

Book Reviews . . .

Kate McQueen, Book Review Editor

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Maracaibo Lake, Venezuela. Image by Wilfredor, 2012. Wikimedia Commons.

Alarm Calls and Echoes of a Once and Future World

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Works discussed:

Under a White Sky: The Nature of the Future by Elizabeth Kolbert. New York: Crown/Penguin Random House Group, 2021. Hardcover, 256 pp., USD\$21.49. Paperback edition with afterword published 2022 by Crown Trade (New York). Page references are to the 2021 edition.

Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out? by Bill McKibben. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2019. Hardcover, 304 pp., USD\$12.19.

The Uninhabitable Earth: Life after Warming by David Wallace-Wells. New York: Tim Duggan Books/Crown Publishing Group/Penguin Random House LLC, 2019. Hardcover, 320 pp., USD\$22.14.

Fuzz: When Nature Breaks the Law by Mary Roach. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2021. Hardcover, 320 pp., USD\$21.49.

Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape by Lauret Savoy. Berkeley, California: Counterpoint Press, 2016. Hardcover, 240 pp., USD\$25.

Plus, an antidote against despair:

The Nature of Desert Nature edited by Gary Paul Nabhan. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2020 (Southwest Center Series).

The present warning issues with no uncertain sound, because this great battle for preservation and conservation cannot be won by gentle tones, nor by appeals to the aesthetic instincts of those who have no sense of beauty, or enjoyment of Nature. It is necessary to sound a loud alarm, to present the facts in very strong language, backed up by irrefutable statistics and by photographs which tell no lies, to establish the law and enforce it if needs be with a bludgeon. . . . This book is such an alarm call.¹

The words above, penned for William T. Hornaday's *Vanishing Wild Life* more than 100 years ago, were both a lament and a battle cry concerning the destruction of the nation's wildlife through "the selfishness, the ignorance, or the cruelty of [Nature's] destroyers."² A controversial and contradictory influence on early environmentalism, Hornaday was not the first U.S. citizen to raise an alarm about vanishing wildlife or the destruction of Nature. Nearly forty years earlier, philologist, linguist, and conservationist George P. Marsh delivered his own warning in a book titled, *Man and Nature; or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*:

The object of the present volume is: to indicate the character and, approximately, the extent of the changes produced by human action in the physical conditions of the globe we inhabit; to point out the dangers of imprudence and the necessity of caution in all operations which, on a large scale, interfere with the spontaneous arrangements of the organic or the inorganic world; to suggest the possibility and the importance of the restoration of disturbed harmonies and the material improvement of waste and exhausted regions. . . .³

Authors, past and present, have repeatedly issued admonitions regarding degradation of the planet and extinction of its inhabitants.⁴

We have been warned—many times over.

How Did We Get Here?

In late September 2021, Dino Grandoni wrote in the *Washington Post* that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had pronounced the extinction of the Ivory-billed woodpecker, along with twenty-two other species.⁵ Hunted to near extinction in the 1800s by private collectors and hat makers, the woodpecker was removed from the endangered species list because it has been extirpated. Eager ornithologists had searched for decades for this avian holy grail. A few possible sightings in the twenty-first century gave hope to those who sought the rare woodpecker, but the bird is gone forever, say the authorities at U.S. Fish and Wildlife, and cannot sound an alarm.⁶

As I sit at my computer, I hear news of an oil spill off the coast of Southern California. Dead fish and birds coated in oil washed onto the shore near Huntington Beach, reported CNN. An "ecological disaster," noted the anchor. "Significant damage" to nearby wetlands, announced an unnamed official.⁷ Those responsible will clean up the beach, we're told. Will we heed this alarm, or will the years pass until, once again, our shores, our wetlands, and the creatures that inhabit them are covered with oil?⁸

How have we as inhabitants of this Earth, many of whom profess to love Nature, gotten ourselves into this predicament? I read *Silent Spring* and conducted an admittedly amateurish study examining the biology of DDT deposition in fatty tissues for

a high school science fair. I volunteered throughout the 1970s at one of the first organized recycling centers in Eugene, Oregon. I lived for a time in a rough cabin with only a wood stove to heat the place. I supported the Zero Population Growth movement in thought and deed.⁹ I was doing my part to fend off the consequences of what we called “the greenhouse effect”—or so I thought.¹⁰ Now, however, my efforts seem like dust in the wind. How did so much time pass with so little progress? Must we, yet again, be confronted with catastrophe before we are willing to change our behavior?¹¹

This review examines a number of books published between 2016 and 2021, books that explain how we got where we are climate-wise and warn us of the difficult ecological future facing us should we continue to dawdle. These books describe the disastrously ineffectual environmental stewardship that has contributed to today’s climate crisis. Three of the books, those authored by Elizabeth Kolbert, Bill McKibben, and David Wallace-Wells, sound warnings loud enough to be heard as they ricochet off the walls and streets of our asphalt cities. They are narratives of anxiety—with only faint (if any) traces of hope. The fourth book is Mary Roach’s *Fuzz: When Nature Breaks the Law*. It also sounds an alarm, but Roach delivers her warnings via humorous (albeit tragic) vignettes featuring charismatic creatures facing long environmental odds.

No review of recent environmental literature is complete without a discussion of the way in which racial injustice has shaped not only Earth and who is allowed to occupy which spaces, but also who is privileged to access the resources necessary to address environmental crises. A search of published environmental literature leads one to conclude that nature writing and environmental writing were chiefly the bastion of white male writers for the better part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is changing, but much slower than our climate, so there are fewer books and articles about the environment written by authors of color than a more equitable society would generate. Originally released in 2015, geologist/author Lauret Savoy’s *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape* is a meditative reflection on the author’s personal and cultural history, racial injustice, the American landscape, and the intersection of these themes.¹²

One final book is offered as a provisional antidote to the depressing predictions of catastrophic environmental, ecological disaster, and environmental injustice that dominate *Under a White Sky*, *Falter*, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, *Fuzz*, and *Trace*. I say “antidote” with the understanding that there is no real remedy for climate change other than for enough of us to heed the warnings we’ve received, take them seriously, and change our reckless course of action. The antidote I offer is a slim volume of interdisciplinary, multicultural essays edited by environmentalist, ethnobotanist, writer, and ethicist Gary Nabhan. *The Nature of Desert Nature* celebrates “everything that sticks, stinks, stings, sings, swings, springs, or clings in arid landscapes.”¹³

Is U.S. Nature Writing Obsolete?

A comprehensive discussion of nature writing as either a viable genre or an antiquated remnant of an earlier era is saved for another time or place. However, a few preliminary thoughts on the topic are worth sharing. Proliferation of what this

reviewer calls the literature of environmental catastrophe, which could be said to have commenced when Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring*, signaled to some that Thoreauvean nature writing was not what our modern era needed. Especially since the rise of ecocriticism in the last quarter of the twentieth century, writing that articulates the author's personal aesthetic experience of observing, classifying, and describing nature has been subjected to increasing criticism. Nature writing is considered by some scholars to represent an overly sentimental, romanticized version of a world facing environmental crises daily and a lighter, more frivolous cousin to the literature of environmental catastrophe.¹⁴ However, reports of the demise of nature writing have been exaggerated.

In addition to the arguments made by Daniel J. Philippon in his essay "Is American Nature Writing Dead?" in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, consideration of the nature writing genre's worth should include the fact that nature writing can provide readers with psychological respite from not only the world's impending ecological collapse, but the depressed state into which many of us who are concerned about the environment—especially the young—have fallen. What I suggest is that there is room for both the literature of catastrophe to inform and motivate us and a genre—such as nature writing—that can provide us with temporary relief from the fear of environmental disaster. Seeking an occasional reprieve from our environmental struggles is not the same as indulging in magical thinking about the natural world.

Mediating Our Relationship with the Environment

Despite all the books and articles written about the looming threats to our climate, some of us seem to be waiting for a miracle—even as the Colorado River dries up and our forests (and towns) burn to the ground. We appear to be waiting for a magician to either save us from our difficulties on Earth or lead us to an extraterrestrial location beyond the reach of catastrophic ecological devastation on our home planet.

Charles C. Mann, a U.S. journalist and author who specializes in scientific topics, divides environmentalists into two categories in his book, *The Wizard and the Prophet: Two Remarkable Scientists and Their Dueling Visions to Shape Tomorrow's World* (New York: Knopf, 2018). Mann argues that prophets believe we are exceeding or have already exceeded nature's capacity to support us and that we must cut back on consumerism or the planet—and our species—might not survive. Wizards, on the other hand, believe in our capacity to deal with environmental problems through scientific ingenuity. Although this binary sorting of environmentalists has been critiqued by none other than Bill McKibben, Mann's framework provides a useful vantage point from which to examine the books considered in this essay.¹⁵

The original wizard (according to Mann) was twentieth-century scientist Norman Borlaug, the driving force behind a collaborative project of the Rockefeller Foundation and the Cooperative Wheat Research and Production Program in Mexico that dramatically increased wheat yield through genetics, plant breeding, soil science, entomology, and other applied scientific disciplines. In 1970, Borlaug was awarded the 1970 Peace Prize "for having given a well-founded hope—the Green Revolution."¹⁶

William Vogt, whom Mann designated a "prophet," maintained that the human

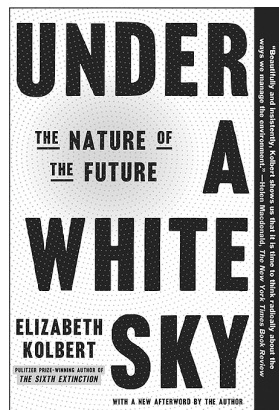
population was taking more from Earth than the planet had to give. Vogt, who espoused limiting population growth—asserting that this was necessary for Earth and our species to survive—was responsible for a revival in Malthusian thought in the 1960s.¹⁷ Norman Borlaug died in 2009 at the age of 95. William Vogt died in 1968 at the age of 66—by suicide, according to Bill McKibben.¹⁸

Mann hints of an unusual meeting between these two forces of nature (Vogt and Borlaug). According to Mann, they met only once—in an encounter that ended in irreparable disagreement.¹⁹ Borlaug won the Peace Prize for an agricultural achievement that led to increases in global food production, but Vogt is said to be the founder of the modern or apocalyptic environmental movement—a description that fits the tone of at least three of the six books examined here. The tension between anxiety and optimism Mann described has been baked into our relationship with the natural world for almost two centuries. Anxious prophets query, “Is it too late for [bison, Nature, the planet] to be saved?” while wizards respond with assurance, “This is how we will do it!”

Three of the books examined here were chosen after an email exchange with Alan Weisman, author of the 2007 best seller, *The World without Us*, a decidedly surreal vision of the healing course corrections Earth might embrace should we meet with our demise as a species. Weisman argues the top choices for recent environmental books should include Bill McKibben’s *Falter*, David Wallace-Wells’s *Uninhabitable Earth*, and Elizabeth Kolbert’s “magnum opus,” *The Sixth Extinction*. While Weisman prefers Kolbert’s last book, here we will consider her newest, *Under a White Sky*.²⁰ Although each of these books occupies the apocalyptic end of the environmental writing spectrum, Weisman noted (cheerfully) that he believes McKibben’s *Falter*²¹ holds out realistic hope to which an anxious reader might cling. Whether that is true is a matter of opinion.

Wizards Gone Wrong

Elizabeth Kolbert’s *Under a White Sky: The Nature of the Future* follows the same formula that made her previous books so successful: a deeply researched narrative, extraordinary interviews with remarkable sources, and shocking-yet-enlightening anecdotes. Kolbert’s work on *Under a White Sky* was disrupted by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic of 2020.²² Despite the interruption, Kolbert collected enough material to write a substantial sequel to *The Sixth Extinction*. At every turn *Under a White Sky* reveals yet another species, place, or environment that humankind has manipulated badly or attempted to improve upon—with questionable if not disastrous results. *Under the White Sky* reveals a series of wizards-gone-wrong catastrophes. The Asian carp story is the saga of bad management on one of Chicago’s essential waterways.



The introduction of Asian carp to U.S. waterways was, ironically, motivated by environmentalists trying to reduce the use of the chemicals condemned by Carson in *Silent Spring*. Importing carp as a biological control to eliminate aquatic weeds instead of using herbicides was a disaster. According to Kolbert, the imported carp reproduced all too successfully, edging out native species of all kinds.²³ The wizards in this story came up with the idea of electrifying the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal to keep the carp from reaching the Great Lakes and colonizing them. Despite a clever environmental DNA assay scientists developed to determine whether carp were or were not present in forbidden locations, the experts couldn't tell when living carp had crossed a critical electric barrier. Did a positive DNA test mean there were live carp where they didn't belong or that a deteriorating carp corpse had settled to the bottom of the waterway? As with much cutting-edge science, none of the experts could answer this question with certainty.

In short order, someone came up with a marketing scheme that would re-brand the invasive carp as "silverfin" in the hope of reducing their numbers by selling them as food. Unconvinced that re-branding carp as an appetizing finger food would convince U.S. citizens to eat them, Kolbert decided to try a couple. The author popped two silverfin fishcakes into her mouth and pronounced them "quite tasty."²⁴ What has become of this re-branding scheme is unclear.

Another of Kolbert's narratives involved an attempt to preserve the Devil's Hole pupfish (an endangered species of fish found only in a rare water-filled cavern in what is, for administrative purposes, considered part of Death Valley National Park). To protect the pupfish, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service constructed a fake, look-alike water hole that scientists stocked with relocated fish. With tongue in cheek, Kolbert labeled the mock water hole a "fishy Westworld."²⁵

Kolbert directed her skeptical gaze to other examples of uncertain environmental wizardry—from managing a flourishing rodent population with genetic engineering and attempting to breed coral resistant to ocean warming, to reducing the impact of the sun's warming rays by spraying reflective particles into the stratosphere—geo-engineering at its most experimental and most terrifying—the wizards explored impractical technical answers to difficult environmental problems. The solutions to problems Kolbert described, especially seeding the stratosphere with sun-dimming particles, often seem worse than the problem. The wizards, however, keep pushing their solutions.

As one of Kolbert's geoengineering sources noted, "We live in a world . . . where deliberately dimming the f----g sun might be less risky than not doing it."²⁶ Is this brilliant science or sheer recklessness?

But to imagine that "dimming the f----g sun" could be less dangerous than not dimming it, you have to imagine not only that the technology will work according to plan but also that it will be deployed according to plan. And that's a lot of imagining. . . . [L]et's just say the record here isn't strong. (See, for example, climate change.)²⁷

The Human Game

Bill McKibben's newest book, *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?* is nothing if not grim. As the author wrote in his ironically titled "An Opening Note on Hope,"

Put simply, between ecological destruction and technological hubris, the human experiment is now in question. The stakes feel very high, and the odds very long, and the trends very ominous. So, I have no doubt that there are other books that would offer readers a merrier literary experience.²⁸

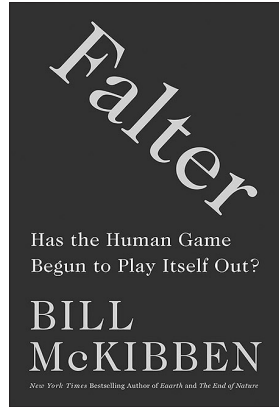
Falter is a wide-ranging book that not only features new illustrations of McKibben's end-of-nature premise but also examines the political and economic forces bringing us to the brink of failure as a culture, a nation, and a species. According to McKibben, libertarian thinkers, high-rolling financiers, fossil fuel moguls, Rupert Murdoch's communications empire, and other modern "robber baron" types are all part of an empire that has poisoned our social and political sphere as well as our environment, and locked in inequality.

Unlike the Gilded Age robber barons, however, the current crop of self-interested rich has too much leverage over too many domains. According to McKibben, the likelihood of the pendulum swinging back toward a new progressive era is slight because the rich control too many aspects of the culture. The tech billionaires in Silicon Valley might, hypothetically, have the leverage to oppose the libertarian billionaires, noted McKibben. However, the techie rich are also somewhat enamored of Randian libertarian thought, so don't count on the techies to resist anyone else's leverage. Recall Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's recent Senate hearings that exposed Facebook's lack of transparency.

Part Three of *Falter*, titled The Name of the Game, is about artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, life extension, and other unregulated, cutting-edge technologies that sound like weird science. Part Four of *Falter* is titled An Outside Chance, that is, the outside chance that we might be able to change our environmental trajectory. Of that "outside chance" McKibben wrote the following:

Climate change is far advanced, and the march of some of these new technologies seems as rapid as it is unregulated. But no one knows that it is impossible, either, and so the last section of this book will be about resistance, about the tools and ideas that might help us keep global warming and technological mania within some limits and, in the process, keep the human game recognizable, even robust.²⁹

Resistance may be the key to keeping the game going, according to McKibben; for example, resistance to the oil companies and tech barons whom McKibben labels "deeply radical."³⁰ McKibben considers solar panels for every roof and the nonviolent movement to be forms of resistance that might help us find a way forward. McKibben's personal mode of resistance is his engagement with activism in the form of



350.org, his “planetwide climate campaign.”³¹ But if the human game is really ending, McKibben has written its obituary: “Even—especially—in its twilight, the human game [was] graceful and compelling.”³²

Life after Warming

“It is worse, much worse, than you think,” writes David Wallace-Wells.³³ His book, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life after Warming*, resembles Weismann’s *The World without Us* in some respects. However, where *The World without Us* is a speculative narrative regarding what *might* happen as Earth heals itself after we are gone, Wallace-Wells’s book places us at the center of the catastrophic maelstrom he believes is coming soon. Using Timothy Morton’s theory about climate change as an object lesson, Wallace explains why we don’t understand the fact that catastrophic change is imminent. Climate change, says Morton, is a “hyperobject”—a concept so vast and complicated that it is incomprehensible.³⁴

We are beginning, however, to get some sense of the crisis bearing down on us: unbreathable air; fires; depletion of water in aquifers, rivers, and reservoirs; a pandemic sweeping the globe; migrants fleeing the terrors at home and being turned away at our merciless borders; collapse of our economic system; and more. How does one avoid despair? One way to do so, Wallace-Wells writes (with what might either be irony or a veiled condemnation of past cruelty) is:

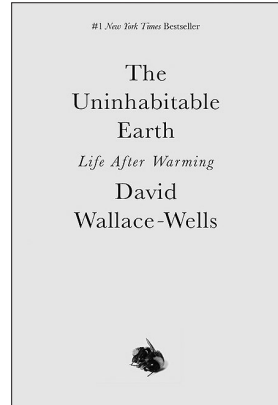
to normalize climate suffering at the same pace we accelerate it, as we have so much human pain over centuries, so that we are always coming to terms with what is just ahead of us, decrying what lies beyond that, and forgetting all that we had ever said about the absolute moral unacceptability of the conditions of the world we are passing through in the present tense, and blithely.³⁵

Memory, History, Race, and the U.S. Landscape

Why so few people of color are visible environmentalists—whether as writers or in some other capacity—is a puzzle author and academic Carolyn Finney addresses in *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* (2014):

[Certain] assumptions, beliefs, and perceptions are at the very foundation of our environmental thinking, how we define the “environment,” and how we think of ourselves in relationship with the environment. Who do we see, what do we see? In *Outside* magazine, Eddy Harris, a black writer and self-described outdoorsman, says that we see black people on television as lawyers or doctors, but we balk at imagining African Americans in the great outdoors.³⁶

In *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape*, Lauret Savoy recalls her own cultural and personal history in relation to outdoor spaces. Savoy, a geologist, described her approach to environmentalism, which she called “a poetics of geology”:



Human history on this continent owes much to the history of the Earth itself, to the land's structure, materials, and texture. Geology as a science has given me one elemental foundation of place. Yet geo-logo also offers metaphors for considering the deposition and erosion of human memory, the fragmentation and displacement of human experience. To write as a belated witness to the past, I've reached toward a poetics of geology—of trying to understand Earth and our place on it by seeking connections across different levels of meaning.³⁷

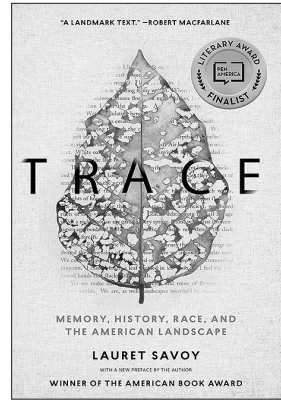
Savoy, a woman of African American, Euro-American, and Native American heritage as well as a professor of geology and environmental studies at Mount Holyoke College, begins *Trace* with her recollection of a trip to Grand Canyon National Park she made with her family when she was seven—a journey that “seeded all that followed.”³⁸ Recalling her experience viewing the canyon from a North Rim vantage point called “Point Sublime”—Savoy then contemplates the history of Euro-American exploration that led to the discovery of the canyon. Prompted by the name, Point Sublime, Savoy's thoughts wander to Emmanuel Kant and his philosophy of the sublime which, Savoy noted, would not have included her.

In Kant's view, neither I nor my dark ancestors could ever reach the sublime, so debased were our origins. In Kant's view neither would W. E. B. Du Bois, for whom this “sudden void in the bosom of the earth,” which he visited half a century before us, would “live eternal in [his] soul.”³⁹

As her reverie continues, Savoy reveals childhood experiences that sharpened her understanding of racism. She also reveals hidden truths behind U.S. myths about the land and its people. Of Hiawatha, Savoy notes, for example, “Longfellow might have viewed *The Song of Hiawatha* as a poetic restating of tribal voices and traditions, but he borrowed, distorted, and invented.”⁴⁰

Savoy's adult peregrinations took her from Arizona to Oklahoma and beyond. As she wandered, she imagined which roads her people might have traveled and which towns they might have inhabited. She examined graveyards across the country, looking for familiar surnames. Disconnected from much of her ancestors' past, she was drawn from an early age to the study of geology—the science of Earth's history.

Savoy's book contains fascinating moments of discovery, as when she finds, serendipitously, that in the mid-twentieth century her father wrote and published a book—a semiautobiographical account of his own childhood experiences as a light-skinned person of color. *Alien Land* by Willard Savoy⁴¹ is currently in print, a trace of Lauret Savoy's history once lost, now found. Lauret Savoy's voice reveals how race and culture impacted her life's work and relationship to the landscape. *Trace* also suggests that nature writing—including memoirs and environmental reveries like Savoy's—can still have meaning in the midst of ecological catastrophe.



What Our Relationship with Nature Says

Released after my email exchange with Alan Weisman, *Fuzz: When Nature Breaks the Law*, concerns itself with animal miscreants and other quirky characters: moose on the highway, bears stealing food, rats in the Vatican, animal-attack investigators, and human/elephant conflict managers. Beneath the humor, however, is a serious appraisal of the state of our relationship with Nature's creatures. "Who exactly are the trespassers here?" Roach seems to ask in a light-yet-heartfelt voice.

Roach, the author of *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*, has an uncanny ability to deliver bad news with humor. For example, she begins one chapter with an amusing discussion of penguin decorum—or the lack thereof—followed by a depiction of the environmental threats to the penguin's well-being. "To live in a penguin colony is to know no modesty. Anything you do—mate, preen, throw up fish for your young to eat—you do in plain sight of the neighbors."⁴²

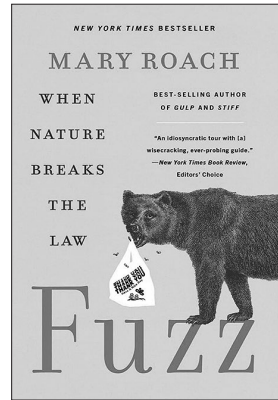
The yellow-eyed penguin of New Zealand's Otago Peninsula, however, pairs and nests in isolation, which makes the bird more vulnerable to predation than penguins living in colonies. Roach walks us through the penguin lifestyle in her characteristic gross-yet-amusing style. While exploring the penguin's territory with an employee of a wildlife tour company, for example, Roach examines a clump of sea lion vomit for signs of penguin tissue and remarks: "We happily note the absence of penguin solids."⁴³

Roach's description of the yellow-eyed Otago species rivals some of Tom Wolfe's most original prose: "candy red beak, the pink go-go boots, the yellow mask angling back from the eyes. They're the Flash, they're 1970s Bowie. I don't mean to imply that adorable, showy species are of more value or somehow deserving of more concern. It's just . . . damn."⁴⁴

Kandy-Kolored Yellow-Eyed Streamline Penguin—RAHGHHHH!⁴⁵

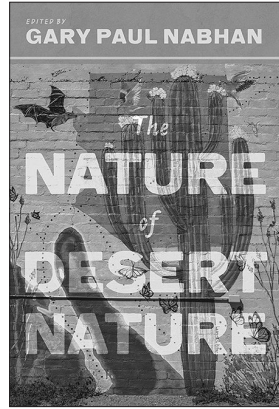
Otago's gaudy favorites are threatened by stoats and ferrets—and feral cats. Introduced to control the descendants of rabbits introduced by homesick Europeans, the stoats, ferrets, and cats eat the prey they were imported to control, but they also consume the eggs and chicks of the yellow-eyed penguin and other desirable avian species.

The killing of favored beasts by invasive species (introduced accidentally or purposely by humans) compels development of traps and/or poison designed to kill the unwanted imports as humanely as possible. With her unflinching sense of humor and without offending her readers, Roach describes the methods one might use to kill invasive animal species. Roach never lets her readers forget, however, that she thinks we humans are the ones responsible for our so-called problems with Nature.



The Nature of Desert Nature

The Nature of Desert Nature is a compendium of essays: a “multicultural collection of essays and art on desert life,” edited by Gary Paul Nabhan, an ecologist, ethnobotanist, nature writer, and Franciscan Brother, that is a breath of fresh air in a world of environmental doom and gloom. Nabhan is a superfan of the desert and its assorted, and sometimes unpleasant, creatures. “[T]here have been many prejudices—or at least, presumptions—about what a desert is and what it cannot possibly be,” wrote Nabhan in his essay, “The Nature of Desert Nature: A Deep History of Everything that Sticks, Stinks, Stings, Sings, Swings, Springs or Clings in Arid Landscapes.”⁴⁶



Introduced to desert life by Indigenous people who became his mentors and friends, Nabhan brings good news to those hungry for a bit of something lovely amidst environmental catastrophe and pandemic panic. What Nabhan shows us is a way of seeing deserts “that echoes and enhances an older way of imagining the desert found in the spiritual traditions of many ancient desert cultures. The shimmer is recognized and the cacophonous chorus [at sunrise] is heard once again.”⁴⁷

The chorus Nabhan speaks of is the chorus I hear every summer morning: cicadas, quail, Cactus wrens, Gila woodpeckers, ravens, and others. Those of us who live in the Sonoran Desert have experienced firsthand the drought and fire and loss that drift like smoke over our arid lands. We can, however, still find beauty in the red head of a female spiny lizard; in the bravado of a young scorpion, spiked tail held aloft as the creature glows under a blacklight; or the rapacious nature of a hungry roadrunner. Yes, the desert sticks, stinks, and stings, but it also sings. This edited collection shimmers and glows. With more than twenty-five authors contributing, there is refreshment for all. *The Nature of Desert Nature* will soothe frayed nerves and ease one’s fear of desert places.

Where Do We Go from Here?

In 2017, *The Atlantic* magazine asked a group of environmental historians, writers, and others a big question: “What Was the Most Significant Environmental Catastrophe of All Time?”⁴⁸ There was no consensus. Several environmentalists, including Bill McKibben and Elizabeth Kolbert, responded that the asteroid that killed an estimated seventy to ninety percent of all then-existing species was the biggest environmental catastrophe. McKibben added, “Of course with climate change we’re on the path to accomplishing something on the same scale, and this time it’s entirely voluntary.”⁴⁹

In the dissertation, *Nature Writing of the Anthropocene*, Christian Hummelsund Voie noted that “[t]he narrative of warning that characterizes [some] nature writing derives its force from the author’s awareness of the changed nature of nature.”⁵⁰ The

answers given by Kolbert, McKibben, Wallace-Wells, and Roach all, in one way or another, could be called “narratives of warning.” Will these narratives of warning motivate the right people to do the right thing—to take the lead and make the changes necessary to avert our climate crisis? Can we still enjoy a more Thoreauvian nature writing, that is, the celebration or contemplation of Nature’s beauty, or is enjoying nature writing irresponsible in the face of climate change?

Kolbert, McKibben, and Wallace-Wells’s style of writing certainly draws attention to the climate crisis. However, there are other styles that are also effective. Humor, which Mary Roach uses so effectively, did not diminish the impact of her narrative. Savoy’s *Trace* illustrates perfectly how environmental reverie can foster a deeper understanding of the way in which culture, race, and our own difficult histories impact our relationship with science and the environment.

Voie writes that “[a] general challenge for nature writing in the Anthropocene is to find ways of providing a sense of empowerment in the face of environmental challenges that often are of a magnitude that seems scaled beyond the scope of meaningful individual action.”⁵¹ Voie is right. The challenges are beyond the scope of individual action. So, what are we to do? Perhaps resistance, as McKibben defines it, is the only thing left to do—by installing solar panels, by taking collective action, by continuing to recycle, by writing works that celebrate nature while *also* sounding an alarm. And there should be no shame—when exhaustion and discouragement overwhelm one—in picking up a volume of essays that describe both poetically and aesthetically a world that might soon vanish.⁵²

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Notes

¹ Osborn, foreword to *Our Vanishing Wild Life* by William T. Hornady, vii. A dedicated conservationist, Hornaday was also a seriously flawed man. In 1906, when Hornady was director of the Bronx Zoo, he put Ota Benga, a Mbuti man, on display in a cage. Hornady was also a friend and colleague of Madison Grant, author of *The Passing of the Great Race*, a book that espoused “scientific” racism. For a revealing biography of Hornady, see Dehler’s *The Most Defiant Devil: William Temple Hornaday and His Controversial Crusade to Save American Wildlife*. See also Jedidiah Purdy, “Environmentalism’s Racist History,” *New Yorker*, August 13, 2015, to learn more about the bigoted undercurrents flowing through nineteenth and twentieth century conservationist thought.

² Osborn, foreword to *Our Vanishing Wild Life*, viii.

³ Marsh, preface to *Man and Nature*, vii.

⁴ Marsh, *Man and Nature*; Hornady, *Our Vanishing Wild Life*; Carson, *Silent Spring*; McKibben, *The End of Nature*; Weisman, *The World without Us*, and others.

⁵ Grandoni, “Ivory-billed Woodpecker Officially Declared Extinct,” para. 1, 2.

⁶ Allen and Kellog, “Call of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker.”

⁷ Spells, “An Oil Spill off the California Coast . . .”

⁸ Hamilton, “How California’s Worst Oil Spill Turned Beaches Black and the Nation Green”; Thurin, “How an Oil Spill Inspired the First Earth Day.”

⁹ Bailey, “What Is Zero Population Growth, or ZPG?”

¹⁰ Shaftel, “What is the Greenhouse Effect?”

¹¹ Swanberg, “‘The Way of the Rain,’” 67–96.

¹² Savoy, *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape*.

¹³ Nabhan, *The Nature of Desert Nature*, 1, 42.

¹⁴ Philippon, “Is American Nature Writing Dead?” 392.

¹⁵ McKibben, “To Respect the Earth’s Limits—or Push Them?” Review of *The Wizard and the Prophet*, para. 4.

¹⁶ Borlaug, Nobel Peace Prize 1970; Norman Borlaug: Biographical. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1970/borlaug/biographical/>.

¹⁷ Thomas Robert Malthus’s 1798 book, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, warned of a disjunction between arithmetic increases in food production and geometric growth of the human population. Malthus warned that what we now call the carrying capacity of Earth could not sustain predicted increases in the human population.

¹⁸ McKibben, “To Respect the Earth’s Limits—or Push Them?” Review of *The Wizard and the Prophet*, para. 4.

¹⁹ Mann, “Prologue,” *The Wizard and the Prophet*, 6–7.

²⁰ Kolbert, *Under a White Sky*.

²¹ Alan Weisman in an email exchange with the author, August 2021; McKibben, *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*

²² Kolbert, *Under a White Sky*, part 1, Down the River; see also part 3, Up in the Air, chapter 3, 197.

²³ Kolbert, part 1, Down the River, chapter 1, 13–29.

²⁴ Kolbert, 28–29.

²⁵ Kolbert, part 2, Into the Wild, chapter 2, 62; 62n26.

²⁶ Kolbert, part 3, Up in the Air, chapter 3, 200.

²⁷ Kolbert, 200–201.

²⁸ McKibben, *Falter*, 1.

²⁹ McKibben, 191.

³⁰ McKibben, 192.

- ³¹ McKibben, 2.
- ³² McKibben, 256.
- ³³ Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, 3.
- ³⁴ Wallace-Wells, 15.
- ³⁵ Wallace-Wells, 240.
- ³⁶ Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*, xii.
- ³⁷ Savoy, New Preface, in *Trace*, Penguin Random House, 2016, xviii–xix. See also Spenser Stevens, “Read an Excerpt from Lauret Savoy’s Trace.” [https://penguinrandomhouse-highereducation.com/2021/12/14/read-an-excerpt-from-lauret-savoys-trace/#:~:text=To%20write%20as%20a%20belated,of%20a%20body%20back%20together](https://penguinrandomhouse-highereducation.com/2021/12/14/read-an-excerpt-from-lauret-savoys-trace/#:~:text=To%20write%20as%20a%20belated,of%20a%20body%20back%20together.). December 14, 2021.
- ³⁸ Savoy, *Trace*, 2015, 5.
- ³⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of Beauty and Death,” quoted in Savoy, *Trace*, 10.
- ⁴⁰ Savoy, *Trace*, 56.
- ⁴¹ Willard Savoy, *Alien Land*.
- ⁴² Roach, *Fuzz*, 251.
- ⁴³ Roach, 252.
- ⁴⁴ Roach, 253.
- ⁴⁵ With apologies to Tom Wolfe, “There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored (Thphhhhhh!) Tangerine- Flake Streamline Baby (Rahghhhh!) Around the Bend (Brummmmmmmmmmmmm) . . . ,” *Esquire*, November 1, 1963.
- ⁴⁶ Nabhan, *The Nature of Desert Nature*, 1.
- ⁴⁷ Nabhan, 2.
- ⁴⁸ Roumieu, “The Big Question: What Was the Most Significant Environmental Catastrophe of All Time?” *The Atlantic*, May 2017.
- ⁴⁹ Roumieu, quoting Bill McKibben, para. 2. Emphasis in original.
- ⁵⁰ Voie, “Nature Writing of the Anthropocene,” 3. Comment in original.
- ⁵¹ Voie, 170.

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Hugo von Kupffer: A Pioneer of Modern Reporting in Berlin

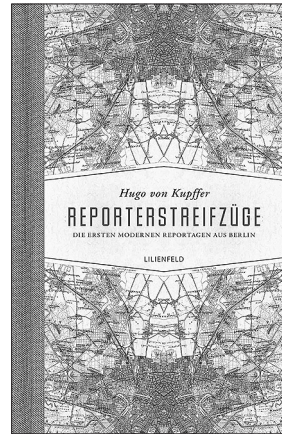
Reporterstreifzüge: Die ersten modernen Reportagen aus Berlin (Reporter strolls: The first modern reportages from Berlin) by Hugo von Kupffer. Edited with an afterword by Fabian Mauch. Düsseldorf: Lilienfeld Verlag, 2019. Footnotes. Editorial Note. Credits. Hardback, 272 pp. €22.00; USD\$24.14.

Reviewed by Kate McQueen, University of California Santa Cruz, United States

When the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, commonly known as the St. Louis World's Fair, flung open its gates in the spring of 1904, thousands of journalists descended upon the city. They came, not simply as reporters but as participants in the World's Press Parliament. This international convening at the fair aimed to promote journalistic professionalization and cooperation across borders—a “universal journalism,” to borrow a phrase from the Parliament's Committee on Resolutions, which outlined a vision for a special committee of seven attendees of the 1904 Parliament to devise a plan for a permanent “confederation” among international members of the press that would take that vision forward.

Five thousand delegates from thirty-seven countries arrived. But only two non-Anglo-Americans rose to the ranks of the World's Press Parliament's higher office and special committees. One of those was Hugo von Kupffer (1853–1928), chief editor of the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, then arguably Germany's most-read newspaper. Kupffer's elevated position reflected his standing as an elder statesman of the profession. In fact, his influence on the German-language press would be difficult to overstate. Kupffer played an outsized role in developing one of the country's first mass newspapers, serving as editor-in-chief for the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger's* first four decades. He was also one of the first German journalists to adopt modern, first-person reporting methods—strategies he learned on his first newspaper job with the *New York Herald*, from 1875 to 1878.

The *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger's* founding in 1883 afforded Kupffer an opportunity to transplant these soon-to-be universal strategies into a regularly appearing section called “*Reporterstreifzüge*,” which loosely translates as “reporter strolls.” With these articles, Kupffer wrote a few years later, “I envisioned the real American ‘reporter,’ who exists in name only here, and who, due to our almost still embryonic, heavily constricted, sometimes even antiquated press conditions, cannot yet thrive on Ger-



man soil.”

The ephemeral nature of newsprint can make it difficult to locate and appreciate such pioneering moments of transfer. But thanks to publisher Lilienfeld Verlag, Kupffer’s efforts are now readily available to today’s readers of German. *Reporterstreifzüge: Die ersten modernen Reportagen aus Berlin* (Reporter strolls: The first modern reportages from Berlin) is a collection of twenty-five articles originally published in the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* between 1886 and 1892. It builds on an 1889 collection of similar title—*Reporterstreifzüge: Ungeschminkte Bilder aus der Reichshauptstadt* (Reporter strolls: Unvarnished pictures from the imperial capital)—by adding twelve previously uncollected articles, a bibliography, a notes section that decodes some rather charming, antiquated vocabulary, and editor Fabian Mauch’s helpful, historically contextualizing afterword.

The articles featured in this volume accomplish two things. They demonstrate Kupffer’s reporting and writing style—a rendering of on-scene observations interspersed with interview-harvested information and dialogue. They also display corners of Berlin that typical readers, then and now, would find unfamiliar. It is worth noting that Kupffer is not a Benjamin-style *flâneur*, nor a “raging reporter” in the model of Kupffer’s more famous journalistic descendant, Egon Erwin Kisch. Kupffer’s explorations are purposeful and less concerned with the city’s seedy underbelly than with the unseen but respectable world of the municipal. He takes his readers inside the city’s canalization (189–98) and water purification systems (223–39). He visits the *Städtische Desinfektions-Anstalt*, the city-operated institute responsible for purifying all manner of household objects of infectious disease (166–74). He knocks on doors with the city’s census gatherers (160–65).

The most attention-grabbing articles in the collection do, however, find a way to connect civic administration with the more sensational topics one can assume appealed to his target audience. Kupffer attends a day of trials at the local criminal court (113–20). He goes inside two prisons, one for men (136–47) and one for women (199–207). He tours the city morgue (104–112). The volume’s most hair-raising piece is a long profile of the city executioner, Herr Krauz, complete with a description of a beheading by sword.

Despite the occasionally gruesome material, the articles are surprisingly prim. Kupffer’s access is city-sanctioned, and his interview subjects are usually civil servants, whom he approaches with little skepticism. As a result, there is a “public service announcement” quality to his work, flavored with an additional dose of local patriotism. This is perhaps to be expected in a newspaper like the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, which explicitly marketed itself as being “above partisanship.” For more critical explanatory work, readers at the time would have needed to consult a more left-leaning publication.

The collection is also free of literary conceit. Like many of his contemporary journalists in Germany, Kupffer studied literature and in his youth and fostered aspirations to be an author in the literary sense. Yet, coming into his own as a reporter, he accomplished a complete reversal. In the foreword to the original collection, Kupffer assessed his work as less of an “oil painting” than an “un-retouched photograph.” He

wrote not for the feuilletonist's bourgeois audience, who enjoyed an elegant turn of phrase, but for the petit-bourgeois and working-class reader who needed, as Hendrik Michael points out, an "everyday resource" to help navigate Berlin's rapid growth. The city had not yet fully evolved into a metropolis but was certainly on the rise; its population tripled to nearly three million during Kupffer's professional lifetime.

Kupffer had the foresight to understand that his work might hold, as he writes in his foreword, a "cultural-historical" rather than a literary value. And it is true that this volume provides a fascinating window into a now utterly unfamiliar Berlin—a city that still faced diphtheria and typhus, retained an executioner (37–42), and reserved a regular "ladies day" at court, exclusively to hear the cases of female defendants (113–20). The new volume does a beautiful job of preserving that value, and not only through its well-researched and imminently readable afterword. Lilienfeld Verlag has provided the book with an attractive feel and design and even created a digital trailer for the publicity campaign. It feels correct for Kupffer's journalism to be reintroduced by a trade—rather than a scholarly—publisher, with a more general audience in mind. Because Lilienfeld Verlag also published the collected work of legendary German trial reporter Sling, *Der Mensch, der Schiesst* (The man who shoots) in 2014, German press historians can hold out hope that additional forgotten treasures of journalism may soon find their way to a new and broader audience. It would be a delight to see other trade publishers follow Lilienfeld's example, in Germany and beyond.

An Imaginative Exploration of German and U.S. Narrative Journalism at the Turn of the Nineteenth to Twentieth Century

Die Sozialreportage als Genre der Massenpresse: Erzählen im Journalismus und die Vermittlung städtischer Armut in Deutschland und den USA (1880–1910)

[The social reportage as a genre of the mass press. Storytelling in journalism and the mediation of urban poverty in Germany and the United States (1880–1910)]

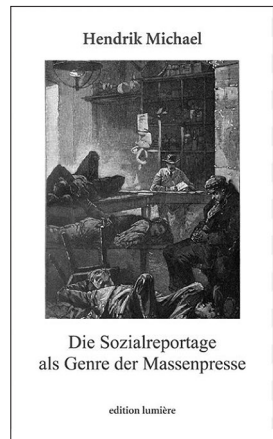
by Hendrik Michael. Bremen: Edition Lumière, 2020. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Hardcover, 536 pp., €44.80; USD\$22.

Reviewed by Thomas R. Schmidt, University of California, San Diego, United States

In his book, *Die Sozialreportage als Genre der Massenpresse*, Hendrik Michael of the University of Bamberg in Germany offers a comparative analysis of narrative journalism in New York and Berlin at the end of the nineteenth century, showing the wide spectrum of narrative techniques, the variety of organizational settings, and the role of journalism in exploring social change. With a focus on representations of poverty, Michael draws from a sample of more than 400 stories in local newspapers, national magazines, and books. The book's core comprises six case studies, set up in a way so that a German case corresponds with a U.S. case. Michael contrasts newspaper series in *The World* ("True Stories of the News") with *Berliner Morgenpost* ("Aus dem Dunklen Berlin"). He also compares the book-length investigative journalism of Jacob Riis and Hans R. Fischer as well as the literary journalism of Abraham Cahan (*The Commercial Advertiser*) and Hans Hyan (*Welt am Montag*).

A sophisticated conceptual framework (mostly drawing from German scholars but also giving nods to the literary journalism studies community) adds further layers of analysis to explore the techniques, organizational contexts, and journalistic functions of what is called "reportage" in German, that is, the narrative news story. With this analytical approach, Michael challenges journalism scholars to evaluate narrative writing in all its variations (from the sensational to the literary) while encouraging scholars of narrative journalism to engage more often and more deeply with narratological analysis.

Following a historical overview of the evolution of narrative journalism in the United States and Germany, respectively, and a description of the book's methodological approach the book is organized around three major parts of analysis: a narratological analysis of news stories, a contextual analysis of conditions for news



production, and a functional examination of narrative journalism as a genre. The narratological analysis introduces four dimensions (narrative situation, character, time, and space) to differentiate between various stylistic effects inherent in the news stories. Michael is particularly interested in exploring how different authors create authenticity and establish their authority as reliable and trustworthy narrators. He finds a broad range of techniques across publications but provides evidence that the major differences are not cultural—that is, between German and U.S. styles. Rather, the analysis shows that particular kinds of journalism (sensational, investigative, literary) are fairly consistent across cultures, using narrative techniques to achieve specific effects. For example, Michael highlights how the varying ways of creating distance or proximity may lead to a range of possible reader responses, either exacerbating social distance or creating openings for empathy.

The contextual analysis pays attention to the economic situation of newspapers during that era. Michael examines if and to what extent the use of narrative journalism was a result of commercialization and market pressures. In a way, he is responding to the plea of the late John Pauly, who argued that what we needed was “a more institutionally situated history of literary journalism to place alongside our studies of writerly technique” (J. J. Pauly, “The New Journalism and the Struggle for Interpretation,” *Journalism* 15, no. 5, 2014, 590). Against this backdrop, the differences between journalism in the United States and Germany become more pronounced. The former was already more newsroom oriented, routinized, and open to various (if not all) social groups (women, for example, but not African Americans), while in Germany, news work was more individually driven, elitist, and restrained by censorship as well as unfavorable libel laws.

Building on the narratological and contextual analyses, Michael then examines the journalistic functions of narrative news stories in relation to their representations of poverty. He challenges common notions of mainstream journalism research that narrative news stories are soft, shallow, and superficial. In contrast, he develops a subtle framework to emphasize that these news stories fulfill key functions, depending on the sub-genre (sensationalism, investigative journalism, literary journalism). Again, it turns out that differences between these sub-genres are more articulated than any potential cultural differences between the United States and Germany. This central insight, that narrative journalists and their techniques were more similar than one would expect, points to globalizing tendencies and the strong currents of modernity that affected urban journalism in both the United States and Germany, in different yet similar ways.

Michael is a media scholar, but his approach reflects a central technique used by anthropologists: to make the unfamiliar familiar and the familiar unfamiliar. His analysis validates narrative news stories in the popular press and emphasizes that their role was not accidental or peripheral in the early twentieth century but integral and central to mainstream journalism. At the same time, he demonstrates through narratological analysis that not all reportages are equal and thus need to be evaluated not just for their literary merit but their journalistic functions.

Yet, as much as Michael engages with a wealth of primary and secondary sources,

his treatment of the six case studies (as well as additional references) at times feels uneven. The analysis of U.S. sources is more expansive (also because there is more research to build on) but travels familiar terrain. The analysis of Berlin stories unearths some hidden gems and seems more original, especially because the study of German literary journalism, particularly from an institutionally situated perspective, has much room to expand. Another curiously underdeveloped aspect is the question of why the narrative styles in the United States and Germany were similar even though societal conditions were quite different.

Taken together, however, Michael has delivered a major piece of imaginative scholarship, identifying the elementary forms of narrative news writing in a pioneering era. His focus on narrative news stories as an integral part of local journalism in mainstream German newspapers especially offers a novel perspective that deserves wide attention and readership.

International Perspectives on Social Justice and Literary Journalism

Literary Journalism and Social Justice

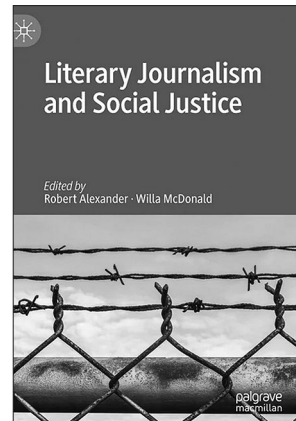
Edited by Robert Alexander and Willa McDonald. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. Index. Hardcover, 326 pp., USD\$139.99; eBook USD\$109.

Reviewed by Nancy L. Roberts, University at Albany, SUNY, United States

This collection of nineteen original essays by major global scholars provides convincing evidence that the pen is mightier than the sword, at least when wielded to write literary journalism. Indeed, this anthology demonstrates that literary journalism seems uniquely able to communicate the importance of, and even to inspire action to advance, social justice. As the editors note, “. . . literary journalists around the world are using their craft to address the unfair distribution of power, wealth, rights, benefits, burdens, and opportunities.” They are “particularly drawn to respond to the impacts of capitalism, globalization, climate change, sexism, heteronormativity, racism, speciesism, and the global legacies of colonialism” (2).

While a few scholars have produced studies of individual writers whose literary journalism focuses on social justice, this is the first major work that investigates the subject collectively and globally. The scope is truly international, with studies of writers both historical and current, representing nations and regions that include Austria, Australia, Canada, China, England, France, India, Iran, Latin America, Portugal, Sweden, and the United States. The editors, Robert Alexander of Brock University, Canada, and Willa McDonald of Macquarie University, Australia, establish a conceptual framework that is both wide-ranging and theoretically and methodologically innovative. A variety of theoretical approaches undergird the research, including standpoint theory, mobility theory, ethnography, Marxism, and Aristotelian phronesis.

The editors organize the book into four parts, each of which focuses on a characteristic of literary journalism that is particularly suited to covering the subject of social justice: “Approach: the critical attitude which motivates literary journalists in the way they select and cover stories”; “Encounter: the special relationships the immersion techniques of literary journalism encourage its writers to develop with their subjects”; “Representation: the flexible and innovative, often multi-scalar, rhetorical techniques literary journalists employ to tell their stories”; and “Response: the powerful affective responses this combination of features can produce in readers and the changes and actions to which they may lead” (3).



As the editors observe, the writers and their work explored in this volume often seem to have become interested in literary journalism and social justice because of their personal experiences. An example is Moa Martinson (1890–1964), a Swedish writer who after demeaning, even “corrosive” experiences with private charity, wrote literary journalism advocating an alternative, namely “social justice through mutual aid and solidarity” (4). Anna Hoyles offers a close reading of Martinson’s writing that focuses on her use of dialogue, description, narrative structure, and other literary techniques.

Similarly, personal knowledge has inspired the contemporary activist writer Meena Kandasamy’s literary journalism criticizing India’s oppressive caste system. “Her own personal experience as a victim of abuse and marginalization forms the basis for her critique,” David Dowling observes in a deeply researched chapter that develops a nuanced theory of anti-caste literary journalism (49–50).

Although, as the editors point out in an insightful introduction, not every piece of literary journalism that spotlights social justice grows out of the writer’s personal experiences (6), the characteristic immersion research of literary journalism builds an intensely personal connection between writer and subject. This intimate link, where the reporter is not a distanced, dispassionate onlooker but a participant observer, brings a greater ethical responsibility for the writer than does conventional journalism. Awareness of this idea developed as part of the theorization of the “eyewitness account” genre (aka reportage) in Europe between 1880 and 1935, the subject of Pascal Sigg’s fascinating chapter. He traces how the Czech writer Egon Erwin Kisch gradually developed the concept of “the reporter as an eyewitness who ‘shaped reality’ for readers” (6). The German-Jewish critic Walter Benjamin further expanded Kisch’s concepts, Sigg explains, as he criticized fascism for its “aestheticizing of political life” (75). Benjamin decried how 1930s film and photography made media consumers passive and increasingly powerless in the face of fascist forces.

Standpoint theory illuminates Sue Joseph’s chapter that discusses two books by Australian writers, John Dale’s *Huckstepp: A Dangerous Life* (2000) and Doris Pilkington Garimara’s *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996). The first tells the story of Sallie-Anne Huckstepp, a sex worker who blew the whistle on police corruption and was murdered in Sydney in 1986 (8). Garimara’s book is about three Aboriginal girls (one of whom was her mother), members of what is called the Stolen Generation, who were removed from their families by the state, divorced from their own culture, and resettled. Joseph uses these books as case studies to show that “Literary journalism can allow voices that have been silenced and repressed by powerful forces to finally be heard” (99). Her analysis is convincing, that both writers, by telling these women’s stories from their standpoint, “have given them agency, remediating in some way the social injustices [that they] endured, and re-narrativising [*sic*] spaces painted by the dominant worldview” (113).

In “Making Visible the Invisible: George Orwell’s ‘Marrakech,’” Russell Frank observes how a common theme in literary journalism addressing social injustice is our failure to notice and take stock of society’s marginalized. As Frank puts it, “The world’s powerless people are neither invisible nor voiceless: It is that the world’s privileged and powerful people refuse to see them or hear them” (128). He begins with a

detailed analysis of this theme in Orwell's "Marrakech," then takes us on a journey through several more pieces that also articulate this theme, mostly culled from Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda's classic anthology, *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997). Many of the "invisible" are "the poor and oppressed," but Frank aptly notes that "The real lives of soldiers and civilians tend to disappear in the fog of glamor that envelopes war" (121). He goes on to cite several compelling examples of literary journalism that pierces this fog, such as Martha Gellhorn's reporting on the Spanish Civil War, Walt Whitman's on the U.S. Civil War's battle of Chancellorsville, and Michael Herr's on Vietnam.

Laura Ventura makes a strong contribution with her exploration of the writing of Latin American chroniclers Juan Villoro, Alberto Salcedo Ramos, Alma Guillermoprieto, Leila Guerriero, and Josefina Licitra, and nonfiction writer Valeria Luiselli. All aim to give voice to the struggles of the powerless and vulnerable, particularly children and young people, "preventing their testimonies from being swallowed by time and indifference" (144). Scholarship on Latin American literary journalism is substantially enriched, also, by Pablo Calvi's "Social Justice as a Political Act: Action and Memory in the Journalism of Rodolfo Walsh" (157–73) and Dolores Palau-Sampio's "Territorial Rights, Identity, and Environmental Challenges in Latin American Literary Journalism" (243–58).

Further evidence of the volume's vision can be seen in Kate McQueen's chapter analyzing the U.S. prison press. She demonstrates how literary journalism can "promote awareness of prison life and encourage necessary reform" as well as buttress "John Pauly's suggestion that the form can play a role in shared civic life—that 'imagined commons in which our hopes for humane . . . and equitable social relations dwell'" (210).

Willa McDonald delves into two recent books of testimonial memoir that illustrate literary journalism's effectiveness in addressing social justice "across physical and political borders" (225). Wang Fang (aka Fang Fang, her pen name) wrote internet posts about being quarantined in Wuhan, China, at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic that were published as *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City* (June 1920) (226). And Behrouz Boochani published *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (2018) about refugees imprisoned by the Australian government. McDonald analyzes these texts through the lens of mobility justice—enforced mobility and immobility that constitute grave social injustices.

Robert Alexander investigates the concept of mobility relative to literary journalism in two major ways. One is the physical mobility of writers that enables them to travel to their subjects and conduct immersion research; the other is the rhetorical mobility of literary journalism that spurs the creation of different techniques and styles that engage the reader and address social injustices in multilayered ways that convey deep truths.

The remaining chapters are also intriguing, original, and well-researched. In the final one, Mitzi Lewis and Jeffrey C. Neely discuss their study, based on a survey of literary journalism instructors in colleges and universities around the world, which "suggests that teaching literary journalism may be a powerful tool for students' transformative learning and for promoting social justice" (307). It is an appropriate finale to this superb collection that will doubtless inspire subsequent inquiry for years to come.

The Art of Audio Storytelling, by a Master of Her Craft

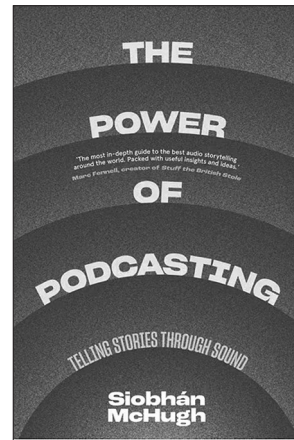
The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories through Sound

by Siobhán McHugh. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. Appendix. Notes. Index. Hardcover, £84.00; USD\$100; Paperback, 320 pp. £28.00; USD\$32.00; E-book, £28.00; USD\$28.

Reviewed by Ella Waldmann, Université Paris-Cité, Paris, France

In 2018, when radio documentary and podcast producer and academic Siobhán McHugh gave a free online course, 35,000 participants from 150 countries joined to learn about “The Power of Podcasting for Storytelling” (5). The success of this course speaks not only to the popularity that this topic has recently gained but also to the central role that McHugh plays today as one of the most generous and stimulating voices in the field. One of her greatest strengths is combining her hands-on experience as a producer and consultant for many acclaimed radio documentaries and podcasts and her academic expertise in oral history and literary journalism. Very early on, she identified the convergence between storytelling and the audio format, insisting on the power of aurality to create authenticity, empathy, and interest. With the coming of age of podcasting in the mid-2010s, audio storytelling experienced an unprecedented revival. McHugh was one of the first to acknowledge the shift that this new medium represented for the form with her seminal article, “How Podcasting Is Changing the Audio Storytelling Form” (*The Radio Journal—International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 2016) in which she drew on testimonies from renowned international professionals to elaborate new theoretical perspectives.

Until now, the existing literature on podcasts has fallen into two categories: on the one hand, practical guidebooks for aspiring podcasters and, on the other, academic works in the now-established field of podcast studies. Siobhán McHugh’s *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound* bridges this gap. This hybrid book is both a trove of information, analyses, and insights for scholars and students and a useful guide filled with practical advice for anyone who would themselves want to start writing and producing podcasts. The feat here is to convey knowledge that is always grounded in personal experience. McHugh applies the methods of storytelling to her writing: she often uses the first person and personal anecdotes to draw readers into the secrets of audio storytelling and does not shy away from introducing affect



by speaking to the reader's feelings to make concepts more palpable, without ever remaining at the surface level or veering away from her rigorous theoretical perspective.

The book begins with a case study in which McHugh relates an interview she conducted with an Australian woman who was an entertainer for U.S. troops during the Vietnam War. This woman, McHugh recalls, was a natural radio "talent"; yet she also recalls the elaborate editing process she had to go through to make the best out of her recording and reveal the "seductive power of sound."

In chapter one, "Podcasting: Why, Who, What" (8–25), McHugh delineates the contours of podcasting and discusses the various forms the medium can take, from informal conversations, known as a "chumcast" or "chatcast" (10) to extremely scripted and crafted narrative podcasts. What these productions all have in common is the centrality of voice, which is McHugh's primary interest and object of research. She then narrows her focus down to the genre that interests her specifically, the narrative nonfiction podcast.

The second chapter delves into the "The Backstory" (26–46) of audio storytelling, giving a historical overview of the genre, in which she pays homage to its public radio origins and founders such as Norman Corwin, Studs Terkel, and Jay Allison. McHugh does not restrict her analysis to the United States, as she also discusses the radio and podcast landscape in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, where she has lived and spent most of her career. This chapter does an excellent job of underlining the "cross-fertilisations" (33) that take place both historically and geographically, between different generations and countries.

With the advent of podcasting, radio experienced a digital revolution that sparked a renewal of storytelling through sound. McHugh retraces the beginning of the medium and ponders the ongoing debate around the distinction between radio and podcast—or whether podcasting can be considered a self-standing medium—which she settles by defining them, with a wink, as "kissing cousins" (48).

Chapter four, "The Aerobic Art of Interviewing" (69–98), deals with the interviewing process, a topic that goes beyond the field of audio and can be of interest for any format or outlet. Here, McHugh highlights the importance—and difficulty—of "active" or "aerobic listening" (70–73). McHugh draws again from her personal experience, breaking down several memorable interviews she conducted throughout her career.

Chapter five revisits some of the most notable podcasts produced in the last ten years, insisting on "milestones" (99) such as *This American Life's* spin-off *Serial* or *The New York Times's* indispensable *The Daily*. The following chapter, "Podcasting as Literary Journalism: *S-Town*" (128–55), adapted from an academic article published in this journal, is an in-depth analysis of the unrivaled masterpiece *S-Town*. It examines how the podcast fits the definition of literary journalism that was developed by Norman Sims in his 1984 book *The Literary Journalists* by analyzing it through the categories of immersion, voice and subjectivity, symbolism, structure, and accuracy, before questioning the impact and ethics of such a production—questions that may and should apply to any work of literary journalism.

The next two chapters are a master class in creating a narrative podcast, based

on McHugh's experience as a consultant for three recent Australian productions. The author takes the reader behind the scenes (or, as she puts it, "under the hood") (183) of the production process of a hit podcast. She dissects authentic scripts and offers a glimpse of the various drafts and revisions they go through—an invaluable resource for practitioners and researchers alike.

The book concludes by addressing the necessary questions of "inclusion, diversity, and equality" (216–49) in the podcasting sphere, and by speculating on the medium's shifting landscape and future. At the end is also an appendix listing recommendations and podcast reviews. Interspersed throughout the book are special sections featuring practical tips, short Q&As with producers, and lists of recommended links, podcasts, and professional networks—further evidence of its versatility.

McHugh shares her knowledge and skills with great generosity and wit. She is an integral member of the close-knit radio and podcast community, which she describes as follows: "It's entirely unscientific and I have no way of proving it, but I just think we audio-storytelling folk are generally a good bunch, softer than the average media apparatchik, more inclined to care about fairness and social justice." After reading *The Power of Podcasting*, one can only concur with her statement.

Conover On Life and People in Colorado's San Luis Valley

Cheap Land Colorado: Off-Gridders at America's Edge

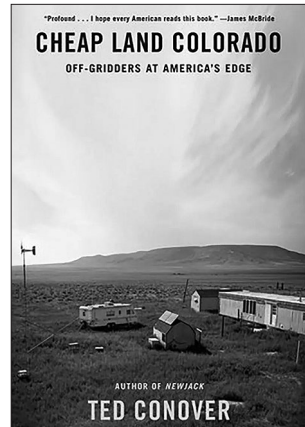
by Ted Conover. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2022. Hardcover, 283 pages. USD\$30.

Reviewed by Patrick Walters, Washington & Lee University, United States

Literary journalism possesses, at its core, powerful potential for telling the most complex and challenging stories of a culture. Perhaps more than any other form, it has the capacity to untangle and explore the nuances of huge subjects usually only truly tackled in essays or academic papers. At its best, it can be used to take on issues that are both beyond and within the daily headlines that make the world spin faster and faster each year.

Throughout his career, Ted Conover has delved into many of these subjects with his immersive reporting. *Coyotes: A Journey across Borders with America's Mexican Migrants* (1987) addressed difficult questions about what leads to the never-ending tensions over immigration in the United States. *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing* (2000) explored the uncomfortable line separating the punishers and the punished in the justice system. *The Routes of Man: How Roads Are Changing the World and the Way We Live Today* (2010) got at the heart of structural factors that lead to varying levels of interconnectedness among cultures across the globe. These are big and often amorphous subjects, but good storytelling can make them concrete and real. When that happens successfully, a reader often thinks only of the narrative story right away; the writer doesn't need to hit him square in the face with the Big Issue. It is only upon thoughtful reflection that the reader comes to the realization of what the story was *really* about.

The storyline of Conover's latest book, *Cheap Land Colorado: Off-Gridders at America's Edge*, is a simple one: It revolves around the diverse subculture of people living in the San Luis Valley in rural Colorado. Conover uses the immersive techniques of his previous works—he moves to the prairie, buys a trailer, eventually purchases his own plot of land, and lives among his subjects. He volunteers with a social services group, making house calls and checking on residents, offering firewood and other supplies. But the narrative is just a tool for telling the *real story*. This book is really about the cultural disconnect in the United States, one which leads many to feel their stories are not being heard, their lives not appreciated. It is about polarization, both its causes and its effects. It is about forces that lead people into isolation amid a



feeling they don't belong elsewhere. Daily journalists have been trying to do a better job of amplifying such lesser-heard voices since the 2016 presidential election, but their format often only allows them to scratch the surface. Conover uses the stories of people who live in this rural prairie land to show how reality can both affirm and complicate the stereotypes that often separate U.S. citizens. Furthermore, he treats the land as a character, showing how its beauty—and its offer of solitude—can offer a salve for the conflicts and tensions of modern society.

Through the stories of his neighbors, Conover shows the diverse, underlying reasons that people move to this nowhere land. Some want affordable land. The book's title came from one resident who, following the death of his wife, had wanted a fresh start and Googled “cheap land Colorado.” Some seek to be alone, a desire not infrequently connected to post-traumatic stress disorder. Others are driven by a desire to be self-reliant or want to stay out of the watchful eye of law enforcement. Drawing on his participant observation skills, Conover notes how the valley enticed him, much as it did his characters. It was partly because he was “coming under the spell of land” (136–37) that he decided to buy his own plot after initially keeping his trailer on the land of the Gruber family. Furthermore, he tells firsthand of the feeling that such escape could have on a person: “Last, and probably the biggest thing, was the way I felt out here on the prairie. I felt good. I felt free and alive” (142).

But it is the dizzying array of characters Conover finds who really tell these stories. Ania and Jurek speak of their distrust of government, especially the zoning office, and how capital letters are a code for enslavement, all part of a “Dog Latin” language that they claim dates back to the Roman Empire (89). Others show their disdain for masking mandates or criticize Black Lives Matter protesters, both opinions that lead Conover to respond with a competing perspective. Conover takes pains, however, to ensure the narrative does not become overly simplistic. He shows he is trying to get at sometimes unreconcilable complexities of humans in a polarized world. When heading to a potluck dinner at one resident's home, Conover recalls being asked about COVID-19: “So, do you think it could all be a hoax?” Expressing shock, Conover says he definitely knew it was real. The neighbor, Paul, acknowledges that he felt conflicted; Paul was, after all, wearing a mask and had masking tape six feet apart on his deck to encourage social distancing (224).

Another neighbor encouraged Conover to take all his money out of the bank due to a banking crisis he said was caused by the media. Others showed disdain for Black Lives Matter, responding with a “Don't all lives matter?” refrain and claiming that the protests involved Black people seeking “superiority,” but Conover contextualizes this exchange, noting that “He lived in a universe of poor people where he was competing for a small share of the available resources. Equality, he said, would be fine with him” (227). This exchange demonstrates how the narrative seeks to go beyond the binary, good-evil nature of standard journalistic frames. Conover is looking to get into the often-conflicting nuances of people, showing the ‘why’ behind the ‘what.’

The characters portrayed in *Cheap Land Colorado* also illustrate the universal nature of humankind and some of the commonalities that bind people across class, race, party, and geography. They show the pain of the opioid crisis, as well as the

struggle of veterans coming to the valley after the legalization of medical marijuana. Conover zooms in when finding out the Gruber family will have to put down Tank, an aging St. Bernard that had become sickly and aggressive. He writes of how Frank Gruber's face becomes wet with tears while getting ready to shoot the dog—the most humane way Gruber knew possible. The scenes here describe death and sadness in a way that shows the universality of emotional pain. However, the reality of the political divide is never far in the background. This book is, at times, Conover's most political one. The starkest example is when chapter five opens with statistics from *Harper's Index* indicating that “the number of the twenty least prosperous [U.S.] congressional districts that are represented by Republicans” is sixteen; and the number of the “twenty most prosperous districts that are represented by Democrats” is twenty. It also highlights how—since 2008—97 percent “of statewide elections in the Deep South” have been “won by Republicans” (138). While Conover's own views do come through, the political narrative mostly focuses on showing the extent of the divide in the United States.

One of the greatest challenges in this book is how to avoid “othering” the subjects, to find a way to treat them as humans and not as mere curiosities. A knee-jerk critic could try to argue that Conover was guilty of that here. The critic could say Conover found a collection of oddballs and extremists that violated the norms of the San Luis Valley's population. But, when viewing this cast of characters as a whole, that seems unlikely. This book stays true to its aim of exploring the country's cultural divides and seeking the reasons these people want to get away and live off the grid. It puts human faces on the increasing distrust of institutions, a phenomenon oft-explored by journalists and academics alike.

In the epilogue, Conover describes the commonalities he found: “Rather, they were the restless and the fugitive; the idle and the addicted; and the generally disaffected, the done-with-what-we-were-supposed-to-do crowd. People who, feeling chewed up and spit out, had turned away from and sometimes against institutions they'd been involved with all of their lives, whether companies or schools or the church. The prairie was their sanctuary and their place of exile” (253). *Cheap Land Colorado* is not a fast read; the storyline does not always suck the reader in with action or drama. The characters can be difficult to keep track of. Their story is not a simple narrative; it has no makings of a movie. But that is partly the point: Today's complex issues are not represented by simple stories. Conover takes on the role of docent here, trying to guide the reader through this place and lead to a better understanding of the differences that divide us.

Insights on Contemporary Latin American Documentary Narratives: The Writers and Their Work

Latin American Documentary Narratives: The Intersections of Storytelling and Journalism in Contemporary Literature

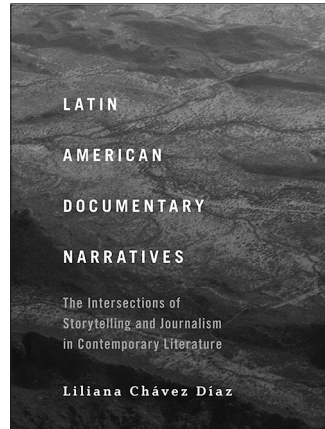
by Liliana Chávez Díaz. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. Photos. References. Index. Hardcover, 290 pp., USD\$108. Paperback, USD\$35.95 Ebook, USD\$35.95

By Aleksandra Wiktorowska, University of Warsaw, Poland

The need to recognize different manifestations of literary journalism and to expand the scholarly work beyond the anglophone world, stressed at the beginning of the twenty-first century, seems still very real. *Latin American Documentary Narratives: The Intersections of Storytelling and Journalism in Contemporary Literature* undeniably fulfills this demand and places selected Latin American non-fiction narratives not only within the global history of literary journalism but also engages in current debates on world literature.

Liliana Chávez Díaz, a Mexican scholar, journalist, and author of *Viajar sola. Identidad y experiencia de viaje en autoras hispanoamericanas* (Women travelling alone. Identity and travel experience by Hispanic American authors) (Edicions Universitat Barcelona, 2020), focuses in *Latin American Documentary Narratives* on “a marginal documentary trend that has formed its own alternative storytelling history and imaginaries at the margins of other more globally visible Latin American worlds” (1). She names this trend “documentary narrative” and discusses it through many examples, taking the reader on a fascinating journey through investigative and literary works of Gabriel García Márquez, Rodolfo Walsh, Carlos Monsiváis, Elena Poniatowska, Juan Villoro, Martín Caparrós, Santiago Roncagliolo, Leila Guerriero, Arturo Fontaine Talavera, Cristian Alarcón, and Francisco Goldman.

According to Chávez Díaz, documentary narratives are a means of exploring the encounter with the other and, as such, could be read as performative speech acts, in which different worldviews clash. The book thus presents a quite innovative approach. Instead of placing Latin American documentary narratives on a more popular intersection of fact and fiction or journalism and literature, as used by other scholars in the discipline, the author opts for the intersection of storytelling and



journalism. She argues that the storyteller is an essential figure through which true stories reconstruct reality and that “Even since the turn of the twenty-first century, in Latin America it is still possible to find [Walter] Benjamin’s storyteller disguised as a *flâneur*, a chronicler or *cronista*” (4).

Díaz explains that while journalists in other parts of the globe are safe enough to introduce first-person narration, the political situation in Latin America makes it difficult to write openly. She clarifies:

[T]he Latin American writer cannot aim to tell the truth of others without risking censorship, or even death. These writers therefore speak from the position of someone who, in order to tell the story of others, must tell their own story too. In contrast with authors publishing abroad, such as Goldman, Latin American writers need to include themselves in the narrative, for being a witness can supplement a lack of official information, or of a trustworthy legal process. This might explain why these authors are more concerned with modes of telling the truth that entail fewer risks, than with delivering ‘objective’ information. (33)

Chávez Díaz’s initial thesis is that “whereas in Europe the novel was born as a popular, mass form of entertainment that aimed to reflect the everyday life of common people, in Latin America this form, like any other literary genre, was produced and consumed by the elites. In their emergence from popular culture, documentary narratives—while not as openly popular—might be seen as an alternative way of revealing the diversity of voices and identities within the masses, a way that allows these voices to speak from their own position of diversity” (43). And although this statement could be considered quite controversial, the author’s analysis of selected Latin American documentary narratives gives evidence that the value and importance of documentary narratives go beyond their “literary” style, as those real stories in a metafictional format cross the limits of conventional media and offer an ethical and aesthetic response to the problem of truth and communication.

The book is structured in three parts, titled “Courage,” “Belonging,” and “Listening.” In the first, the author offers a historical overview of *crónica* (chronicle), literary journalism, and *testimonio* (testimony), proposing a new reading of two stories of survivors, namely Gabriel García Márquez’s *Relato de un naufrago* (The story of a shipwrecked sailor) and Rodolfo Walsh’s *Operación Masacre* (Operation massacre), which represent two different approaches to the task of journalism under censorship and show the complex relationship between the journalist-narrator and his sources.

In the second part, Díaz analyzes writers from the 1970s through the 1980s who are considered founders of the contemporary Latin American chronicle. On the one hand, she examines the work of chroniclers of Mexico City: Elena Poniatowska and Carlos Monsiváis, paying attention to their methodology and how they mediated between the elites and the people. On the other hand, she analyzes the multiple versions of Juan Perón’s story, as depicted by Tomás Eloy Martínez, exploring his research process—again in a context of censorship—and the ways in which storytelling can be used, both in fiction and nonfiction, to reconstruct historical events.

Part three focuses on the second group of writers, from the 1990s to 2000s, who search for new methods in research and narration. First, Díaz compares Martín

Caparrós's *Una luna. Diario de hiperviaje* (A moon. A hypertravel diary) with Juan Villoro's 8.8 *El miedo en el espejo. Una crónica del terremoto en Chile* (8.8 The fear in the mirror: A chronicle of the earthquake in Chile), paying special attention to their different investigative processes and employed literary devices and how social and environmental problems can be approached through dialogue with others. Then, she focuses on the work of the latest generation of Latin American authors who are working on testimonial-based stories and explores their use of metafiction as narrative strategy. While analyzing *Cuando me muera quiero que me toquen cumbia* (Dance for me when I die) by Cristian Alarcón; *Los suicidas del fin del mundo. Crónica de un pueblo patagónico* (The suicidal ones at the end of the world: Chronicle of a Patagonian town) by Leila Guerriero; *La cuarta espada. La historia de Abimael Guzmán y Sendero Luminoso* (The fourth sword. The story of Abimael Guzmán and the shining path) by Santiago Roncagliolo; and a novel, *La vida doble* (The double life: A novel) by Arturo Fontaine, Chávez Díaz shows how those contemporary documentary narrators are, in fact, a blend of two figures: the storyteller and the professional listener, and how Latin American documentary narratives shift from the representation of the other to the representation of the author's self-transformation after having encountered the other.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews carried out by the author with Cristian Alarcón, Arturo Fontaine, Martín Caparrós, Leila Guerriero, Elena Poniatowska, Juan Villoro, Santiago Roncagliolo, and Francisco Goldman, are found in the appendix, and add another layer of information. Arranged in three thematic sets, the interviews give insights into the beginnings of the literary and journalistic careers of eight authors and their investigative and creative processes. The interviews also shed some extra light on the kind of work Chávez Díaz was interested in analyzing. They not only complement the theoretical work she has carried out as a meticulous scholar and researcher but also demonstrate Chávez Díaz's ability to listen, dialogue with, and extract the essence. *Latin American Documentary Narratives* is thus polyphonic and dialogical in its nature. Not only does the author quote her sources, but documentary narratives result from different dialogues: the source with the writer, the writer with the reader, and journalism with literature. Not to mention that works she analyses (often in comparison) also enter into the kind of dialogue.

Another particularly interesting aspect of this book is the employed hybrid methodology, with textual analysis, a sociological approach, fieldwork undertaken in Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and Spain, and participant observation, all of which make her research quintessentially multidisciplinary: literary, journalistic, but also anthropological.

If Pablo Calvi's *Latin American Adventures in Literary Journalism* (2019) was searching for historical roots of Latin American literary journalism, Liliana Chávez Díaz in this work moves toward contemporary documentary narratives, analyzing them from the perspective of a literary scholar (as she self-describes). And although she doesn't take a historical approach, the structure of her book allows us to trace chapter by chapter the evolution of this documentary mode.

All in all, it is a fascinating reading of Latin American documentary narratives, which offers valuable insight into the art and craft of the chosen Latin American storytellers (although I am not completely sure all the aforementioned authors would be happy with that term). However, I believe the employed category of storytelling is particularly important as it places literary journalism in another dimension, showing Latin American documentary narratives as cultural texts and underlining their indisputable literary and cultural value.

Mejor que ficción: An Anthology of Spanish Language Literary Journalism Attempts to Prove that ‘Crónica’ Is Actually “Better Than Fiction”

Mejor que ficción: Crónicas ejemplares. Edited by Jorge Carrión. Madrid: Almadía, 2022. 525 pp. €24.95; USD\$35.48.

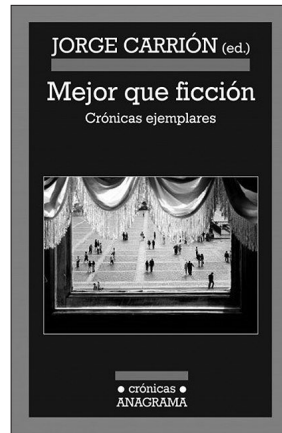
Reviewed by Roberto Herrscher, Universidad Alberto Hurtado, Chile

Two decades ago, the masterful Argentine *cronista* Martín Caparrós retraced the journey that Henry Morton Stanley had taken one century earlier in search of the famous explorer David Livingston, who had disappeared in the heart of Africa. Between Zanzibar and Tanganyika, among the descendants of those who escaped being sent as slaves to America, Caparrós found the key word for his *crónica*, which bears the title of “Pole Pole in Zanzibar” (“Pole Pole. De Zanzibar a Tanganyica”).

“*Pole pole* seems to be basic Swahili *Weltanschauung*. It could be translated as ‘take it easy, living life without constraining oneself to the forced rhythms of modern culture, re-establishing a way to peaceful resistance,’” writes Caparrós in the midst of his journey, which leads him to sit under a huge tree to hear the sad, surprising conclusion of one of his sources: that in his view, the descendants of those who were taken to America as slaves have in general a much better life than those who escaped and live in today’s Africa (449).

But Caparrós’s slow-flowing text could itself be described as “*pole pole journalism*: elegantly written and paced, adjusted to its own needs, an act of peaceful resistance to the speedy news of important deeds and famous people one sees in today’s mediascape. That pace—and the way it allows for listening to what others want to say, not what they answer to the febrile questions of the reporter—is what gives us the priceless monologue of the African elder who compares the lot of his town with the life of plenty and laughter that he sees on U.S. TV. “We would be better off had we been taken as slaves,” the wrinkled man gloomily ponders (476.)

Caparrós’s text is the last in the anthology, *Mejor que ficción* (Better than fiction), which journalist, essayist, novelist, podcaster, and professor Jorge Carrión compiled in 2012 for the publisher Anagrama, the most prestigious nonfiction editorial company in Spain. After almost four decades of bringing to the Spanish-speaking public the best classics and latest surprises in nonfiction, Jorge Herralde’s Editorial Ana-



grama finally came up with an anthology of Spanish and Latin American examples of *crónica*, which showed the vitality and width of a genre at the peak of its success and prestige.

The volume, published in Barcelona, introduced to Spanish readers to literary journalists already famous across the Atlantic. To take a few examples, Leila Guerriero penned a meticulous profile of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team. Juan Villoro wrote a luminous narrative essay on the postmodern and perennial Japan. Alberto Salcedo Ramos offered one of his hilarious profiles of rural Colombia. And Pedro Lemebel lent an example of his pop, baroque, poetic, and poignant prose on the luck of poor gay folk in Chile.

The 2012 edition also brought to the fore new voices who came not from literary ambition but from the depths of the newsroom. These included Venezuelan reporter Maye Primera's heartbreaking report on misery in Haiti, Alberto Fuguet's curious interview with a seedy seller of copied DVDs who fancied himself a cultural crusader, and Edgardo Cozarinsky's pilgrimage to Tangier in search of his idol Paul Bowles, which led him to unearth an army of ghosts that come to life in a burnished, silky style.

But there was more. Unlike the competing *Antología de crónica latinoamericana actual* (Anthology of current Latin American *crónica*), which the larger publishing house Alfaguara distributed at the same time (this one the handiwork of Colombian poet Darío Jaramillo, featuring many of the same authors from the New World), Carrión's list included Spaniards such as Jordi Costa and Guillem Martínez.

Interestingly, for these mainly Barcelonan writers, the search was not outward but inward, back to their childhoods in dictator Francisco Franco's gray Spain. They introduced dark humor to their depictions of kitsch development in a country that saw itself as European but was closer to the Third World than to France or Germany. It was the "how" more than the "what" that shone in these pages, with word games that played with the language of stiff newspapers and pedantic academics.

In the ensuing decade it so happened that *crónica* became a standard journalistic mode of storytelling. Every newspaper and magazine now had their narrative journalism sections, and even Carrión himself blossomed both as an analyst (in English, for *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*; in Spanish, for *El País* and *La Vanguardia* in Spain and *Infobae* in Argentina), and as a *cronista* himself.

Carrión now writes about podcasting and has created his own podcast series, *Solaris*, which won an Ondas (the main Spanish prize for radio). He analyzes nonfiction comics and teams up with an artist to bring into existence the comic book *Los vagabundos de la chitarra* (The vagabonds of scrap). And three of his twenty books have English language versions: *Bookshops* (McLehose Press/Biblioasis), *Against Amazon* (Biblioasis), and *Madrid: Book of Books* (Ivory Press), all three translated by Peter Bush. He has written a handful of novels as well. The last one, *Membrana*, brilliantly portrayed a technological dystopia. It is to the point where one must wonder whether Carrión still believes narrative journalism is "better than fiction."

"We live in documentary times," he says, replying to the question posed. "Over the years *crónica* has been canonized (Svetlana Alexievich won the Nobel Prize; Elena

Poniatowska the Cervantes, a Spanish-language Nobel), while the public has grown accustomed to digital nonfiction (series, podcasts, digital stories, reality shows, overblown selfies). I still think that writing nonfiction is harder than writing fiction. And I believe that some true-life characters, like Vladimir Putin, for example, are more complex and harder to grasp than literary characters.”

With these ideas Carrión approached the new Mexican publisher Almadia to propose a new version of *Mejor que ficción*, with five additional texts and a second prologue aimed at all Spanish-speaking countries. The anthology now boasts twenty-five *crónicas* written by authors from seven different countries—Argentina, Chile, Perú, Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Spain. And, significantly, the five new authors are women: three Mexicans (Marcela Turati, Cristina Rivera-Garza, and Eileen Truax), one Ecuadorian (Sabrina Duque), and one Cuban (Mónica Baró). With this attempt to be more inclusive, the gender playing field is a little more even: ten out of twenty-five (forty percent), instead of the five out of twenty in the first version (twenty percent).

Reading the new edition from beginning to end, the feeling is at once exhilarating and disconcerting because of the sheer variety and dispersion of voices, stories, and treatments. But if these texts have one thing in common, it is the playful—and sometimes painful—slowness with which all these stories move forward. It is as if each author tried to follow to the bitter end the intricate path of a character, an event, a group. There are no common formulas, just *pole pole*.

Of the five new stories, only Duque’s does not feature horror prominently. Her text is a precise, poetic profile of a sound artist who creates landscapes for listening and cannot bear noise. All the others are about women who are killed by men, or refugees, or political massacres. In the case of Mónica Baró, it is the tragic story of those who believed in Castro’s revolution in Cuba and were forced to demolish their own homes to make way for the road that took the dictator’s remains to his final resting grounds.

The old introduction and the new prologue are inspiring and erudite to read. They give way to twenty-five stories jumbled in happy confusion, not following any chronological, geographic, or thematic order. In other words, the reader may not want to seek meaning in their exact placement. We travel from a personal anecdote to the explanation of a perverse economic system; from the style of a newspaper of record to that of a personal memoir; from an explosion of emotional, poetic prose to the austerity of facts and voices, where the feelings are left to us to decipher.

And there is no prevailing tradition or “voice,” as one sees in *The New Yorker*, *Gatopardo*, *Etiqueta Negra*, *El Malpensante*, or the Sunday magazine of *La Vanguardia*. And perhaps that is what ‘*pole pole* journalism’ should look like: an escape from the fast lane of current news to find what one was not looking for or expecting.

Is it better than fiction? Who knows, because fiction today has also spread its margins and embraced tools and voices from journalism and the arts and sciences, as Carrión well knows and practices. But, as Jorge Luis Borges once said of an imaginary map, this book may well cover a field as vast as the territory it attempts to describe.