

Book Reviews

Bak, John S., and Bill Reynolds. *Literary Journalism Across the Globe: Journalistic Traditions and Transnational Influences.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011. 306 pp. \$28.95.

This collection of sixteen essays about literary journalism across the globe is a valuable addition to the scant literature on the genre. Its value derives both from the fact that even a superficial reading opens our eyes to the extent that literary journalism—or some derivation of it—has been and is being reported, written, and published in every corner of the world in response to a need for a form of journalism that connects the many subjectivities within nations.

In doing so, this collection helps to refute the view that the United States is the genre's principal player, but it still reveals the transnational dynamic in how the New Journalism of the 1960s and the 1970s in the U.S. helped spawn similar movements elsewhere. Indeed, the collection shows us that while what we call literary journalism may take on different aspects depending of the exigencies of particular nations, the genre's goal across nations is similar in its attempt at the "probing of the 'real' world," as cultural historian Warren Susman once put it.

As with any such collection, the book's essays vary in their quality and degree of scholarly rigor. Still, even after a reading of a casual, almost gossipy essay on literary journalism in Canada, I came away with a good sense of the problems of structure and agency that literary journalists face in that nation, especially in a Western outpost such as Vancouver, where they must deal with the dominant publishing powers far to the east.

Briefly, several themes emerge across the essays.

One is the transnational pollination of new forms of writing. For example, an essay on "Literary Journalism in Twentieth-Century Finland" reveals how Hunter S. Thompson and Gonzo journalism inspired several Finnish writers to break out of old molds of reporting and writing.

Along those same lines, several essays

show us how literary journalism—or literary reportage—was a response to the times when the scientific model of traditional inverted-pyramid objective reporting was seen as not up to the task of adequately informing readers. And related to that, there is some confusion, discussion, and debate about distinctions between the terms literary journalism and literary reportage. Even with John C. Hartsock's well-argued introductory essay on that subject, this distinction is never really made clear. The one sense I come away with is that reportage deals more with active, socially conscious advocacy than straight literary journalism. Of course, then, I am left asking how we would classify such works as James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*? But whatever the definition, these essays reveal that reporting in the genre across nations involves immersion in the subject, and the writing includes such techniques of the fictionists as dialog, different points of view, and scene-setting.

To add to that confusion, one theme across nations that I draw from the essays is that literary journalism is viewed as largely a progressive modality: a critic of society and the *status quo* whose function is the revelation of other cultures and the other within individual societies. Also, one comes away with the sense that when journalists are left to their freedom, they will often report and write in a literary vein. But across many nations journalists face the overt mandates of government censorship and/or journalistic traditions enforced by conservative editors inured to a template or the more subtle demands of publishing commercial content solely concerned with profit.

Indeed, one gets a sense from these essays that in each nation there has been a distinct swirl of history surrounding the genre. And often in these histories, there has been a clash of distinctions and a turf

war between the traditionalists and the new journalists not unlike the clash more than a century ago over the definition of journalism in the genteel magazines versus the modern magazines in America or, in Britain, Thomas Hardy's condemnation of W.T. Stead's revolutionary new journalism as "feather-brained."

In fact, the best essays in this collection are those that offer some history and then bring us to the present and the status of literary journalism in a particular nation today. Those essays that remained hinged to a past without showing the state of the genre today in that nation left me wanting more.

I also found wanting those essays that talked about contemporary literary journalists without excerpting some of their work, which many of these failed to do. The reader needs a better picture of what these writers' work is like to better understand them.

This collection would certainly help inform a course in literary journalism. I know it would have been helpful over the last few years in my graduate-level course in literary journalism to open my eyes and to answer the questions of several of my international students, who have asked about literary journalism outside the United States. I would not require this text as a reader, though I would certainly recommend it as a starting point for research into the genre.

And to that point (this is not a weakness of this collection of sixteen essays but a demand that it creates), we now need a second accompanying volume that collects representative examples of literary journalism from around the globe with context about the authors and brief histories of literary journalism in those nations. That is a text that I would ask students to read.

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