

Note from the Editor . . .



For some time now (alas), I have been tinkering with a hybrid theory. It is one that would combine elements of phenomenology, as laid out by Husserl originally and then modified by Sartre and others, with the methods we might normally associate with practitioners of literary journalism. By methods I am not necessarily referring to the literary elements frequently used, elements which tend to differentiate the reporting involved in building long narratives—scene building, capturing dialogue, switching points of views, and recording significant details that relay character—from news reporting.

No, I am referring more to the way in which the material is gathered, to the particular ways literary journalists go about their business. There is the extended time involved in the creation of a work of literary journalism. There is the doubling back and pursuance of deeper meanings. There are the successive, wave-like passes at building the story, swooping from bird's eye view to street level, and back. And there is the open admission at the beginning that the literary journalist does not know much about the subject—yet—and might do well to keep those eyes wide open.

As well, the path of the story might be usefully obscured if the literary journalist decided in advance not to know what the story is, to remain in the dark for as long as possible while in the field gathering information, to better weigh the various realities on offer. Husserl's *epoché*, or reduction, had more to do with suspending judgments of the kind we make without reflection, which at that point in time, in the early twentieth century, I think meant trying to bracket the scientific discoveries we tend to accept without question. Instead, the task was to look at the world as it is and describe it that way. I'm not sure how successful anyone could make the *epoché*. Sartre pointed out that you cannot keep peeling away layers of reality in the search for the "real" reality because, if you achieved success, you would end up with nothing. Your consciousness would be empty, a null. Sartre thought this was impossible because all we have is our consciousness. No consciousness, no us.

What I liked about this idea is how it could play out for the literary journalist. If the theory of withholding judgment could only go so far before it collapsed, this actually works to the advantage of the literary journalist. However much we admire how literary journalists work—the deep research, the evaluation of possible realities, the search for a true answer—eventually

we want them to take a stand. They are the ones on the frontlines, they are the ones who have done the hanging-out time, and they are the ones we want to read. Reality is something we want filtered through their consciousness, knowing full well that this “lifeworld,” in Husserl’s formulation, is not a static place. Things change. But the reality the literary journalist presents is reality as she sees it at this point in the continuum. Think about reading Didion, for instance, and how reality is necessarily and overtly processed through and by her own consciousness as expressed via her honed style. This is exactly why we read her work when it was published, and why we continue to read it even though the lifeworld has moved on.

Australia, Byelorussia, Netherlands, United Kingdom

This issue, we offer four excellent research essays. James Rodgers discusses two of Svetlana Alexievich’s works, *Boys in Zinc* and *Chernobyl Prayer*, with a view to studying not only how her methods differ from everyday journalistic practice, but also how through textual analysis of her work we can better understand the disconcerting post-Soviet era.

Willa McDonald and Bunty Avieson inform us of an impressive project that they, along with Kerrie Davies, have undertaken, the Australian Colonial Narrative Journalism Database. This low-overhead repository of early Australian literary journalism is meant to be memory-based and informative, removing the dominant political spine that informs so many archive projects.

Hilde Van Belle brings to wider attention the strange rise and fall—and rise again—of Joris van Casteren, one of the highest ranked literary journalists in the Netherlands. Van Casteren became a sensation in 2008 when his memoir of growing up in a planned/invented city, *Lelystad*, was published. His reputation grew quickly until, poof, three years later he was pilloried for his memoir of a girlfriend and their love affair gone wrong. He has since achieved, and in 2019 now enjoys, “well-respected author” status. Van Belle teases out the implications for literary journalism of van Casteren’s roller-coaster ride.

And David Dowling elucidates the frustrating and sorry tale of Marilynne Robinson’s *Mother Country*, a nonfiction book that, when published in 1989, seemed destined to become the *Silent Spring* of Great Britain’s nuclear industry. Instead of naturally increasing in influence and notoriety over the decades, Robinson’s tour de force was attacked and successfully sued by Greenpeace, of all organizations.

In addition to these fine essays we present Matthew Ricketson’s keynote address to IALJS-14 at Stony Brook, New York, last May, which focuses on the ethical issues that crop up in doing book-length literary journalism.

— *Bill Reynolds*

