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Awakening a social conscience: the study of novels in journalism education

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Abstract

This study deals with the nonfiction novel in journalism ethics, literary journalism, media studies, newsgathering, and reporting and writing classes. We are often confronted with the mistaken notion that the novel is for entertainment while news stories are to provide information and to encourage effective civic engagement. For some journalism educators and for many in the reading public, reading fiction is something one does on airplanes; reading nonfiction, on the other hand, impacts political and social discourse. The borderland between literary and journalistic study is a problematic one, with some professors in English contending that journalism is hack writing and some professors of journalism contending that writing fiction is a harmless diversion if one has the time and the financial means to pursue it. Since Tom Wolfe wrote his landmark book *The New Journalism* and since nonfiction overtook fiction as the most popular literary form in America, the controversies around literary journalism have intensified. When I teach a nonfiction novel— from Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* to John Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley* to John Berendt’s *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* to Sara Davidson’s *Loose Change* to Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild* to Susan Orlean’s *The Orchid Thief*—definitions of literature and journalism are called into question. These questions are not optional: In a literature or creative writing class, the answers would be thought-provoking, indeed. But in a journalism class, the answers determine the very ways in which future journalists are taught to gather, filter, interpret, and disseminate information about daily events and the people who drive those events.

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Awakening a social conscience

Joan Didion describes eerie music piped into a deserted mall during a catastrophic war in *Salvador*. In “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” from *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, she relates a tale of middle-class America in which a seemingly contented woman burns her husband to death in a Volkswagen on a street called “Bella Vista.”

In *The Right Stuff*, Tom Wolfe accomplishes, among other things, a compelling study of the roots and definitions of masculinity in America and of the role of recklessness in confronting our mortality.

Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* highlights the raw, cruel power of murder and its denouement and raises nearly impossible questions about a journalist’s responsibility to a source.

In *Real Property*, Sara Davidson juxtaposes the hedonism of Southern California with an emphasis on family and personal sacrifice in Israel. And in *Loose Change: Three Women of the Sixties*, she develops a deeply personal and highly representative narrative about friendship and betrayal and forgiveness and despair.

In *Orchid Thief* Susan Orlean marvels at people who devote their lives to the obsessive search for a symbol—a sign of beauty and perfection—in a disappointing and imperfect world.

These and other extended nonfiction narratives by literary journalists convey humility, indecision, compassion, obsession, fear, love, and mystery. They have endured in the canon of great American literary nonfiction, largely because they diverge greatly from the fact-based rhetoric of everyday newspapers and news programs; because they rely upon sophisticated representational systems that approach allegory and myth; because they challenge readers to engage ideas and cultural constructs they might never have encountered otherwise; and because they demand a response that may be entirely cerebral or may, in fact, engage the heart and lead to activism.

Media historian Nancy Roberts (1992) describes Dorothy Day, a “gifted storyteller” (184) and activist, as someone who believed that journalism should exist “to move the heart, stir the will to action, to arouse pity, compassion, to awaken the conscience” (179). Day’s commitment to “the realities of poor people’s lives” resulted in a “large body of writing that transcends conventional journalism in both the gravity of its themes, which more commonly are literature’s province, and in its degree of insight into human beings, who are vividly and compassionately evoked” (Roberts:184).

This study argues that the social impact of journalism, especially literary journalism, depends upon a complex symbolic system that is unapologetic about the didacticism that lies at its core. Those of us who teach novels in courses such as media ethics, newsgathering, and literary journalism address concerns that are similar to those in creative writing, history, literature, political science, sociology, women’s and gender studies, and other disciplines in which the study of novels may also be essential.

When teaching and analyzing news, news-features, commentaries, editorials, and other forms of professional writing, those in journalism and media studies confront how particular genres inform public discourse and encourage citizens to draw conclusions about their society. We acknowledge with profound seriousness

that what readers and viewers gain from media outlets may propel them to action, may immobilize them, may disturb them, or may precipitate any number of other responses.

Furthermore, although journalism students often are drawn to the field because of their devotion to and their belief in the impact of the written word and of visual images, they sometimes lose their idealism in the glare of corporate-owned media empires and the compromises of everyday journalistic practice. The study of literary journalism—albeit a popular and lucrative enterprise in its own right—can be an antidote to the unexamined life—an enemy to false consciousness—if it is incorporated into an interdisciplinary curriculum.

In fact, teaching extended fiction and nonfiction is an effective way to address the intimate connection between journalism and literature and to allow for conversations about the journalists who became some of the greatest novelists and poets and short-story writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and about contemporary journalists who best exemplify the effective use of literary techniques in news coverage. Studying novels in journalism courses makes obvious the increasingly indistinct lines between fiction and nonfiction and between fact and creative narrative in contemporary media texts. Most importantly, it may encourage the awakening of a social conscience in both our students and ourselves.

Because addressing controversies in literary journalism, in contemporary media, in civil engagement, and in political process is emphatically too much for one essay, this study provides: 1) a rationale for including novels in the formal study of media, and 2) a list of a few particularly compelling texts that cross interdisciplinary boundaries and allow for spirited class discussion. Although the study must allude to the historically controversial nature of literary journalism, its primary purpose is to argue for the inclusion of fictional texts that are based on a writer's reportorial experience and to suggest the importance of the study of extended nonfiction. In classes that focus on news gathering, news writing, and a journalist's role in defining and disseminating news, it may be that a study of writers themselves—in particular, of their commitment to their sources and of their understanding of their roles as translators of experience—becomes almost as significant as a study of their literary and journalistic canon.

Literary Journalism as a Social and Political Movement

"I'm a journalist at heart; even as a novelist, I'm first of all a journalist," wrote Tom Wolfe. "I think all novels should be journalism to start, and if you can ascend from that plateau to some marvelous altitude, terrific. I really don't think it's possible to understand the individual without understanding the society" (in Angelo 1989:92). Wolfe's words about the definition and purposes of journalism, about literature as art, and about the individual as a player in the larger society are compelling reasons for relying upon literary journalism in teaching even rudimentary news writing classes. "What is your audience?" we ask our students. And, perhaps more importantly, "What can you tell your audience that might motivate them to understand, to engage with, and to improve their communities?" Here, of course, it is clear that literary journalism shares some of the goals of civic journalism and encourages personal moral development and community involvement.

When scholars discuss literary journalism, they often do so by using words and phrases that are sometimes synonymous and sometimes oppositional; furthermore, the terms are sometimes laudatory and sometimes tinged with contempt. The words and phrases are, most certainly, political. They include “intimate journalism,” “immersion journalism,” “nonfiction with a literary purpose,” “art-journalism,” “the nonfiction novel,” “essay-fiction,” “factual fiction,” “journalit,” “personal journalism,” “parajournalism,” “creative nonfiction,” “new reportage,” “literary nonfiction,” “artistic nonfiction,” “The New Journalism,” and “witness literature.”

The most essential element of literary journalism is its focus. Unlike daily journalism that has historically emphasized government institutions and institutional authorities as sources, literary journalism also explores the lives of those who are affected by those institutions and authorities. “Rather than hanging around the edges of powerful institutions,” Norman Sims (1984:3) writes, “literary journalists attempt to penetrate the cultures that make institutions work”.

In the postmodern universe, we need more than facts; in fact, we crave what Wallace Stevens called “the blessed rage for order” (1988:292). An informed citizenry does not long for press releases but for what John Hellman (1981) calls the “penetration of mystery.” According to Hellman, “Almost by definition, new journalism is a revolt by the individual against homogenized forms of experience, against monolithic versions of truth” (8). What many perceive to be “corporate fiction” (4), as Hellman suggests, increases the distance between a reader’s need for verifiable information upon which to make life-altering decisions and the desire of owners of media outlets to generate profits. For many Americans, the battle is not between objectivity and subjectivity or between fact and fiction but between a disguised perspective and an admitted one, between a corporate fiction and a personal one.

Literary journalism is at root a political and social movement. At its heart is the belief that a disclosed point of view is everything and that readers will trust a personal voice, informed commentary, and thorough research more than they will trust many of the texts produced by a mainstream media that claim “to tell the truth” (what truth?) and “to be objective” (whose objectivity?). In an essay entitled “The Other Side,” Richard D. Manning writes, “Reporters keep their distance from community, and reporters think they like that. We call it objectivity. It is the myth that organizes our subculture, a naïve belief that we are better observers because we are separate” (1990:13). Stories about those who run a transportation system do not necessarily engender trust. Readers deserve stories in which reporters talk with those who ride city buses as well as those who manage the transportation system. Literary journalists rely on their belief that readers understand a personal voice and can distinguish it from an institutional one.

In popular culture, reporters and editors often are portrayed as vultures, as automatons who care only about the story, as human beings whose allegiances are primarily to the corporate media world. Films such as “Absence of Malice,” “Broadcast News,” “Network,” and “The Paper” highlight these portrayals. One of the most important books to deal with the public perception of the reporter as “other” is Janet Malcolm’s *The Journalist and the Murderer*. In it, Malcolm asks hard questions about the role of journalism and about the tendency of some reporters to manipulate their sources to get a story. One of Malcolm’s most damning comments appears on the first page of her book. In it, she focuses on the source, who must

realize that the reporter's first obligation is to the story and not to the assumed relationship established between the reporter and the source during the interview:

On reading the article or book in question, he has to face the fact that the journalist—who seemed so friendly and sympathetic, so keen to understand him fully, so remarkably attuned to his vision of things—never had the slightest intention of collaborating with him on his story but always intended to write a story of his own. (1990:3).

In “A Third Way to Tell the Story: American Literary Journalism at the Turn of the Century,” Thomas B. Connery discusses a news story as a cultural artifact and says that literary journalism is not fiction (because the people are real and the facts occurred) and is not journalism (because it is interpretive and incorporates a narrative point of view). Immersion, Connery suggests, describes an intimate relationship between a reporter and a news source. Instead of watching him or her from an intellectual or ideological distance, the literary journalist builds a relationship with the subject(s) of his or her story (1990:3-20). The text, then, becomes a catalyst for change and for human connection.

Unlike the reporters who exploit their sources in order to get the story first, literary journalists immerse themselves in the worlds of those whom they cover. They build extended relationships with their sources, making it unlikely that they can avoid bias and making it even more unlikely that they want to do so. They relay dialogue and use description in a way that makes it clear that they are a part of the world they describe. Does their work contain bias? Certainly. Do they write from their own point of view and “distort” the news by being too close to the events and sources? Most assuredly. But literary journalists count on readers to understand their vantage point and to trust their narrative precisely because they confess their preconceptions and their points of view.

Since the time Wolfe sought to define the techniques of those who called themselves “New Journalists” and since the time many others distinguished themselves as practitioners of the form, a new generation of writers has taken the stage. Robert S. Boynton (2005) celebrates those whom he calls the “New New Journalists.” He lists Ted Conover, William Finnegan, Jonathan Harr, Alex Kotlowitz, Jon Krakauer, William Langewiesche, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, Michael Lewis, Susan Orlean, Richard Preston, Eric Schlosser, Lawrence Weschler, Lawrence Wright, and others.

Boynton's argument is that a new generation of writers is experimenting with the form made popular by the New Journalists of the 1960s and 1970s and that they, too, speak to social and political concerns that resemble those of nineteenth-century writers such as Stephen Crane, Jacob A. Riis, and Lincoln Steffens. “Rigorously reported, psychologically astute, sociologically sophisticated, and politically aware” (B10), these New New Journalists have capitalized on what Boynton calls “the literature of the everyday” (B10).

When a reporter does her or his job well, social and political contexts become clear and the underpinnings of the day's news are visible. In *Fame and Obscurity: Portraits*, Gay Talese writes that “the new journalism, though reading like fiction, is not fiction. It is, or should be, as reliable as the most reliable reportage, although it seeks a larger truth than is possible through the mere compilation of verifiable facts,

the use of direct quotations, and adherence to the rigid organizational style of the older form” (1970:vii). This “larger truth,” of course, suggests a rich, compelling narrative that encourages cultural change and personal growth. For example, Richard Manning, angry about massive destruction of virgin forest and the media that he believes allowed it to occur, condemns conventional news coverage and challenges reporters and editors to be more than they are and to commit themselves to widespread social and political change: “It would be journalism. It would be balanced, fair and irrelevant. It would be yet another example of the bi-polar, fill-in-the-blanks, objective, alienated journalism that has fueled our homeland’s controversies lo these many years” (1990:14).

And Michael Herr, who reports on Vietnam in *Dispatches*, introduces his own concerns as he challenges journalists to fulfill their responsibilities by understanding the possible contributions of their craft: “The press got all the facts (more or less), it got too many of them,” he writes. “But it never found a way to report meaningfully about death, which of course was really what it was all about” (1978:215). Writing meaningfully about death and other universal issues—translating everyday events and providing context for readers and viewers—is precisely what many scholars challenge media practitioners to do. And it is the goal to which literary journalists in general have committed themselves.

The debate about the virtues of literary journalism explodes again with the publication of every successful example of the genre embraced by the public. When Truman Capote published *In Cold Blood* in 1965, he considered it the first nonfiction novel. Journalists accused him of having gambled with the integrity of news by employing literary techniques such as stream of consciousness; literary critics accused him of glorifying sensationalism and of violating the high calling of fiction. The controversy that followed *In Cold Blood* erupted again with the 1994 publication of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. In an “Author’s Note,” John Berendt acknowledged that he took “certain storytelling liberties” but that his book remained “faithful to the characters and to the essential drift of events as they really happened”. The nonfiction novels of Capote and Berendt are catalysts for what Sims, a former United Press International reporter, calls an exploration of the “borderlands between fact and fiction” (1990:v).

Literary journalism does not gain its name or its identity from being the only lyrical or creative prose in the field of journalism. It does, however, differ significantly from everyday journalistic stories published in newspapers and magazines. It requires immersion in an event. It presumes a point of view. It also employs the techniques of literature without apology, making rich use of stream of consciousness, metaphor, symbol, description, point of view, narration, dialogue, and other techniques considered by many to lie in the province of literature.

Some literary journalists experiment with chronology and/or change the names of characters, but most adhere to rigid journalistic practices while writing an extended narrative that captures the reader’s interest and builds suspense and an investment in the development of complex characters. Literary journalism also is often interdisciplinary and a combination of genres. In “The Art of Literary Journalism,” Sims writes:

The liveliness of literary journalism, which critics compare to fiction, comes from combining this personal engagement with perspectives from sociology and anthropology, memoir writing, fiction, history, and standard reporting. . . . Literary journalists are boundary crossers in search of a deeper perspective on our lives and times. (1995:19)

Literary journalist Tracy Kidder also defends literary journalism against the charge that its practitioners use literary techniques (presumably thereby violating journalistic ethics) by saying:

Some people criticize nonfiction writers for “appropriating” the techniques and devices of fiction writing. Those techniques, except for invention of character and detail, never belonged to fiction. They belong to storytelling. In nonfiction you can create a tone and a point of view. Point of view affects everything that follows. (in Sims 1990:19)

Rather than distancing themselves from the subjects of their stories and striving to maintain objectivity, literary journalists immerse themselves in the lives and the environments of their subjects and, while they strive for balance and fairness, trust the reader to realize that their stories are bounded by time, space, and human limitation. There is no place for omniscient point of view in literary journalism. John C. Hartsock (2000) is helpful in understanding these concepts, although he rightly refuses to privilege literary journalism over traditional objective journalism:

How best can one account for the phenomenal world? In principle, objective news would seem to serve the purpose better because of its announced intention to exclude partisanship. But as several critics have noted, objective news paradoxically disempowers readers by excluding their participation in such discourse. Narrative literary journalism offers more of an opportunity for reader engagement precisely because its purpose is to narrow the distance between subjectivity and the object, not divorce them. . . .

Nor is this to suggest that one form of journalism is superior to the other. That has been precisely the problem in the historic privileging of the information or discursive model over the story model, and more specifically of objective news over narrative literary journalism in our own century. Rather, given that the strengths of both are also their liabilities, such a conclusion argues in favor of a diversity of journalisms in the problematic attempt to interpret the phenomenal world. (132-33).

It is the implied social contract between reporter and source and the emphasis on symbolic systems and the principles of storytelling that make the following writers particularly appropriate for inclusion in a journalism course: Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, Katherine Anne Porter, John Steinbeck, Truman Capote, Sara Davidson, and Susan Orlean. All sought to transform the world in which they lived by challenging readers to explore new ideas and values. They did so without artifice, although they employed literary techniques considered by some to be manipulative. This list, of course, is not inclusive or even broadly representative. Notable omissions include John Berendt, Stephen Crane, Joan Didion, Ernest Hemingway, John Hersey, Tracy Kidder, Norman Mailer, Frank McCourt, Lillian Ross, Hunter S. Thompson, Mark Twain, Tom Wolfe, and numerous other well-known literary journalists. In spite

of those disclaimers, however, the list of novels that follows is a significant beginning as we continue to expand the curriculum and acknowledge the rich reservoir of extended fiction and nonfiction texts that encourage social and political engagement.

Sister Carrie, An American Tragedy, and The Jungle

Some of the novels especially appropriate for study in journalism courses are classified as realism or naturalism. Theodore Dreiser and Upton Sinclair both worked as journalists and wrote novels based on fact. Their work is evidence of their commitment to solid reporting and to the possible impact of writing on public attitudes and public policy. Although students are often aware of the role of Dreiser and Sinclair as novelists, few recognize them as effective and committed journalists.

Dreiser worked for newspapers in Chicago, Pittsburgh, New York, and St. Louis. *Theodore Dreiser's "Heard in the Corridors": Articles and Related Writings*, edited by T.D. Nostwich, is an essential collection of his work as a journalist. Best known for his novels *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser focused on the cracks in the American dream. Dreiser believed that human behavior often is determined by social forces, not free will. In both novels, Dreiser writes about the sweat shops at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. The robbery in *Sister Carrie* is based on a feature article Dreiser wrote; the point of view relies upon his interviews with real people; the chapter titles could be headlines in a daily newspaper. (In fact, the novel reads as though it were a series of feature articles.)

Two critics are particularly astute in their commentary on Dreiser. One, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, writes: "The seeds of his finest works of fiction were gathered during the twenty years Dreiser spent trafficking in the world of fact" (1985:90). The other, Marilyn Ann Moss, provides a riveting first sentence in an essay about Dreiser: "Theodore Dreiser's journalistic writing was a configuration of factual data that ultimately coalesced into a personal mythos—a tale of how a young journalist might invent himself as a spokesman for American lives at the turn of the century" (1992:143).

Like Dreiser, Upton Sinclair was an activist and former newspaper reporter. He published 90 books, pamphlets, and letters, although he is best known for *The Jungle*, a work of fiction that is based upon the weeks he spent working in a Chicago meatpacking plant and upon the interviews he conducted with immigrants while there.

Sinclair spoke out in favor of miners, he favored women's rights, he started the California branch of the American Civil Liberties Union, and he ran for governor of California in 1934 on the platform "End Poverty in California!" In 1900, there was no minimum wage, no maximum number of working hours, no employer liability, no food and drug laws, no votes for women, no education on birth control and venereal disease, few unions, no health insurance, no social security, and no unemployment compensation. Known as an ethnographer of the working poor, Sinclair challenged Americans to change the system and to address these wrongs.

Sinclair wrote *The Jungle* when he was 26, and it was serialized in *Appeal to Reason*. The story he told is so graphic and so powerful that President Theodore Roosevelt

invited Sinclair to the White House to verify his facts. Doubleday sent an attorney to confirm that conditions in the meatpacking plants were as bad as Sinclair described them, and, according to several critics, the attorney found the conditions to be worse than he described. The publication of the novel about Jurgis Rudkus, a strong Lithuanian immigrant who could not break the cycle of poverty, led to the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act, to the Meat Inspection Act, and to other social and economic reforms.

In “How Should We Teach *The Jungle*?” Christopher Phelps (2006) suggests that the novel relies upon reporting and that *The Jungle* should be taught as journalism: “It ought to be possible to consider *The Jungle* as both a transcription of social life and a work of literary imagination, as both reportage and social criticism” (B12). Arguing that *The Jungle* is “primarily a sympathetic sketch of the foreign born, those fabled ‘masses yearning to breathe free’ that Americans welcome in our poetry and disdain in the breach” (B10), Phelps writes:

After all, *The Jungle* is as much reportage as literature. Sinclair’s searing, graphic revelations were based on close observation. He spoke to workers and infiltrated the giant packinghouses, carrying a lunch pail in hand to make it seem he belonged there. Although a work of fiction, *The Jungle* is often classified as “muckraking,” exposé journalism that blends revealed fact with moral indignation in the pursuit of social reform. (2006: B10)

Pale Horse, Pale Rider

Unlike *Sister Carrie*, *An American Tragedy*, and *The Jungle*, studying *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* allows instructors to discuss the role of women in journalism history, to deal with the perception of print journalists by the public, and to address the necessity for writing that adheres to grammatical and stylistic principles. Journalism students often have not considered Katherine Anne Porter as someone who drew on her experience in newspapers and struggled with the decisions her editors made and with the demands of the profession. The long hours and poor salaries she describes make for compelling discussion in journalism classes.

A literary figure who left journalism, Katherine Anne Porter did not remember fondly her days in newspapers. In fact, she said late in her career:

I forgive [one] critic here and now, and forever, for calling me a “newspaper woman” in the public prints. I consider it an actionable libel, but, as is too often the case in these incidents, he has a small patch of solid ground under him. . .

Fifty-odd years ago, for eight short months of my ever-lengthening (or shortening?) life, I did have a kind of a job on a newspaper, *The Rocky Mountain News*. (in Givner 1986:69)

In her article “Katherine Anne Porter, Journalist,” biographer Joan Givner (1986) acknowledges Porter’s rejection of her own work as a journalist and calls it “unfortunate” because it “deflected attention from material which is crucial to the understanding of Porter’s life and art” (69).

In spite of her feelings about journalism, Porter was a dedicated newspaperwoman during the short time she spent in the field. Instinctively, she understood the importance of careful observation and utilized her skill in both her newspaper stories and her fiction. A strong journalistic influence—not an obvious part of her memoirs or the published conversations with her—emerges in an analysis of the short novel *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*.

A reporter for the *Rocky Mountain News*, Porter reviewed books, plays and concerts; interviewed celebrities; and rewrote crime stories. In *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* Miranda, who represents Porter herself, seeks assurance that she can discern truth, but that desire is consistently undercut. As a journalist familiar with the William Randolph Hearst-Joseph Pulitzer-Adolph Ochs newspaper wars of the 1880s and early 1900s, Mary Towney, the society editor, says with sarcasm, “I read it in a New York newspaper, so it’s bound to be true” (Porter 1944:284).

In the novel, Miranda’s experiences and salary certainly reflect accounts of Porter’s early days as a reporter. Asked for money to support the war effort, Miranda says in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, “I have eighteen dollars a week and not another cent in the world. I simply cannot buy anything” (Porter 1994:273). She also describes the exhaustion and recurring deadlines of newspaper work. Porter writes:

After working for three years on a morning newspaper she had an illusion of maturity and experience; but it was fatigue merely, she decided, from keeping what she had been brought up to believe were unnatural hours, eating casually at dirty little restaurants, drinking bad coffee all night, and smoking too much. (Porter 1994:280)

With humor and obvious first-hand knowledge, Porter describes Miranda’s conflicts with irate readers and impatient editors. The descriptions of the newsroom (where people sat on her desk and where she heard the incessant “rattle of typewriters” and the “steady rumble of presses”) are realistic, as are Porter’s memories of rigid stylistic principles:

They lolled away, past the Society Editor’s desk, past Bill the City Editor’s desk, past the long copydesk where old man Gibbons sat all night shouting at intervals, “Jarge! Jarge!” and the copyboy would come flying. “Never say *people* when you mean *persons*,” old man Gibbons had instructed Miranda, “and never say *practically*, say *virtually*, and don’t for God’s sake ever so long as I am at this desk use the barbarism *inasmuch* under any circumstances whatsoever. Now you’re educated, you may go.” (Porter 1994:274)

The Grapes of Wrath and Travels with Charley

Like Dreiser, Sinclair, and Porter, John Steinbeck based much of his fiction on actual events and experimented with several genres of nonfiction, including personal essays, travel writing, and political and social commentary. In spite of this fact, his interest in journalism often is treated as ancillary to his writing of fiction, which is regarded as his real work and true calling. Steinbeck scholars allude to journalism when discussing Steinbeck’s development as a writer or when chronicling and categorizing his work, but to date they have not investigated Steinbeck’s role as a literary

journalist with the same analytical zeal they bring to the study of his fiction. “The truth is that Steinbeck was really a journalist at heart,” Gore Vidal said in a 1993 interview with Steinbeck biographer Jay Parini. “All of his best work was journalism in that it was inspired by daily events, by current circumstances. He didn’t ‘invent’ things. He ‘found’ them” (Parini 1995:274).

It is important to remember that Steinbeck did not simply experiment with journalistic techniques; he also worked as a serious and committed journalist at several times in his career. Most notably, Steinbeck covered World War II and wrote insightfully about international politics. In a July 5, 1943, article, a *Newsweek* reporter praised Steinbeck’s coverage of the war, saying that Steinbeck’s “cold grey eyes didn’t miss a trick, that with scarcely any note-taking he soaked up information like a sponge, wrote very fast on a portable typewriter, and became haywire if interrupted” (Parini 1995:275). Although Steinbeck did not describe himself as a journalist, he understood the complexity of journalism as a field and celebrated its influence at the same time that he warned of its dangers. Steinbeck writes:

What can I say about journalism? It has the greatest virtue and the greatest evil. It is the first thing the dictator controls. It is the mother of literature and the perpetrator of crap. In many cases it is the only history we have and yet it is the tool of the worst men. But over a long period of time and because it is the product of so many men, it is perhaps the purest thing we have. Honesty has a way of creeping in even when it was not intended. (Parini 1995:391)

In addition to his belief that journalism is the “only history we have,” Steinbeck shared with journalists a reliance upon actual events and told compelling stories that advocated social and political change. While traditional news reporters retell chronological events, quote sources directly, and allow readers to draw conclusions from the facts, Steinbeck said in a letter to one of his sources for *The Grapes of Wrath* that his purpose in writing about his experiences was “to do some good and no harm” (Parini 1995:180). His fiction and nonfiction had a purpose: He wanted to increase people’s awareness and lead them to action on behalf of others while causing as little damage as possible.

Best known for *The Grapes of Wrath*—a novel that relied upon fact and won Steinbeck the 1940 Pulitzer Prize—Steinbeck was later celebrated by the public for *Travels with Charley in Search of America*. This curious four-part book remains a compelling example of Steinbeck’s success with nonfiction and serves as what Parini calls an “elegy for a world he has lost” (1997:ix), but it is undeniably different from the journalism he produced earlier in his career. Accurately defined as a travel chronicle or travel monologue, *Travels with Charley* is a first-person narrative with a beginning, middle, and end; the journey undertaken by the author contributes its own structure, and as Steinbeck draws conclusions about himself and his homeland, the road trip takes on the narrative significance of a personal quest. Explaining why the pilgrimage is necessary, Steinbeck writes in *Travels with Charley*, “Thus I discovered that I did not know my own country” (1997:5).

While being immersed in the events of his time, Steinbeck met figures who were larger than life and who were easily translated into fiction. One such person was Tom Collins, who headed migrant camps in Marysville and Arvin, California, for the federal government. *The Grapes of Wrath* is partially dedicated to Collins (“To

Tom—who lived it”). In the foreword to a manuscript by Collins, Steinbeck writes of the time he met Collins: “Sitting at a littered table was Tom Collins, a little man in a damp, frayed, white suit. . . He had a small moustache, his graying, black hair stood up on his head like the quills of a frightened porcupine, and his large, dark eyes, tired beyond sleepiness, the kind of tired that won’t let you sleep even if you have time and a bed” (in Parini:179).

Including Steinbeck in a journalism course allows discussion about personal voice in journalistic texts and about the role of fact-based reporting in many celebrated works that have been relegated to literature survey courses.

In Cold Blood

Like *The Grapes of Wrath*, *In Cold Blood* is an American classic and will be dealt with more briefly in this list because it, like *All the President’s Men*, is often used in journalism classes. The author of 25 plays, two novels, 60 short stories, more than 100 poems, and an autobiography, Truman Capote is the subject of two films, *Capote* and *Infamous*, which, like the novel itself, highlight the complex relationship between an author and a source. The advantage of incorporating the films into class discussion is obvious: Students may watch one or both of them as an outside project and debate journalistic reporting techniques in the following class session.

The difficulties and potential of the relationship between Capote and his source, Perry Smith, are important for students in print media and broadcasting classes to consider. In a film review of *Capote*, John DeFore of the *Austin American Statesman* (2005) focuses on the role of interviewer and interviewee:

In an early scene in small-town Kansas, we see the friction between the man and his image. Interviewing a friend of one of the murder victims who is reluctant to confide in this strange creature from New York, Capote unexpectedly makes what feels like a confession, indirectly giving the girl permission to find him odd while offering her something to identify with. Within moments, the interviewee has decided to share a piece of evidence she has previously kept hidden.

Is this interview a rare miracle of empathy, or an example of a journalist’s genius for working his subject? That issue is the heart of the movie, as Capote meets and conducts marathon interviews with the killers, particularly the strangely magnetic Perry Smith. (1E/10E)

The murder of the Clutter family in Kansas, the fact that Capote read a story about the murder in the *New York Times* and was obsessed by it, the years he spent researching the murder, the relationship he developed with one of the murderers, and his professional demise following the book are all common knowledge. However, the book remains a staple of any journalism class in which the thin line between fiction and nonfiction and the question of reportorial ethics are debated.

Loose Change: Three Women of the Sixties

When *In Cold Blood* was published in 1965, one of those who read the nonfiction novel was a reporter and national correspondent for the *Boston Globe* (1965-1969), Sara Davidson. Since that time, Davidson has published in *The Atlantic*, *Esquire*, *Harper's*, *Life*, the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, *McCall's*, *Mirabella*, *Ms.*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *New Woman*, *Oprah*, *Spirituality and Health*, and other publications. She is best known for the international best seller *Loose Change: Three Women of the Sixties* (1977), a social history of the sixties told through the lives of three young women who met at Berkeley; *Real Property* (1980), a collection of her early essays; *Cowboy* (1999), a memoir of a relationship; and *Leap* (2007), a chronicle of her generation at mid-life.

Davidson's life experiences often mirror those of students in journalism classes who are committed to challenging the status quo through their prose. In *Loose Change*, Davidson employs a self-effacing authorial voice to suggest to readers that it is all right if they, too, are unsure about who they are and how they fit into the social order:

It is the summer of '76 and I am living by the ocean in Southern California. I have fixed up my house as if I intend to stay. I've planted a cactus garden and furnished the rooms with wicker and Mexican tile. People tell me I speak like the natives. They say I look "laid back."

I don't know. (1997:366)

Davidson's tone remains consistent throughout *Loose Change*, and the conclusion both summarizes and problematizes the issues raised in the nonfiction novel. The anguish of the narrator is evident when she explains the title of the book – "We had predicted that the center would not hold but it had, and now we were in pieces. 'Loose change,' I told a friend" (1997:366) – and when she admits to her own confusion about drugs, the sexual revolution, the Civil Rights movement, and other phenomena of the sixties: "I'm afraid I will be criticized for copping out. ('We want to know what you make of it all, what this period meant in terms of a society, a culture.') But the truth is, I have not found answers and I'm not sure I remember the questions" (1997:367).

The Orchid Thief

A contemporary of Davidson's is Susan Orlean, author of *The Orchid Thief*. Her articles also have appeared in *Outside*, *Rolling Stone*, *Vogue*, and *Esquire*. *The Orchid Thief*, subtitled *A True Story of Beauty and Obsession*, is appropriate for journalism classes because the nonfiction novel provides a compelling example of how writers weave character and didacticism into an extended symbolic system.

Orlean's reason for writing extended nonfiction is common to many literary journalists and is interesting for students to consider: "I didn't want to be a newspaper reporter, because I have never cared about knowing something first, and I didn't want to write only about things that were considered 'important' and newsworthy," Orlean writes. "I wanted to write about things that intrigued me, and to

write about them in a way that would surprise readers who might not have expected to find these things intriguing” (2006:ix).

Orlean makes clear that she is telling the stories of others in order to better understand herself and her own quest for passion and joy. Her explanation for her pilgrimage to Florida is other people’s obsession with orchids, and in the end she will understand her own obsession with telling their stories and deconstructing their fascination with the unique flowers: “Orchids seem to drive people crazy,” she writes. “Those who love them love them madly. Orchids arouse passion more than romance. They are the sexiest flowers on earth” (2006:50).

The Orchid Thief is based on a newspaper article Orlean read about John Laroche and three Seminole men who were arrested with rare orchids they had stolen from a swamp in Florida called the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve. With typical understatement, Orleans writes, “I wanted to know more about the incident” (2006:6). Knowing more became a 284-page novel. The working title of *The Orchid Thief* was *Passion*, and the novel about rare and beautiful flowers is an internal pilgrimage to discover her own reasons for being and for creating.

Conclusion

Although the classics of American literary journalism are appropriate for classes across the curriculum, they are essential for students in journalism and media studies. Those who commit themselves to the transformation of human experience into art commit themselves to making meaning, to changing individual lives, and to the evolution of social and political processes. In his essay “Journalism and the Larger Truth,” media critic Roger Rosenblatt writes:

If one asks, then, where the larger truth is to be sought, the answer is where it has always been: in history, poetry, art, nature, education, conversation; in the tunnels of one’s own mind. People may have come to expect too much of journalism. . . . The trouble is that people have also come to expect too much of journalism at its best, because they have invested too much power in it, and in so doing have neglected or forfeited other sources of power in their lives. Journalists appear to give answers, but essentially they ask a question: What shall we make of this? A culture that would rely on the news for truth could not answer that question because it already would have lost the qualities of mind that make the news worth knowing. (1992:133)

Rosenblatt does not suggest the supremacy of fiction over journalism; instead, he argues that fiction and nonfiction provide different kinds of truth for the reader. In “Dreaming the News,” he writes:

So much of living is made up of storytelling that one might conclude that it is what we were meant to do—to tell one another stories, fact or fiction, as a way of keeping afloat. Job’s messenger, Coleridge’s mariner, the reporter in California all grab us by the lapels to tell us their tale. We do the same; we cannot help ourselves. We have the story of others to tell, or of ourselves, or of the species—some monumentally elusive tale we are always trying to get right. Sometimes it seems that we are telling one another parts of the

same immense story. Fiction and the news are joined in an endless chain.
Everything is news, everything imagined. (1997:102)

Because we are storytellers, because we live in relationship with others, and because we rely on narrative for personal and collective decisions, the study of novels in journalism education becomes an imperative for those committed to the awakening of conscience and to the understanding of the complexities of our lives.

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