feels only "walls" all around her linguistic attempts.

Language, of course, is also at the core a means of communication. Whether for imparting information, as in journalism in all its branches, or for self-expression, as in autobiography, it allows an author to share her experiences of an outer or inner world. As readers, we keep turning the page, or tapping the screen, because we are engrossed in seeing something, feeling something, living something—if only the passing beauty of the prose itself—through another's eyes.

A linguist who is fluent in Italian and English might keep turning Lahiri's pages, or rather comparing them, for the fascinating interplay between the two texts. Her Italian, with its constant lexical, grammatical, and syntactical errors, reveals it was conceived by a foreign mind, and, judging from most sentence constructions, by one thinking in English. But the excellent translator, Ann Goldstein, seeking to reproduce the original, bypasses the colloquial formulations, so that the English version, too, feels just a bit off.

But back to the linguistic triangle of Bengali, English, and Italian, Lahiri calls it "a kind of frame" that defines her self-portrait. Looking into it as if in a mirror, she fears that it "reflects only a void, that it reflects nothing."

Exactly like this book?

## Writing the Iraq Invasion: Author and Authority in Five War Memoirs

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### Works Discussed

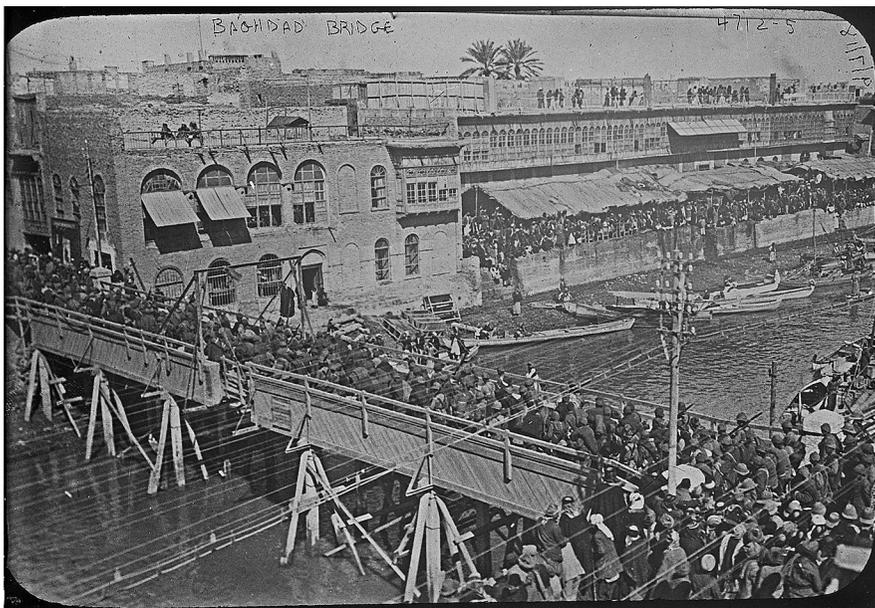
Anderson, Jon Lee, *The Fall of Baghdad*. New York: Penguin, 2005. Paperback, 400 pp., \$16.

Ayers, Chris, *War Reporting for Cowards*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006. Paperback, 308 pp., \$13

Engel, Richard, *A Fist in the Hornet's Nest*. New York: Hyperion, 2005. Paperback, 272 pp., \$13.95

Garrels, Anne, *Naked in Baghdad*. New York: Picador, 2004. 264 pp., \$19

Wright, Evan, *Generation Kill*. New York: Berkley Caliber, 2005. Paperback, 368 pp., \$17



Some things never change: *Baghdad Bridge*, c. 1915, George Grantham Bain Collection (Library of Congress).

“It’s another Iraqi town, nameless to the Marines racing down the main drag in Humvees, blowing it to pieces.” This is the dramatic opening line of Evan Wright’s *Generation Kill*, his 2004 book about the invasion of Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Jon Lee Anderson opens *The Fall of Baghdad*, his account of the Iraq war, in a different way, visiting the elegant home of an exiled Iraqi living in Jordan. Anderson’s source, Nasser al-Sadoun, is no ordinary Iraqi. “Nasser, a handsome, silver-haired man in his late sixties, is a descendent of a legendary Sunni Muslim clan that once possessed its own kingdom, called Muntafiq, which had once ruled over most of southern Iraq for four centuries,” Anderson writes. Not only that, Nasser is also “a direct descendent—thirty-sixth in a direct line—of the Prophet Muhammad.”<sup>2</sup>

The contrasting openings of these two war memoirs illustrate different journalistic approaches to twenty-first century war reporting. Wright is a frontline journalist, riding in a Marine Humvee fighting its way toward Baghdad. He provides gritty descriptions of young Americans facing the violence and chaos of combat. Anderson takes a more considered approach. In the run-up to the invasion, he travels from Jordan to Iran to Baghdad in pursuit of people who can explain the complicated politics of the region. Anderson’s Middle Eastern sources add cultural nuance and historical depth to his narrative way of explaining the war and its effects to a more sophisticated reading audience.

This essay looks back at five books about the beginning of the Iraq war of 2003, a conflict well documented by combat veterans<sup>3</sup> as well as reporters, so much so that its timeframe has been described as “the Decade of the Embedded Journalist.”<sup>4</sup> I examine these books—two by magazine writers, two by broadcast journalists, and one by a daily newspaper reporter—in order to better understand the nature of war reporting in the twenty-first century, especially the ways that journalists turn their wartime experiences into book-length, autobiographical narratives. My starting assumption is that these correspondents want to establish themselves as credible witnesses with the experience, knowledge, and skills to understand and explain what they hear and see. For readers, a reliable and authoritative narrator offers the promise of a greater version of the truth: that is, deeper insights and thoughtful evaluations not available in daily print and broadcast journalism. But how do these five journalists—Wright reporting for *Rolling Stone*, Anderson for the *New Yorker*, Chris Ayers for the (*London*) *Times*, Richard Engel for ABC and Anne Garrels for NPR—construct and maintain their positions as authoritative narrators of a chaotic military action? What themes, or “narrative codes,”<sup>5</sup> do they employ to establish their credibility? Finally, how do these books fit under the umbrella of nonfiction writing known as literary journalism?

My essay builds on a recent article by James Aucoin in which he describes the methods Sebastian Junger uses to establish his credibility as a war correspondent in his 2011 book, *War*.<sup>6</sup> These methods—some drawn from literary journalism, include the use of secondary sources, immersion reporting, direct observation, extensive interviewing, the use of informants, videotaping, and expert testimony—are used to one degree or another in the war memoirs under review here.

As noted, Anderson has produced an erudite narrative in *The Fall of Baghdad*. A *New Yorker* staff writer since 1998, he has wide-ranging international experience

including assignments in Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Afghanistan, Angola, Somalia, Sudan, Mali, and Liberia.<sup>7</sup> He has also reported extensively from Latin America and the Caribbean, and is the author of *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life* (1997). In *The Fall of Baghdad*, however, Anderson does not highlight his familiarity with warzones. Instead, he focuses on two aspects of the Iraq story—its recent political history under Saddam Hussein, and the US invasion. As might be expected, Anderson's political reporting is thorough and multi-toned, building on a series of extended interviews with knowledgeable Iraqis. One of his sources is Ala Bashir, a London-trained physician and artist whom Anderson meets before the invasion.<sup>8</sup> Bashir, being one of Saddam's personal doctors, puts him in a precarious position in Baghdad, but makes him a valuable guide to the mysteries and dangers of Iraqi politics under Saddam. Notably, Anderson does not emphasize his proficiency with war reporting in his narrative, but the scope, depth and explanatory nature of his writing make clear that he is a careful observer, well versed in international conflict and war. One reviewer hailed Anderson's thoughtful reporting of the US invasion and its chaotic aftermath—as opposed to the day-by-day reports of combat filed by embedded reporters—as “the best book on the Iraq war.”<sup>9</sup>

Like Anderson, Wright is already a veteran reporter before he leaves for Iraq. Unlike Anderson, though, he has little international experience, having worked for several US magazines such as *Time* and *Vanity Fair*. At *Hustler*, he has covered the porn industry and reported on white supremacists, in the process developing a knack for getting “outsiders” to talk. For *Rolling Stone*, Wright embeds in Iraq with a Marine reconnaissance unit, a “tip of the spear” force that is guaranteed to face hostile fire as it blasts out of Kuwait on its way to Baghdad. Wright's first-person account—or “eyewitnessing”<sup>10</sup>—of the US invasion is immersive journalism in its rawest, most profane form. As the title suggests—and as *Rolling Stone* readers might expect—*Generation Kill* emphasizes the macho, pop culture-obsessed soldiers who make up the Marine fighting force where he is assigned. “They are kids raised on hip-hop, Marilyn Manson and Jerry Springer,” Wright says. “There are tough guys who pray to Buddha and quote Eastern philosophy and New Age precepts gleaned from watching Oprah and old kung fu movies.”<sup>11</sup> Wright concentrates his reporting on the lives and actions of these men, both in combat and in the daily, dirty grind of warfare.

The authority of Wright's approach comes from his ground-level view of modern warfare, warts and all. In contrast to Anderson, who seeks to explain the intricacies of Iraqi life and politics in a time of crisis, Wright offers a testosterone-fueled ride in the back seat of a Marine Humvee, dodging enemy bullets and rocket-propelled grenades. Given the life-and-death situation, it is no surprise that Wright bonds with the men in his unit. This fact reinforces his credibility not only with his unit but also with readers, who can see, hear, and feel the chaos of battle in Wright's reporting. In the Afterword to the paperback edition, Wright defends the Marines and criticizes American citizens who have lost interest in the war. “The young troops I profiled in *Generation Kill* . . . are among the finest people of their generation,” Wright writes. “We misuse them at our own peril.”<sup>12</sup> This declaration, along with his extensive experience under fire, helps make *Generation Kill* a powerful—and authoritative—war

story. Having put himself in harm's way repeatedly, Wright is allowed to claim authority as a real combat veteran as well as a journalistic witness for the courage of the Marines he chronicles.

Broadcast journalist Engel, author of *A Fist in the Hornet's Nest*, goes to Iraq as a freelancer for ABC television. Early in his book, he explains that his path to foreign correspondent begins in Egypt. In 1996, as a recent international relations graduate of Stanford, Engel moves to Cairo to learn Arabic and begins his apprenticeship as a reporter. His language breakthrough comes when he moves into a run-down apartment in a poor neighborhood where no one speaks English. Nonetheless, he quickly becomes a popular figure. The locals, he explains, want to “check out the new young American who'd landed in their neighborhood like a Martian.”<sup>13</sup> In time, Engel's Arabic improves and he begins to develop contacts in Egypt, working as a freelance journalist for various newspapers and magazines. In 2003, Engel makes his way to Baghdad, entering the country from Jordan as a pretend “peace activist.” In contrast to Wright, who focuses on the lives of soldiers (with little attention to his own safety), Engel emphasizes the physical, mental, and emotional hurdles he has to jump in order to report and file stories from Baghdad. (The theme of Baghdad bureaucracy is also prevalent in Anderson's and Garrels's books.) Unlike Anderson, though, Engel provides little of the historical background or political context. His focus has a certain narrative appeal—revealing the dangers and drama of war reporting—but at a cost of context (Anderson's strength) and a focus on US troops (Wright's forte). As an identifiable broadcast personality, though, Engel's emphasis on his safety and other reporting challenges makes his story more accessible and compelling for American readers.

As the senior foreign correspondent for National Public Radio, Garrels, author of *Naked in Baghdad*, refers to a number of her previous assignments to establish her credentials as a war reporter. “In many ways covering Iraq is like covering the former Soviet Union, where I began my career in the late 1970s,” Garrels notes early in her book.<sup>14</sup> These references are consistent with the personal tone of her memoir, a narrative that includes her husband Vint Lawrence's email reports to friends about Garrels's time in Baghdad.

Like Engel, Garrels emphasizes the many personal and logistical challenges of radio reporting in a highly unstable situation. As one of the few women reporting from Baghdad, she sometimes feels vulnerable in a male-oriented Iraqi society where women are sequestered. On balance, she notes, being a female reporter in such countries “has been a distinct advantage.” She continues, “Men generally deal with me as a sexless professional, while women open up in ways that they would not with a man.”<sup>15</sup> Garrels also reports in detail about the living conditions for journalists covering the invasion. As the bombing of Baghdad intensifies, in late March 2003, she writes that the phone service begins to fail and the hotel where she and other foreign journalists are living is now filthy. “Trash mounts in the hallway,” she writes. “I have to keep the balcony door open so the blasts don't shatter the glass. The room is consequently covered with a layer of oily dust.”<sup>16</sup> Feeding the NPR beast, she admits, is a challenge in Baghdad. “First there's *Morning Edition*, then *Talk of the Nation* in the afternoon, and then *All Things Considered*, not to mention the hourly newscasts,”

she writes. “Given the nine-hour time difference from Washington, this means working a double-shift.”<sup>17</sup> Like Engel, Garrels emphasizes the challenges of dealing with Iraqi officials and her minders, as well as the technical obstacles of filing stories. This central “how-I-got-the-story” theme fits her more intimate and personal narrative.

The outlier among these memoir writers is Ayers, who reports for the *(London) Times* and later expands his thoughts into the book, *War Reporting for Cowards*. As the title makes clear, Ayers takes a different approach to war reporting, one that reveals the significance of author and authority in the other books. While the others present themselves as trustworthy, veteran journalists, assuring readers of their competence and bravery, he emphasizes his incompetence and cowardice, which he explains, or exploits rather, for comic effect. For instance, Ayers says he did not have international reporting experience beyond the US, and none at all as a war correspondent. As a journalism graduate student in London, he says he was “easily the least cool student” in his program.<sup>18</sup> He also says he has no interest in foreign reporting, and that it is a job he is ill equipped to tackle. “I couldn’t speak a foreign language and I hated any kind of physical discomfort,” he writes. “I had flown only once before. . . , and I wasn’t keen to repeat the experience.” He continues, “The idea of covering a famine in the Sudan or a civil war in a failed Balkan state was enough to bring me into a hot, prickly state.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Ayers begins his journalism career as a business reporter, a self-described “financial geek.” Nevertheless, by accident of fate, he happens to be working in New York on September 11, 2001, which thrusts him into the nascent US war on terror. After a two-day public relations junket on the *Constellation*, a US aircraft carrier, off the coast of California, Ayers finds himself covering the Iraq war for the *Times*, embedded with the US Marines. Not surprisingly, he underscores the many discomforts of combat, which include heat and sandstorms as well as bad military food (Meals Ready to Eat, or MREs) and the resulting constipation. He is also obsessed with the many ways to be injured or die in a desert war, from chemical weapons to land mines, from scorpions to tarantulas, to ordinary enemy fire. His fears overwhelm his ability to report, or so he claims. Early in the invasion, he contacts his editor by sat phone. His editor asks,

“Are you in a position to file us something. Just give me something off the top of your head?”

For the first time in my career I blanked out. I couldn’t think of anything. I was the world’s worst war correspondent.

“Come on, Chris,” said [editor] Barrow. “You’ve dictated stories a million times before. Just concentrate. You’re going to be fine.”

But I wasn’t fine. I was very much not fine.

And I had nothing to say.<sup>20</sup>

Despite such mistakes, Ayers manages to survive the early days of the invasion to file some vivid, frontline stories, one of which covers the entire front page of the

*Times*. He describes his reaction to this news in terms many readers can understand: “For a brief, exhilarating moment, I realized why people become war reporters. The thrill of writing an I-nearly-died-a-gruesome-death story is unbeatable. It feels like giving a middle finger to anyone who’s ever doubted you, including yourself.” He adds, “War makes you feel *special*.”<sup>21</sup>

But Ayers does not stick with the story. He is offered a chance to pull out, and rides out of Iraq in a Marine Humvee after nine days of fighting. He feels guilty about leaving—like Wright, he has bonded with some of the Marines—yet elated to get back to London. “Freedom is a novelty,” he writes, “the thrill of spending money; of eating your own choice of food, of not doing what the captain says.”<sup>22</sup> Serious for once, he admits war reporting has changed him, writing at the end, “Battlefield fear has put all other fear into perspective.”

By admitting his cowardice and lack of experience, Ayers deliberately subverts the standard way Iraq war reporters present themselves and claim the authority to report from the war zone. The contrast is stark: Anderson and Garrels are well-traveled and knowledgeable foreign correspondents; Ayers is not. Wright, like Ayers, is embedded with the Marines as they invade Iraq, but Wright goes all the way to Baghdad, taking fire and chronicling day-to-day fighting for months, not days. Nevertheless, Ayers’s approach works as humor because of these differences. That is, readers expect war correspondents to be brave, tough, and competent—all qualities Ayers gleefully repudiates. They also expect war reporters to be knowledgeable about war or international diplomacy, topics Ayers admits he knows nothing of. As a chronicler of war, Ayers is effective as a kind of anti-correspondent, appealing to readers because he admits he does not know what he is doing—and because he is funny.

### Conclusions

The analysis shows that these writers use various combinations of the methods identified in Aucoin’s research. All of them, for example, are immersed in the war and all are direct observers, witnessing what they can of the invasion given the limitations of their location. Wright is the most traditional combat reporter, living (and suffering) with the troops for many weeks. Wright’s Marines are his informants, and he renders their lives in vivid, sometimes gruesome detail. In contrast, Anderson is the most reliant on secondary sources and extensive interviewing. On assignment for the *New Yorker*, which to some degree still luxuriates in the time-consuming, explanatory approach of magazine journalism’s more prosperous days, tells the story of the war from a broader perspective.

The analysis also reveals additional narrative themes these writers use to explain their role and bolster their authority. Three of the five—Anderson, Garrels, and Engel—have international reporting experience. Although Anderson makes little mention of his background, Garrels and Engel make notable references to their foreign experiences, thereby claiming authority in international reporting. Wright lacks international reporting, but brings significant US experience as a magazine reporter covering outsiders and misfits—a fact that helps him bond with his Marine unit and tell their stories from their point of view. Ayers’s complete lack of war-reporting expe-

rience explains his brief, funny, and somewhat warped approach to the war.

These memoirs emphasize other themes, including the logistics of war reporting, especially involving the gear each journalist uses to stay alive and keep reporting. All write about the threat of chemical war and discuss their preparations for such an attack. The broadcast reporters, Engel and Garrels, underline the challenges of filing stories from Baghdad, offering readers behind-the-scenes stories about the difficulties of reporting from a warzone.

Ayers excepted, combat competence is also a major theme. Wright is the most conventional war reporter, spending weeks on the front lines with the Marines and, from all accounts, holding up well under the stress of combat. Anderson, Engel, and Garrels are un-embedded reporters in Baghdad, subject to the power and unpredictability of the Iraqi regime (while it lasts), and to the hardships and miseries of a city under attack. In their own stories at least, all of them are courageous in the face of uncertainty and danger.

With the exception of Ayers's humorous approach, all of the themes here represent ways for these writers to establish their authority as war correspondents. That is, they need to make the case for their presence in the warzone, to offer evidence of their qualifications and thus their abilities and trustworthiness. These narrative themes justify their war reporting and mark their authority. Highlighting experience, preparations, equipment, suffering, and perseverance, these Iraq War journalists present themselves as credible and worthy observers who have accumulated significant, detailed, first-hand knowledge of the war to elucidate its meanings and consequences.

In terms of literary journalism, Anderson's *The Fall of Baghdad* is the most ambitious book. A deeply observed narrative distinguished by his range of knowledge, it is a carefully rendered examination of the people and politics of Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Wright's experience of the war is intense and action-oriented, yet his story is also rich with details of fighting men and their terrifying, sometimes thrilling, drive to Baghdad. The books by the two broadcasters, Garrels and Engel, are exercises in immersive journalism, to be sure. Yet their books are more narrowly conceived, focusing largely on their experiences as un-embedded reporters in Baghdad. Garrels organizes her book as a diary, a technique that allows her to tell a vivid, personal story, though she offers few of the wide-ranging observations and detailed character studies that mark the work of Anderson and Wright. Engel's account is similar to Garrels's—a personal narrative of the invasion limited in depth and scope. In short, Garrels and Engel produced compelling, firsthand reports of the invasion, but neither succeed as fully developed examples of literary journalism. The final book reviewed here, Ayers's comic account of the war, remains detached from the other accounts. While self-deprecating and funny, he makes little effort to go beyond the limits of this comic approach in search of a larger, more meaningful narrative.

Whatever their merits as literary journalism, all of these books describe the day-to-day psychological and physical challenges of war. Embedded with the Marines or un-embedded in Baghdad, these reporters suffer physically and psychologically, as do the troops and Iraqi civilians. In one powerful but terrible example, Anderson reports on the victims of a rocket attack he finds in a Baghdad hospital, including a

twelve-year-old boy named Ali. His body has been hideously blackened, Anderson reports, "and both of his arms had been burned off."<sup>23</sup> Anderson's source, an Iraqi surgeon, tells him Ali has three weeks to live. This incident—usually not the focus of the evening news—is one way Anderson can explain the myriad complexities of the Iraqi invasion in memorable and human terms.

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### Notes

1. Evan Wright, *Generation Kill* (New York: Berkley Caliber, 2004), 1.
2. Jon Lee Anderson, *The Fall of Baghdad* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 1–2.
3. War memoirs by veterans include, for example, John Crawford, *The Last True Story I'll Ever Tell* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005); Paul Rieckhoff, *Chasing Ghosts* (New York: New American Library, 2006); and Kayla Williams, *Love My Rifle More Than You* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005).
4. Tom Bissell, "American Soldiers," a review of *War* by Sebastian Junger, *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 2010, 58.
5. This useful term is borrowed from James Wood, "Red Planet: The Sanguinary Sublime of Cormac McCarthy," *New Yorker*, July 25, 2005, 90.
6. James Aucoin, "Sebastian Junger's *War*, 'Expert Testimony,' and Understanding the Story," *Journalism Studies* 17:2, 2016, 231–246.
7. <http://www.newyorker.com/contributors/jon-lee-anderson>. Retrieved May 13, 2016.
8. Anderson, 63–71.
9. Matthew Harwood, "Ground Up," *Washington Monthly*, December 2004, 51–53.
10. The meaning and use of the term "eyewitnessing" is discussed in Barbie Zelizer, "On 'Having Been There': 'Eyewitnessing' as a Journalistic Key Word," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24:5 (December 2007), 408–428.
11. Wright, 5.
12. Wright, 370.
13. Richard Engel, *A Fist in the Horner's Nest* (New York: Hyperion, 2004), 16.
14. Anne Garrels, *Naked in Baghdad* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 49.
15. Garrels, 31.
16. Garrels, 141.
17. Garrels, 104.
18. Chris Ayers, *War Reporting for Cowards* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005), 24.
19. Ayers, 24.
20. Ayers, 209.
21. Ayers, 252–3.
22. Ayers, 274.
23. Anderson, 209.