Light on Obscure Literary Journalist

Seeking to Understand the World: Literary Journalism of Vincent Sheean
by Anish Dave. Wilmington, Delaware: Vernon Press, 2023, Hardcover, 157 pp., USD$52; paperback, USD$33; e-book, $75.

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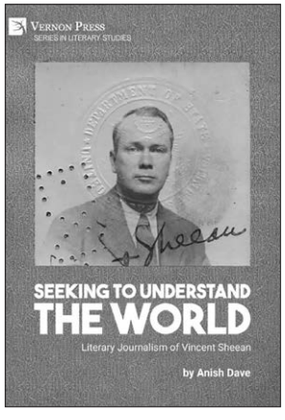

Newcomers to the world of literary journalism studies may not be familiar with the name Vincent Sheean (1899–1975). Indeed, in the field of literary journalism, this reporter gets lost among the larger-than-life personae who have dominated the popular imagination, including Ernest Hemingway, Tom Wolfe, and Norman Mailer. In his book, *Seeking to Understand the World: Literary Journalism of Vincent Sheean*, Anish Dave strives to establish Sheean's rightful place in this pantheon. His purpose in this slim, informative volume is to do justice to Vincent Sheean's craft as a literary journalist, and, as he indicates in the later pages of his book, to rectify "the absence of Sheean in the front row of literary journalism scholarship" (106). In doing so, Dave, an English professor at Georgia Southwestern State University, presents a biographical overview of the reporter's life and career, and offers a close reading of five important works: *Personal History* (1935); *Not Peace but a Sword* (1939); *Between the Thunder and the Sun* (1943); *Lead, Kindly Light* (1949); and *Nehru: The Years of Power* (1960).

The opening chapters of *Seeking to Understand the World* familiarize the reader with the field of literary journalism studies and its theorists, as well as its practitioners. Dave concurs with scholars Roberta Maguire and William Dow that it is "helpful to see how the modes of literature and journalism fuse and function in individual works produced at specific historical moments and from particular contexts" (1). While acknowledging Sheean as an "American foreign correspondent," Dave also argues that he found common ground with two other exemplary journalists, John Reed and John Hersey, in producing "artistic reporting" that "enhances our knowledge of the world by stirring our imagination" (2). In making this point, however, Dave provides a somewhat overly long synopsis of the journalistic practices of Reed and Hersey, devoting fourteen pages of discussion to their "immersion" reporting (19) and delaying Sheean's own biography until page twenty-eight.

The best parts of Dave's book are his reviews of the literature and critical commentary on Sheean's life and works, but he begins each chapter with unnecessary applications of formalist perspective on Sheean's books. In Chapter 2, dealing with the 1935 memoir, *Personal History*, we are given a refresher course on such fundamental concepts as linear narrative, story structure, "crisp sentences," and chapter titles (41–42). Regarding the last of these formalistic features, we are told that Sheean's short chapter titles "seem to encourage readers to find out what a chapter will include" (43). Surely, this technique could be said of *any* title in *any* book.

Later, when relating how Sheean meets a leader of the 1925 Riffian revolt, Dave describes the narrative structure through the classic terminology promoted by Practical Criticism, complete with a table that charts out the exposition, rising action, crisis, climax, and denouement (48–49). Such an approach offers limited insight to any reader who is already familiar with the perspectives applied to short stories in first-year university English classes. A similar problem occurs in Chapter 3, which discusses Sheean's "focus on people" (59) in his 1939 book *Not Peace, but a Sword*. Here, the lives of actual people who participated in real-life events during the tumultuous 1930s are treated as textbook examples that illustrate the principles of character development. Dave spends considerable time discussing the depiction of Jim Lardner, an American volunteer in the Spanish Civil War, with the intent of showing how the arc of his life mirrors the formulaic criteria of "character," "goals," "conflict," and "struggles" associated with any literary creation (63–69). The purpose of this section is to demonstrate the literary nature of Sheean's journalism, but it overstates obvious techniques taken as a given in any form of storytelling.

In the same chapter, Dave offers a definition from the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* to inform his readers of how a "scene" functions: it "depicts actions that occur at the same place and during a particular time" (69). While this concept is not too difficult to grasp, the chapter then continues with a detailed discussion of "Three Stimulating Scenes" in this memoir, which is then delivered in three subtitled sections: "The Bomb Shelter Scene," "Two Arguing Strangers," and "The Bus Journey Scene." While the three scenes are detailed and informative in terms of content, during a six-page description the insights can seem inconclusive and perfunctory. For example, in the first subtitled section of "The Bomb Shelter Scene," we are told matter-of-factly that "[t]he exchange between the men seems real, reminding a reader of similar incidents from their own lives, though not necessarily involving a bomb shelter. For example, it is common to find oneself sitting next to a stranger on an airplane. People also share apartments with others (70)." Dave offers an extensive summary of each of the three scenes, and he ends his third subsection on "The Bus Journey Scene" by invoking the "power and magnetism of ordinary people," concluding that "[t]hey had simple concerns, going home. It is clear that Sheean enjoyed their company" (74). Dave directly follows this statement by simply inferring that "[t]he reader vicariously feels this enjoyment" (74). Ironically, while much is made from such simple inferences, the following section on "Spartan Language" limits its discussion to only three paragraphs, in contrast to the six pages spent focusing on scenes. Even though Sheean's diction and sparse prose could be showcased in these paragraphs, this section focuses instead on defining what "plain prose" (75) is—without applying these ideas to any specific examples of Sheean's writing from *Not Peace but a Sword*.

Dave's book does flourish when we come to the later chapters, which deal with Sheean's experiences during the Second World War and his travels to India in the

post-war era. In Chapter 4, Dave focuses less on the formulaic application of short-story terminology and more on Sheean's use of symbolism in his book *Between the Thunder and the Sun* (1943). He concludes that "Sheean as a narrator is a lot more visible" in this memoir, adding that "[p]rominent characteristics of literary journalism such as scene and stories are not frequent in the book" (86). Dave turns his attention to the recurring examples of metonymy, metaphor, and synecdoche in *Between the Thunder and the Sun*. He notes how Sheean employed metaphor effectively to communicate the horrors of the German bombing of London in 1940, which the journalist described as "a strange survey of damnation" and a "vision of the end of the world" (84), where he "watched the centuries hurl themselves into the flames" (84).

Sheean continued to emphasize symbolic language when writing about his personal experiences with Mahatma Gandhi, the subject of *Lead, Kindly Light*, published in 1948 following the Gandhi's assassination. Dave devotes Chapter 5 of his study to "A Personal Homage to Gandhi," and it is here that one can perceive the respect that both Dave and Sheean hold for this iconic figure and practitioner of non-violence. As was the case with the previous chapter, less is said about the formalistic features of Sheean's memoir, which results in a condensed, five-paragraph discussion of symbolism. Instead, Dave details the personal bond that Sheean perceived with his subject; he quotes the journalist's admission that "my own interest was centered about Gandhi, because by this time I was well aware of his great spirit and what it had done in the world" (89). Building upon the anecdote of how Sheean had foreseen (through a premonition) the assassination of Gandhi, Dave argues that the reporter saw his own relationship with the Mahatma in highly symbolic terms, constructing a kind of personal narrative that places his memoir in the realm of literary journalism. In Chapter 6 of his study, Dave focuses on the second book to come out of Sheean's travels in India, *Nehru: The Years of Power* (1960). This chapter is also shorter than the preceding sections discussing Sheean's earlier works, and it suggests that Sheean did not have as much of a personal connection to India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru as he had to Gandhi. While brief and to the point, this discussion of Sheean's final book puts forward an eloquent case for the importance of immersion journalism, citing Sheean's own claim that he had "traveled far more in India than most people ever do, Indian or foreign" (97).

It is somewhat fitting, therefore, that this final episode—which marks the peak of Sheean's ability as an immersion journalist—coincides with the culmination of Dave's study. In the later chapters of *Seeking to Understand the World*, Dave himself becomes more thoroughly immersed in his subject, producing an eloquent commentary that is more succinct and engaging than in the earlier chapters, where he tended to overelaborate on basic formal concepts. He concludes his study with appendices that feature photographic reproductions of Sheean's journals and postal correspondence: seeing these documents (in his own handwriting) makes Sheean's personality even more palpable for readers. Personal touches like these testify to Dave's sincerity in paying tribute to an overlooked figure in twentieth century journalism. The extent of the author's research is admirable and makes this book a valuable resource for seasoned scholars, as well as a useful primer for those who are just beginning their studies of literary techniques and their application in the field of reportage.

Dog Shows Reveal Their Humans

Dogland: Passion, Glory, and Lots of Slobber at the Westminster Dog Show
By Tommy Tomlinson. New York: Avid Reader Press, 2024. Hardcover, 256 pages, US$28.99. Paperback, US$18.99. E-book US$14.99.

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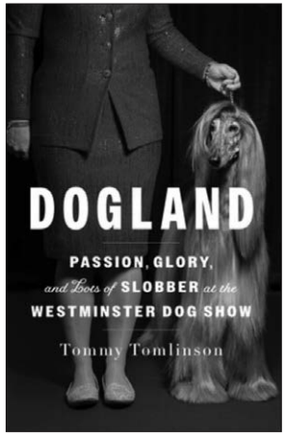

Merriam-Webster defines culture as "shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices." Those four attributes become Tommy Tomlinson's focus as he dives into *the fancy*, the world of dog shows and the animals and humans that inhabit it. The result is a work of immersive journalism, which at times is moving, even shocking, but always fascinating—even for someone who does not love dogs.

Tomlinson begins his journey into "Dogland" after he watches the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show on television and wonders, "Are those dogs happy" (xiii)? To answer that question, he chooses Westminster, this "pinnacle of the dog show world like Wimbledon or the Super Bowl" (xiii), as his case study. During his two-and-half-year quest, Tomlinson reveals much about the fancy's culture of "shared attitudes, values, goals and practices" and informs readers about things like arcane judging qualifications and standards that make a dog the "Best in Show." He also introduces an ensemble cast of stars (dogs) and supporting characters (humans) that move the narrative along.

This is a heavily researched book, and Tomlinson's breezy style makes digesting all the information easier, clearing up any confusion, for example, about how a dog wins a show. He sets the record straight about the hierarchy of dog shows, too, pointing out that the nationally televised National Dog Show at American Thanksgiving i*s not* the Westminster, as many believe. So much information is packed into this book, it could have been aptly entitled Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Show Dogs but Were Afraid to Ask. Indeed, readers learn about the usual, such as grooming and training, and the unusual, such as the intimate details of a top dog's sex life. The reader, for example, is introduced to the "sperm girls" whose job is to collect (yes, manually) a desired "sample" from a dog with impeccable lineage: "It's exactly what you're picturing at the moment" (68), one of them tells Tomlinson. The reader learns these dogs "rarely, if ever have sex" (83) and that the use of testicular implants called "neuticles" (8) can disqualify a dog from the competition.

The biggest star in *Dogland* is a Samoyed named Striker whose "near-perfect brightness can be more than the eye can handle" (91). He appears to have extraordi-