

The Uses of Literary Journalism: From History to Future Directions

The Routledge Companion to American Literary Journalism

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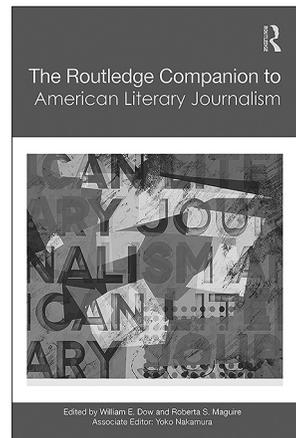
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This collection is identified as a companion to literary journalism studies in the United States, rather than as an explicitly global survey, but its scope and depth give the work a much broader relevance. It is a *tour d'horizon* that presents recent findings and ideas, situating the discussion in the evolving language of its field while also linking to much broader debates about narrative nonfiction and the current state of literary and media theory. It is both a general reference tool and a thought-provoking work of current scholarship.

Section headings help the reader navigate the thirty-five chapters, offering historical perspectives, cross-cutting themes, theoretical frames and debates, and new directions for inquiry. Each chapter is short and focused, moving outward from specific individuals, publications, or periods to tease out a general insight, or inward to anchor a broad issue to concrete examples. The following highlights are inevitably selective, due to the constraints of a book review, but they indicate how readers might navigate an individual path through the varied material.

For this reviewer, the note of ambition is struck in the very first chapter when Colin T. Ramsey offers a new origin story for literary journalism, its earliest moment yet, by drawing out the importance of letters to both journalism and literature in the eighteenth century. The ambition is sustained even when it reaches more familiar topics from history, such as the New Journalism. Here John J. Pauly—to whom the book is dedicated—weaves a whole cloth of the era, a connected world of journalism and literature in which writers experience difficult practical choices. In the process readers are reminded of the material conditions of the literary market and the social status connected to each genre: in this case, the beguiling kudos of fiction.

Susan Keith's look at counterculture publications of the 1970s gives a historical treatment to a current topic, the consideration of literary journalism as "alternative" media. Keith recognizes upfront that the production of literary journalism requires money and time, factors in short supply in the examples studied here. Her account is a reminder of the ways in which 1970s counterculture has influenced the pervasive



digital culture of today, including its anti-editing rhetoric and the oppositional positioning of “passion” against “writerly style.” Keith draws on a range of definitions for “Alt Media,” emphasizing either their economic and organizational divergence from “hierarchical” commercial models or the ability of the content to “question dominative social relations.” While such definitions apply to the alternative media of the 1970s, one can ask if the same is true for the dominant “alternative” outlets of today such as RT (formerly Russia Today), which are state sponsored.

In part three’s focus on “disciplinary intersections,” Kathy Roberts Forde’s attention to the potential affinities of literary journalism and book history are of particular interest. Her analysis also zeroes in on a key difference: while book history privileges the reader, “historians of any form of journalism necessarily conceive of readers as publics” (316). Evoking Michael Schudson’s argument that the history of U.S. print culture should reflect what print means to people, Forde draws a parallel: “what literary journalism means to the public is what matters most for literary journalism studies” (316). This opens up, in turn, a debate about the uses of Jürgen Habermas’s “public sphere” and Jeffrey Alexander’s “civil sphere” to explain how literary journalism operates in public life.

In part four, on new directions, Roberta S. Maguire is persuasive in making the case that generalizations about U.S. literary journalism are not transferable to the work produced by African Americans, because the subjective voice as a distinguishing marker does not exist in that journalistic tradition. Instead, subjectivity is at the heart of the entire African-American press, because of its role in providing a voice for people who were otherwise “spoken for” by others. As one writer is quoted as saying, “The black press was never intended to be objective because it didn’t see . . . the white press being objective” (401). The insight leads to a nuanced analysis of craft issues such the use of the second-person point of view—usually a rare choice because of its inherent instability—to foreground subjectivity.

The section on new directions includes Robert Alexander’s examination of literary journalism’s potential as a fitting genre for ecocriticism. One possible affinity identified in the chapter is the use of “slow” techniques such as immersion: for example, as a potential technique for intuiting the communications of nonhuman animals, just as it helps to intuit otherwise inaccessible information about other people. Alexander also describes as a “powerful resource” literary journalism’s “ability to shift among various rhetorical modes, between different spatial and temporal scales, and to link the abstract and unseen with the concrete” (487).

Pascal Sigg provides a rare focus on postmodern theory and its potential to inform literary journalism studies. He is right to argue that post-structuralist ideas about reality deserve a nuanced analysis, and the chapter provides some grounds for the argument that the big beasts such as Derrida do not deny reality as such. Sigg goes on to provide an enjoyable close reading of several less predictable nonfiction authors from the last twenty years. However, this pleasantly provocative argument would be stronger if it anticipated a wider range of opposing arguments. One might ask, for example, whether Derrida can be considered a champion of rhetorical theory when any talk of the rhetorical concept of “agency” causes his intellectual descendants to

react like Superman with a rock of Kryptonite. The main objection, in brief, is that whatever interpretation is offered here, the postmodern school as a living practice still poses its own obstacles to nuance about reality.

There is so much more of interest in this collection; my own ersatz tastes prompt a mention of ethnography as a journalistic method (Gillespie), rock journalism as a literary genre (Schack), the relation between words and images (Marino and Jacobson), the inherent disruption of nonfiction narratives (Hartsock), and the uses of the first person (Phillips).

If I have a bugbear about the collection, it is the recurrence of tropes that refuse to die. It is hard to fault such ideas, especially in a multiauthor work, because of their very pervasiveness. But I look forward to the day when references to narrative storytelling techniques as “fictional” or “like a novel” cease to be the default. And to the time when any reference to objectivity adds an automatic disclaimer, citing Thomas Nagle’s distinction between objectivity and neutrality. Too often, people cite each other’s definitions in a circular way and too much weight is put on the term in its weakened form, divorced from its origins and use in science and philosophy.

But that is another discussion. Meanwhile, I salute this collection’s cool nerve and ambition.