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Doug Underwood

Literary Journalism in British and American Prose: An Historical Overview

Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. 286 pp. ISBN 987-1-4766-7621-0

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Ask a group of literary journalism scholars to define their genre and, most likely, a plethora of answers will follow. Tom Connery defines the genre as ‘nonfiction printed prose whose verifiable content is shaped and transformed into a story or sketch by use of narrative and rhetorical techniques generally associated with fiction’ (Hartsock, 2000: 10). In *Telling True Stories* Mark Kramer and Wendy Call describe it as ‘the genre . . . that goes by many names: narrative journalism, new journalism, literary journalism, creative non-fiction, feature writing, the nonfiction novel, documentary narrative’ (Kramer and Call, 2007: xv). Many practitioners including John McPhee, Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese have defined ‘literary journalism’ by its stylistic qualities such as the use of dialogue, description, immersive detail, plot or scene-building, emotional insight or transformation and character description.

So Doug Underwood’s new volume, *Literary Journalism in British and American Prose* not only offers a historical overview of the genre’s development but details the significant and complementary influence of British and American genre traditions in which journalism, literary criticism and scholarship overlap. Adding to the already complex mix of definitions is Underwood’s inclusion of book reviewing and the critical essay as forms of literary journalism. He suggests the moniker of ‘journalist-literary figure’ who produces book reviews, edits fiction and journalism, writes long-form narrative prose and even literary fiction. While these ‘hacks of genius’ may be best remembered for their fiction, a list which includes Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, Mark Twain and George Orwell, Underwood argues that journalism was their route into dramatic prose.

Since journalism was – and perhaps remains – an undervalued genre, Underwood suggests it offered a pathway into fiction for women and ethnic minority writers excluded from more prestigious outlets. One pleasure of this volume was discovering forgotten writers such as Margaret Fuller who the author describes as ‘perhaps the best example of an early American woman journalist-literary figure to embrace the important features of what would be termed modern feminism’ (Underwood, 2019: 111). Fuller was a nineteenth century reformer who wrote for Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune*, where she believed that journalism could inform and persuade public views on marginalised people. But she also edited some of America’s best-known literary figures including Ralph Waldo Emerson, and critiqued (‘in blunt and uncomplimentary fashion’) the poetry of James Russell Lowell and Henry W. Longfellow. Another discovery was novelist Richard Wright, an African-American author who assured his white critics of his approach to realism that ‘I prefer to write out of the background of my experience in an imaginative fashion. I don’t prefer to streamline my stuff to what the public will like’ (Underwood, 2019: 115).

During the late nineteenth century, the ‘journalist-literary figure’ evolved in parallel with the development of the academic literary specialist in university departments of English in America and Britain. The battle ground for the high ground of literary cultural authority was then split between journalists who wrote for ‘the common reader’ versus the academic literary intellectual. Tensions rose further as universities began to assert control over, systematise and professionalise the assessment of reading materials. The ‘journalist-literary figure’ operated as a form of double agent, engaged in academic pursuits while reviewing for the marketplace, thus ensuring that professional scholars took narrative non-fiction writing seriously. A generation later, the New Criticism narrowed the focus again, with T. S. Eliot, the arch modernist, blunting the inroads made by scholars whose interests lay in the social, in history or in biography. By the 1960s, the struggle over who deserved to be read and revered would erupt under the influences of the New Journalism and post-modernism’s stance that sought to erase the differences between fiction and non-fiction. Underwood argues that the rebel charge against modernism’s elitist notions was played out in both academia and journalism. From this ferment grew the movement within contemporary scholarship to de-colonise the literary canon and to the rediscovery of writers whose work had been ignored by previous generations. The result is today’s so-called ‘canon wars’ where the debate rumbles on.

This is a timely contribution to the history of literary journalism, which includes a useful appendix of British and American literary journalists and ‘journalist-literary figures’ for scholars and students of the subject. Underwood makes a convincing case that even in the current fractious media and publishing landscape, many

celebrated novelists learned their craft through the practice of writing long form narrative non-fiction. Whether his definitional divide between 'literary journalist' and 'journalist-literary figure' will survive as scholarly usage is a moot point. But his argument that literary journalism's influence on the 'hacks of genius' remains underrated is sound and should open up the field for further research.

Hartsock, J. (2000) *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Kramer, M. and Call, W. (2007) *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writer's Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University*, New York: Plum.