

# International Perspectives on Social Justice and Literary Journalism

## *Literary Journalism and Social Justice*

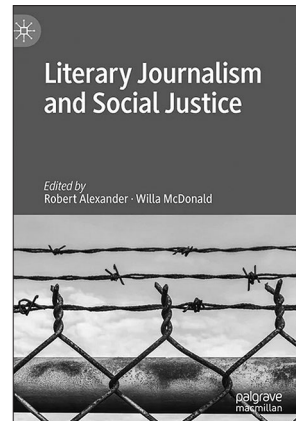
Edited by Robert Alexander and Willa McDonald. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. Index. Hardcover, 326 pp., USD\$139.99; eBook USD\$109.

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.