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Literary Journalism on Trial

Literary Journalism on Trial: Masson v. New Yorker and the First Amendment by Kathy Roberts Forde. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008. Paperback, 288 pp., \$28.95.

Reviewed by Peter Parisi, Hunter College, U.S.A.

When the flamboyant psychoanalyst Jeffrey Moussief Masson sued *The New Yorker* magazine and writer Janet Malcolm, charging that she had altered or fabricated quotes to portray him in a defamatory light, narrative technique in journalism came under unprecedented legal scrutiny. Was it legitimate for a journalist to reshape a subject's words, drawing together statements from various times and smoothing gaps and ambiguities, all to translate "speech into prose"? How was such creative license to be evaluated in the context of libel and the Supreme Court's ringing affirmation in *Sullivan v. New York Times* of the importance of robust, free-wheeling, even caustic, public expression.

In *Literary Journalism on Trial: Masson v. New Yorker and the First Amendment*, Kathy Roberts Forde sets these questions in a richly intricate yet lucid historical, legal and literary context, organized around three closely interwoven strands. There is, first, the virtually irreconcilable debate between fact-based and literary journalism with their distinct conceptions of reporting, writing technique and the nature of "truth" and "reality"; secondly, the philosophical rendition of this debate through the postmodern rejection of objectivity and unitary, palpable truth; and, finally, the bearing of these differences on the law of defamation with important implications for the quality of democratic discussion.

Conventional practice for an argument like this might suggest a linear design, opening with legal and cultural background of the case, followed by its chronological unfolding and closing with discussion of journalistic implications. Forde, instead, ingeniously spirals in on her conclusions, creating an intellectual suspense unusual in a scholarly volume. After an introductory overview, she takes up *Masson v. New Yorker* in the middle of its course at the end of the first federal trial in 1993. Thereafter, she alternates chapters, tracking the case with chapters on elements of the cultural context. Thus Chapter 2 lays out the history of American journalism's competing models of reportage, the news-based and the literary, with due attention to *The New Yorker's* place in that history. Chapter 3 traces American libel law as it was transformed in *New York Times v. Sullivan*, with particular notice of changing

standards of truth and the First Amendment. Chapter 4 follows libel suits against *The New Yorker* from its founding to the period after *Sullivan* and its strategies for fending off suits (a favorite: foot-dragging until the complainant got tired of the business). Chapter 5 takes the initial years of *Masson v. New Yorker* to the point when the Supreme Court remanded it for lower courts to evaluate the factual basis of the alleged libelous statements. Chapter 6, "Libel Law and the Postmodern Dilemma," explores the Sullivan-Masson line of Supreme Court cases attempting to define actual malice and the conditions that deem defamatory speech factual enough to incur damages. Chapter 7 sees the case to its close, with the jury concluding that Malcolm's contested statements were either not defamatory or not made with absolute malice. A fascinating final chapter offers Forde's thoughts on mediating between the opposed approaches of news and literary journalism in order to maximize journalism's democratic service.

Forde approaches the news/literary divide as an adherent of postmodernism, inflected by the "middle way" of American pragmatism. This is to view "human action and reality as embedded within social and cultural contexts and thus always open to interpretation" (215), a far cry from the worldview of conventional journalism. But in placing social action at its center, this orientation escapes the smug obscurantism of postmodernism that renders all of experience as "text."

Given Forde's pragmatic postmodernism, she is well aware of reasons why the sacrosanct verbatim quotation, so much revered in conventional journalism, can be greeted skeptically. "Quotations cannot always be viewed as factual statements," she writes (209). Nor is it so easy to determine whether a quotation has been substantially altered. "The test demands interpretation, compression, and weighing of the actual spoken words and written quotation. But what happens when the actual spoken words are not recoverable? What happens when the words spoken are ambiguous in meaning and rambling to boot . . . ? In these instances, the speaker's actual utterance can hardly be treated as a fact. Yet the material alteration test assumes that it can" (p. 209). Janet Malcolm may have failed openly to acknowledge her technique of compressing and smoothing quotes, but Forde responds that traditional journalism commits an equivalent misdemeanor when it fails to reveal the exact question that elicits a quote.

Forde rightly notes that the dichotomy between news and literary journalism is not absolute. Any reading of *The New York Times*, she says, will find journalists deploying narrative technique and any survey of *The New Yorker* will reveal writing from an objective stance centered on facts.

If journalism is to register the multiple perspectives of social experience and serve democratic debate in the process, what is needed, Forde contends, is greater candor and transparency about the writing and reporting process. Journalists and news organizations should be much more forthcoming about their methods of gathering information, presenting it, and the assumptions that underlie their interpretations. For the many press observers who find journalistic claims of objectivity to be dangerously simplistic, often disingenuously masking political-economic interests, Forde's emphasis on transparency is attractive and opens some rich lines of discussion. What exactly would such full disclosure look like? Is it entirely feasible? I propose here to respond to Forde's valuable, foundational work (and the launching of a scholarly journal devoted to literary journalism) by offering a few reflections for further discussion.

There are some indications of conventional journalism registering the postmodern critique, which is so inimical to its basic truth claims and objective approach. Most significantly, narrative journalism has carved itself a secure niche, supported through Harvard's Nieman Foundation and the Poynter Institute. To judge from work published in the online *Nieman Narrative Digest*, long-form work, following a compelling story with rich detail and description, is appearing in a wide variety of news outlets (see <<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/digest/notable/notablebysource.html>>). The editors of the *Digest* note that narrative journalism isn't just a matter of good yarns, but is a strong medium for opening out the complexities of social issues such as race and class. (Narrative fiction of that stripe deserves further examination.)

Other indicators are more subtle but show the institution of journalism responding to debates about its factual credibility. *The New York Times* has taken to publishing a "Reader's Guide," initially on page A2 or A3, and now on the web (www.newyorktimes.com/readersguide), that aims to explain the various "special forms"—"news analysis," "reporter's notebook," "memo" or "journal"—that readers will encounter in its pages. The real function of this service seems less to acknowledge the multiplicity of possible viewpoints than to prevent readers from expecting objectivity uniformly throughout the paper and complaining after they stumble on qualitative judgment or description. So this move falls well short of acknowledging a world of multiple, competing interpretations.

Another sign of "soft postmodernism" is the increasing use of the term "narrative" to refer, not to story-telling, but to the interpretive construction of social realities. So we find a *New York Times* business reporter speaking of "the corporate narrative that is Time Warner" and in a reaction story on the destruction in Gaza, "The heroic Israeli narrative has run its course."

A problematic form of postmodernism is in campaign reporters' adoption of a "dramaturgical" frame. Within that frame, candidates' "performance"—not just in debates, but in the whole conduct of the campaign—is the core object of assessment and is treated as a more significant sign of political competency than positions and plans. This suggests something that gets somewhat obscured in Forde's discussion: narrative structure and assumptions ("frames") are as consequential in hard news reporting as in literary nonfiction.

One of the advantages of the dramaturgical frame is that it allows the reporter to appear both objectively descriptive and critical all at once. The objective stance dies—or deconstructs—hard. There are solid political-economic reasons why mainstream journalism would have difficulty disclosing the styles and assumptions of press accounts. The rhetorical strategies that constitute objectivity are essential passport for navigating between the powerful interests that represent the "sides" in mainstream, corporate media.

Although my own philosophical sympathies lie with Forde's, there are some problems with allowing too much flexibility to the phrasing of the facts. Forde believes that sophisticated readers of *The New Yorker* understand full well the creative license that gives us characters enunciating long, eloquent monologues such as we do not encounter (or produce) in life. Is there not something problematic about representing human experience as more polished than it is? Critics are generally much less comfortable with compound characters than with *The New Yorker* writer's accepted "compound quotations." Why the difference? Can we really claim that characters compounded of several others, as Joseph Mitchell confessed to creating, express a "deeper truth"? Perhaps, but the question needs a good airing.

"Journalism history," Ford says, "has yet to engage in a sustained way the postmodern critique of objectivist knowledge that has influenced the broader discipline of history" (19). For all its complexities, Forde has made a major contribution to that engagement.

Stories of New York

New York Stories: Landmark Writing from Four Decades of New York Magazine by Editors of *New York Magazine*, foreword by Tom Wolfe. New York: Random House, 2008. Paperback, 624 pages, \$17.

Reviewed by Elizabeth B. Christians, Louisiana Tech University, U.S.A.

N*New York Stories: Landmark Writing From Four Decades of New York Magazine* is a wonderland of the most enduring cultural, social and political events, ideas, and people in America's recent history told through the eyes and with the voices of those who experienced and witnessed them—a losing candidate, a cancer survivor, an illegal immigrant, prostitute and swinger, working class and high-class, police officer and firefighter widow, mobster and rock star, and several sassy and sophisticated journalists. They are all within these pages, and they tell the story of *New York* but also the story of America from 1968 to 2008.

From the intensely personal to the culturally significant, *New York Stories* not only covers the last forty years but includes nearly as many subjects. The foreword is appropriately written by the father of New Journalism, Tom Wolfe, whose eloquent style and satirical wit defined much of the best literary nonfiction of the 1970s. Wolfe's *New York* masterpieces include "Radical Chic," about the absurdity of the Black Panther fundraiser held by renowned composer Leonard Bernstein in 1970 in his Park Avenue palace, and "The 'Me' Decade"—in which Wolfe examines the enormity of the ego—using of all things, a woman's continuously worrisome hemorrhoid.

The selections chosen for *New York Stories* compilation illustrate how culturally and politically significant the literary journalism of the magazine has been since its 1960s inception as a Sunday supplement to the *New York Herald Tribune*, which Wolfe defines as "the lowest form of newspaper journalism in America at the time" (xiv). Merely surviving would have proved a feat at a time when magazines were dying in droves or reinventing themselves for a niche market. Yet, Felker's *New York* rose to the challenge of putting out a weekly publication that challenged readers—primarily Manhattanites—to look at their world in new ways, to learn about issues that they had perhaps heard of but only superficially, and to explore new ideas.

In 1968, *New York* became its own stand-alone magazine. Felker had gotten his start at *Esquire* and helped that magazine set the bar—along with *The New Yorker*—for expansive, subjective and literary works of journalism. Many of the writers that have graced the pages of *New York* already had

successful careers in the business. For others, *New York* gave them the opportunity to spread their wings without confine as to space or subject matter, and the results are priceless. Some of the pieces were expanded and became best-sellers.

After a glance at the table of contents of *New York Stories*, some readers may not realize the significance by title or author of works like “Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night” by Nik Cohn, which was the basis for the movie *Saturday Night Fever*, which has garnered an eternal place in American popular culture. Or Mark Jacobson’s 1975 article, “Night-Shifting for the Hip Fleet,” which served as the basis for the hit TV series *Taxi*.

From food—humorist and novelist Nora Ephron’s “Critics in the World of the Rising Souffle (or is it Rising Meringue?)” and writer George Plimpton’s “If You’ve Been Afraid to Go to Elaine’s These Past Twenty Years, Here’s What You’ve Missed”—to female issues in Ariel Levy’s “Female Chauvinist Pigs” and Joyce Wadler’s intensely private emotional journey, “My Breast: One Woman’s Cancer Story,”—to finances in Pete Hamill’s look at “The Revolt of the White Lower Middle Class” and John Taylor’s “Hard to Be Rich,” about the rise and fall of Wall Street mogul John Gutfreund and his wife, Susan.

From a historical standpoint, one realizes upon reading *New York Stories* just how well connected Felker had to remain in the fickle world of literati to pull off such a successful and poignant magazine week after week in an increasingly saturated media world. Felker and his editorial staff deserve much praise for their craftiness and creativity at content selection. *New York Stories* is a testament to this.

Gloria Steinem served as *New York*’s political writer in 1969, when she wrote “After Black Power, Women’s Liberation,” which is included in *New York Stories*. Three years later, in 1972, Steinem founded *Ms.* magazine, which was funded and distributed initially by Felker and *New York*. Interesting from a historical perspective, Steinem’s initial article on women’s liberation actually predated Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, which is often credited with the start of the 1960s feminist movement. Steinem wrote the article dealing with women’s health issues and choices (or lack thereof) in contraception for *Esquire* at the bidding of Felker, who was a features editor. She credited Felker with encouraging her to write serious journalism.

Several authors appear more than once in the collection in addition to Wolfe and Steinem. Columnist Jimmy Breslin’s 1969 profile of the young party-boy quarterback Joe Namath appears with an essay about his and Norman Mailer’s attempt at taking New York City Council by storm that same year.

A more recent article by multiple *New York* contributor and political journalist Joe Klein tackles the issue of race in one of the most unforgettable essays in the book, “Race: The Issue,” which chronicles the Central Park rapist case of 1989. Klein, perhaps best known for his penning of *Primary Colors* under the pseudonym “Anonymous,” bravely uncovers the multiple layers to racism.

New York has long been recognized for its colorful profiles of the rich and famous, and several are included in this collection. Unique portraits of award-winning author Truman Capote, depressed and alone at the end of his life, and Woody Allen, as a pen pal to essay-writer Nancy Jo Sales in her early teens in 1980, show readers familiar celebrities in unfamiliar and uncomfortable ways.

From the most seemingly innocuous of pastimes—crossword puzzles (Stephen Sondheim’s “How to Do a *Real* Crossword Puzzle or What’s a Four-letter Word for ‘East Indian Betel Nut’ and Who Cares?”) and Internet chatting (Emily Nussbaum’s “Say Everything”)—to the most heinous acts in American history, *New York* has covered them all in memorable fashion. A 2004 article, “The Dead Wives Club, or Char in Love” by Steve Fishman, about the 9/11 widows, reads almost like morbid humor while respectfully exploring the process of mourning on a personal level over an event that touched the nation. The title of the article comes from the name the group gave themselves.

One of the most recent and enlighteningly funny articles, “Up With Grups” by Adam Sternbergh, an editor-at-large at *New York*, borrows its name from a 1960s *Star Trek* episode to describe the state of adulthood in the twenty-first century. Grups, according to Sternbergh, are thirtysomethings—and sometimes even older—who are stuck in a mindset that is a cross between wannabe rock star and Peter Pan. They have jobs and kids but want to wear holey jeans and listen to iPods. “They’re making up adulthood as they go,” according to Sternbergh (73).

The final part of *New York Stories* includes political essays on the character of and characters that have been part of the American political climate during the past four decades. They include the newest American president, Barack Obama, in a profile of the then-Illinois senator written by *New York* writer Jennifer Senior in October 2006.

It takes the right mixing of flavors, of styles, and of voices to create a magazine that can survive and thrive as long as *New York* has. And that whole menu of flavors can be found in this collection.

Settling the Borderland

Settling the Borderland: Other Voices in Literary Journalism by Jan Whitt. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2008. Paperback, 159 pp., \$29.

Reviewed by Nancy L. Roberts, University at Albany, U.S.A.

“**B**orderland” is a familiar metaphor for the realm where journalism’s supposed factual verifiability and literature’s techniques can contrast and coalesce to form a work of art that communicates a larger truth about human existence. Yet “borderland” also aptly describes the terrain occupied by several women and some men of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States whose literary journalism has been under-represented. This is the landscape of “other voices” that Jan Whitt explores in this insightful addition to the growing scholarship about the relationship between journalism and literature.

Whitt, a journalism professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder, focuses here on the work of five women (Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, Joan Didion, Sara Davidson, and Susan Orlean) and three men (Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, and John Steinbeck), all of whom were deeply influenced by journalism. She undertook this study, she writes, in part because she wondered, “Where were the women?” when preparing to teach literary journalism courses during the 1980s. Instead, at that time she “confronted the standard set of characters” such as Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Ernest Hemingway, Hunter S. Thompson, Mark Twain, Tom Wolfe, and others.

Settling the Borderland reflects Whitt’s thinking, developed over at least two decades, about both the practice and the academic study of literary journalism. Her background as a practicing journalist, with degrees in English and journalism and a Ph.D. in literature, richly informs this study. One of her original insights is the important role of allegory as used by women literary journalists such as Joan Didion, Sara Davidson, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, and Susan Orlean. Techniques of literary journalism such as “reliance upon description, appropriation of narrative forms, heavy use of dialogue, [and] emphasis on character . . . were already in use by the men who represented the genre,” Whitt notes. “But to employ these strategies in the service of rich symbolism—for Joan Didion to tell a tale of middle-class America in which a seemingly content woman would burn her husband to death in a Volkswagen on a street called ‘Bella Vista’—well, that is allegory. This use of allegory taps into the wellspring.”

Whitt argues that while male writers such as Capote, Wolfe, et al. are “settlers” of the genre, women literary journalists are its

“revolutionaries.” Joan Didion, Sara Davidson, Susan Orlean, and others mastered the “rituals” of literary journalism, she asserts, adapting to the genre, and “then, quietly—without visible disruption—some of them would begin to subvert the accepted tenets and transform the genre.” Such transformations include Susan Orlean’s *Orchid Thief*, a tale of people’s lifelong search for a “symbol of beauty and perfection—in a tormented and imperfect world,” and Sara Davidson’s *Loose Change: Three Women of the Sixties*, which Whitt calls “the story of friendship and betrayal and forgiveness and despair.”

Whitt offers key insights about literary journalism’s contributions not just to aesthetic but to social discourses. She builds upon John Pauly’s germinal essay, “The Politics of the New Journalism” (in Norman Sims’s edited collection, *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*), in choosing to analyze seemingly disparate works such as Didion’s *Salvador*, Poe’s detective stories (such as “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”), Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. All seem to have in common a social commentary and even criticism that may derive from each author’s immersion in the day-to-day world of journalism.

The chapter dealing with the work of Katherine Anne Porter and Eudora Welty is particularly intriguing, as here Whitt demonstrates in detail the direct links between these authors’ early journalism experiences and their later literary writing. For example, Whitt points to “the importance of place and the supremacy of the moment” in Porter’s later work, as well as her usual “desire to observe without passing judgment on the events she describes.”

Whitt grounds her study in a nuanced review of some of the major ideas and controversies in literary journalism scholarship for the last several decades. She finds particularly useful literary journalism’s definition as developed by Thomas B. Connery in “Discovering a Literary Form,” the introductory essay in his anthology about literary journalism: “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” [in Connery, ed., *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism: Representative Writers in an Emerging Genre*, New York, NY: Greenwood, 1992, p. 15]. She also seems to agree with Connery’s definition of the genre as *not* including essays and commentary, and with his view that “much of the content of the works comes from traditional means of news gathering or reporting, including interviews, document review and observation. Finally, journalism implies an immediacy, as well as a sense that what is being written about has a relevance peculiar to its time and place.”

So it is surprising that Whitt calls Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a 2005 book about the death of her husband, both a “memoir” and an

important work of “literary journalism.” Given the amount of invention, often unconscious but nevertheless present in any autobiographical work, the two cannot happily coexist. First, there is the perennial problem of memory’s notorious duplicity. Also, as Timothy Dow Adams has convincingly argued, all autobiographers (including memoirists) are “unreliable narrators,” in effect, “liars,” because they are shaping *their* version of the story, which always includes the creation of a “self” (an enterprise that requires imagination as well as memory) [*Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990, p. ix]. And as the memoirist Patricia Hampl has written, “memoir is not a matter of transcription, . . . memory itself is not a warehouse of finished stories, not a static gallery of framed pictures” [“Memory and Imagination,” in *The Dolphin Reader*, ed. Douglas Hunt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986, pp. 1006-1007]. I would argue that memoir belongs in its own, unique category as a partly factual genre that shares literary journalism’s use of literary techniques to evoke a larger (“literary”) truth (what Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks called “truth of coherence,” as opposed to factual “truth” or “truth of correspondence”).

That said, there is much to recommend in *Settling the Borderland*. Whitt should be commended for raising and investigating penetrating questions about the other voices of literary journalism. Her book offers an engaging discussion of a wealth of literary journalism’s history and trends. At book’s end, the reader will be struck by how much has been imparted in relatively few pages. Whitt’s scholarship here is sound and will doubtless inspire continued exploration of this less known realm. If Whitt’s women literary journalists are “revolutionaries,” she herself is a pioneer in the genre’s scholarship.

Telling and Reading True Stories

Telling True Stories—A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Neiman Foundation at Harvard University, edited by Mark Kramer and Wendy Call. New York: Penguin Group, 2007. Paperback, 352 pp., \$15.

The Writer's Reader—Understanding Journalism and Non-fiction, edited by Susie Eisenhuth and Willa McDonald. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Paperback, \$37.

Reviewed by Douglas Whynott, Emerson College, U.S.A.

Reading *Telling True Stories* is like being at a nonfiction writers' conference with most of the shining lights of literary journalism as practiced in the United States over the past twenty-five years or more. There are nearly fifty of them here—Pulitzer prize winners, National Book award winners, MacArthur fellows, all offering up short talks on craft, issues, or concerns. Reading the various pieces, two to four pages each, you get the impression that each writer chose what he or she knew best and wanted most to talk about regarding narrative nonfiction. This book kept reminding me of another book I read three decades ago when I was very interested in higher states of mind and meditation, a little volume called *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* by Shunryo Suzuki: short takes, distilled wisdom, building upon the accrual of knowledge like mist on a wool jacket.

Telling True Stories probably isn't a book appropriate for a course introducing students to nonfiction writing. Though I say that with reservation, because anyone interested in writing could get something out of this book. All in all, however, it is best suited for the writer who already has read and perhaps begun to practice narrative nonfiction. (I for one will assign it in a graduate course on writing the nonfiction book in the coming semester.) *Telling True Stories* is certain to be useful and inspiring for accomplished and professional writers, because its range and the above mentioned wisdom and distilled knowledge. Anyone, no matter who and how experienced, will take something away.

Disclaimer: I know Mark Kramer and was once his student when I was in a Master of Fine Arts program and he taught a nonfiction workshop. Mark had just written his wonderful book about agriculture, *Three Farms*. I told Mark when I ran into him recently at a nonfiction conference in Boston what I have told others over the years, that I learned more about writing in ten minutes, listening to him read through a *New Yorker* piece paragraph by paragraph, identifying techniques, than I did in the entirety of other writing

courses. Mark introduces, with Wendy Call, the various sections in *Telling True Stories*, and contributes two chapters, on “Reporting for Narrative: Ten Overlapping Rules,” and “Setting the Scene” (“Try to array details and events so that readers experience the location in three dimensions. You can write, ‘Out the window, a tree waved in the wind,’ or ‘She spoke from across the room.’”)

I found the opening piece in this book to be unforgettable, painful, and perfectly appropriate for the leadoff story. Jacqui Banaszynski tells about an assignment she had in Sudan at a famine camp on the Ethiopian border, where 100,000 people had come because they have no water, where little girls soaked rags in mud by a river and wrung them out in plastic jugs drop by drop. Banaszynski feels freaked out by it all, and terribly guilty. But she keeps hearing this noise at night, this *singing* sound: “You hear sweet chants and deep rhythms. Each night, over and over, at about the same time.” She asks around, and learns that the singers are actually telling stories, that the nightly storytelling is a ritual, that the elders are the ones singing the songs and passing the knowledge. “Stories are the connective tissue of the human race,” she writes. “Tell yours with accuracy and understanding and context and with unwavering devotion to the truth.”

David Halberstam is here, the giant of nonfiction writing who didn’t publish any books about writing, but a lot of them about momentous subjects, on canvasses large and small. The moment I saw him on the contents page I turned to see what he had to say: In his four pages, titled “The Narrative Idea,” he writes: “To write good narrative you must be able to answer the question: *What is the story about?* The *idea*, the concept, is critical to narrative journalism. Moving the idea from genesis to fruition is what it’s all about.” He provides an example from *The Teammates: A Portrait of Friendship* (concerning four friends of sixty years caring about each other late in their lives) and says, “The book *is* the idea. Once you have the idea, it just flows out. Taking an idea, a central point, and pursuing it, turning it into a story that tells something about the way we live today, is the essence of narrative journalism.” He has another bit of wisdom to offer aspiring writers and states it emphatically: “Read,” he says. “Read good nonfiction books. Read good detective fiction, because no one does narrative structure better than good detective writers.” That advice is a recurring theme throughout *Telling Good Stories*, and the nice things about the various writers represented here is that not only do you learn about some of their books, the ones you don’t know, but you also sometimes get their reading recommendations. One more thing about Halberstam, not to give it all away, but to my thinking the price of the book is covered, for anyone seeking to do literary journalism, in one

little nugget of advice he offers up: At the end of the interview always ask, “Who else should I see?” How much better a question than the rusty old saw: “Is there anything I haven’t covered?”

Telling True Stories is organized into ten parts under such titles as “Finding, Researching and Reporting Topics,” “Constructing a Structure,” “Building Quality into the Work,” and “Building a Career in Magazines and Books.” As one can imagine, because each of the essays or talks is freewheeling, the pieces don’t always confine themselves to the subject at hand; frequently the writer thinks of something else, starts off by talking about structure but then (like Halberstam telling us to *read*) suddenly is talking about editing or ethics or quality—which to this reader made it more interesting, because books about writing can be so very dull and organized and plodding.

Lane DeGregory asks the question, “Will there be interaction between my character and others?” Dialogue is more important than explanation, she says: Look for ways to observe interaction: If you can, go out to lunch with your subject and his grandma. Isabelle Wilkerson speaks to the fact that interactions between journalists and sources are relationships, though ones of accelerated intimacy. Jon Franklin writes of the psychological interview: explore what made the character who he or she is, he says; ask, “What is your first memory?” and other such questions. Ted Conover tells about how he went to prison, in the only way he could manage—as a prison guard, to write *Newjack*. Philip Lopate writes that memoirists must dramatize themselves, and must find distance from themselves to do it. Nicholas Lemann writes that yarn-spinning alone will not suffice; there must be ideas. He says that when Tom Wolfe listed his famous four devices in the introduction to *The New Journalism*, he didn’t name the one thing he does very well in his nonfiction and that is responsible for his success, that he “works actively with ideas as well as techniques.” And in this book there is even Tom Wolfe himself, examining once again his four devices, stating their value once again, then going on to show how Stephen Crane had the right stuff (for narrative nonfiction).

I claimed that published writers have a lot to learn from *Telling True Stories*. I would say that the most intriguing piece for me was a short meditation on story structure by Jon Franklin, when he writes that all stories have three layers. The top layer is what happens, the narrative. The next layer is how those events make the main character feel. Then there is the third layer, which is the rhythm of the piece, Franklin writes, mentioning the neuroanatomist Paul MacLean and his idea of the triune brain, that each person has three brains: “One understands rhythm, one understand emotions, and the third is cognitive.” Rhythm is important, because storytelling is symphonic.

I liked thinking about that in terms of writing your first draft, the idea

that you would listen to the rhythm, rather than to the inner editor, which can be so debilitating.

This is a useful *and* inspirational book, slices of advice caught in a moment in time—the Nieman nonfiction conferences, which Mark Kramer founded and imbued with his energetic personality and perceptive mind for several years.

The *Writer's Reader* is more of a textbook, and would be useful in courses that introduce students to narrative nonfiction for the first time, perhaps journalism students who have some knowledge of feature writing and are now ready to break out into longer narrative forms. It is also, as the title states, a reader, and so one of its advantages is that it provides writing, full length articles and essays, by the various authors featured, which include Joan Didion, Barr Siegel, Jessica Mitford, David Sedaris, Annie Dillard, and Pico Iyer.

The authors, Susie Eisenhuth and Willa McDonald, are Australian journalists, and the word choice is distinctly Aussie flavored at times (“while the NJ boys were frequently *lairizing* on centre stage, Joan Didion was, typically, huddled quietly in the wings.” Or, “Didion . . . had returned to the essay writing of her early years, but in a much *stroppier* mode.”) The italics are mine; I take “lairizing” to mean making a lair, wallowing, just as I take “stroppier” to mean touchy (with some help from Webster). But Aussie term-bending is always fun, and this is a well-organized book.

It begins with two chapters, “News and Follow-Ups” and “New Journalism and Its Legacy,” on topics and follows with six chapters on genres: Profiles, Investigative Writing, Essays, Memoir, Place, and Travel. Each chapter begins with an overview of the topic by one of the book’s authors, followed by analysis of the respective writers. In the New Journalism chapter Susie Eisenhuth writes, “Another thing Didion showed them—and continues to demonstrate—was the elegant economy of her style. Anyone who spends time with new writers knows the perils of overwriting, the way they often abandon their natural bent for the forthright and retreat instead into self-conscious writer mode, producing complex sentences garlanded with adverbial tinsel and trailing dependent clauses as they head recklessly into their fourth or fifth line.”

A piece by Joan Didion then follows, “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream,” from *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*. A piece by the journalist Barry Siegel follows the Didion, his “A Father’s Pain, a Judge’s Duty and a Justice Beyond Their Reach,” which won a Pulitzer for reporting. The New Journalism chapter concludes (as each does) with an interview, in this case with Barry Siegel. With these interviews *A Writer's Reader* enters the realm of *Telling True*

Stories, with the seasoned writer Siegel offers his knowledge and experience: “I just simply gravitated towards the stories where the people were facing ambiguous moral issues, where the characters had to choose and act in situations where there were no clear right or wrong answers. Instinctively as a writer, it struck me as being rich material for storytelling . . . and it’s universal. This is what life is and this is what we all do.” *A Writer’s Reader* is a versatile book that approaches the subject of narrative nonfiction from several vantage points.

U.S. and Slovenian Parallels

Literary Journalism in the United States of America and Slovenia by Sonja Merljak Zdovc. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2008. Paperback, 145 pp., \$26.

Reviewed by Alice Donat Trindade, Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas, Universidade Técnica de Lisboa, Portugal

Three years ago at the University of Nancy, France, a new international association was founded—the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies. Among our early founding members, who are both scholars and practitioners of this particular nonfiction genre, was Sonja Merljak Zdovc, the author of *Literary Journalism in the United States of America and Slovenia*. The Slovenian academic and journalist was able to meet and interact within this new society with some of her international peers, with those who clearly shared her interests. Despite the number of works of literary journalism written over the past one hundred years, academic recognition has been slow in coming. Depending on countries and continents, the emerging recognition of this type of writing has been translated into a more or less profuse number of academic publications in a number of countries and continents, but especially in the U.S.

The author, therefore, uses a lot of the seminal theoretical work written

so far on this matter in the United States by such authors as Thomas Berner, Thomas B. Connery, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, John C. Hartsock, Kevin Kerrane, Mark Kramer, Barbara Lounsberry, John Pauly, Norman Sims, and Ben Yagoda, to name but a few of those who have helped in the last twenty to thirty years to lay the foundations for this area of academic study. Her work is then placed within two demanding and complementary areas—comparative and literary journalism studies—using pieces of writing originating in her home country and America. Merljak Zdovc is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ljubljana, and a feature writer as well for the *Saturday Supplement* of the daily newspaper *Delo*. Consequently, she is in a position to analyze both the reasons that direct a journalist towards becoming a practitioner of literary journalism, and those that lead a community of international scholars to delve into this (often) misunderstood and even denied genre.

This scholar/journalist enlightens the reader as to why she chose to focus on American Tom Wolfe: “Tom Wolfe is synonymous with a movement he helped bring into existence in the mid-1960s.” (46) The time of the original publication of the pieces of Wolfe’s work which are used as corpus in the volume—the collection *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby* (1965), and the nonfiction novels *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) and *The Right Stuff* (1979)—are two decades of particular relevance not only in the U.S., but also across the Atlantic, in Slovenia.

The writings by the herald of New Journalism, “The Loudest of Them All,” as Merljak Zdovc describes Wolfe in her book, are to be compared with the audible whispers of Slovenian writers who, under the somehow benign, but still stern rule of President Tito’s Yugoslavian regime, could not do much more than shout with half-sealed lips. The comparison between American New Journalism and the work by Slovenian journalists, handling the individual lives and hardship of their peoples in the same time frame—the 1960s and the 1970s—has an indeed intellectually fascinating outcome. In fact, it clearly demonstrates beyond doubt the way the written word frames the surrounding world for the benefit of readers, and of the various interests involving all possible gatekeepers—journalists, editors, publishers, secret police, and so on. The slight opening of the Socialist Yugoslavian establishment in the 1960s allowed for some innovation in themes and structure. Reference is made to some authors, namely Predrag Djuričić and his 1965 article “Adria Foxtrot Charlie.” The close comparison of this particular text shows how techniques, systematically described by Wolfe in his introduction to the 1973 volume *The New Journalism*, are used by the Yugoslavian writer even if he was totally unaware that he was using the exact same techniques in use half

way across the world by American writers who were also trying to figure out how to portray the joys, sorrows, and plights of their corner of the world to all audiences.

Although, as Merljak Zdovc notes, not many Slovenian journalists' texts can be compared in style and technique to the American literary journalism production of the period, still, even in situations as diverse as the ones experienced in capitalist America and socialist Yugoslavia, authors in the two countries were experiencing the same urge to write detailed, vivid, well-researched accounts of their countrymen's life experiences. In the preface to his influential work, *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism*, Thomas Connery calls literary journalism a "type of cultural expression" (xi). This concept of "expression" explains much of what those writers were doing at the time in that in all moments of history there are particularly suitable "types of cultural expression," types that are ripe to be produced by authors and received by the public. It is as if each type of writing in each historical circumstance was found by means of a fruitful silent (sometimes loud) exchange which engages those two elements of communication, plus all other agents involved in the process: editors, media, their ownership, and even political regimes. Thus the "shaping" quality of journalism, as Merljak Zdovc puts it, drawing on John Hellmann's, *Fables of Fact. The New Journalism as New Fiction*, paradoxically assumes utmost significance in very different, almost opposite social circumstances. Whereas Wolfe captured situations, issues and people living in extreme, sometimes incomprehensible, times of social change for the many who were not experiencing them directly, Slovenian writers were well aware that the neatly framed socialist society where they lived and about which they wrote was not as uncontroversial as it was made to seem. The author reminds the reader: "Similarly, almost as a rule, literary journalism is about an everyday story that assumes true meaning when the journalist places it into a broader context" (8). That was made by Wolfe and his counterparts in Slovenia—when Wolfe wrote about customized cars, or when journalists, writing for the magazine *Tovariš*, tried to evade official Yugoslavian journalistic discourse. The situations experienced by New Journalists and their European colleagues were far from similar; however, they all felt that established, conventional journalism was unsatisfactory.

Wolfe actually introduced a designation in the introduction to the volume *The New Journalism* for the particular sort of writing and publication he was rejecting, "totem newspapers." Readers buy them because they need to display to themselves and others that their style of living is in conformity with the principles and rules of the publication. It is a sign of belonging.

Whereas this sort of newspaper had this symbolic value in the U.S., rules and values were more rigidly enforced in Slovenia—and not only in terms of outward appearance. Merljak Zdovc notes (78) that some reports “flew’ out of the magazine” because they were not in conformity with the established rules on matters that could be approached without endangering yourself and your family. In appearance and in substance, all Slovenian newspapers had, thus, to be “totem” newspapers, as they had to show both writers and readers compliance with the establishment. Nevertheless, there was always some, often scarce, room for transgression, and journalists in Slovenia “turned to novelistic techniques because analytical, factographic reporting was not possible” (84).

Finally, we may say that reading Merljak Zdovc’s book enlightens journalism and literary journalism scholars as well as all those interested in matters related to these areas on how two radically different sets of reasons may lead authors to similar techniques and genres: both Wolfe’s depictions of extraordinary moments of considerable social change, and Slovenian authors’ use of literary techniques to bring hard times to the fore without being regarded as enemies of the regime resulted in writings of *News that Lasts*.

A Century of True Stories

True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism by Norman Sims. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2008; paperback, 398 pp., \$24.95.

Reviewed by Paul Ashdown, University of Tennessee, U.S.A.

Trying to write a history of American literary journalism is a bit like trying to write a history of baseball. The recondite origins of each reach back at least to the early nineteenth century, drawing liberally upon rustic entertainments that predate the American nation. Near the beginning of the twentieth century forms emerge we might recognize today.

The problem is where to begin. A clodhopper whacking a hurled orb with a stick and then running to a clump in a pasture before his progress is arrested

by a team of defenders may anticipate later competition between the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees, but is it really the same game? Likewise, Washington Irving was writing fictional literary sketches during the Monroe Administration. By the time Mark Twain gave the form a journalistic twist the commonplace sketch was no more likely to anticipate Joseph Mitchell's *McSorley's Famous Saloon* than Trick McSorley, who played briefly for the 1875 St. Louis Red Stockings, was likely to presage Alex Rodriguez. But somehow it happened.

Norman Sims has plowed these fields capably before in *The Literary Journalists* (1984), *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century* (1990), and *Literary Journalism* (1995). A professor of journalism at the University of Massachusetts, Sims advises critics to read nonfiction as a "creative medium that permits an author's expression in subtle ways." A critic might read *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism* that way too. Sims darts in and out of his text, sometimes in the guise of teacher, interviewer, passionate fan, wide-eyed schoolboy reader, raconteur, or perceptive critic. This is a lively, personal, investigation of a literary and historical phenomenon. We learn why Sims thinks literary journalism really matters, how it developed, and what the writers themselves consider the essential nature and purpose of their work. Sims's enthusiasm for fine writing drives the text forward. This is history and creative criticism with a vital point of view. Sims comes admirably close to achieving his goal of establishing a historical foundation for American literary journalism.

The term literary journalism in its contemporary meaning was first used by University of Minnesota professor Edwin H. Ford in a 1937 bibliography, as Sims notes. Ford defined the term as writing that fell in the "twilight zone" between literature and journalism. That was neither the first nor the last attempt to situate literary journalism in some kind of limbo or contested no man's land. Borders are inherently intriguing places where cultures clash and smugglers skulk, yet that edge of uncertainty too often beguiles without purpose. Although this sort of Gnostic journalism may not be everyone's idea of what nonfiction is about, it does point to the richness of field.

Sims wisely is less interested in mulling over definitions, theories and metaphors than in letting the writers and their works speak for themselves. He is a superb interviewer, beguiling writers like Mitchell to explain or further mystify their own work. He provides a selected historical bibliography and five fine examples: "Red Caucasus," by John Dos Passos, an excerpt from *Orient Express*, published in 1922; "The Jumping-Off Place," by Edmund Wilson, originally published in *The New Republic* in 1931; "The Old House at Home," by Mitchell, originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1940; "The Long Fall of One-Eleven Heavy," by Michael Paterniti, published in *Esquire* in 2000; and "Family Journeys," by Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, from *Random*

Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx, published in 2003.

His focus is on themes and trends that began in the nineteenth century and on significant writers who shaped the field in the last hundred years. The hundred-year time frame is arbitrary because so many of the writers who interest him have pre-modern roots. Nor are they exclusively American. While most are familiar to students of the genre, their canonical stature mandates inclusion in any survey.

Literary journalism came out of early newspaper work, emerging in the 1890s from “a maze of local publications” in urban environments where reporters struggled to define their identity in the mass circulation press (43). While editors wanted more objective “scientific” accounts, the writers experimented with more “humanistic” reporting with strong narratives and gritty realism. Chicago writers such as George Ade, Finley Peter Dunne, and Opie Read joined the Whitechapel Club, a peculiar association of police reporters and other urban realists who gathered for strong drink and literary discussion in a ghoulishly appointed back room of a saloon on Newsboy’s Alley. The club drew its inspiration from Irish revolutionary cells with an admixture of socialist and anarchist bluster that attracted visitors ranging from Rudyard Kipling and Richard Harding Davis to Theodore Roosevelt.

Newspaper publishers, according to Sims, were willing to put up with the profitably eccentric columnists who haunted the club, whose members shaped the mythology that eventually produced *The Front Page* and other tales of reportorial profligacy and adventurism. The cult, which had its counterpart in press clubs in Boston, New York, and San Francisco, predated the emergence of literary journalism in popular magazines.

Magazine prose styles, influenced by the newspaper writers, changed to engage readers in narrative reporting that would eventually become the prevailing literary style. Exposition gave way to storytelling as a new kind of journalism emerged in the twentieth century.

Another influence was travel writing, a form that had developed in the eighteenth century, been used by Twain and others in the nineteenth century, and inspired Hemingway, Dos Passos, and John Reed in the twentieth century. By the time of the First World War, writers increasingly were impelled to explore the modern world, and the journey narrative became one of the primary forms of literary creativity. That meant writing about ordinary people as well as politics and the crosscurrents of global conflict. As Dos Passos put it, “Journalism is the business of fussing with bigbugs—and above anything on earth I detest bigbugs.” Literary journalism, Sims reminds us, “generally dispenses with bigbugs” (110).

With the onset of the Depression, the writers distanced themselves from the media bigbugs, who, ever conscious of their advertising base, largely ignored the collapse in hopes it would just go away. It was a story conventional journalism was ill equipped to tell, and it was left to writers like Dos Passos, Wilson, James Agee, John Steinbeck, and Martha Gellhorn to invent new ways of personal, sometimes radical, reporting equal to the task.

Sims suggests that during the Depression nonfiction writing may have begun to upstage fiction. A major part of that shift occurred at *The New Yorker*, where, beginning in the 1930s, writers and editors with a vision of what literary journalism could become began producing the kind of work that has directly influenced the genre ever since. “That’s the magazine that changed everything,” Mitchell told Sims. “For one thing, the detail was important but it seemed to lead to something” (165). What it led to was John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, classic works by A.J. Liebling, Lillian Ross, Truman Capote, John McPhee, and, of course, Mitchell. And it was Mitchell who came up with what could be the best, and simplest, definition of literary journalism: “With *The New Yorker*, you were trying to write something that could be read, again” (171).

The New Journalism of the 1960s never displaced *The New Yorker* approach, despite Tom Wolfe’s attack on editor William Shawn in the Sunday supplement of the *Herald Tribune*. The attack, according to Sims, triggered a literary war that unjustifiably tainted New Journalism as inaccurate. He argues that the much maligned and loosely connected New Journalism movement was more “important, influential, experimental, and valuable than the controversies would lead us to believe” (223). Perhaps, however, it is impossible to separate New Journalism from the era in which it flourished. As the culture turned narcissistic and solipsistic, so did the writers who interpreted it. New Journalism had no more future than the leisure suit.

In a concluding chapter, Sims examines contemporary literary journalism, noting the emergence of the book as the form’s privileged medium, as well as a certain retro-affinity for long narratives in some newspapers. Internet sites, documentary films, and even graphic novels hold promise as well. Paterniti’s discussion of his *Esquire* article shows the craftsmanship of a master writer who understands character and point of view. “Sometimes this work feels like method acting,” Paterniti tells Sims. “You attempt to live so completely inside of your characters and their stories that it becomes part of you” (313). Getting narrative nonfiction right, he says, requires commitment to the “metaphysical details” (315). Can writing be both metaphysical and factual? Language, Sims concludes, “is more powerful than facts, if we can control it . . . This is tough. It takes a literary sensibility. And at the same time, it takes a commitment to the facts. Paterniti could not cut corners and make things up. Because this was real life” (317). Real life, true stories.