



Journalism and the Novel: Truth and Fiction, 1700–2000

By Doug Underwood. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
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The literary and journalistic traditions in England and America have been closely intertwined for at least three hundred years, yet few scholars have explored how the practice of journalism across time shaped the Anglo-American literary canon. In *Journalism and the Novel*, Doug Underwood undertakes the ambitious project of documenting how the journalistic experiences and values of a select group of writers spanning three centuries shaped their work and attitudes as novelists and thus the literary canon (in a valuable Appendix, the author provides information on more than three hundred writers he identifies as “journalist-literary figures”). In particular, Underwood argues that, from the emergence of the English novel in the early eighteenth century to the present, novelists with experience in journalism have used journalistic methods to write fiction based to varying degrees on “reality.”

This book tells the story of the influence of journalism on the novel across three centuries by focusing on the relevant biographical details of selected journalist-literary writers. The result is an important scholarly work that not only brings into relief a largely neglected area of the history of American print culture—the shaping influences between what the late nineteenth-century trade publication *The Journalist* deemed “the twin professions” of literature and journalism—but also provides, in broad brush strokes, a base map that other scholars are left to further survey, level, contour, and adjust. It is my hope that scholars across a range of subfields—from literary history to journalism history to literary journalism to the history of the book and print culture—will complete the map.

The greatest strength of this book’s argument owes much to the expanse of time it covers. *Journalism and the Novel* begins its historical survey with the birth of the novel and the rise of the commercial press in England and a biographical study of the earliest novelists and their related journalistic experiences, with particular emphasis given to Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett, and Oliver Goldsmith. The survey ends with twentieth century writers of the New Journalism movement in America, including Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, and Joan Didion, who worked as both journalists and novelists. By providing a virtual avalanche of evidence across three centuries, from 1700 to 2000, Underwood demonstrates convincingly that the Anglo-American journalistic tradition has consistently shaped the literary tradition. This demonstration is a significant contribution to our existing knowledge of literary history and journalism history.

Viewed from another angle, the strength of the book—its survey of three centuries—is also a weakness. Historians often face vexing problems in determining how best to divide the past into useful and sound periods of study. In this case, the historical narrative is at times troubled by unclearly delineated or explained periods. The result is an often-vertiginous reading experience. For example, some of the periods identified in the introduction are not clearly expressed in terms of years and, further, do not map clearly onto the periods indicated in the titles of the first three chapters (“Journalism and the Rise of the Novel, 1700-1875,” “Literary Realism, 1850-1915,” and “Reporters as Novelists and the Making of Contemporary Journalistic Fiction, 1890-Today.”) What and when exactly was the “Age of Periodicals” and did it overlap with the “Age of Newspapers” (both terms used in the introduction)? And how did these two periods interplay with the periods of literary realism and naturalism and modernism? How do these periods fit within the periodization of the chapter titles, and how should readers account for the considerable overlap between time periods covered in the different chapters? It is not that such overlap is an insurmountable historical problem, but it is that such overlap needs explanation and justification. Further, I would suggest that attempting to cover the years 1700-1875 in only one chapter forced the author to remain on the surface of his subject and allowed little room for close attention to nuanced historical change and continuity across one hundred seventy-five formative years of novel writing and journalistic practices in Anglo-American print culture.

The historical method in *Journalism and the Novel* is largely biographical—that is, in telling the story of the influence of journalism on the novel across time, the book’s primary evidentiary bases for the historical argument are the lives of particular well-known English and American writers who worked in both fields of literary production. This method works particularly well in showing how many novelists used their experiences in journalism to guide their research for their novels, to fashion “realistic” plots and dialogues, and to craft narratives they believed represented the actual lived experiences of their time. The bulk of the book’s historical evidence thus comes not from primary sources but from biographies of journalist-literary figures, analyses of literary movements such as realism and naturalism, and scholarship on literary journalism. As Underwood explains, he understands his work in this book as that of “synthesizer and interpreter” (28). His synthesis is a welcome addition to the broad fields of literary and journalistic history.

Although other modes of inquiry might have deepened and complicated the resulting history, this book leaves that work to future scholars. And *Journalism and the Novel* makes a timely call for more scholarly work that investigates the connections and ruptures between the literary and journalistic traditions in American print culture. For example, scholars following Underwood’s lead may wish to focus more on the textual analysis of the novels and the journalistic work of a select group of writers of a particular period. Strategic textual analysis in the vein of the new historical criticism would likely provide a much more textured understanding of how a given literary and cultural movement (such as romanticism, realism, naturalism, modernism, or postmodernism) both reflected and shaped the work of writers across a range of print genres and industries—and how the literary tradition shaped the journalistic tradition, a phenomenon Underwood rarely acknowledges in *Journalism and the Novel*. In addition, scholars can extend research in this area by exploring the contemporaneous press discourse surrounding the lives and works of particular authors as well as a broad range of archival materials that document print culture, from the institutional records of publications and publishing houses to the personal papers of writers, publishers, and literary agents to the written records of ordinary readers.

As Underwood discusses at length, the relatively young but productive field of literary journalism studies explores the hybrid form of writing that uses narrative and literary techniques to tell timely news stories. *Journalism and the Novel* both builds on and expands on this field. Although Underwood cites a few relevant works in the field known as the history of the book or the history of print culture, he does not explicitly acknowledge or discuss this body of work that has made profound contributions to our understanding of practically all arenas of print culture in American history. In the sphere of journalism history, David Paul Nord has been one of the most persuasive proselytizers for increased attention to the impressive and highly influential work of historians of the book, many of whom have contributed rich insights about the historical relationships among various print genres, labor practices, and markets—including the journalistic and literary—in American print culture. [To learn more about the history of the book and print culture and its potential to enliven the field of journalism history, see Nord's informative essay, "The History of Journalism and the History of the Book," in Barbie Zelizer's *Explorations in Communication and History* (Routledge, 2008)].

Journalism and the Novel raises important questions that the methods of book history might address, such as how and to what degree did the authorship, publication, circulation, and reading of novels influence the work of journalism, including the meaning readers made of their news consumption and novel reading and the uses to which they put it? Who belonged to the different publics (which constituted "separate literary cultures," to borrow a term from Richard Brodhead's *Cultures of Letters*, who read the work of the journalist-literary figures), how were they configured in terms of class and culture, and how did their reading help shape the fabric of their social worlds? These are simply a few examples of questions future scholars might explore using the conceptual tools of book history to expand Underwood's fine contribution to our understanding of print culture in America.