

Vol. 1, No. 2, Fall 2009

# *Literary Journalism Studies*

Richard Critchfield: "Genius" Journalism and the Fallacy of Verification  
by **Miles Maguire**

The Citizen-Witness and the Politics of Shame:  
Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*  
by **Aryn Bartley**

Book Excerpt  
*The Boy in the Moon: A Father's Search for His Disabled Son* (Random House Canada)  
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Reflective Essay  
Writing What You See, Not What You Think You See  
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Unraveling the Webs of Intimacy and Influence:  
Willie Morris and *Harper's* Magazine, 1967–1971  
by **Berkley Hudson and Rebecca Townsend**

The Literary Mind of a Cornfield Journalist:  
Joel Chandler Harris's 1904 Negro Question Articles  
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Getting Away From It All:  
The Literary Journalism of David Foster Wallace and Nietzsche's Concept of Oblivion  
by **Joshua Roiland**

## *LJS*

The journal of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies



### **On the Cover**

The ghost image in the background of our cover depicts Toronto writer Ian Brown on a chaise longue with his severely challenged son, Walker. Father and son enjoy a calm moment together in cottage country, a couple of hundred kilometers north of the city. Walker Brown is the subject of Ian Brown's book, *The Boy in the Moon: A Father's Search for His Disabled Son* (Random House Canada). The excerpt begins on page 41, followed by Ian Brown's essay on the joys and difficulties of writing literary journalism.

Photo courtesy of Ian Brown

# Literary Journalism Studies

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## For Contributors

*Literary Journalism Studies* invites submission of scholarly articles on literary journalism, which is also known as narrative journalism, literary reportage, reportage literature, New Journalism, and the nonfiction novel, as well as literary nonfiction and creative nonfiction that emphasizes cultural revelation. The journal has an international focus and seeks submissions on the theory, history, and pedagogy of literary journalism throughout the world. All disciplinary approaches are welcome. Submissions should be informed with an awareness of the existing scholarship and should be between three thousand and eight thousand words in length, including notes. To encourage international dialogue, the journal is open to publishing one short example or an excerpt of literary journalism per issue accompanied by a scholarly gloss about a writer not widely known outside his or her country. The example or excerpt must be translated into English. The scholarly gloss must be between fifteen hundred and twenty-five hundred words long and indicate why the example is important in the context of its national culture. Together, both the text and the gloss must not exceed eight thousand words in length. The contributor is responsible for obtaining all copyright permissions, including from the publisher, author and translator as necessary. The journal is also willing to consider publication of exclusive excerpts of narrative literary journalism accepted for publication by major publishers.

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## A Note From the Executive Editor...

by Bill Reynolds



Last Thursday, in my weekly Feature Writing Workshop class, I handed to students one sheet of paper with typing on both sides. It contained twenty-five factual bits of information about events that happened to me when I was eighteen years old. I knew all of these facts to be true, although I changed the names of the characters to 'Joe' and 'Rebecca.'

I asked my students to use between twelve and fifteen of those facts, no less, no more, in order to write a scene. The scene could be written however they wanted—from Joe's point of view, or Rebecca's, or perhaps the omniscient narrator's.

They consumed about twenty minutes of class before I finally called, "Time's up!" I insisted they read aloud their works in their best broadcast quality voices. Many of the baker's dozen in attendance chose to stick safely to the script, inferring only what logically could be inferred from the facts. Their prose was generally acceptable, but rarely did it come alive. A few, however, took liberties, and this is where things got interesting, because some of those liberties looked not only plausible but also legitimate. They dug inside Rebecca's head and tried to think the way she was thinking. Indeed, some statements went beyond basic inference, yet did not cross a border to become factually incorrect.

For instance, when Joe arrived in Banff, Alberta, he stayed at Rebecca's place because he had nowhere else to go. Rebecca already had a job, but Joe didn't. No job, no accommodation, and a steadily dwindling cash supply. He imposed on Rebecca for nine days before finally landing a summer job. Some students interpreted the fact that Rebecca yelled at Joe once to mean Rebecca frequently must have been angry with her shiftless boyfriend. One student, however, modulated Rebecca's scorn. He wrote from the point of view of a frustrated girlfriend who loved Joe but resorted to barking at him to incite him to find paid work. This is not only closer to the correct psychological take, but hints at the gray nature of reality. Rebecca is angry not in cartoon-like fashion but in a tempered way.

I mention this exercise because, for me at least, it gets the writer, the teacher, and the scholar of literary journalism a bit closer to the crux of a persistent problem: Where exactly is that truth boundary, as Norman Sims characterizes it? Does it move? Is it a formidable looking *Ligne Maginot* that is surprisingly easy to circumvent? Is it purely situational? When is it okay to cross? Never? Sometimes, depending on the circumstances? The truth boundary, alas, may well be literary journalism's *bête noire*.

In this, the second issue of *Literary Journalism Studies*, we find five pieces of scholarship and one excerpt from a new piece of literary journalism, all of which in one way or another emphatically do not avoid this search for what seems to present itself in a color spectrum consisting only of grays.

In our excerpt from Ian Brown's *The Boy in the Moon*, the author jabs at, teases out, and challenges his own reality barrier—in almost an investigative phenomenological analysis, à la Annie Dillard's prismatic look at existence, *For the Time Being*—with respect to Walker, his severely handicapped son. Walker cannot communicate in any conventional way, which forces Brown to search for flickers of reality, to glimpse the truth of what Walker might actually be thinking.

Miles Maguire discusses the inadequacies of the “village reporting” of war journalist Richard Critchfield, an ambitious level of immersion that seemed to elevate Tom Wolfe's saturation reporting to another plane of reality. Even living among the Vietnamese, for example, learning their dialects and customs, to see things as they see them, was not without its own set of tricky truth-tests for Critchfield.

In Aryn Bartley's piece about James Agee and shame, we find Agee of course grappling with the notion of exploitation in his written and Walker Evans's photographic objectification of subjects, the shame of doing so, and allowing oneself to become the objectified in order to stanch the flow of guilt involved in this purportedly ameliorating truth-telling process.

In Berkley Hudson's and Rebecca Townsend's study of *Harper's* magazine under the editorship of Willie Morris, we find that the search for truth through the writing of daring prose can result in a conflict so serious that it ultimately prohibits the work from being accomplished, despite its pursuit of excellence in truth-telling.

Cheryl Gooch recalibrates the factual truth of Joel Chandler Harris's apparent acquiescence to a racist journalistic framework by balancing it with the writer and editorialist's later views on how education could emancipate black Americans in his lifetime.

And Josh Roiland takes on the notoriously prolix writing of David Foster Wallace, arguing that for Wallace it was one hurdle to write truthfully in his fiction, but a much higher leap when writing his literary journalism for magazines such as *Harper's* and *Premiere*. That is because Wallace, like everyone else, needed to subscribe to Nietzsche's concept of oblivion, shutting out the more unpleasant aspects of consciousness in exchange for happiness. But to do so Wallace found that he could not do justice to his own literary journalism.

As for the students of mine who produced some of the more outrageous versions of an eighteen-year-old's reality, they admitted to enjoying the act of tarting up facts—they found it *très amusant*, in fact—but agreed with me that a quick follow-up interview would most likely clear away any gremlins that crossed the truth border.

And if the follow-up interview didn't catch them, the fact-checker would.

## Richard Critchfield: “Genius” Journalism and the Fallacy of Verification

by Miles Maguire

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*Critchfield, the first reporter to be awarded a MacArthur Foundation “genius grant,” practiced what he called “village reporting” in his literary journalism. However, an adherence to the “discipline of verification” proved unreliable. The need for a self-reported estimate of reliability could be a way to improve journalistic credibility*

Richard Critchfield could be fairly described as a “genius journalist,” as he was the first reporter to be awarded a fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation, popularly known as a “genius grant.” Critchfield’s recognition, in December 1981, marked a hard-earned return to a level of professional stature that a decade earlier probably seemed beyond his wildest dreams. As a former Vietnam correspondent for *The Washington Star*, Critchfield had published in 1968 a contrarian analysis of the failure by the United States to achieve victory, a book that was greeted with a deafening silence by book reviewers, policymakers and—perhaps most significantly—Critchfield’s journalistic colleagues in the overseas press corps, and in the media centers of New York and Washington. In a letter to a friend in the publishing industry, Critchfield described the reaction to the book, *The Long Charade*, as “a trauma” of “frustration and disillusionment,” and noted that he suffered a “humiliating” reassignment at the hands of his editors from foreign correspondent to labor reporter. Critchfield was particularly taken aback by the studied lack of reaction from the top *Star* editors because much of the material in the book had been gathered in conventional ways and had already been printed in the daily newspaper. “I naively didn’t think it would be like this,” Critchfield wrote. “Foolish as it sounds, I expected the *Star* to back me up more, since most of what the book says has after all appeared in my dispatches from Saigon already.”<sup>1</sup>

MacArthur, which does not use the term “genius grant,” also does not explain in precise detail why it chooses to recognize the recipients of its no-strings-attached monetary awards. In its notification to Critchfield, the foundation said only that the award “is given in recognition of your accomplishments in Journalism which demonstrate your originality, dedication to creative pursuits, and capacity for self direction.”<sup>2</sup> Based on a review of Critchfield’s publication record, it is safe to assume that his fellowship was the result of a dramatic shift he made in his reporting and writing techniques after the release of his Vietnam book, in which he argued that the underlying political dynamics of the country were far more complicated than the American people understood and may have involved high-level infiltration of North Vietnamese agents into the South Vietnamese government. “I left Vietnam in November 1967, convinced that our defeat was not a failure of power but a failure of knowledge,” he wrote in a 1985 essay published in *Washington Journalism Review*. “Not only did we—the press, American academics, diplomats, the CIA—fail to learn enough about the Vietnamese communists and their strategy of subversion, we also failed to learn enough about the ordinary Vietnamese peasant out in his village and his Confucian culture.”<sup>3</sup> To remedy this lack of knowledge about ordinary life at the basic level of social organization, Critchfield dedicated himself to what he

called “village reporting”<sup>4</sup> and spent much of the rest of his career engaged in a form of immersion journalism that borrowed heavily from the ethnographic techniques of anthropologist Oscar Lewis.<sup>5</sup>

Critchfield’s later work, which appeared in more than half a dozen books, foundation reports, and in publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Economist*, *Reader’s Digest*, and *The Nation*, was a form of literary journalism, marked as it was by the techniques such as immersive reporting, extended dialog, scenic descriptions, and narrative development that critics, including Wolfe,<sup>6</sup> Lounsbury,<sup>7</sup> and Sims,<sup>8</sup> have identified as—to use Hartsock’s phrase—“the defining characteristics of the form.”<sup>9</sup> As told in his unpublished correspondence as well in essays and elsewhere, the approach he developed was born out of a zeal to present to Western readers a view of peasant life as it was changing under the pressures of modernization and globalization. While much of Critchfield’s writing seems remarkably prescient from a distance of three decades in a post-9/11 world, the focus of this study is not on Critchfield’s successes but on challenges to the reporting that he did for one of the books that was brought to the attention of the MacArthur judges and likely helped to secure his fellowship. This book, *Shabbat: An Egyptian*, later became the subject of a withering academic critique that included credible accusations of plagiarism. A closer questioning of Critchfield’s methodology provides an occasion to consider the need to find ways to evaluate the quality and accuracy, i.e., the truth, of the journalism that is presented as literary journalism. This analysis suggests that one of the central principles of journalistic accuracy, the notion of a “discipline of verification,” can lead to serious error and needs modification.

Failures of fact, or allegations thereof, in literary journalism, or journalism generally for that matter, are not new or unusual. What distinguishes Critchfield’s case and makes it worthy of closer scrutiny are two qualities: his evident sincerity and dedication to craft. Even Critchfield’s harshest critic described him as “an enthusiastic writer whose sense of adventure and evident enjoyment of the company of some of those he writes about gave him a far greater exposure to villages around the world than any of his former colleagues among American foreign correspondents.” Critchfield was neither a journalistic psychopath who was out to perpetrate a fraud, nor was he a fame-driven ego out to build a personal brand. He spent most of his professional life working in distinctly unglamorous locations and, until his MacArthur grant, barely making ends meet while working as a freelance reporter and foundation researcher. The error he made that is the subject of this paper is an ordinary kind of error, in which none of the usual excuses apply—he was not a novice reporter committing a rookie mistake, he was not under competitive deadline pressure, he was not misled by manipulative sources. If sincerity and craft, i.e., good intentions, are not enough to ensure that the journalism half of the literary journalism equation holds up, then proponents of this genre may need to reconsider whether it can be viewed as a form of fact-based journalism. To explore this issue, this paper proceeds in three sections: first, a consideration of the concept of truth in journalism; second, an overview of Critchfield’s work based on his published reporting, unpublished correspondence, and other documents that are in his archived papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society; and, finally, a closer look at an academic critique of Critchfield’s accuracy, which he first rejected but later seemed to accept.

### **Truth in Journalism**

Poststructuralists, and the modernists before them, have provided persuasive arguments

about the elusiveness of truth, but they have not persuaded journalists to abandon its pursuit. “Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth,”<sup>10</sup> assert Kovach and Rosenstiel in their 2001 book, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. “This first principle of journalism—its disinterested pursuit of truth—is ultimately what sets it apart from all other forms of communication.”<sup>11</sup> But Kovach and Rosenstiel are quick to acknowledge that truth is a confusing concept, not to be mistaken for facts, accuracy, or objectivity. The concept of truth in journalism is profoundly laden with misconception, in no small part because journalists are not in the habit of thinking deeply about such ideas. As Fuller describes the situation:

[M]ost news people talk as if the examined life is hardly worth living. They consider themselves skeptics, but this is not so much a matter of philosophy as of style. Even among themselves, they rarely discuss the nature of the claims of truth they make in their work or the basis of the disciplines they follow in furtherance of these claims.<sup>12</sup>

When it comes to literary journalism, the pursuit of truth is often, though not always, viewed as a basic requirement. Aucoin offers several compelling reasons why verifiability as a defining characteristic of literary journalism is “problematic.”<sup>13</sup> But for many critics literary journalism can only bear that designation to the extent that it honors the traditional goal of truth telling. As Yagoda writes in the preface to *The Art of Fact*:

For us, definition begins with the second half of the formulation, that is, with “journalism.” And so for a piece of writing to be included in this anthology, it must first of all be factual. We do not mean to say that we guarantee the veracity of every statement in every piece in the collection. But we did disqualify works that were not, in our view, informed and animated by the central journalistic commitment to the truth (not just The Truth).<sup>14</sup>

Literary journalism’s claim on the truth is perhaps central to its impact. MacDonald was directing his ire toward Tom Wolfe and New Journalism, but his comment could be applied more generally. Literary journalism in his view could be said to function by “exploiting the factual authority of journalism and the atmospheric license of fiction.”<sup>15</sup> Lounsberry, in a far more sympathetic analysis of literary journalism, makes much the same point: “In short, verifiability is fundamental to successful literary nonfiction.”<sup>16</sup>

Kovach and Rosenstiel said that a “discipline of verification”<sup>17</sup> needs to be at the heart of journalism and provided a list of possible strategies. In their view, which is shared by Ettema and Glasser, it is the journalist’s responsibility to perform the acts of verification. But if this is the case, it puts the reader in a position of having to accept the authority of the journalist on faith. As a practical matter, verification by the reader is much more difficult. Even when a writer is transparent enough to allow an expert reader to test for verifiability, many readers may be disinclined or ill-equipped to do so, as we will see in the case of Critchfield. With a nod to Iser, Sims suggests that readers do not bother to verify even when they can.<sup>18</sup> Instead, warns Kenner, readers are taken in by the conventions of journalistic writing, what he called “the plain style,” built up from nonspecialized vocabulary and simple sentence structure.<sup>19</sup>

Operationalizing the concept of journalistic verification remains an elusive task. Like Kovach and Rosentiel, Cunningham and more recently Clark have proposed steps that a well-meaning journalist can take to improve accuracy and move closer to the truth. But it's not clear that any of these proposals, including techniques such as using accuracy checklists, resisting the temptation to add colorful but invented details, developing expertise in a given topic, will lead to an accurate, fact-based account. Lippmann was a proponent of a more scientific approach to reporting, although this idea has never really taken hold. Goldstein argues that this approach is unworkable because "the best scientific thinking today suggests that there is no single scientific method."<sup>20</sup> While this observation is valid, it is also true that certain general approaches do pervade a scientific approach to truth seeking. Much like journalists, scientists have found themselves on the receiving end of intense criticism for ethical failures, a sense of overreach, and their supposedly irrational belief in their ability to get at the truth. Gauch argued that "clearly understood methods" are the best way to allow scientists to "defend science's legitimate claims from influential attacks with a measure of sophistication and confidence." So, too, for journalism, a better understanding of methods and their shortcomings will provide a basis for assessing and improving credibility, and defending against outside attacks.

### **The Career of a Genius Journalist**

Richard Critchfield was a child of the Great Depression, born in Minneapolis on March 23, 1931. He spent his early years in Fargo, North Dakota, where his father was a country doctor and a well-respected member of the community until he was brought low by an ongoing battle with alcoholism and a scandalous affair with a young woman whom he had first met in the aftermath of a botched abortion. His parents separated, and his father died at the age of forty-nine, poisoned to the point of insanity by his drinking. It is not a stretch to suggest that Critchfield's later interest in the families living in the poverty-stricken villages of the world was tied to his own upbringing, particularly the difficult economic times of the 1930s and the emotional turbulence of his parents' broken marriage. Using his MacArthur funding, Critchfield wrote a book-length chronicle of his family, *Those Days: An American Album*, and in it he explained the importance of paying attention to common people and their common ways. "It was their ordinariness that made them matter," he wrote. "Individual life was by its very nature a tragedy; it came to an end; for all of us it was going to be a short way to that grave. But the ordinary life of a society was a comedy that kept going on."<sup>21</sup>

Critchfield's adult life was highly episodic and somewhat disjointed, marked by relatively short stays in disparate parts of the world. This pattern was one of the factors that gave rise to ongoing intimations he was an agent for the Central Intelligence Agency, an organization where his older brother had a long career as a spy and rose through the ranks of covert operations to become head of its Near East Division. Aside from his decade-long tenure at *The Washington Star*, from which he took two long leaves of absence, the journalist never spent much time on the permanent payroll of a news organization or in one place. After graduating with a degree in Far Eastern studies from the University of Washington in 1953, he served in the Army, including a tour in Korea. He began his career in journalism in 1955 as assistant farm editor at Iowa's *Cedar Rapids Gazette* and worked for another Iowa daily before leaving for the Columbia School of Journalism, which awarded him a master's degree in 1957. He next went to work for a news bureau in Washington, D.C., but left to take graduate courses in Austria and then to complete

“a shoe-string trip around the world in 1959 as a freelancer, partly on Yugoslav and Japanese freighters.” He spent one quarter at Northwestern University studying Indian history before taking a job as an instructor in journalism at the University of Nagpur, in central India, where he also coached the swim team.

During his two years at Nagpur, Critchfield wrote a journalism textbook, *The Indian Reporter's Guide*; worked on a novel set in India; and spent some of his free time in the Himalayas, an experience that formed the basis for articles he sold to *The Christian Science Monitor*. He was relieved of his teaching duties after Indian Communists staged protests amid charges that he was working for the CIA. At the time his brother was in the region organizing Tibetan refugees to fight the Communists, but the reporter later insisted this was a coincidence. Critchfield's career as a foreign correspondent was greatly aided by his presence on the subcontinent, gaining him writing opportunities with the *Star* and *The New York Herald Tribune* when the Chinese invaded India in 1962 and a job offer from the *Star* in 1964, after rioting broke out in Kashmir.

The *Star* posted him to Vietnam, where he was based until 1967. He started out working in a conventional manner, “emulating Ernie Pyle” as he put it, and his coverage from 1965 was cited by the Overseas Press Club as the best daily newspaper reporting from abroad for that year. But his background in Asian studies and his experience in the region led him to a perspective that was far different from that of the rest of the American press corps. He had run-ins with editors and was quoted in a *Time* magazine article criticizing his fellow reporters for misrepresenting the wave of Buddhist self-immolations as purely voluntary acts and for not spending enough time talking with Vietnamese sources. In a typescript document dated 1969 among his papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society, Critchfield writes: “In Saigon, I was often told I thought more like a Vietnamese than an American. Presumably this is one reason why the *Star* has asked me to spend a year or two in the United States before taking up another overseas assignment.”<sup>22</sup>

Critchfield had high hopes for *The Long Charade*, which detailed his view of what he saw as subversion in the U.S.-backed regimes in Saigon, and he made extensive efforts to get his message out, including secret meetings with the President's Board of National Intelligence Estimates and correspondence with influential members of Congress and administration officials. But the reaction was tepid, and a note from CBS newsmen Eric Sevareid was typical in expressing both surprise at Critchfield's thesis and a disinclination to give it much thought: “It does sound radioactive, and I hope I can get to it sooner rather than later.”<sup>23</sup>

Critchfield's book put him very much on the outside of mainstream journalistic opinion, but he became more convinced of the value of his approach to covering international policy debates, by focusing on ordinary people who are caught up in the effects. With a promise from his publisher to print another book, the writer took a leave of absence from the *Star* and returned to Asia, eventually securing funding from the newly formed Alicia Patterson Foundation, where a friend of his brother was executive secretary. The Patterson decision process did not go smoothly, and Critchfield speculated that the cloud created by his book and his failure to adopt a conventional critique of the Vietnam War was still hanging over him. Eventually, however, he secured enough funding, including a \$2,000 loan from his family, to spend two years on his “village studies.” After a year back at the *Star*, which he spent honing his techniques for village reporting while writing about ordinary American families, Critchfield received a Ford Foundation grant that allowed him to devote himself to his chosen subject.

By the time Critchfield received the MacArthur, he had published three more books and

numerous articles as well as long studies for the Agency for International Development and American Universities Field Staff, a nonprofit consortium of schools that sponsored foreign correspondents. But during the decade after he left the *Star*, his earnings and his lifestyle were precarious. Although he knew that he was under consideration for some kind of large grant from MacArthur, the program was not well known and just weeks before he was notified of the award he wrote to his sister and brother-in-law about the stress he was under:

The future is a pretty blank page right now. Can manage the \$3,000 for 1981 and \$4,000 for 1982 (or probably \$5,000 by now) by drawing down savings \$5,000 and still having enough—\$6,000-\$7,000—to do a village study somewhere next spring from what I earn lecturing and the \$5,000 Ford payment in January. Rockefeller could come through with another \$12,000-\$18,000 (a lot depends on how they feel VILLAGES fared, I guess). The strain is rather getting me down.<sup>24</sup>

The MacArthur grant allowed Critchfield to turn his attention to an idea that he had been toying with for several decades, a family history describing his own roots and explaining the culture of small rural communities in the American Midwest as they developed in the first half of the twentieth century, which became *Those Days*. Before his death in 1994, Critchfield continued his international reporting as well and published three additional books.

### **The Fallacy of Verification**

Although he began his village reporting long before Kovach and Rosenstiel coined the term “discipline of verification,” it’s clear that Critchfield was deeply concerned with journalistic methodology and willing to go to great lengths both to verify his information and to allow others to check his work. The 1978 book that is the focus of this study ends with Critchfield stressing the importance of verification. The final page of *Shabbat* includes a quote from Anton Chekhov, “Man will become better when you show him what he is like.” Referring to that sentiment, Critchfield writes: “This is our common purpose and the reason I have written *Shabbat*’s story, and in the way I did. A real person, his identity and existence are its verification.”<sup>25</sup>

An examination of his fact-gathering techniques shows that they align very closely with the “core set of concepts that form the foundation of the discipline of verification” identified by Kovach and Rosenstiel:

1. Never add anything that was not there.
2. Never deceive the audience.
3. Be as transparent as possible about your methods and motives.
4. Rely on your own original reporting.
5. Exercise humility.<sup>26</sup>

For example, in the first of his village books, *The Golden Bowl Be Broken*, published in 1973, Critchfield described how he followed the Oscar Lewis model of “detailed observations, interviews and recorded conversation,”<sup>27</sup> but never added to or invented what he experienced. “Although used selectively, all of the dialogue in this book is taken verbatim from more than a million words written down by my interpreters or myself, as spoken or soon afterward,”



Critchfield wrote.<sup>28</sup> The reporter was also devoted to transparency, often writing about his methods, naming the interpreters he used, and in one case even identifying the depository where the original tape recordings of his conversations could be found. By including extensive detail and using real names, Critchfield was in a way issuing an invitation for others to check his work.

In several articles in magazines targeted at journalists, Critchfield provided more detail about his technique, demonstrating his commitment to first-hand fact gathering and an awareness of the fallibility of standard journalistic techniques, as well as the humility required to subject himself to peasant work for the sake of a story. In a 1985 essay, Critchfield said he began his reporting by backgrounding himself in the subject through extensive reading about “local politics, geography, economics and history, as well as the religion.”<sup>29</sup> But he stressed that this was just context for what he observed: “The cultural views that count are those that emerge in the dialogue.”<sup>30</sup> In most cases he captured the dialogue with the help of interpreters but as much as possible avoided conducting interviews. He said he feared that interviews would end up “leading a subject, either consciously or unconsciously, along preconceived paths.”<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the most striking feature of Critchfield’s reporting technique is the emphasis he placed on physical labor.

Early on I discovered that value of engaging in the same daily physical labor as the men I was writing about, perhaps because hard work was the basic fact in all their lives; after I spent many days with them helping them to herd sheep, spear octopus, harvest wheat or whatever they were doing, a barrier of reserve was overcome, and in time the principal characters began to take our mutual enterprise very seriously and developed what might be called a strong sense of integrity.<sup>32</sup>

*Shahhat* was initially well received both among popular and scholarly audiences. *The New York Times* said the book was “beautifully written” and “wonderfully evocative, making real and alive rather than picturesque and artificial a country and a people largely unknown to us.”<sup>33</sup> *Population and Development Review* called the book “revealing” and said “it provides the social and psychological ‘context’ so often missing in social science research and literature.”<sup>34</sup> But others had their doubts. *American Ethnologist* criticized Critchfield’s use of the tools of literary journalism: “It is tempting to try to infuse life into often dull life routines through novelistic techniques, but the credibility lost through excesses of undisciplined subjectivity in such attempts always seems to outweigh any gains of communicated immediacy.”<sup>35</sup>

*The Journal of American Folklore* said the book was “enjoyable and readable” and that it contained “penetrating insight” into peasant life.<sup>36</sup> But the reviewer also faulted Critchfield for not living up to the journalistic responsibility to provide a full picture of the forces at work in Shahhat’s village, including political and economic ones.

In the late 1980s, Critchfield became the target of Cambridge- and Princeton-educated political scientist Timothy Mitchell, who accused the journalist of plagiarism and of fabricating a racist and historically inaccurate picture in *Shahhat*. Mitchell’s critique appeared first in a 1988 conference paper and was published two years later in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*.<sup>37</sup> When Critchfield learned of these accusations, he wrote a detailed reply to Mitchell, parts of which were later published in the *IJMES*,<sup>38</sup> along with a rebuttal from

Mitchell.<sup>39</sup> Continuing to research the matter, Mitchell published a longer critique, citing even more problems with Critchfield's reporting, as a chapter in a 2002 book, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*.<sup>40</sup> Mitchell's most clear-cut criticism is plagiarism, and he pointed to eight passages showing very clear similarities between Critchfield's writing and that of a French Jesuit, Henry Habib Ayrout, who wrote a 1938 study on Egyptian peasants, *The Fellahéen*. Critchfield conceded that he had relied on Ayrout and had failed to provide full scholarly notation of his debts. His excuse is not a particularly compelling one, that he was busy working on subsequent books and that in any case he had not tried to hide the fact that Ayrout was a key source. But Mitchell's criticism went further, as he argued that a more serious problem than the plagiarism was that the material was plagiarized from an unreliable source. Mitchell's research showed that Ayrout, although widely recognized as an authority on Egypt, had in fact based his books on secondhand accounts. This information was presented after Critchfield had made his rebuttal and was not addressed by the journalist.

Some of Mitchell's criticisms seem like nitpicking, and some of his statements about Critchfield are not accurate. For example, the scholar says that Critchfield left the *Star* for good in 1969, when in fact he was just on extended leave at the time and returned for a time in the 1970s. In the end, Mitchell's most troubling charge goes to the question of whether Critchfield had accomplished what he had set out to do, namely to provide insights into how an entire society was changing based on the experience of an ordinary family. In an Author's Note, Critchfield declares, "This is the story of how a deeply traditional Egyptian, when faced with sudden changes in his way of life, tries to master his condition and communicate with those around him."<sup>41</sup> On the next page, Critchfield argues that his research subject is in important respects "typical of the great mass of poor Egyptians" and that his challenges are "exemplary."<sup>42</sup>

Mitchell refutes these characterizations, however, pointing out that the focus of Critchfield's study was not a typical Egyptian peasant at all, despite his involvement in agricultural work. Shahhat came from an entrepreneurial family that was not trapped in a traditional agrarian economy but was already engaged in the modern world, at least its advance guard, by serving the Western visitors who came to Egypt either as tourists or as archeological researchers. In Mitchell's view, Critchfield was not witnessing change so much as participating in and promoting it:

This long history of relations between local families, foreign archeologists, and a small-scale tourist industry, mixed in with the agrarian economy of sugarcane and household farming, has formed the complex reality of Shahhat's village. We cannot read Critchfield's work as a portrait of this reality, for the book deliberately ignores the relations between locals and outsiders that have formed it. We should see the book, at best, as one more aspect of those relations.<sup>43</sup>

Not surprisingly, Critchfield's initial reaction to Mitchell's criticism was dismissive. In his published response, he wrote, "I was fascinated by Mitchell's attempt to apply Derridean deconstruction to Shahhat, which, if you know Shahhat himself, becomes wildly inappropriate."<sup>44</sup> As to the charges of plagiarism, Critchfield noted, correctly, that he quoted Ayrout outside of the narrative and was not attempting to hide his use of the French scholar as a

source. That lack of attribution within the narrative was the result of an attempt to maintain the dramatic structure of the book: "A lot of academic-style citations would have ruined the effect. I very likely planned to have references to the Ayrout passages in a 'Notes' section at the end."<sup>45</sup>

Despite these public protestations, Critchfield by the early 1980s had already started to have some misgivings about how clearly he had seen into the soul of the common Egyptian. The assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981 made him rethink how well he had understood Egyptian society. In a 1982 letter to an official of the MacArthur Foundation, Critchfield said he had been "badly shaken" by the killing and the lack of mourning by ordinary Egyptians. On a dreary day in London, he spent five hours walking through Wimbledon Common trying to figure out what had gone wrong in his reporting. "After all, if you've done a book about the Egyptian character and then discover you haven't understood it at all, it makes you think," Critchfield wrote.<sup>46</sup> Eventually he made plans to return to do an update on Shahhat's situation. In his final book, *Villagers*, for which he was on a promotional tour when he had a fatal heart attack, Critchfield offered a new assessment of Shahhat, based on a visit in 1992. By this time Shahhat had become a heavy drinker like his father, and also like his father had become a watchman at an archeological site. Critchfield seems to acknowledge the fact that the portrait of Shahhat, no matter how accurately drawn in its particulars, could no longer be described as a generalizable account of life for the Egyptian peasant. He writes: "Yet Shahhat, if his work was seasonal and somewhat sporadic, was paid the equivalent of about a hundred dollars a month, a good wage in rural Egypt. To really look at a poor fellah, we need to consider a landless laborer."<sup>47</sup>

In the next section of the book, Critchfield does exactly that, telling the story of Helmi, a man he had met when conducting his Shahhat research but who did not appear in the book. One could argue that Mitchell was no more or less an expert on Egypt than was Critchfield. But the journalist's pained admission that he had been mistaken about the national character, coupled with his newfound interest in the fellah Helmi, lends credence to Mitchell's critique.

Although Mitchell's criticism of Critchfield was harsh to the point of caricature, it was not the individual journalist who is the ultimate target of his attacks. In his view the real problem was a system of "reviewers, editors, publishers, development experts, policy makers, grant committee members, and university teachers"<sup>48</sup> who were not paying close enough attention to see the internal contradictions of Critchfield's writing. According to Mitchell, "The most important issue is the structure of academic expertise that enabled these forms of prejudice, ignorance, and misrepresentation to flourish and gave such dubious books their circulation and acceptance."<sup>49</sup>

While Mitchell directed this critique at academics generally, clearly the journalism profession, whether in or out of academia, needs to acknowledge its share of the blame and a "structure of expertise" that does little to prevent or identify errors. It's not that journalists and their critics don't think that accuracy is important, it's more that they have been unable to come up with a workable system of promoting the veracity of published work. By applying some of the ideas that have been advanced to ensure truthfulness in literary journalism to the Critchfield example, we can see that the proposed solutions will not necessarily solve the problem. For example, Clark's injunctions to journalists not to invent detail or to deceive readers would have had no effect here.<sup>50</sup> Critchfield included a long section on methodology, and there has been no suggestion that he made up any part of his narrative. His lack of deceptiveness is evidenced by the fact that Mitchell was able to use details that Critchfield included to undermine Critchfield's argument

and conclusions. Cunningham advises that journalists develop expertise in specific fields.<sup>51</sup> But this guidance likewise falls short, as Critchfield was the leading expert on village reporting. His expertise on rural agriculture was recognized by no less an authority than Norman Borlaug, the American scientist who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in leading the Green Revolution (and who was one of those who recommended Critchfield for the MacArthur).<sup>52</sup>

Critchfield's case illustrates a significant gap in the methodological protocols that are used by journalists to get at the truth. The problem with the idea of a "discipline of verification" may be that it encourages journalists to reinforce their own prejudices rather than seeking to overcome them. As Lippmann and Merz warned, the most important factor in false reports is self-delusion, "seeing not what was, but what men wished to see."<sup>53</sup> Verification is most often a process of confirmation, so that facts that are verified or confirmed are included and those that are not confirmed are set aside. In Critchfield's case, his reporting conformed to what he had learned from the experts and confirmed their perspectives. His information was verified according to documentary sources and according to his first-hand experience. But, as Mitchell showed, Critchfield's frame of analysis was skewed and there was no way for him to correct for this error within the methodology that he was using. His verification process failed him. Although this is not a problem limited to literary journalism, it may be a more serious problem in that arena simply because of the volume of literary journalism that is published as books and therefore outside of the editing systems that exist at newspapers and magazines.

Missing from the discipline of verification, as practiced by Critchfield and others, is an explicit acknowledgment of limits. Nearly a century ago Lippmann argued: "You can judge the general reliability of any observer most easily by the estimate he puts upon the reliability of his own report. If you have no facts of your own to check him, the best rough measurement is to wait and see whether he is aware of any limitations in himself. . . ."<sup>54</sup>

But rare is the reporter who provides such an estimate. After all, journalists are trained to report what they know, not what they don't know. It may seem mechanistic, particularly in the context of journalism that aspires to being read as literature, to suggest the need for a self-reported estimate of reliability or limitations. But in Critchfield's case there is evidence that he was aware of the limits of his reporting, as shown in a letter that he wrote to the Egyptian government seeking permission to conduct the village study that led to *Shahhat*.<sup>55</sup> If he had reflected on the fact that he was working in a locale that was open to outside visitors and was not completely free to roam the countryside in search of research subjects, he may have modified his claim to have captured a representative picture of Egyptian life. Similarly, if he was not so intent upon protecting the "novelistic" elements of the book he may have been more likely to include the citations that would have headed off the plagiarism attacks and that would have, perhaps by undermining his claims to the timelessness of Shahhat's situation, forced him to provide a more historically accurate context for his reporting. The acknowledgement and contemplation of the limits to his reporting might also have undercut the claims—implicit in so much anecdote-based reporting—that a single individual stands for a much larger group.

The problem of defective reporting is hardly limited to literary journalism, but the threat it poses may be especially critical here. Weber's critique is referring specifically to New Journalism but his comment applies to literary journalism when he argues that writing that does not live up to its accuracy claims faces "widespread disregard . . . as serious journalism, let alone serious

literature, and the inclination to view it as just another branch of the entertainment industry.<sup>56</sup> For that reason alone, practitioners of the form should constantly seek to improve on reporting methodology. To quote Lippmann and Merz once again:

Since human beings are poor witnesses, easily thrown off the scent, easily misled by a personal bias, profoundly influenced by their social environment, does it not follow that a constant testing of the news and a growing self-consciousness about the main sources of error is a necessary part of the democratic philosophy. . . . The process is nothing but the attempt to extract wisdom from experience, and the greater the indictment against the reliability of human witnesses, the more urgent is a constant testing, as objectively as possible, of these results. When you consider how profoundly dependent the modern world is upon its news, the frailty of human nature becomes an argument not for complacency and apology, but for eternal vigilance.<sup>57</sup>



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## The Citizen-Witness and the Politics of Shame: Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

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*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men mobilizes the shame of the citizen-witness, re-envisioned as the privileged person who exposes him or herself as an object to the gaze of the other. However, this "imagined community" erases its own reliance on objectification and difference*

The end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth mark the apogee of the development of a certain kind of sociopolitical figure in the United States, one that attests to a constant renegotiation of the relation between the individual and the democratic state, a figure I am calling the citizen-witness. The late 1800s saw an explosion of texts in which a citizen (usually a journalist) voluntarily witnessed and documented living conditions. These texts challenged democratic ideals of equality and justice, namely conditions of poverty, corruption, and violence. The most well known of these works include Nellie Bly's *Ten Days in a Mad-House* (1887), Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), and Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903). The writings of the citizen-witness were meant to influence directly the reform of the flawed but perfectible state; their underpinning logic was that public awareness would lead either directly or indirectly to institutional social reform.

It is in the figure of the citizen-witness, I would like to argue, that the relation between the state and its citizens is dramatized. If in the late nineteenth century the citizen-witness valorizes the idea of citizenship, as the twentieth century progresses, self-representations by citizen-witnesses become increasingly troubled. In this essay, I track the ways Walker Evans and James Agee's 1941 work *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* mobilizes the shame of the citizen-witness to critique and reform both journalism and politics. First, shame's association with an objectifying vision is enlisted to point out the way social-reform journalism's spectatorial conventions may reinforce racial and class hierarchy. In so doing, the book undermines social-reform journalism's attendant concepts of altruistic citizenship and the perfectibility of the state. *Famous Men* next explores and ultimately destabilizes a mode of representation that attempts to avoid objectification by refocusing vision on the inanimate object instead of the human. Finally, the book forwards an alternative model of sociality in which the ideal democratic space becomes one that erases shame because all risk it. This formulation re-envisioned the good citizen as the privileged person who exposes him- or herself as an object to the gaze of the other. I will argue, however, that *Famous Men's* "imagined community" erases its own reliance on objectification and difference.<sup>1</sup>

The term “citizenship” operates on two levels: passive and active. On the one hand, citizenship is a passive state of being. One is, by virtue of birth, a citizen who possesses certain rights. The other kind of citizenship is active, and refers to the duties and responsibilities of the citizen. In this kind of thinking about citizenship, one may perform the role of the citizen more or less successfully. Judith Shklar puts the distinction thus: “Citizenship as nationality is a legal condition; it does not refer to any specific political activity. Good citizenship as political participation, on the other hand, concentrates on political practices, and it applies to the people of a community who are consistently engaged in public affairs.”<sup>2</sup> As Shklar points out, “Good citizenship simply is not separable from the sort of society in which it functions”<sup>3</sup>; the acts that constitute “good citizenship” vary depending on context. Citizen-witnessing texts, I would like to argue, theorize and imagine in important ways what it means to be a good citizen.

In his book *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*, Michael Schudson tracks four historical modes of “good citizenship” in the U.S. The figure of the citizen-witness that solidifies at the end of the nineteenth century embodies what Schudson calls the “informed citizen,” a figure he aligns with Progressivism’s attack on political parties.<sup>4</sup> In late nineteenth century social-reform journalism, good citizenship was conceived as an act of witnessing the social sphere and pointing out its failures so that they might be corrected. The citizen-witness was depicted as gentle and rational, only bursting into well-founded and righteous indignation when pushed to do so by others’ ignorance or corruption. In these texts, the citizen-witness often took on the role of a tour guide or a sympathetic undercover agent, guiding the reader through an unfamiliar social landscape. The representation of the citizen-witness as good, informed, and rational helped to cement the notion that the state and other social institutions also held the potential to be “good.” These narratives did not undermine the reliability of the basic structures on which that system was founded.<sup>5</sup>

The reliance of social-reform journalism on the figure of the good citizen-witness metamorphosed with turn-of-the-century texts published by men and women Teddy Roosevelt classified as “muckrakers”; Lincoln Steffens’s *Shame of the Cities* (1904), Ida Tarbell’s *History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904), and Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) can be counted among these.<sup>6</sup> While the figure of the citizen-witness was not as important in the narration of these slightly later texts, the cultural notoriety of their authors at the time when they were writing these works suggests that the archetype persisted.<sup>7</sup> The 1930s ushered in a third wave of citizen-witnessing with the emergence of photo-textual books and documentary films, which primarily critiqued Southern poverty. Films such as Pare Lorentz’s *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) can be placed in this group of visual and verbal representations of Southern poverty, as well as collections of photographs and essays such as Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor’s *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939).

James Agee and Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) intervenes in, manipulates, and critiques the tradition of citizen-witnessing, which had solidified by the end of the nineteenth century, and carried into the 1930s. The intervention that *Famous Men* makes into this tradition can be illuminated most effectively by juxtaposing it with Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), the decade’s most evident self-styled descendant of the genre. *You Have Seen Their Faces* rehabilitates the modes of representation that characterized the citizen-witness genre: the exposure of the injustices of a socially ignored space, the authoritative representation of the other person, and the centrality of the good and even heroic citizen-witness’ experience to these processes.

*You Have Seen Their Faces* takes up social-reform journalism's assumption that the textual representation of the other space and other person can produce social change. The book provides a visual and narrative representation of the American South during the Great Depression, pairing photographs with written text to expose the conditions of poor tenant farmers. These photographs are accompanied by captions indicating the location of the photograph and representing the thoughts the people in the photograph are supposedly having at that moment.<sup>8</sup> In perhaps the most obvious expression of the central role of the citizen-witness in representing the other person's perspective, the note to the book indicates that "[t]he legends under the pictures are intended to express the authors' own conceptions of the sentiments of the individuals portrayed; they do not pretend to reproduce the actual sentiments of these persons."<sup>9</sup>

*You Have Seen Their Faces* even more clearly indicates its participation in the citizen-witnessing genre by emphasizing, at the end of the book, the experiences of Caldwell and Bourke-White as they pursue their project. While this section, entitled "Notes on photographs by Margaret Bourke-White," focuses primarily on the types of photographic equipment she utilized, it also narrates quite captivantly the dramatic process of attaining a photograph. Bourke-White writes, for example, about her technique of capturing particular expressions: "It might be an hour before their faces or gestures gave us what we were trying to express, but the instant it occurred the scene was imprisoned on a sheet of film before they knew what had happened."<sup>10</sup> The construction of Bourke-White and Caldwell as heroic good citizens who, in the name of social change, pursue the story in the face of adversity is expressed in the very last paragraphs of the book, in which Bourke-White describes both the excitement of shooting photographs in a "hysteria"-laden church service, and the adventure of photographing a chain gang as "the captain shouted that he would shoot off our tires."<sup>11</sup> John Tagg suggests that this seemingly marginal addition to the book was in fact central to the narrative. In "Melancholy Realism" he writes: "From the very beginning, the antics of the 'crack photographer' were central to the glamour and modernity of *Life*. The photographers were the stars . . . the salary, the pose, the clothes, the travel, and the life were integral to the package being sold, in which 'Margaret Bourke-White makes a picture' was always part of the performative meaning of the image, and in which an essential part of the story would always be an account of her pains to meet the challenge of her assignment."<sup>12</sup>

In comparison with *You Have Seen Their Faces*, which uncritically reproduces the norms of representation established in late nineteenth century citizen-witnessing, *Famous Men* mimics and ultimately destabilizes these norms. In so doing, it simultaneously disrupts the genre's valorization of the good citizen.

At first glance, the form of the book and the conditions of its production seem to engage with the conventions of the genre. Agee and Evans were sent to Alabama on behalf of *Fortune* magazine to document the government's rural electrification program, a project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) that was designed to provide economic relief during and after the Depression. The physical appearance of the book seems to conform to the conventions of the genre: Evans's photographs of tenant farmers are clustered at the beginning, and much of Agee's prose engages with the conditions of the farmers' existence. Yet even the most limited overview exposes the book's critique of the representational practices common to social-reform journalism.

*Famous Men's* form most obviously disrupts these modes of representation. Its two "books" are of vastly different length, and include pieces of information that do not seem to contribute

to what is conventionally considered documentation. Book one, for example, is five pages long, consisting of unattributed quotations from *King Lear* and the *The Communist Manifesto*, an excerpt from a child's geography textbook, two footnotes, and a list of "Persons and Places" such as would be expected from a playscript. Book two spans over four hundred pages, and, while it includes a written tour of the homes and surroundings of the tenant families as well as long semi-anthropological descriptions of objects and practices, it also incorporates poetry, personal anecdotes, sexual fantasies, newspaper excerpts, a list of "monosyllabic Anglo-Saxon words" (most of which are not monosyllabic), and lyrical meditative passages—all of which are atypical of the genre. When taken as a whole, the book's structure, like the "fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement" that Agee notoriously claimed he wished his words could approximate, is akin not to a linear narrative but rather to a collection of objects.<sup>13</sup>

The content of the photographs and the writing similarly violate the genre's norms of representation. Unlike conventional citizen-witnessing, which uses images as supplements to document and condemn specific living conditions, in this work, Evans's photographs stand alone, without title or comment. His subjects stare from the frames of each photograph into the eyes of the reader, who is given no guidance as to what these gazes might mean. Tagg describes Evans's oeuvre as follows: "In Evans's image, meaning is held back, seemingly less by the photographer than by the objects themselves, from which the viewer is cut off by an uncertain distance that reintroduces the presence of the lens between the eye and the scene."<sup>14</sup> If citizen-witnessing conventionally presents and explains its images of poverty so that they can serve as easy-to-read documentary evidence for a social-change platform, *Famous Men's* images, as Tagg points out, disallow this easy transformation of image into meaning.

Most obviously, however, the book emphasizes (and in so doing attempts to undercut) the invasive voyeurism of even the most altruistic journalism. In one of his famous diatribes, Agee explicitly aligns journalism with an unacceptable infringement on other people's privacy, early in the book describing the practice of it as "curious," "obscene," and "thoroughly terrifying." He writes that journalism is notable for "prying into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings."<sup>15</sup> In this context, the citizen-witness is no longer "good," but is rather deeply compromised.

If traditionally the goodness of the citizen-witness reaffirms the ultimate perfectibility of the state, the citizen, and democracy, here the shame of the citizen-witness is employed to critique the disjunction between democratic ideals and democratic practice. Using shame as both a marker of a fundamentally damaged democratic system and as the catalyst for producing an alternative democratic community, *Famous Men* models the way a subset of privileged U.S. citizens in the mid-twentieth century began to question and critique traditional political categories. In this essay, I explore both the appeal of shame politics and its significant limitations. If this type of politics does offer the potential for a certain reconceptualization of the democratic community, I will argue that *Famous Men's* politics of shame—like many of its current manifestations—imagines community on the basis of similarity, erasing material difference and (re-)positioning the suffering white liberal as the hero of the polis.<sup>16</sup>

### On Shame and Shame Theory

In her 2007 book *From Guilt to Shame*, Ruth Leys traces a historical shift in the West from an

emphasis on guilt, which focuses on the actions of a subject (“what one does”) to a focus on shame, which focuses on being (“who one is”).<sup>17</sup> She discusses the movement of the logic of torture, for example, and notes the erasure of survivor guilt from the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder in favor of an emphasis on the “traumatic image” and the “spectatorial logic” of shame. While Leys argues that the increased interest in shame theory occurs primarily in the last twenty years, she traces earlier considerations of shame in the works of Charles Darwin, anthropologist Ruth Benedict, and psychologist Silvan Tomkins. Shame has also been theorized in legal studies by John Braithwaite and others, potently described by Frantz Fanon in his study of colonialism, *Black Skin White Masks*, and theorized in the critical and philosophical works of Elspeth Probyn, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, E. R. Dodds, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.<sup>18</sup>

Despite various disagreements and debates about shame, certain common traits emerge.<sup>19</sup> The most helpful for my reading of *Famous Men* are those theories of shame that portray it as a response to objectification by the gaze of the other. The experience of being both subject and object—one that sees and one that is seen—is described by Giorgio Agamben as the “fundamental sentiment of being a subject”; in other words, it is “to be subjected and to be sovereign. Shame is what is produced in the absolute concomitance of subjectification and desubjectification, self-loss and self-possession, servitude and sovereignty.”<sup>20</sup> Agamben uses the work of Emmanuel Levinas to claim that shame stems from the inability to escape one’s being: “shame is grounded in our being’s incapacity to move away and break from itself. If we experience shame in nudity, it is because we cannot hide what we would like to remove from the field of vision.”<sup>21</sup> In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben connects the shame of being both subject and object to the “new biopolitical body of humanity,” the “bare life of the citizen” who is both the object of state power and, in modern democratic theory, the subject of political power.<sup>22</sup>

Taking this positing of exposure, vulnerability and split subjectivity to its inevitable limit, Jacques Derrida in a well-known passage describes his shame at being seen naked by his cat. In being seen by the cat, he imagines himself in the cat’s position, betraying the seemingly rigid boundaries of a subjectivity that denies animality. He sees and recognizes himself being seen at the same time. Derrida notes the fragility of the definition of the human: “As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called ‘animal’ offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say, the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself.”<sup>23</sup> Shame, in this formulation, signals a subjectivity split not just between subject and object, but between human and not-human as well. In these conceptualizations, the phenomenological experience of feeling split and objectified reinforces and intensifies the feeling of vulnerability attendant to exposure.

Frantz Fanon’s psychoanalytic consideration of shame as one of “the anomalies of affect” associated with colonization similarly hinges upon the subject/object split.<sup>24</sup> In chapter five of *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon theorizes the way colonizing vision is structured to produce the desubjectification of the colonized. Fanon’s colonial landscape is characterized as a network of judgmental gazes. He describes, for example, the way racism produces hypervisible bodies (as demonstrated when a child pointed him out again and again with the words, “Look! A Negro!”); and repeatedly uses visual metaphors to describe racialized encounters. Fanon discusses the transition of self-perception from active subject to object which occurs when the self encounters the racist gaze: “I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit

filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.”<sup>25</sup> In this passage, the self as subject, the “I” with a “will” or “spirit,” comes into conflict with the self as “an object in the midst of other objects.” Fanon’s description of being positioned as both subject and object corresponds to the notion of shame’s split subjectivity and illuminates how particular modes of vision inscribe shame into the spectatorial structures of the colonial system.

All of the above theorists focus primarily on the lived experience of shame, considering the social and political circumstances that produce it, how it manifests in the body, and its relation to subjectivity—and these readings will be helpful when I turn to *Famous Men*. What is as yet undertheorized, however, is the public performance of shame by the privileged as a response to injustice. While Leys ultimately uses her book to condemn shame theory in a defense of what she sees as an embattled approach to the human psyche (psychoanalysis), she ends her introduction in a striking and perhaps paradoxical way, noting: “Many Americans, including myself, would not hesitate to declare that they experience intense shame for the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib. Nothing that is said critically about contemporary shame theory in the pages that follow is meant to criticize the view that shame can be an appropriate response to such a situation.”<sup>26</sup> This comment, strikingly different from her chapter up to this point (and indeed from the thrust of her argument), evokes an alternative approach to the study of shame which many of the above theories, in their associations with the specularity of the social landscape, allude to but do not directly grapple with: shame as a particularly charged, altruistic, political response. While the preceding studies almost predominantly focus on the lived experience of shame, then, I would like to consider its textual production and political use.

In her 2005 book *Blush: The Face of Shame*, Elspeth Probyn asserts that the performance of shame is political. Linking Silvan Tomkins’s work on shame with Pierre Bourdieu’s theorization of *habitus*, she argues that shame’s expression in the body holds the potential for personal transformation, the academic rethinking of the role of the body, and political change. As an example of shame’s productive potential, Probyn describes her shame-filled and teary reaction to approaching Ayers Rock, a contested site in Australia that is both a sacred space for Aboriginal people and a tourist location for the Australian government. She suggests that, as a white Australian who has benefited from the colonization of the land, shame is a viable political response. Such moments, Probyn claims, show how shame, by indicating “interest” in the other person and making “the feeling and minding and thinking and social body [come] alive,” becomes “a prompt for [political] action.”<sup>27</sup> It is this increasingly common assumption about the political power of performing shame, albeit from a different angle, which I would like to examine and ultimately critique in Agee’s work.

*Famous Men* enlists shame as a textual marker by mobilizing its conventional associations with the exposure to the gaze of the other.<sup>28</sup> In so doing, the book suggests that conventional social-reform journalism unwittingly relies on objectifying structures of vision characteristic of colonial relations. In its imagining of an ashamed citizen-witness, the book goes further, asking the American reader and the nation itself to “look at your shame!”<sup>29</sup> The book ultimately critiques the roles of the citizen, the state, and democratic practice, ending by imagining shame as a gateway to an alternative (if, I would argue, equally problematic) set of social relations that might replace those it criticizes.

### **Shame and the Violence of Voyeurism**

Since *Famous Men*’s publication, Lionel Trilling, James Lowe, Carolyn Wells Kraus, and other

critics have pointed out what they often call Agee's guilt. They tend to read these detonations as manifestations of his personal response to the scenes he witnesses. Trilling, for example, explains these moments as "the observer's guilt at his own relative freedom."<sup>30</sup> Lowe describes Agee's self-flagellation as stemming from his failure to permanently attain a shared consciousness with those he witnesses: "As long as individuals are oppressed . . . knowledge or ignorance of implication in this oppression produces guilt or insensitivity in the advantaged that, together with the disabled consciousness of the oppressed, denies the full reciprocity among all individuals necessary for perfect and absolute unity."<sup>31</sup> Kraus argues that guilt is an appropriate ethical response to the "presumptuousness" inherent to the nonfiction enterprise.<sup>32</sup> While these critics tend to conceptualize shame as emanating from the realities of lived experience to the documentation of that experience, I would like to read *Famous Men's* use of shame in a somewhat different way: as a literary device that acts in the service of (and, paradoxically, against) the text's larger political goals.

Various scenes near the beginning of *Famous Men* are emphasized by eruptions of shame; these passages become dramatized representations of the way particular structures of vision uphold hierarchical social relations. An early passage titled "Late Sunday Morning" exposes the way that race relations in the American South rely on modes of vision that are designed to produce shame. In "Late Sunday Morning," Agee and Evans are invited by a white landowner to visit the house of African-American sharecroppers. When they arrive, it becomes clear that the landowner's motivation for the visit is to goad the farmers into a forced performance that will both physicalize and validate a system of hierarchical social relations. As the three arrive at the foreman's house it becomes clear that they are interrupting a family gathering, a brief respite after a week of hard labor. By bringing Agee and Evans to the house on a Sunday, the landowner immediately performs his refusal to see the laborers as circulating within his set of social codes and conventions.

This performance of social domination becomes reinforced by a more formal and equally forced performance, when the landowner commands three young men to demonstrate, in Agee's words, "what nigger music is like."<sup>33</sup> As the men perform a series of songs, Agee describes himself as "sick" that this anthropological performance has been commissioned for himself and Evans.<sup>34</sup> He suggests that, just as the African-American laborers are trapped in the performance of social hierarchy, he too is not just a spectator but a performer: "now, in a perversion of self-torture, I played my part through. I gave their leader fifty cents, trying at the same time, through my eyes, to communicate much more, and said I was sorry we had held them up and that I hoped they would not be late; and he thanked me for them in a dead voice, not looking me in the eye, and they went away."<sup>35</sup> Both Agee and those he witnesses are associated with expressions of shame—manifested either in "sickness" and "a perversion of self-torture" or the reluctance to maintain eye contact. Agee's performance of shame, I'd like to argue, is meant to draw attention to his implication, as a privileged citizen and a journalist, in the way certain structures of vision produce others' shame.

*Famous Men*, by emphasizing the uneven effects of objectification, aligns itself with Fanon's work. By performing shame, Agee asks the reader to see how the colonizing gaze produces and relies on a more insidious production of shame in the dominated. In "Late Sunday Morning," the structural alignment of one person in the role of passive object and the other in the role of active spectator reinforces relations of racial dominance, a set of relations that Agee, in his frantic attempts to force a mutual gaze, cannot disrupt. This scene emphasizes the way that social-reform journalism is implicated in the violent voyeuristic practices of a racist landscape

aligned with that which Fanon describes. The relations between Agee, the white landowner, and the black singers, the book implies, are preconditioned by already existing social relations which institutions and structures compound. Non-mutual, objectifying vision both manifests and reifies these social relations.

If the citizen-witness traditionally comes to stand in for the reader, Agee's shame exposes and becomes the reader's shame and the shame of the polis in general. In emphasizing the reliance of social-reform journalism on voyeurism, he asks readers to see the violence of their own voyeurism. In so doing, he imagines an ideal community of privileged readers who both recognize their complicity in social dominance and wish to change it.

### Revising Vision

*Famous Men* critiques and disrupts the spectatorial and representational conventions of social-reform journalism by emphasizing the objectification of vision. The middle of the book is marked by the attempt to practice a different kind of vision, one that focuses on the objects surrounding humans instead of the humans themselves. I refer to the approximately two hundred pages in which Agee embarks on an exhaustively detailed description of, first, the physical surroundings of the Woods', Gudgers', and Ricketts' households; second, the objects in the Gudger house; and third, the more general objects and practices ("clothing," "education," and "work") of the three tenant families and others like them.

Agee's practices here demonstrate the family resemblance between journalism, tourism, anthropology, and espionage. In his description of the wider environment of the Woods', Gudgers', and Ricketts' houses, Agee directs the reader to: "Leave this room and go very quietly down the open hall that divides the house [etc.]," vividly detailing each step on the way to the Ricketts' house.<sup>36</sup> In this narrative recounting, however, the reader becomes less a traditional tourist and more a spy, drawn into complicity by the narrator. The tour Agee conducts occurs at night and the reader is instructed to be "very quiet." Later, the reader voyeuristically looks on as Agee, left alone in the Gudgers' house, opens drawers and rifles through belongings, fastidiously noting each detail. Agee here performs the actions of the spy, and the reader, like him, sees the results of his invasion. Yet, far from being ashamed at his actions, he seems to revel in this role—to the point that he openly describes himself as a spy, and rehabilitates his voyeurism into an almost spiritual endeavor.<sup>37</sup> Agee informs the reader that he respects "being made witness to matters no human being may see," and claims that he approaches these objects with reverence.<sup>38</sup>

*Famous Men* posits that the examination of the objects that surround the person can lend the spectator insight into that person. Ideally, Agee claims, "it would be our business to show how through every instant of every day of every year of his existence alive he is from all sides streamed inward upon, bombarded, pierced, destroyed by that enormous sleeting of all objects forms and ghosts how great how small no matter, which surround and whom his senses take: in as great and perfect and exact particularity as we can name them."<sup>39</sup> He suggests that each human being is infinitely complex—and that it is impossible to capture this complexity in finite language. The focus on "that enormous sleeting of all objects," then, is designed to help the reader understand in greater detail and complexity the other human being. This mode of vision seems to contradict and counteract the spectatorial logic of shame depicted in the earlier passages, in which vision is used as a weapon to categorize, humiliate, and objectify the other person. Here, vision is used to explore the other from various perspectives, and it is directed



not at the person, but at the objects surrounding the person. The gaze is divided and diverted and its potential violence ostensibly muted.

Agee recognizes that describing all the objects linked to a particular human being is impossible. He asks the reader for assistance:

One can write only one word at a time, and if these seem lists and inventories merely, things dead unto themselves, devoid of mutual magnetisms, and if they sink, lose impetus, meter, intension, then bear in mind at least my wish, and perceive in them and restore them what strength you can of yourself.<sup>40</sup>

His attempt to draw from descriptions of the various material objects surrounding a person a mosaic-like representation of that person's essence, is depicted as a process of human sociality, imagination, and cooperation between reader and writer. In these passages, then, Agee reforms the lopsided voyeurism of journalistic practice to imagine an alternative kind of democracy, one based on the recognition of differences linked not to race or class, but rather to the unique location of individual human beings in the world. Readers are asked to place themselves in this formulation, and to actively participate in producing it. Agee seems to be imagining a democratic network that stretches across time, space, and text to link together himself, the tenants, and the reader.

This kind of sociality depends on the recognition and imagined production of the complexity of the subject of representation. It transforms difference from something based on rigid class and racial boundaries into a difference that differentiates all human beings. One passage in this middle part of the book, entitled "Colon," elucidates this philosophy. In it, Agee engages in an extended discussion of how best to imagine the complexity of human life: "[I]ts structure," he writes, "should be eighteen or twenty intersected spheres, the interlockings of bubbles on the face of a stream; one of these globes is each of you."<sup>41</sup> The social recognition of difference, however, does not divide humans into dominant and dominated, but produces a form of horizontal, intermixed, and fluid equality: "the interlockings of bubbles on the face of a stream."<sup>42</sup> By imagining difference not on the basis of social class, but at the level of the individual, this new kind of vision seems to reinvigorate the lost democratic ideal.

If the reader is temporarily lulled into accepting Agee's philosophy, the uncomfortable intervention of shame into the narrative disrupts his seemingly democratic spectatorial and representational practice. Near the end of this section of the book, Agee describes himself narrowly avoiding being caught rifling through the Gudgers' belongings, re-establishing the uninvited nature of these explorations and reincorporating the potential for shame into a narrative that has for a time erased it. His actions here may be in good faith, but their outcome is similar to the scenes he earlier critiqued:

I hear her voice and the voices of her children, and in knowledge of those hidden places I have opened, those griefs, beauties, those garments whom I took out, held to my lips, took odor of, and folded and restored so orderly, so reverently as cerements, or priest the blessed cloths, I receive a strong shock at my heart, and I move silently, and quickly. . . . It is not going to be easy to look into their eyes.<sup>43</sup>

After pages of meditative description, the sudden reminder of the uninvited nature of his

examination shocks the reader along with Agee. The reader is left to question whether the attempt to represent the humanity of another person can justify the violation of that person's privacy (a discomfort intensified by the image of Agee kissing and smelling the Gudgers' clothing). His shame, in its association with "Late Sunday Morning," suggests that his tentative philosophy of the object may not take into account the self-identification of the journalistic subject with the object. Agee's gaze becomes shameful when discovered; it is an invasion, a violation doubled when reprinted for voyeuristic readers. His imagined difficulty at looking the Gudgers in the eyes indicates that his initial solution to social-reform journalism's practices may objectify the human subject at the same time it seeks to avoid that objectification.

I have now examined a moment in which shame emerges within the text to alert the reader to the way social-reform journalism and the good citizen can be implicated in and reinforce hierarchical and oppressive social relations. I have also commented upon Agee's attempt to correct normative modes of representation by practicing a different kind of spectatorship, and pointed out the way in which the eruption of shame into the narrative illuminates his unwitting replication of objectification. Now I would like to show how at the end of the book Agee again enlists conventional aspects of shame to theorize a utopian form of sociality that is based in the risk of shame, one that imagines (problematically) the deliberate exposure of vulnerability and self-objectification as a catalyst for producing a new kind of democratic community.

### **The Sociality of Shame**

The end of the book describes two incidents in which Agee imagines the possibility of an alternative kind of democracy grounded in the mutual gaze. These two events evoke the possibility of a utopian sociality, an intimate democracy in which social barriers are erased and humans mutually witness each other's vulnerability.

In the first of these incidents, which he calls "introits" or entrances, Agee describes how he joins the Gudgers in their home to escape a thunderstorm. In the midst of this, the mutual gaze at which Agee has hinted throughout the book, but never fully achieved, comes to a physicalized peak:

I come soon to realize that [Louise] has not once taken her eyes off me since we entered the room: so that my own are drawn back more and more uncontrollably toward them and into them. From the first they have run chills through me, a sort of beating and ticklish vacuum at the solar plexus, and though I have frequently met them I cannot look into them long at a time without panic and quick withdrawal, fear, whether for her or for myself I don't know.<sup>44</sup>

Here, vulnerability is expressed not just in the image of humans huddled in a house, seeking shelter from a massive storm. The reader is asked to consider the exchange of gazes as an expression of mutual exposure and vulnerability. By practicing what Tomkins calls "interocular intimacy," Agee and Louise are violating a deeply rooted social taboo.<sup>45</sup> Most obviously, the association between eye contact and sexuality makes this extended gaze a potential violation of social norms, especially on Agee's part, as the older man in the pair. In the potential transgression of the interocular taboo, both Agee and Louise risk the shame and danger of being seen seeing.<sup>46</sup> If the dangers of eye contact are made apparent in this scene,

the unique character of the experience which involves the mutual vulnerability of all involved seems to stave off temporarily the possibility of shame, although the description teeters on the edge of transgression.

The second, and professedly more significant, introit culminates in another model of human interaction based around an even more palpable erasure of shame. In this famous passage, Agee's car is stuck in the mud, which follows the thunderstorm. He comes back to the Gudgers' and stands in the dark outside of their home. Just as Agee is overwhelmed with shame, so too is this passage; indeed, the word "shame" is mentioned three times:

[S]tanding here, silently, in the demeanor of the house itself *I grow full of shame ... and shame the more*, because I do not yet turn away, but still stand here motionless ... and am aware of a vigilant and shameless hope that—not that I shall move forward and request you, disorder you, but that 'something shall happen,' as it 'happened' that the car lost to the mud: and so waiting, *in doubt, desire and shame...*<sup>47</sup>

Agee's shame here derives from his inability to move away from the house; in his failure to move, he displays a vulnerable desire to be seen and cared for (rather than a desire to see). Yet his inability to move, if it is shameful, also includes its opposite: "a vigilant and shameless hope."<sup>48</sup>

When George Gudger comes out into the darkness, the potential for social judgment is made manifest. Gudger disrupts expectations by viewing Agee not with the judging eye of the stranger but with the welcoming eye of the mutual friend. Externality and shame are instantly transformed into literal and metaphorical insiderness when George Gudger invites Agee into his home and Annie Gudger makes him a meal. The passage culminates with Agee and the Gudgers sharing a late-night conversation:

[T]here is a particular sort of intimacy between the three of us which is not of our own creating and which has nothing to do with our talk, yet which is increased in our tones of voice, in small quiet turns of humor, in glances of the eyes, in ways even that I eat my food, in their knowledge how truly friendly I feel toward them, and how seriously I am concerned to have caused them bother, and to let them be done with this bother as quickly as possible.<sup>49</sup>

This scene, when taken in conjunction with the thunderstorm scene, establishes a human intimacy that indicates for Agee the utopian possibilities of a new kind of sociality. This intimacy is subdued, and features a physical tableau of equivalence. The three are seated together on the inside of the house, and exchange "glances of the eyes" that are more gentle than direct, aggressive or voyeuristic gazes. Here, the reader meant to witness a moment in which hospitality transcends the possibility of shame.

Agee claims that these moments of unplanned human intimacy and hospitality represent the grounds for a larger human solidarity. Ultimately, his vision is a utopian one, which prefigures a future in which humans come together across difference:

[T]here is a marching and resonance of rescuing feet which shall at length all dangers braved, all armies cut through, past, deliver you freedom, joy, health, knowledge like an enduring sunlight . . . that it shall come at length there can be no question: for this I know in my own soul through that regard of love we bear one another: for there it was proved me in the meeting of the extremes of the race.<sup>50</sup>

Agee foresees this kind of future because, he claims, he experienced its nascent form in these introits.

It seems to be the risk of shame in the exposure of bodily and interpersonal vulnerability that allows for these utopian moments. This vulnerability is characterized by the ever-present possibility and refusal of judgment, and therefore these scenes imagine the simultaneous avoidance and risk of shame. Agee thus reimagines the act of good citizenship as one in which the citizen actively produces himself or herself as the object of the other person's gaze. Good citizenship becomes lodged not in witnessing, but in being witnessed. The exposed good citizen becomes temporarily unmoored from his or her relation to the state, and constructs an alternative democratic sphere in which all become both subjects and objects. It is this fantasy of human communion, inaugurated by the risk of shame, which I would like to critique in the next section.

### Shame and the Politics of Privilege

Recent years have witnessed not just a resurgence of interest in shame theory, but the rise of shame politics as well. When I read Leys's comment in *From Guilt to Shame* about Americans' professed shame at Abu Ghraib, what struck me was the way she naturalized and legitimized the political performance of shame.<sup>51</sup> This response was reiterated when I read Probyn's *Blush*. Even Agamben has theorized the "shame of being human" as "the beginning of a revolution."<sup>52</sup> The performance of shame has become increasingly common in the recent political landscape. It is the enduring quality of this approach to imagining democratic relations that I think warrants sustained inquiry into the implications of developing a politics of shame.

As further evidence of this resurgence of the politics of shame, I would like to point to and discuss another text that, in its performance of shame, can illuminate the possibilities and limitations of *Famous Men's* political philosophy. "Sorry Everybody," a website anonymously produced in the wake of George W. Bush's re-election in 2004, collected thousands of pictures of voters who didn't vote for Bush holding signs that expressed some variation of public apology. Responses from others outside the U.S., especially Europe and South America, accepted the apology.<sup>53</sup>

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, *From Guilt to Shame*, *Blush*, and "Sorry Everybody" all imagine shame as a viable response to the helplessness of witnessing political injustice. Each posits a witness or community of witnesses responding to an action that has already taken place: the tenant families—both white and black—are already oppressed, Australia was already colonized, the Abu Ghraib photographs were already taken, and Bush was already re-elected. Political shame, these texts suggest, is performed after the fact, and is a way to process, perform, and in some way regain discursive control of political helplessness. Shame, too, symbolically separates the witnesses from the actions they critique, which were carried out in their name.

The political performance of shame, then, becomes a way to negotiate the inevitable limit of democracy: the impossible ideal of political representation inscribed in the very concept of the democratic state. If in democratic theory the state is imagined as an extension of the people, these witnesses use shame to mark the erasure of their political positions. They highlight the disjunction between the imagined possibilities of democratic theory, in which all are represented and justice is served, and the way democracy is practiced, in which certain opinions are ignored while anti-democratic practices like colonization, invasion, and violence are authorized and justified through recourse to democracy's structures and principles. In the face of the seeming lack of shame (and indeed, open celebration) with which colonial and neo-colonial ventures are carried out, these witnesses, much like Agee, personify, perform, and testify to what they see as the shame of democracy's failure. In so doing, they mark themselves as the subject and object of politics.<sup>54</sup> Shame becomes a mode of good citizenship.

Shame not only speaks to the failure of the practice of democracy; it can, as in *Famous Men*, also provide a way to imagine alternative manifestations of democratic community. The political performance of shame, these texts suggest, can indeed produce what Benedict Anderson has called an "imagined community," seeming to encourage alternate imaginings of the democratic polis and allowing for a critique of the limits of democratic practice. The initiation and use of "Sorry Everybody," as indicated in a subheading titled "Explanation," addresses this possibility when the site claims that it allowed participants to "reassure each other that we weren't alone, to remember that one loss won't marginalize us forever."<sup>55</sup> In this scenario, the performance of shame creates community among those who try, but are unable, to produce political change. The site, too, provided a discursive foil to the Bush administration's rhetoric and actions. Instead of aggressive, violent assault, it performed a different America—one that was passive, ashamed, and friendly. Reactions from others around the world (primarily Europe and South America), in which the apology was accepted with similar placards, also produced an imagined transnational community of politically like-minded individuals. Like the "imagined community" in *Famous Men*, "Sorry Everybody" became a metaphorical location to construct an alternate democratic community, here an international one.

Yet these shame-based communities cannot be the grounds for a sustainable democracy. What "Sorry Everybody" points out and *Famous Men* elides is the way in which shame produces an imagined community on the basis of similarity, not difference. In order to imagine this kind of community, shame politics can erase or ignore materially inscribed social differences. In "Sorry Everybody" the mutual and voluntary expression of shame binds people together and produces comfort. Moving from the site back to the book, we can see more clearly that the community that is produced by Agee's book is also based on similarity, but a more sinister manifestation of it. When Agee comes together with the Gudgers, for example, racial similarity binds their temporary community: when George Gudger finds Agee outside of his home, he invites him in after explaining that "he had thought I was a nigger."<sup>56</sup> Community here is grounded on objectification of the other person.

If racial difference grounds *Famous Men's* temporary community, gender hierarchies, too, are not relieved in Agee's seemingly utopian vision. Agee's elision of the power differential between men and women in the first introit makes the reader question, as Kaja Silverman has, Agee's interpretation of the gaze between him and Louise. Rather than a mutual violation of the interocular taboo initiated and maintained by Louise, Silverman argues that this encounter "turns on [Louise's] psychic violation."<sup>57</sup> In Silverman's re-examination of the passage, what

Agee paints as shared vulnerability becomes an invasion. Silverman's reading intimates that Louise as a young girl risks more in her exchange of gazes than does Agee, a sexually mature man. Similarly, the idyllic meal shared in the ultimate introit is made possible by the meal Annie Gudger habitually provides her husband and his guest. This gendered critique of one of the founding premises of his vision of human communion suggests again that the book's idealized way of seeing may in fact be grounded in, rather than alleviating, hierarchy.

Finally, if race and gender hierarchies underpin Agee's politics of shame, class barriers—the focus of the book—are similarly reinscribed in its narration. In the end, the primary community of the book is created not between Agee and the tenant families, but between Agee and his privileged readers. We can see this, for example, in the way that, throughout *Famous Men*, Agee shares his innermost feelings, flaws, and failings with the reader but not with the Gudgers, Ricketts, or Woods. His concern is to mobilize and produce community in his readership.

Seen from these perspectives, Agee's interpretation of the scenes as models of democratic community becomes questionable. Agee's depiction of the utopian possibilities of shame relies upon imagined similarity and objectification of the other person; material and social difference is erased or underplayed to facilitate the imagining of this hypothetical community.

Another problem with crafting a politics on the basis of self-objectification is that to do so can reinforce the very social hierarchies that the citizen-witness ostensibly attempts to dismantle. The importance of the citizen-witness to this formulation normalizes his/her values and feelings as the center of the imagined ideal democracy. The discursive force of shame further (re)produces the privileged citizen-witness as the center of the social scene. The disruptive explosion of strong emotion, and the continuing attention to it, redirects focus at the suffering witness rather than the conditions he or she witnesses. The ideal democratic encounter that is witnessed at the end of *Famous Men*, therefore, becomes an expression of Agee's internal life. The knowledge Agee gains "in his own soul," and his narrative about that experience, draw the readers' attention as Agee's internal life takes dramatic precedence over those whose lives he witnesses.<sup>58</sup>

This focus on Agee rather than those he witnesses is replicated in the book's paratexts and responses, in which the material conditions of poverty in the American South take a back seat to the sensationalistic centrality of Agee himself. In his introduction, for example, John Hersey describes how Agee "drank enough to stun a rhinoceros" and claims that he "died of a broken heart"<sup>59</sup>; in his, Walker Evans associates Agee with the tragic heroism of King Lear, noting about his plain clothing that "[i]n due time the cloth would mold itself to his frame. Cleaning and pressing would have undone this beautiful process. I exaggerate, but it did seem sometimes that wind, rain, work, and mockery were his tailors."<sup>60</sup> Even after his death, Agee (and not the "famous men" to which his book refers) was transformed into a legendary character by his contemporaries and later readers, especially young white Civil Rights workers in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>61</sup> If the book struggles to overcome hierarchy, ostensibly broadening out the notion of "famous men," then, the book and responses to it simultaneously support that same hierarchy, maintaining the privileged citizen-witness as the (anti-)hero of democracy.

Narratives that imagine political concepts such as the citizen, democracy, and community express complex, powerful, and often contradictory messages—messages that necessitate close examination. It is clear in this instance that the attempt to conceptualize an alternative democratic polis and practice on the basis of shame is fraught with difficulty, and may rein-

scribe the very hierarchies it seeks to challenge. The contemporaneity of “Sorry Everybody,” *Blush*, and the response to Abu Ghraib photographs, along with the resurgence of interest in shame theory, indicate that the politics of shame early and distinctively manifested in Agee and Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* have not waned but have in fact become more thoroughly inscribed in the way the liberal public encounters, and performs itself within, the political landscape. If it is necessary to recognize the community-building possibilities of shame politics, it is equally important to note the inherent limitations of this approach to democracy.



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### Endnotes

1. The term “imagined community” refers to Benedict Anderson’s similarly titled book. Anderson tracks the way that print capitalism enabled the imagining of the nation through the circulation of different kinds of cultural texts, including newspapers, censuses, and maps. I utilize the term to emphasize the important role both nonfictional and fictional narratives play in producing, critiquing, and experimenting with various conceptualizations of political community. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York and London: Verso, 1991).
2. Judith Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 5.
3. *Ibid.*, 12.
4. Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 9.

5. In *How the Other Half Lives*, for example, Riis ends his exposé of tenement conditions with a call on owners to help counter the conditions he sees. “Miss Ellen Collins in her Water Street houses” is Riis’s ultimate example of the ideal citizen; he writes that “Her first effort was to let in the light in the hallways, and with the darkness disappeared, as if by magic, the heaps of refuse that used to be piled up beside the sinks.” (211) Collins’s “magic touch” is accompanied by cooperation between two types of citizens—the tenant and the landlord: “To this end the rents were put as low as consistent with the idea of a business investment that must return a reasonable interest to be successful.” (211-212) Similarly, in her introduction to *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, Bly stated proudly that her undercover venture into the asylum had led to New York City appropriating an additional million dollars per year toward improving the asylums. If London as a socialist advocated a more radical overhaul of the economic system, his emphasis on the “mismanagement” of “Civilization” he charts in his exploration of London’s East End in *The People of the Abyss*—and his apparent belief in the ability of the good citizen to intervene in this mismanagement—indicates his conception of the state, and the state-citizen relation, as the foundation of the democratic promise. See Nellie Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House* (New York: Ian L. Munro, Publisher, n.d. [orig. pub. 1887]), <<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/bly/madhouse/madhouse.html>>; Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1903); and Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997).
6. I do not mean to suggest that the muckrakers had the same exact goals or approaches to social change as Progressive Era reformists, but rather that they become representations of the same kind of public figure—the citizen-witness.
7. This notoriety may be seen reflected in and produced by Roosevelt’s frustrated and very public bequeathing of the group’s name.
8. As one example of this practice an image in part five of the book depicts two elderly people looking off to their left. The caption reads: “*Yazoo City, Mississippi*: ‘I think it’s only right that the government ought to be run with people like us in mind,’” Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York: The Viking Press, 1937), 147.
9. *Ibid.*, 6.
10. *Ibid.*, 187.
11. *Ibid.*, 190.
12. John Tagg, “Melancholy Realism: Walker Evans’s Resistance to Meaning,” *Narrative 11*, no. 1 (January 2003): 12, footnote deleted.
13. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988), 13.
14. Tagg, 59.
15. Agee and Evans, 7.
16. As I will suggest later in the essay, Agee’s conceptualization of shame points forward to the present moment, in which a similar politics of shame has emerged in the West as a response to injustice.



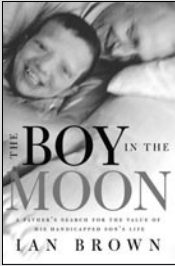
17. See Ruth Leys, *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 11. Sixty years earlier, Ruth Benedict hypothesized a similar shift when, in her 1946 book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, she argued that U.S. culture at the time was becoming increasingly conscious of shame. See Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989). Conversely, some in the field of legal studies maintain that the reverse has happened, and that guilt has overtaken shame as a legal category in the West only in the last century. Mark Drumbl cites John Braithwaite's argument thus, contextualizing this shift by noting Freud's emphasis on guilt at the turn of the century, the rise of the penitentiary, the rise of the city (which de-emphasized social interaction in favor of anonymity), and positing that the Victorian sensibility was "disgusted" by shame-based modes of punishment. See Mark Drumbl, "Punishment, Postgenocide: From Guilt to Shame to Civis in Rwanda," *New York University Law Review* 75 [2000]: 1221-1326, 1256-1257.
18. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 1999). Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965). Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Willis, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008). E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (University of California Press, 1951). Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967). Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: Face of Shame* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, "Introduction." In Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995). Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995).
19. If one debate focuses on the relative importance of guilt and shame in the West, Leys points out another area of disagreement. While pre-1950s psychoanalysts and others tended to represent shame as a predominantly negative emotion, she notes, recent writers such as Probyn, Agamben, and Sedgwick have rehabilitated it as ultimately productive. (124) Debates on shame take place as well amidst a larger intellectual conversation on the emotions in general. While some would have it that the emotions are "intentional," in *Feeling in Theory* Rei Terada argues that emotions indicate the lack, not the presence, of the subject and subjectivity. See Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory: Emotion After the 'Death of the Subject'* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001).
20. Agamben, 107.
21. *Ibid.*, 104.
22. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 9.
23. Derrida, 12.
24. Fanon, 10.
25. *Ibid.*, 109.
26. Leys, 16.
27. Probyn, 34-35, 101. Probyn claims, after Tomkins, that "[i]f you're interested in and care about the interest of others, you spend much of your life blushing. Conversely, if you don't care, then attempts to shame won't move you. Shame highlights different levels of interest" (x).

28. In making this claim, I am not meaning to forward the argument that Agee deliberately draws on the shame theories I have listed above (which would clearly be impossible as many were published after *Famous Men*). Rather, I would like to suggest that despite interpretive debates, the concept of “shame” holds certain associations that Agee’s work implicitly reflects and mobilizes.
29. In a posthumously published essay, forcefully titled “America! Look at Your Shame!” Agee responds to a photograph taken during the 1943 race riots in Detroit, and narrates a story about his self-proclaimed shameful refusal to speak out against overt racism. The essay, written soon after the publication of *Famous Men*, engages with similar topics and questions as the book. James Agee, “America! Look At Your Shame!” in *James Agee Rediscovered: The Journals of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and Other New Manuscripts*, ed. Michael Lofaro and Hugh Davis (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005): 165-173.
30. Lionel Trilling, “Greatness With One Fault in It,” *The Kenyon Review* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1942): 102.
31. James Lowe, *The Creative Process of James Agee* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 87.
32. Carolyn Wells Kraus, “On Hurting People’s Feelings: Journalism, Guilt, and Autobiography,” *Biography* 26, vol. 2 (Spring 2003): 283-298, 292.
33. Agee and Evans, 28.
34. *Ibid.*, 31.
35. *Ibid.*, 31.
36. *Ibid.*, 75.
37. *Ibid.*, liv, 134.
38. *Ibid.*, 134, 136, 137, 188.
39. *Ibid.*, 110.
40. *Ibid.*, 110-111.
41. *Ibid.*, 101.
42. *Ibid.*, 110.
43. *Ibid.*, 188-189.
44. *Ibid.*, 400.
45. Tomkins, 144.
46. Agee and Evans, 400.
47. *Ibid.*, 411, emphasis mine.
48. *Ibid.*, 411.
49. *Ibid.*, 417-418.
50. *Ibid.*, 392.
51. Leys, 16.
52. Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 132.
53. See “Sorry Everybody.” <<http://www.sorryeverybody.com>>. The website now has a sequel: “Hello Everybody,” which was produced after Barack Obama won the U.S. presidential election in 2008.
54. The relation between self-objectification and shame politics is reinscribed in “Sorry Everybody’s” display in which participants photographed themselves holding placards. The participants thus became artistic objects sending a particular political message.

55. See "Hello Everybody: Explanation." 12 July 2009. <<http://www.sorryeverybody.com/explanation.shtml>>.
56. Agee and Evans, 412.
57. Kaja Silverman, "Moving Beyond the Politics of Blame: Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," *Desire of the Analysts: Psychoanalysis and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Greg Forter and Paul Allen Miller (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 136.
58. Agee and Evans, 392.
59. John Hersey, "Introduction: Agee," James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families*, v-xi: vii, xxxv.
60. Walker Evans, "Foreword: James Agee in 1936." James Agee and Walker Evans. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families*, xli-xliv: xli-xlii.
61. See Alan Spiegel, *James Agee and the Legend of Himself: A Critical Study* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1998), and David Madden, *Touching the Web of Southern Novelists* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2006) for further elaboration. Spiegel has described a number of Agee "cults," including "the cults of Poor Jim, Saint Jim, and Plain or Country Jim." (6) This depiction of Agee as a hero, as Spiegel and Silverman point out, was encouraged by Agee's own self-representation. Spiegel, comparing Agee to other self-fashioning artists such as Walt Whitman, argues that in his self-reflexivity Agee portrays himself as a hero, a "Janus-faced modern" who "conflat[es] indigenous national fantasy (i.e., 'orphan' heroes, lost families, everlasting roots, etc.) with the blessed mystery of his own mental turmoil, his intellectual honesty, his orneriness, confusion, and perversity." (24) Silverman focuses in on what I would assume are similar moments to those I have located, in which Agee "excoriates himself for his shortcomings as a writer or man and expresses his desire for humiliation or punishment." (135) She claims that these moments indicate "false care," performing a masochistic "heroic fantasy" that focuses on the self while ostensibly caring for the other. (135)



*The Boy in the Moon:*  
*A Father's Search for His Disabled Son, and*  
**Writing What You See, Not What You Think You See**



In late September, Random House Canada released *The Boy in the Moon: A Father's Search for His Disabled Son*.

From the dust jacket:

“Ian Brown’s son, Walker, was born with a genetic mutation so rare that doctors call it an orphan syndrome: perhaps a hundred people around the world live with it. At twelve, Walker is still in diapers: he is globally delayed, he can’t speak and he has to wear cuffs on both his arms so that he won’t constantly hit himself. Yet those details don’t capture him. Despite the turmoil and pain of his life, Walker still delivers to the world moments of joy so intense they seem supernatural.

“Brown first wrote about his son in a series for *The Globe and Mail*, which drew an unprecedented reader response. But the series only scratched the surface of what Brown needed to know and needed to say about his son.

“... Brown never shies away from the humour or the intense pathos of life with Walker. With the tender imagination and stark honesty Brown brings to the writing, the quality that infuses his book is love: for this amazing boy, for his family and for life. As much as this book is about one frail boy and the tiny constellation of people who surround him, it is also about all of us who try so hard to be parents worthy of our children.”

*Literary Journalism Studies* is pleased to publish three excerpts from Brown’s latest work. An essay, which been compiled from one of the author’s guest appearances at the School of Journalism, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada, will follow the excerpts. In the essay, Brown discusses his views of personal journalism, the New Journalism, and literary journalism.



**I**an Brown, one of Canada's most accomplished journalists, currently writes features for *The Globe and Mail* national newspaper. He is also the anchor of two documentary programs, *Human Edge* and *The View From Here*, on the province of Ontario's public broadcast station, TVO. For ten years he hosted CBC Radio's *Talking Books*. Brown's reporting and writing have won three National Newspaper Awards for the *Globe*, as well as seven golds, four silvers, and sixteen honorable mentions at the National Magazine Awards, for magazines such as *Saturday Night*, *exploire*, *Chatelaine*, *Canadian Business*, *Toronto*, and *Outdoor Canada*. He is the author of two previous books. The first, *Freewheeling: The Feuds, Broods, and Outrageous Fortunes of the Billes Family and Canada's Favorite Company* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1989), is an entertaining history of the Canadian Tire Corporation. The second, *Man Overboard: True Adventures With American Men* (Toronto: Macfarlane Walter and Ross, 1993), is a mordant take on what it means to be a man in an age when a woman no longer requires him. He has also edited an anthology of twenty-five narrative essays, *What I Meant to Say: The Private Lives of Men* (Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2005). Brown lives in Toronto.

# The Boy in the Moon

by Ian Brown, Toronto, Canada

## (From Chapter One)

**F**or the first eight years of Walker's life, every night is the same. The same routine of tiny details, connected in precise order, each mundane, each crucial.

The routine makes the eight years seem long, almost endless, until I try to think about them afterwards, and then eight years evaporate to nothing, because nothing has changed.

Tonight I wake up in the dark to a steady, motorized noise. Something wrong with the water heater. *Nnngah*. Pause. *Nnngah*. *Nnngah*.

But it's not the water heater. It's my boy, Walker, grunting as he punches himself in the head, again and again.

He has done this since before he was two. He was born with an impossibly rare genetic mutation, cardiofaciocutaneous syndrome, a technical name for a mash of symptoms. He is globally delayed and can't speak, so I never know what's wrong. No one does. There are just over a hundred people with CFC around the world. The disorder turns up randomly, a misfire that has no certain cause or roots; doctors call it an orphan syndrome because it seems to come from nowhere.

I count the grunts as I pad my way into his room: one a second. To get him to stop hitting himself, I have to lure him back to sleep, which means taking him downstairs and making him a bottle and bringing him back into bed with me.

That sounds simple enough, doesn't it? But with Walker, everything is complicated. Because of his syndrome, he can't eat solid food by mouth, or swallow easily. Because he can't eat, he takes in formula through the night via a feeding system. The formula runs along a line from a feedbag and a pump on a metal IV stand, through a hole in Walker's sleeper and into a clever-looking permanent valve in his belly, sometimes known as a G-tube, or mickey. To take him out of bed and down to the kitchen to prepare the bottle that will ease him back to sleep, I have to disconnect the line from the mickey. To do this, I first have to turn off the pump (in the dark, so he doesn't wake up completely) and close the feed line. If I don't clamp the line, the sticky formula pours out onto the bed or the floor (the carpet in Walker's room is pale blue: there are patches that feel like the Gobi Desert under my feet, from all the times I have forgotten). To crimp the tube, I thumb a tiny red plastic roller down a slide. (It's my favorite part of the routine—one thing, at least, is easy, under my control.) I unzip his one-piece sleeper (Walker's small, and grows so slowly he wears the same sleepers for a year and a half at a time), reach inside to unlock the line from the mickey, pull the line out through the hole in his sleeper and hang it on the IV rack that holds the pump and feedbag. Close the mickey, rezip the sleeper. Then I reach in and lift all forty-five pounds of Walker from the depths of the crib. He still sleeps in a crib. It's the only way we can keep him in bed at night. He can do a lot of damage on his own.

This isn't a list of complaints. There's no point to complaining. As the mother of another CFC child once told me, "You do what you have to do." If anything, that's the easy part. The hard part is trying to answer the questions Walker raises in my mind every time I pick him up. What is the value of a life like his—a life lived in the twilight, and often in pain? What is the cost of

his life to those around him? “We spend a million dollars to save them,” a doctor said to me not long ago. “But then when they’re discharged, we ignore them.” We were sitting in her office, and she was crying. When I asked her why, she said, “Because I see it all the time.”

Sometimes watching Walker is like looking at the moon: You see the face of the man in the moon, yet you know there’s actually no man there. But if Walker is so insubstantial, why does he feel so important? What is he trying to show me? All I really want to know is what goes on inside his off-shaped head, in his jumped-up heart. But every time I ask, he somehow persuades me to look into my own.

**(From Chapter Eleven)**

Six weeks later, in Cuise-la-Motte, a village ninety kilometres northeast of Paris, I saw an even more precise version of a possible future for Walker.

Cuise-la-Motte is one of four villages with L’Arche communities that form a tight knot in Picardie—Pierrefonds, Trosly-Breuil, and Compiègne, which is large enough to have a university, being the other three. A 36,000-acre forest—one of France’s famous hunting preserves, a former forest of the king—sits in their midst. Joan of Arc hid in these woods before her capture in Compiègne in 1430. The same forest was where Marshal Ferdinand Foch signed an armistice with the Germans on behalf of the Allies on November 11, 1918, and where, twenty-two years later, Adolf Hitler forced France formally to surrender to the Nazis. There are two grand châteaux in the region, one of which is said to be the inspiration for the castle in Walt Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty*. But no tourist plaques mention the L’Arche communities, though the people who live in them walk the streets like ordinary citizens.

The most critically disabled residents, both intellectually and physically, lived in a maison d’accueil spécialisé called La Forestière, in Trosly-Breuil. La Semence—the seed, in French—where I was planted, was home to people mostly incapable of speech, but mobile, after a fashion; conscious, and capable of registering their consciousness, but incapable of doing so alone. Walker would have fit in here, at the bottom end of the range. I was staying in the guest room, the sole person in a room that accommodated four. Outside my window a magnolia tree was flowering. Rosemary and lavender bushes were in bloom. It was April.

My flight had arrived that morning in Paris, and I’d arrived in Cuise-la-Motte just before lunch. My plan was to stay a few days, see how L’Arche worked, talk to Jean Vanier. He was one of the world’s foremost thinkers on the subject of disability, and I wanted to know what he thought would comprise a satisfying, decent, just life for Walker. I had read some of Vanier’s books, and found them radical. Vanier believed the disabled deserved a place of their own, that they often wanted to live apart from their families and parents if they could find a sufficiently supportive environment. That was an idea I thought I could get behind. He also insisted that the disabled were capable of teaching the able-bodied more than the able-bodied could ever teach them. If Vanier was right, I didn’t have to feel so bad about letting Walker live his life at least to some degree on his own. In some way I was there to find out if I was letting my son down. I unpacked my bags and sat down at the table in my room’s small kitchenette to look over the questions I planned to ask Vanier that afternoon. I had a page or two of notes prepared when there was a knock on the door. I opened it to a tall man wearing a beard and a red sweater. He immediately offered me some water. I said yes, invited him in, and offered him a seat at the kitchenette table.

He was sixty-four years old, but he looked fifty. His name was Garry Webb and while he wasn’t



disabled, he too lived at Semance. Webb was L'Arche's director of special projects: he'd just returned from taking fifteen L'Arche residents on a trip to Portugal. He'd grown up in Vancouver, but left home at eighteen. "It wasn't my culture," he said matter-of-factly. I asked him how he came to work at L'Arche, but that didn't work, because he refused to classify what he did as work. "It's living. Being. Working is only part of it. Everyone who comes here is transformed by it. Relationship is our priority. And then we tell people about it just by being who we are." All of which was interesting, free, spirited, and made me extremely nervous. But that was often the way conversations with people at L'Arche began. They didn't seem to suffer from the self-consciousness the rest of us do: disabled or not, they launched forthwith into the act of "relationship" with whomever they met, whenever they met them. I found their enthusiasm alarming. Were they high? Had they been smoking kindness? What the hell were they up to, anyway! I admired their openness, but being a city boy, had no desire to emulate it; I appreciated their generosity, but as a product of twentieth-century capitalism, doubted its sincerity. If Walker ever lived in such a place, would he be surrounded by people who cared for him for his own sake or by people who cared for him because they were in a cult? I didn't want Walker in a cult.

Webb had trained as a Jesuit and spent seven years in a Trappist monastery when he took a leave of absence to reassess his life. He had a lot of options. He'd studied philosophy and theology and psychology at university; his parents had been artists, and Webb was himself a part-time sculptor and sometime actor. He had strict requirements for his new path. It had to unfold in a new community; it had to be responsible work, with the poor or their equivalent; it had to be non-exclusive, nothing that shut out the rest of life (he didn't want to be locked away in a monastery again); it had to be a long-term commitment; it had to be holistic; and, most importantly, had to occur in a community that respected "the spirituality of each person." The first time he visited L'Arche, "I asked to stay for three days. But then I asked to stay for three weeks, then three months, then for a year."

I was about to ask if living at L'Arche ever got boring, but at that moment Webb explained he was only popping in to say hello on his way to the nearby village of Trosly-Breuil, to visit Jean Vanier at his home. They met every other week.

"What do you talk about?"

"Us," Webb said.

"Not the business of L'Arche?"

"Oh God, no. Us. My stuff. Why I'm still shitting my pants, figuratively speaking, in my dealings with the world. Why he's still running around like a rooster with his head cut off."

As he got up to leave, I confessed I was a little nervous at the prospect of talking to people who couldn't talk. Webb scoffed and waved his hand. "I think the core members of L'Arche are our teachers," he said. "And if you communicate with them, you'll be okay. Lunch is at twelve-thirty." Then he left.

An hour later, in the dining room, I met the people I was to live with for the next three days. Gérard was in his fifties. He could speak, after a fashion, but made whinnying noises as he did. He liked to tell stories, and was known to go into town for a beer. Laurent (also known as Lorenzo, because he was born in Italy) was trim and well dressed; he made a soft moaning noise as he ate, and liked to walk into a room and then stand stock-still for long stretches. Lydie, a young woman from the south of France who was Laurent's assistant, said, "Laurent

loves trains. He has all sorts of books about trains.”

“*Train!*” Laurent said, in French. It was the only word I ever heard him speak.

“*C’est ça,*” Lydie replied.

Several of the residents wore large neckerchiefs, bib fashion, in preparation for lunch. Francine was in a wheel chair; thanks to cerebral palsy she never spoke, though she could make noises, and was keenly interested in those around her. Another resident, Jean-Claude, could power himself in a wheelchair, liked cognac, could hear what people said, could not respond, and carried his favorite object, a stuffed raccoon, wherever he went. He was my age. Sabina appeared to have a severe form of Down syndrome, and spent all her time silently in her wheelchair.

The person who captured my interest most was a small, stooped, watchful man named Gégé. He was forty-six years old and he reminded me of Walker. The similarity smacked me like a blow: I could see Gégé’s ceaseless curiosity, and his permanent loneliness. He never spoke, but observed the action around him intently and slyly, with his head tilted. Singing made him smile. He made popping noises with his mouth, and walked in a crabbed forward crouch, half bent over. He had a habit of staring at his hands as if they belonged to someone else, the way Walker did.

No one at L’Arche talked about integration, the way staff sometimes do at conventional homes for the disabled: this community existed for the disabled and made no pretense that residents eventually would be part of the “normal” community. People like me were the outsiders here. There was a routine, a structure, a community of individuals, and their lives counted for what they were, no added value required. The table was set, grace was sung. Red leather pill-wallets were set out carefully at the head of each resident’s place setting, alongside any required digestive powders—a small neat pharmacy of remedies next to each water glass. Some of the residents could eat on their own, but just as many needed their food spooned into their mouths. As we ate, the assistants talked to their wards, and the wards grunted or laughed or moaned or peeped in reply. Gerard was the only resident at the table who could initiate what someone on the outside would recognize as conversation, but that didn’t stop everyone from interacting. It was a form of speaking, but you had to let it lead you.

After lunch, the residents who worked in L’Arche’s workshops making trinkets and jewellery returned to their labours; the others went for a walk. It was a community for the disabled, there was no question of that, but because the disabled were considered, and considered themselves, equals, none of it felt like a “special” arrangement. This was their world, not ours; these were their standards, not ours. The pace of life was slower, life itself was simpler; there were delays and problems, but no one took them seriously. It was a pleasant place to be, and conveyed no sense that life ought to be otherwise.

A couple of months after I visited L’Arche, at a party in Toronto, a friend scoffed at Jean Vanier’s saintliness. “It’s just so hard to accept that a guy with his intelligence and his opportunities would want to live with those people,” my friend said. “But maybe he just always wanted to make sure he was the smartest guy in the room.” Which he conceded was a terrible joke almost as quickly as Vanier would have laughed at it.

But there was something to the joke. Vanier had an imposing reputation, the result of a life dedicated to accomplishment. He had founded L’Arche. He was a perennial candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize, and had written dozens of pamphlets and books, including the

international bestseller *Becoming Human*.

But in person, Vanier was anything but intimidating. His house—the house he lives in when he isn't travelling the world for L'Arche—was a tiny stone cottage that backed onto the main street of Trosly-Breuil. Inside, in a cramped study off a modest kitchen, I found a tall, shy, unassuming white-haired man in a pale blue sweater.

Jean Vanier was born in Geneva, Switzerland, on September 10, 1929, while his father, Georges Philius Vanier, a retired general in the Canadian army, was stationed there on a diplomatic mission. Vanier attended school in England, but at the outset of the Second World War went to live, for reasons of safety like many other English children, with his brothers in Canada.

Late in 1941, he approached his father for a meeting. As his father was by then the nineteenth governor general of Canada, this required making an appointment. Jean wanted to join the British Navy, by way of the Royal Naval College in England. He had to cross the dangerous waters of the Atlantic, an idea his mother strongly opposed. But his father held a different view. "If that is what you really want to do," Georges Vanier said to his son, "then go. I trust you." Vanier later remembered the conversation as a formative moment of his life.

He was too young to see active service, but did witness the liberation of Paris, and in the years that followed helped process the return of survivors from the concentration camps at Dachau and elsewhere. By 1950 he was assigned to Canada's largest aircraft carrier.

At sea, Vanier began to wonder if he really wanted to be in the navy. He had begun to pray, for starters. He later wrote in *Toute personne est une histoire sacrée*, his account of his spiritual call to arms, that he had begun to feel "called to work in a different way for peace and freedom." He was more attentive to reciting the Divine Office than he was to night watch. He felt he was being called to God, and within a few years had resigned his naval commission and enrolled as a student of philosophy and divinity at Paris's L'Institut Catholique. He also joined L'Eau Vive, a small community of students devoted to prayer and metaphysics under the direction of a French Dominican priest, Père Thomas Philippe. Shortly after Vanier's arrival, Père Thomas fell ill. Vanier was asked to run the community, which he did for six years.

"I suppose I had been hopping around," Vanier told me that afternoon over a cup of tea. "I'd been a naval officer, I'd left the navy, I'd come to a community near Paris. I was searching. I didn't know quite what to do. Later I got a letter from St. Michael's College in Toronto: Will you come and teach? And it was interesting." By 1963, at the age of thirty-four, Vanier had defended his doctoral dissertation at the University of Toronto (*Happiness: Principles and Goals of Aristotelian Morality*) and was a popular lecturer with a scholarly interest in the ethics of friendship. "But I knew that teaching wasn't my thing. There was something in me that wanted a commitment to people, and not ideas." He spent a lot of time visiting the edges of society—notably prisons near Ottawa, where he took to praying with the inmates, guards, wardens, and in-house psychologists alike. "After a while, no one knew [during the prayer sessions] who was a prisoner or who was a guardian," he later wrote. It was his first experience of non-hierarchical life—an early model for what L'Arche would later become, with its residents and assistants living side by side, as equals. Raised as he had been in the protocol-encrusted diplomatic community and in military college, casteless society was a revelation to him.

During the summer of 1963, after the school year finished in Toronto, Vanier visited his old spiritual mentor, Père Thomas. Thomas had retired from teaching following a disagreement with the Vatican, and was by then serving as chaplain at Le Val Fleuri, a small institution for men with

developmental disabilities in the tiny village of Trosly-Breuil. “I was a bit scared,” Vanier said of his first visit, “because—well, how do you share with people who don’t speak, or speak badly?”

But his encounters with the intellectually frail men of Trosly were the opposite of frightening. “What touched me was that everyone, in one way or another, said, ‘Do you love me? And, will you be my friend?’ I found them so different from my students at the university. My students wanted my head, and then to leave, to get a position, get money, found a family. But here was something else. I think their cry—‘Will you be my friend?’—triggered off things within me. I think I was searching for a place of commitment.

“These were the years of Martin Luther King,” Vanier explained. “He wanted to liberate those who were oppressed. I think my impression of people with disabilities was that they were among the most oppressed people of this world. I suppose that somewhere at the heart of the beginning of L’Arche was a desire for liberation, to liberate them.

“It seemed obvious. That was the period in Canada where there were twenty institutions for the handicapped just in Ontario; here in France it was the same type of thing. And I had visited institutions where there were a thousand people with disabilities all cluttered together. And I thought: What is the meaning of this? And so my sense was just, why not get a house? And why not welcome two people? And see what happens? In a way, I’m quite naive. I think I like risk. And if you put naïveté and risk together, then you start L’Arche.”\*

A small house was available in the centre of Trosly-Breuil. Vanier bought it. The house was so primitive it had no indoor toilet. On August 6, 1964, he moved in with three intellectually disabled men (one of whom quickly proved beyond his capabilities and moved out again). Neither of the remaining men, Raphael and Phillippe, could speak. Vanier’s only other asset was an unreliable Renault, in which he and his companions roamed the countryside.

“I can say that as soon as I began, I think I became a child. I could laugh, we could have fun. We’d sit around the table and fool around. I had been quite serious up to that time. As a naval officer you’re quite serious. You know how to command people. Then when I started teaching, I was quite serious: you have to give the impression that you know something when you teach.

“But here it was something else. We could fool around. Because the language of people with disabilities is the language of fun. But you know that with Walker. Don’t be too serious. Celebrate life, have fun.” A profound three-way ritual of acceptance developed: Vanier’s acceptance of his two new disabled companions, their acceptance of him, and perhaps most significant of all, Vanier’s acceptance of himself in his new, less ambitious, counter-cultural role.

\*I’m always surprised by the range of people I meet who have experienced the energy of the handicapped, however difficult and even embarrassing that energy can be. Not long ago, for instance, at a Christmas solstice party, I found myself at the cheese tray, standing next to John Ralston Saul, the writer and public intellectual, and his wife, Adrienne Clarkson, the former governor general of Canada. I had only just learned that Saul had written about disability. I asked him what had drawn him to the subject. Saul—a fairly intimidating figure at the best of times—revealed that he had an intellectually disabled brother. “He was certainly the most influential person in my life,” Saul told me, reaching for the Havarti. “Why?” I asked. But he only looked at me, thinking, until Clarkson answered for him. “Because John and his brothers were always trying to communicate with him. All the brothers, they wanted to include him. And they couldn’t. And so that left them always wanting to get through to him. Everything else in John’s life has flowed from that.” The process can work the other way, as well. The playwright Arthur Miller renounced his own Down syndrome son, and even denied he existed; a number of critics maintain this is when Miller’s decline as a writer began.

He called the house L'Arche, after the French word for ark, as in Noah's ark. To his surprise, the venture attracted attention over the ensuing years, and eventually donations and public funding that allowed it to expand.

"In the beginning Jean was still in the very traditional thing of doing good for the poor," Jean-Louis Munn had told me when we met. "But then it switched: he realized he was benefiting. After that Jean wanted to be a voice for people who had no voice. He quickly discovered that the simple life, living with Raphael and Phillippe, was satisfying." Gradually, lured by Vanier and word of mouth, young people from around the world began to show up at L'Arche to do a year or two or more of service. (Jean-Louis Munn and Garry Webb were two of them, as were many of the people who still work for the organization thirty years later.) By 1971, as L'Arche expanded internationally, demand for places was overwhelming, especially from parents who could no longer look after their adult children. L'Arche couldn't build homes and communities to serve them all, but that year, with the help of a colleague, Marie-Hélène Mathieu, Vanier created Faith and Light, a net of extended support groups for people who have no recourse to a full-service L'Arche residence. Today there are nearly fifteen hundred Faith and Light networks in seventy-eight countries that cater as much to the parents of the disabled as to the disabled themselves—an evolution with which Vanier did not feel comfortable at first. "At the beginning my concern was not with them: It took me a long time to really listen to parents," he said, leaning back in his seat in his study. "Because most of the people we brought in to begin with, their parents were either dead or had abandoned their children young. And so there was inside of me to begin with a little bit of upsetness with parents." I understood that feeling: I had a little bit of upsetness with myself for letting Walker live somewhere else, however necessary it was. But as Vanier met more parents who had not abandoned their children but who nevertheless couldn't care for them, his strict views began to moderate. He was struck more and more by the immense lake of pain and guilt in which many parents of disabled children tried to stay afloat.

"The guilt. The guilt. The parents of the disabled were as a group the most pained people, because many of them feel guilty. They ask that terrible question, why has it happened to me? You find in the Knights chapter of St. John, when Jesus and his disciples meet a man born blind. And their immediate question is: Why? Whose fault is it? Did he commit a sin, or did the parents commit a sin? Why do you have a son like that and why does someone else not have a son like that? Wracking your brains about that sort of stuff—we can spend a lot of time asking the wrong questions. The right question is: How can I help my son, to be happier? The wrong question is, is it my fault?"

"But the social disapproval is still intense," I said. "People don't like to be reminded of the disabled. Why is that?"

"I think people are frightened at seeing people with disability," Vanier replied. "It might say to them, one day, you might have an accident and you will be disabled. You know, we are frightened of death. And the disabled are a sign of death." He then embarked upon a story about the first person who ever died in a L'Arche home in Trosly, an assistant named François. As the word got around among the residents, two of them decided they wanted to see François. Another assistant led them into the visitation room where François's body was lying in an open coffin. One of the men, Jean-Louis, asked the assistant if he might kiss François goodbye. The assistant said sure. And so Jean-Louis kissed dead François. "Oh shit!" he

exclaimed. "He's cold!" Then he left. On his way out the assistant heard Jean-Louis say, "Everyone's going to be so surprised I kissed a dead person!"

Vanier stopped speaking, looked at me and shrugged his shoulders. "What is happening?" he said then. To my relief I wasn't supposed to have an answer: Vanier was going to tell me. "My belief," he said, "is that he's kissing his own handicap. And so accepting people with disabilities is some way of accepting one's own death."

I suddenly found myself telling Vanier the story of Walker's bath—how when I felt out of sorts, when nothing helped, I could feel better if I gave Walker a bath, because it made him feel better too.

"You see?" Vanier said. "You are bathing your own handicap."

It was a point of view I'd never encountered before, I can say that for it.

"What is it that makes you open your heart to someone else?" Vanier asked.

I stared at him. I had no answer.

"A weak person," Vanier said. "Someone who is saying, 'I need you.'" If the need of the person is too great to be satisfied, as is often the case with parents looking after a severely disabled child on their own, the result is guilt and disaster. "But parents in a village where there are young people who are going to come and sit by Walker and take him for a walk, and all that sort of thing, then life changes. But alone, it's death.

"I mean, it's crazy. We all know we're going to die. Some of us will die at the age of ten. Some of us will die at eighty-five. We begin in fragility, we grow up, we are fragile and strong at the same time, and then we go into the process of weakening. So the whole question of the human process is how to integrate strength and weakness. You talk about your vulnerability with Walker. Something happened to you, which people who haven't lived what you've lived will never be able fully to understand—you have been able to become human by accepting your own vulnerability. Because you were able to say, I didn't know what to do.

"We're in a society where we have to know what to do all the time. But if we move instead from the place of our weakness, what happens? We say to people, I need your help. And then you create community. And that's what happened here."

We talked on for an hour and a half. By mid-afternoon the light outside was a burnished yellow. "Unless we move from a society based on competition to a society based on welcoming people back to the village," Vanier said, "we will never get away from our obsession with strength. In a way, that's all that L'Arche is: It's a village where we meet each other. We celebrate life. And that's what these people do. They celebrate around the weak. When you're strong, the way you celebrate is with whisky."

Vanier paused, and laced his hands behind his head. "In 1960, the big question in France was, what sort of a society do we want? Was it the society of Mao Zedong? Was it the society of Russia? Was it a slightly different form of communism? Nowadays, nobody's asking what sort of society we want. They're just asking the question: How can I be a success in this society? Everyone, they're on their own. Do the best you can, make the most money you can. So what sort of vision have we? Somewhere in L'Arche, there is a desire to be a symbol—a symbol that another vision is possible. We're not the only ones who are doing this sort of thing, of course. There are lots of little communities."

A community of the disabled as a model of how the world might co-exist more effectively: I have to say, that struck me as a radical idea, even a gorgeous one. It also struck me as hopelessly unrealistic—the sort of idea that is beautiful in repose, that an idealist would love, Vanier included.

So I said, “I think that’s a beautiful idea, but the world doesn’t work that way. People don’t work that way. It takes a massacre of eight hundred thousand people in Rwanda before we try to stop it. We can’t seem to act to prevent the most obvious tragedies—never mind the small, individual ones. So how can I hope to convince the world that Walker ought to be seen as a human being—not just as a disabled human being, because he is that, but also as a human being, who may have talents—just not the talents we expect to find?” What I meant was that I wished the world might see Walker not just as a boy without many common qualities, but as a boy with uncommon qualities as well. But it was too much to think that might be possible. “The truth is,” I said, “the world isn’t that kind of place.”

“There’s a beautiful text of Martin Luther King’s,” Vanier said, without hesitation. “Someone said to him, will it always be like this—that someone will always despise people and want to get rid of others? And he said yes, until we have all learned to recognize, accept, and love what is despicable in all of us. And what is that despicability? That we are born to die. That we have not full control of our lives. And that’s part of our makeup. But we need to discover that we are built for something else, too, which is togetherness, and that we have to try and stop this need to be the best. Only then can we build something where there are fewer of these things that are going on in Rwanda and elsewhere.”

I left Vanier soon after that. We were done for the day, and he was preparing to depart for Kenya soon. I ducked out of the cramped stone house in Trosly, walked down the street and up a lane and across a field. I couldn’t decide if I was defeated or enthralled. Vanier’s ideas appealed to people: Two of his books had been best-sellers, and several had been translated into nearly thirty languages. He had been awarded the Légion d’Honneur in France and had been made a Companion of the Order of Canada. He had radical ideas: frailty was strength, peace no longer lay in the tolerance of difference, but in the bridging of it through a mutual concession of weakness. I wondered how that would go over in the Middle East—if Israel, say, confessed its fears and weaknesses to Hezbollah, and asked for the Palestinians’ help, instead of vowing to annihilate the source of any threat to Israel’s security. In Vanier’s world, Walker was not a weak link, but an extra-strong one.

Look: I wanted to believe it. Every ounce of me knows my odd little boy can teach everyone something about themselves. Whether that will ever happen is another story.

**(From Chapter Fourteen)**

**E**very time we meet someone who is severely handicapped, Jean Vanier believes, they ask two questions: Do you consider me human? Do you love me? The more we meet the handicapped on their own ground, Vanier believes, the more our answers evolve. We begin in fear of their appearance and behaviour; move on through pity; pass through the stage where we help them and respect them, but still see them as lesser beings; until finally we experience “wonderment and thanksgiving,” and “discover that, by becoming close to disabled people and entering an authentic relationship with them, they transform us.”

In Vanier’s last and highest stage of consciousness, “we see the face of God within the disabled. Their presence is a sign of God, who has chosen ‘the foolish in order to confound the strong, the proud and the so-called wise of our world.’ And so those we see as weak or marginalized are, in fact, the most worthy and powerful among us: they bring us closer to God.”

I wish I could believe in Vanier’s God. But the truth is, I do not see the face of the Almighty in Walker. Instead, I see the face of my boy; I see what is human, and lovely and flawed at once.

Walker is no saint and neither am I. I can't bear to watch him bash himself every day, but I can try to understand why he does it. The more I struggle to face my limitations as a father, the less I want to trade him. Not just because we have a physical bond, a big simple thing; not just because he's taught me the difference between a real problem and a mere complaint; not just because he makes me more serious, makes me appreciate time and my daughter and my wife and friends, and all the sweetness that one day ebbs away. I have begun simply to love him as he is, because I've discovered I can; because we can be who we are, weary dad and broken boy, without alteration or apology, in the here and now. The relief that comes with such a relationship still surprises me. There is no planning with this boy. I go where he goes. He may be a deleterious effect of evolution as far as a geneticist is concerned, but he has few peers as a route to developing what Darwin himself in *The Descent of Man* called the evolutionary advantages of "the social instincts . . . love, and the distinct emotion of sympathy." Darwin's opponents pointed out that man was weaker than the apes, and so there was no logical way he, man, could be the result of the survival of the fittest. But evolution is smarter than that, Darwin replied. "We should . . . bear in mind that an animal possessing great size, strength, and ferocity, and which, like the gorilla, could defend itself from all enemies, would not perhaps have become social: and this would most effectually have checked the acquirement of the higher mental facilities, such as sympathy and the love of his fellows. Hence it might have been an immense advantage to man to have sprung from some comparatively weak creature."

My own goals are modest: to step from time to time into Walker's world; to come to know a few intellectually disabled people (rather than simply permitting them to live in my milieu); to face my fear of the broken people who are The Other—not to fix them or even save them, but merely to be with them until I stop wanting to run away. At my most optimistic and confident I hope those might qualify as a few steps toward what the evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley imagined when he wrote his famous essay "Evolutionary Ethics" in 1943. A clearer ethical vision as human beings, Huxley writes, will never "prevent us from suffering what we feel as injustice at the hands of the cosmos—congenital deformity, unmerited suffering, physical disaster, the early death of loved ones. Such cosmic injustice represents the persistence of chance and its amorality in human life: we may gradually reduce its amount but we assuredly shall never abolish it. Man is the heir of evolution: but he is also its martyr.

"But man is not only the heir of the past and the victim of the present: he is also the agent through whom evolution may unfold its further possibilities. . . . He can inject his ethics into the heart of evolution."

The face of God? Sorry, no. Walker is more like a mirror, reflecting much back, my choices included. For me—and this is the grandest and yet most consistent way I can think of him, amid all the others, head bonker and beagle and hyperkinetic maniac and gurgling drooler and intermittently curious boy and sad sweet son—Walker is like the vessel Wallace Stevens wrote about:

*I placed a jar in Tennessee,  
And round it was, upon a hill.  
It made the slovenly wilderness  
Surround that hill.  
The wilderness rose up to it,  
And sprawled around, no longer wild.  
The jar was round upon the ground  
And tall and of a port in air.*



*It took dominion every where.  
The jar was gray and bare.  
It did not give of bird or bush,  
Like nothing else in Tennessee.*

I realize it's not much to go on, not much of a light to see by. It easily wavers. But it's the best I can do.

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## Writing What You See, Not What You Think You See

I work for *The Globe and Mail*. I'm what they call a rotating feature writer. So I mostly write big, long stories. I don't write every week.

There are two kinds of information. There's the kind of information that you know you need to know—that's mostly what you read on the front page. It's often dreary. It tells you interest rates are going up, if there's any flu vaccine, any world scourges that we need to avoid this week. It's the stuff you need to know to live your life.

And then there's information you didn't know you wanted to know. This is the kind of information that I like to write about. It's off-agenda, tends to come in the form of stories, not just information and facts. It's the stuff that makes your life worth living.

Years ago I picked up an old copy of *The New Yorker*. I started reading this article. It was about oranges—a story about oranges around the world. I started reading it and I thought, "This guy's obviously on drugs." And I kept reading it, I got to the end of it, and it's thousands and thousands of words long! That's a long article. And then it says, End of Part One." Holy cow! There were other parts, and they were all fascinating—the trade in oranges rivals the trade in slaves. Oranges have quite a history, one that stretches from ancient kings to the mafia in Florida.

Then, a couple of years later, I was walking through the bookstore and I saw this book called *Oranges*. Well, the article had been turned into a book. John McPhee, one of the great nonfiction writers of all time, wrote it. He's a great reporter, and he really knows how to tell the story.

That's the kind of story I want to write, one that gives you information you didn't know you wanted to know. Before I read the article, I really had no interest in knowing anything about oranges. I could have happily lived without knowing anything about them. But I felt alive when I read it because it was about this thing that I had held in my hand and peeled and relished eating hundreds of times, and yet knew nothing about.

I like that kind of discovery. I love details. I like to know a lot—I don't actually know a lot, but I like to try. Because I like to figure out what it is I'm interested in. I think what you're interested in is what you should write about, pretty much without exception.

And I really like to feel things when I read them. I especially like to feel things about the real world. That's the kind of information I want. I'm talking about long-form journalism, or literary journalism, or New Journalism. I'm not saying I can do it all the time. I'm not saying I'm that great at it. But it's what I always try to do. I think it's the only kind of journalism that's worth doing if you have any gumption at all, because if you try to do the other stuff you'll end up a spent version of yourself within about twenty years.

Because what happens in that approach is, you go in and write what somebody else wants you to write. This becomes more and more the case. And gradually you lose your sense of what really matters to you. Newspapers mostly put stuff on the front page because it's supposed to be important, as opposed to stuff that actually feels truly important, personally significant or interesting. That would be too eccentric for the front page. I mean, if we stand up here and somebody says something and then keels over and dies, we know that's important. It's what is called "felt life." That's what I want to write about. Felt life is what you live. I want to recreate felt life. I want to recreate some aspect of what it felt like to be alive, at least within the context of a particular

story. But that's not the traditional purview of the news.

If you're still in any doubt, I do not have a journalism degree. I came out of the University of Toronto with a degree in English and philosophy or something like that—hopeless. I thought I wanted to be a lawyer. I tried to get into law school, but I kept getting drunk before the LSATs. I thought this was a sign that I didn't want to be a lawyer.

So I applied to a bunch of places looking for a job, and got rejected, except at the *Financial Post*, based in Toronto, where I wrote a funny letter. They said, "Oh, he's funny, get him in here." So I went in and they said, "What would you like to write about? What does your father do?" I said, "My dad's a scrap metal broker." So they asked, "Would you like to write about gold?" And I said, "He's a scrap dealer! He buys stuff from the back of a truck and sells it." And they said, "Well, would you like to write about real estate?"

I guess they wanted somebody slightly younger. Slightly younger? To me, a lot of people at the *Financial Post* seemed to be a hundred eighty years old. They weren't, but that was my callow impression. I said, "Oh, maybe that would be good." They said, "All right, you're on the real estate beat."

So off I go, and I know nothing about journalism. Haven't got a clue! When you write a story, you go to the library, you research, you go to the periodical index, the newspaper index, you go to the Internet, you do your fancy research, you get all the stuff you know about the subject, you read all the stuff, you figure out from that a couple of interviews, go and interview those people, write it all down, they tell you to talk to more people, you come back and write the story... right? Well, I had no clue about any of that.

I sit there in the office wondering, "Does somebody call?" People were looking at me sitting there, thinking, "What is he doing? He hasn't moved for two weeks."

Finally, an item comes across my desk, to the real estate reporter, and it's from the Cadillac Fairview Corporation, or the Bramalea Group, one of the companies in what was then the biggest real estate corporation in the world, based in Canada. And the item is a news release saying, "We are transforming Bramalea into Manhattan." I grew up for a couple of years near there, about forty-five kilometers northwest of Toronto, so I knew Bramalea, which is now part of Brampton, and I knew it wasn't Manhattan. It was a hole in the ground. It was nothing. Back then it was a hideous, cultureless, featureless, characterless hole.

I think to myself, "Brampton becomes Manhattan, that's going to be a big project!" So I phone these guys up and I say I'd like to talk to the president of the company. What do I know? So he comes onto the phone. And I say, "You know, I'm really interested in this Bramalea thing turning into Manhattan—that sounds like a great idea." He goes, "Really?" I say, "Yeah, yeah, I'd love to interview you." He goes, "Great, we'll take you out to lunch." He obviously thinks, "I've got a sucker on the line. Whatever I tell him, he's going to put it in the *Financial Post*. The stock is going to go through the roof, and I can retire tomorrow." At least, I couldn't blame him for thinking that.

He says to meet him at some place called Brandy's. It's a disco. Well, not a disco, but there used to be things called singles bars. Except it was lunchtime. But it was kind of groovy because you'd go in and there were glass tables with chrome tubing and these cushy leather seats.

I had no presentable clothes, so I went and bought my first suit. I bought—on sale—a chocolate brown, corduroy, wide-wale, three-piece suit, with a yellow shirt. It was just unbelievable, but I thought I looked like the cat's ass.

So off I go to this thing. I walk in wearing my new poo-brown, wide-wale suit—I swear,

the wale was so wide I looked like four lanes of superhighway—and I sit down, and for some reason, they're all sitting down normally, but I have a groovy slung-leather low seat, and I sit down at the table, and my eyes barely crest the glass-and-chrome tabletop. They're all wearing twelve-hundred-dollar nailhead beauties. And their hair! Look-sharp, feel-sharp, be-sharp, file-your-head-to-a-point hair—every single hair is shellacked in place.

I do know that reporters take notes (I've seen movies). So I take out my reporter's notebook and I'm about to ask, "Tell me about the company," when they start talking—I don't say a word. I'm writing and I'm writing and drinking coffee, and they're eating. And they talk for about forty-five minutes, maybe an hour. And I'm thinking to myself: "You've got to ask a question because that's what reporters do."

But instead they ask questions, and through asking questions they redirect the rational course of the conversation to a conclusion that they want to come to. I can't think of anything. I've done no research, and I'm sitting there, being snowed by three of the best-paid executives at Cadillac Fairview.

Finally, they stop and say, "Perhaps you have a question."

And I go, "Yes! I do." And I've been drinking a lot of coffee, and it has really gotten to me. I start to have a bit of a spaz attack, and I go, "How much money do you guys make?"

That's my question. And just as I ask it, I have one of those shivers you have—my mother used to say it was when someone walked over your grave in the future—and I have the sugar for my coffee in a spoon in my hand, and my hand starts to whiz back and forth from the shiver, whereupon I go w-h-u-u-u-u-u-u-u-u-p with the sugar!

And it's everywhere. On their twelve-hundred-dollar nailhead suits and on their perfect shellacked hair and on me and on the table. One of them has the grace to say, "We never talk about that."

I'm mortified. So I say, "I'm very, very sorry." And then, then, *I get up and walk out of the restaurant!* And all the way back on the subway I'm thinking, "I am meat!" I've got to go back to the *Financial Post*, to my editor, Dalton Robertson. He had been one of the main thinkers at the federal Department of Finance before he became a journalist. He was a very smart guy. He really personified the notion of the first-class mind—the mind that can hold many contradictory ideas at the same time without having a nervous breakdown. He never, ever committed to any point of view, even when he used to smoke incessantly. He never seemed to exhale—because I think if he breathed out, it would have been too much of a commitment to life. But he was sharp.

So I go in, and I'm thinking, I'll just resign. I'll walk up, I'll say, "I'm sorry, I appreciate the opportunity that you've given me. It was misplaced and I will go back and learn to be a journalist, and perhaps one day you can give me a job again." I walk in, Dalton's there, with these viper eyes, and he says, "So, first story—how did it go?"

And so I tell him the whole story. I say, "It was a bit of a fuck-up. I think I was thrown off by their clothes, I don't know. I asked them how much money they made, and I freaked out, spilled sugar all over them...."

He says, "It's a good story. Write that up."

I never did write it up because I didn't understand what he was talking about. It took me ten years to understand what he was saying. And what he was saying was: *The story is what happens.* Not what you think is supposed to happen, not what everybody says should happen. The story is about what actually happens.

Somebody once asked Hemingway what the hardest thing about writing was and he said

there are two things. The first is using the details of reality to recreate emotions in the reader. So you've got to get the reader to feel things. That's hard, but there are actually techniques for that. The second, harder thing is to know what it is you actually noticed and saw and felt, as opposed to what you think you should have noticed and seen and felt, or what everybody wants you to see and think and feel, or what you yourself wish you had thought and seen and felt, because that would make you feel like a genius.

You have to resist that tendency, even within journalism, where we're supposed to be resisting it in the first place. Sometimes I think it's a structural problem, ingrained in the craft of journalism. At the *Globe*, for instance, where I work, the first meeting of the day is at 9:30 a.m. All the top editors get together and say, "Okay, what do we want to do stories on?" Then they come out with ideas—ideas they have leftover from the night before, ideas that turned up on the Internet overnight, ideas that the other papers and the television and the cable stations are running, that the web is blaring everywhere. And then they assign the writers to do those stories. That's the daily event. I'm not saying they have any choice. But what used to happen, prior to the Internet, is that the editors never met before 3:30 p.m. The reporters would go out into the world, look around and say, "I think I'm going to write a story about this new habit of ugly shoes." The big fat ugly shoe is back, big time! And at 3:30, the editors would ask what's going on, and the reporter would say, "I've got a story on big fat ugly shoes." The stories were based on what had happened in a more immediate purview.

News is so packaged now—because there are so many competitive forms and sources of digitized information, and because it has to be published instantly—the problem today is even more pronounced. We in the media, mainstream or otherwise, figure that we have to do everything everybody else is doing, cover everything that everyone else is covering. Never mind that I can get my news in an elevator now—everyone has to cover what's being covered, even if it's mostly repetition. The problem with the competitive pressures of twenty-four-hour constant news cycle newsgathering today is that it has forced all the forms to do exactly the same thing, over and over again. We live in the middle of this incredible information revolution, and yet ninety-five percent of the information we get today is the same two percent of human experience repeated again and again and again and again. Places like the Pew Forum have studied this, and they consistently find that the so-called "newshole"—a good name for it—is dominated by the same handful of stories, for weeks at a time. The news happens, and then everyone piles on, and how.

I have no interest in taking part in that repetitive, mind-deadening process. I'm never going to be rich, but I'm sure as hell not going to be bored. And if you don't want me to take six weeks to write a story at the *Globe*, a story no one else probably has that way, so that when you read it you can actually feel something new, fine, you don't have to read me. But I'm not going to do that piling on thing, if I can avoid it. Because it's dangerous. Gradually you lose the ability to discern or feel or instinctually understand what feels true. It's a skill that requires steady practice. Hemingway said that a writer only needs to lie three or four times, and then he can't tell the difference anymore.

Editors who understand this distinction—who will let you go out and write these kinds of stories; stories, for starters, as opposed to topics, that are full of scenes and details that are actually true, as opposed to stuff that everybody else says is important—those kinds of editors are rare. In my experience, or at least my experience in journalism (I'm not talking about book editors), I've only worked with a handful who are consistently true to their craft: Paul Tough

at *New York Times Magazine*, Cathrin Bradbury at the *Globe*, Gary Ross at *Saturday Night* magazine, a few others. These are people who will say to you, “Yes, I understand, I get that.” You suggest a story, and they have the grace to let you follow your nose. It is an instinctual and mutual understanding.

But, partly because these stories are off the radar or the agenda, when you’re doing one, you really have to convince yourself to keep going. I am always thinking to myself, “Should I write this down? Is this necessary?” And I’m constantly answering, “Yes, I should write it down. You never know.”

Most of the time, I’m quite shy. So I hate to ask questions. The thing I really hate to do is pull out my notebook and write things down, because then people are looking at me. It’s so stupid! Who cares if somebody’s writing something down? But I feel it every time.

But when you really begin to understand this kind of story, and you start to sink into it, I don’t think there’s anything better. The only thing that’s better is actually writing this kind of story. And there’s so much storytelling now going on—bloggers and journalists and news people—that if you don’t tell this kind of story with style, if you’re not a good storyteller, if you do not have a voice, and a distinctive way of making your story stand out so that people will want to read it, you’ll get lost in the vast modern sea of words.

Felt life is hard to capture; it’s hard to report. It’s hard work—you have to do all the regular reporting, and then get all the details you need to tell the story well, as a story. It’s upsetting; it’s exhausting. You constantly doubt that you have enough material. But the more material you have, about every nook and cranny of the story, the more easily it leads to style and voice. And style really is a metaphor all on its own. Style is evidence of individual consciousness. Readers respond to individual consciousness—they take it on as their own. It says, in this massive Niagara Falls of information that crashes down on us every day, this is real. It’s a trick, in a way, the writer’s illusion. If you can make people feel things through long-form journalism, you make them remember, you actually recreate the thing you are describing in the mind and guts of your reader. At least, that’s the ideal.

You’ve got to know how to do this kind of writing technically, but you’ve especially got to know how to do it emotionally. And you have to know how to do it boldly. Trust your instinct. You train yourself; you learn how to do it. I have to relearn it every time. You learn to notice the hackle of your interest, catching onto something as you breeze by. You learn to pay attention to those snags in the otherwise smooth, speedy, featureless glide of modern life.

Because this is the thing: There are only four techniques necessary to tell a great story. That’s all you need to know. One, there are scenes. Aristotle said a scene is unified by time and place. Tell stories as much as possible in scenes. And if you can go from scene to scene to scene—fantastic.

Now, how am I supposed to convey critical information, such as the socio-economic status of people in the room, by scenes, without breaking one of the four walls of a story or a scene? By using details—what Tom Wolfe called status details—that tell us who we are and where we are. Shoes, hair accents, clothing, stutters, looks, inflections of style. Routines. *Et cetera*.

Then there’s dialogue. In most news stories, dialogue is a quote that fills a purpose. Sometimes I want somebody to sort things out and tell me what’s going on and what it means. But what I really want is life reproduced. One of the great techniques I like to try is to reproduce aimless chatter. The best dialogue recreates life and gets you to where you want to go in the story.

The fourth technique, the most difficult, is point of view. What is that guy over there actually thinking? I can find that out because I can go and talk to him. And I can actually recreate the inside of his mind.

You don't have to decide whether it was a good experience or a bad experience. There is no notion of what's correct and what's not correct. That goes out the window. You can't think like that. You just recreate the experience and build up the story. The reader will decide.

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*This essay has been edited (and revised with new material), from a talk Ian Brown gave to students in an advanced magazine writing class at the School of Journalism, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada, 18 October 2004.*



# Unraveling the Webs of Intimacy and Influence: Willie Morris and *Harper's* Magazine, 1967–1971

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*During his tenure as editor of Harper's, Willie Morris shaped a creative, defiant writing culture for the magazine, one that produced some radical examples of New Journalism. Was his editorial risk-taking admirable and important, or arrogant and self-indulgent?*

In 1967, thirty-two-year-old Willie Morris ascended to the position of editor-in-chief of *Harper's*, the oldest general interest magazine in the United States. During that era of the late 1960s and early 1970s, New York City's literary society embraced editors and writers that bucked the convention of reporting the news in an objective, non-participatory voice. Some of these names—Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, and Tom Wolfe—have risen to a mythical status. They are synonymous with the New Journalism movement, the literary journalists of that time. At *Harper's*, Morris tried to create a revolution in reportage and journalistic prose that was as renegade and inflammatory as what was happening in the streets. Thus, this chapter of New Journalism's history gives rise to a debate: Was Morris's editorial risk-taking admirable and important, or was it arrogant and self-indulgent? Perhaps, as the interviews and literature discussed in the following pages suggest, it was both.

At its heart, the writing culture that evolved under Morris's leadership was driven at first by a love of language, which then developed into a commitment to audacious prose that embraced the defiant ideas and spirit of the day. As Morris himself explained, he aimed to create “a magazine young and courageous enough to carry the language to its limits, to reflect the great tensions and complexities and even the madneses of the day, to encourage the most daring and imaginative and inventive of our writers, scholars and journalists—to help give the country some feel of itself and what it is becoming.”<sup>1</sup> According to him and his supporters, this sense of mission ultimately led to his demise as editor and to the staff walkout that followed. The story of Morris's rise and fall raises the question of whether the challenging, evocative journalism that Morris championed put him at odds with *Harper's* magazine's financial backers, or the demands of the marketplace, or both, or whether the truth came down to something more subtle and complex.

Though Morris may no longer be well remembered for his role in the New Journalism—and *Harper's* may no longer be well remembered in its role as one of the organs of the literary journalism of his day—his contributions were nevertheless important. Morris made *Harper's* a forum for such paragons as Didion, Marshall Frady, David Halberstam, and Gay Talese,<sup>2</sup> but perhaps his most salient contribution came through his efforts to bring aboard Norman Mailer. In order to entice Mailer to submit a story about his arrest at a 1967 Vietnam protest, Morris and executive editor Midge Decter first secured the writer a book contract.<sup>3</sup> The result was “The Steps of the Pentagon,” which took up the entire *Harper's* March 1968 issue, and came out in book form as *The Armies of the Night*. Tom Wolfe included an excerpt in his defining collection, *The New Journalism: With an Anthology*, and in his introduction explained its

significance in linking literature with this newly emergent form: “Here was another novelist who had turned to some form of accursed journalism . . . and had not only revived his reputation but raised it to a point higher than it had ever been in his life.”<sup>4</sup>

But beyond the particulars that link *Harper's* with the New Journalism that has survived in popular memory there is a far more important story: Morris's efforts at creating a culture of gutsy innovation. The Morris tenure at *Harper's* offers evidence of how writers encourage and undermine each other, how individual writing processes meet in a common space, and how shared experience leads to cultural change. Influenced by anthropologist Clifford Geertz's assertion that man is “suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,” this study defines “writing culture” as a web of intimacy and influence.<sup>5</sup> A close reading of the monthly issues edited by Morris, from June 1967 to April 1971, of the books and articles written by him and his inner circle, and of more than twelve hours of interview transcripts, reveal this culture.

Many *Harper's* veterans have committed to paper their memories of working with Morris at the magazine; the research in this study supplements these offerings with a series of in-depth interviews conducted in 2007 with *Harper's* staffers John Corry, Midge Decter, Larry L. King, Robert Kotlowitz, and Lewis Lapham. An annotated bibliography lists more than two thousand works about and by Morris.<sup>6</sup> Each opens a window into journalism history, but they have not been integrated in a way that would elucidate the evolution of the magazine's overarching writing culture. While Morris's accounts of what occurred focus on his efforts to protect writers and their work from external profit-oriented pressures, this study's interviews opened an avenue for members of his staff to offer a deeper understanding of the forces affecting them. In part, in these interviews they articulated the challenges that writers create for themselves. As Grant McCracken has instructed: “The purpose of the qualitative interview is . . . to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one culture construes the world. . . . It is the categories and assumptions . . . that matter.”<sup>7</sup>

Previous scholarly work has justified this study's analytical methods and theoretical underpinnings. Donald Matheson's work on journalistic identity and Barbie Zelizer's theory of journalists as interpretive communities support the use of interviews and texts as avenues through which the work of writers can be explored. Matheson says journalists come to understand and interpret their work by positioning themselves within the context of a journalistic community.<sup>8</sup> Zelizer posits journalistic community is created through discourse, which she finds reflected in autobiographies, memoirs, and interviews.<sup>9</sup> These notions of community call forth the work of Max Weber, which laid the groundwork for Geertz's “webs of significance” concept in its stance that a person's actions could have meaning at the individual level, but also in reference to a larger community.<sup>10</sup>

Such research moves beyond the “great men” approach to media history in that it uses interviews and textual analysis to identify themes that support a greater understanding of the cultural framework in which a group of writers worked. Such a research technique also moves beyond journalism study that uses theories, for example, of framing or agenda setting, by focusing not on the positioning of journalists' work with respect to its ultimate consumption, but on the energy behind the internal processes—both individual and collective—that fueled the writers' creativity.<sup>11</sup>

### **A Common Burden of Memory**

When he promoted Morris to the top editing position, the previous editor-in-chief, John

Fischer, anticipated the young editor would, like the seven editors who preceded him, “put his own stamp on the publication.” Cultural divisions may have widened further than Fischer had imagined. Still, Fischer said Morris’s background “might have been designed specifically for a magazine editor: i.e., it was rough, varied, and spread over a lot of landscape.”<sup>12</sup>

Morris was a product of the public schools in his hometown of Yazoo City, Mississippi, but also Oxford University where he, like Fischer, was a Rhodes Scholar. Fischer noted that Morris graduated from the University of Texas with honors, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and chosen as the university’s outstanding senior “in spite of a journalistic war with the administration.”<sup>13</sup> By way of introducing to *Harper’s* readers the man he promoted to replace him, Fischer excerpted in the June and July 1967 issues selections from Morris’s *North Toward Home*.<sup>14</sup> While the book chronicled “the arrival of a provincial (as he calls himself) in New York City and his first nervous ventures into its literary world,” Fischer remembered Morris as “confident and resourceful” from the beginning of his *Harper’s* stint in 1963.<sup>15</sup> Morris’s steady hand, Fischer said, “surprised nobody, since he had already edited two publications—the *Daily Texan*, student newspaper of the University of Texas, and *The Texas Observer*, a statewide political and literary journal—under circumstances of remarkable turbulence and difficulty.”<sup>16</sup>

In the *North Toward Home* selections included in *Harper’s*, Morris had detailed his earlier journalistic struggles. His subsequent editorial tenure at the helm of *Harper’s* demonstrates how a writer or editor can be born of one culture, in this case the *Harper’s* world envisioned by John Fischer, and metamorphose into a new incarnation. From his declared pursuit of “strong and brave and evocative” writing that marked the beginning of his leadership of *Harper’s* to his public letter of resignation lamenting the ownership’s lack of appreciation for his artistic ideals, Morris provides the defining central character through which to trace *Harper’s* foray into New Journalism.<sup>17</sup>

In Morris’s article on integration in Yazoo City, Mississippi, the only cover story he authored while editor-in-chief, he explored his tortured relationship with issues of race in America. His story also revealed “the most terrible burden of the writer,” a thread he saw running throughout the writing community:

[T]he common burden that makes writers a fraternity in blood despite their seasonal expressions of malice, jealousy, antagonism, suspicion, rage, venom, perfidy, competition over the size of publishers’ advances—that common burden is the burden of memory:

It is an awesome weight, and if one isn’t careful it can sometimes drive you quite mad. . . . a remembrance of everything in the most acute detail from one’s past, together with a fine sense of the nuances of old happenings and the most painful reconsideration of old mistakes, cruelties, embarrassments, and sufferings, and all this embroidered and buttressed by one of the oldest of urges, the urge to dramatize to yourself about yourself, which is the beginning of at least part of the urge to create.<sup>18</sup>

The passage validates several layers of symbolic meaning at the heart of *Harper’s* writing culture. Morris’s own burden of memory drove his passion to confront America’s racial history and evolution; his home state of Mississippi served as not only a focal point, but was

also a caricature of the legacy of inequality and injustice with which the whole country grappled. All at once, his words illustrate why he encouraged *Harper's* writers to report from their own hometowns and, by extension, how his interest in America developed. Midge Decter recalled, "If you hung around Willie, if you got serious with him, you got serious about a place called America. He had this thing: 'Go back to your hometown. Let's send everybody back to their hometowns!'"<sup>19</sup>

Morris's comments about writers' common burden demonstrates how he could be a part of the literati—with its jealousies, advances, and the like—but recognize that writing represented an opportunity to be so much more: Being a writer meant confronting personal discomfort, the specters that haunt people in the middle of the night. It meant taking the weight of that feeling and channeling it into words published for consumption by people who may find that a stranger's work has given a voice to their own unarticulated burdens.

In his memoir, John Corry captured a sentiment that the rest of his inner circle colleagues echoed in interviews for this research, that the product of their individual and collective efforts must truly matter:

Willie's magazine was about something; Willie cared, and late at night, when his cherubic face turned owlish, he would say that the magazine had to matter. He pronounced it "mattuh," but the meaning was clear, and to matter meant something important—life and death and American literature and the soul of the Great Republic. To matter meant width and breadth and vision. To matter meant you cared.<sup>20</sup>

At a time when America had plenty of ghosts—old ones from the holds of slave ships and new ones now floating back from the jungles of Vietnam—selections like these from Morris, Decter, and Corry suggest that *Harper's* writing culture valued going deep, whether into one's self or into a shared past. The *Harper's* writers held to this mission regardless of whether the stories generated enough advertising revenue or were too long for the average attention span in a nation bedazzled by the light of television.

### **A Common Bond: The Visceral Love of Words**

The interviews with the *Harper's* veterans make clear that, at the beginning, an intoxication with language functioned as the common glue that first bound the staffers together. Morris himself learned about "the deep dedication of the serious writer's calling, the hazards inherent in it, the long stretches of loneliness..." from watching writer William Styron and his "emotional connection with his words."<sup>21</sup> Accepting such challenges of the profession, though, was a simple reflection of the core truth "that a writer literally cannot live without his words."<sup>22</sup> Morris expounded on his literary lifeblood:

*Words!* I was lucky to have grown up in an American place obsessed with words, even in ordinary conversation—their rhythms, sounds, nuances, words in the churches, in the baseball bleachers, on the front porches: the older people giving us as children a great gift ... giving us a way to see.<sup>23</sup>

This love of words is not unique to the writers at *Harper's*, but it formed the fundamental

base from which their particular community developed. Larry King recalled a high-minded commitment to language as a unifying theme among the members of *Harper's* editorial circle. "He selected those of us who he thought more or less agreed with him about writing, who were clearly dedicated to writing, the use of the language, to telling our story as best we could," he said. "Willie always said, 'Get it all and get it right, tell it all and tell it right.' We were all really into the use of the language. We all really loved it."<sup>24</sup> Morris told King not to be afraid to use words that readers might not understand. "[Willie] said, 'You can't write down to your audience,'" King said. "I learned more about writing from [his] edits. I had opportunities to say things in a different way. How he edited those first few pieces improved my writing immensely."<sup>25</sup> Although King did not save any of his drafts edited by Morris, King watched how his editor combed through the drafts, paring them and shaping them in detailed ways. From that experience King learned "that I didn't have to use as many words as was my wont." King and his colleague Corry confirmed that Morris was an excellent "pencil" editor in addition to being a "real reporter."

Morris's obsession with words and how they fit together unified the staff with a sense of shared purpose, bridging the gaps in the individual writer's ideological approaches by extolling appreciation and support of craft. "He was just a sucker for a beautiful sentence," said Midge Decter, who served as executive editor during the Morris years.<sup>26</sup> Decter's first article under Morris's chief editorship (her third for *Harper's*) chronicled the struggle for power and satisfying sex lives in which she and her daughters were engaged as women in a male-dominated society. Not only did it represent one of the few contributions from a woman in the Morris years, it also reflected her feelings about words. She wrote, "Words constitute a kind of post amniotic fluid in which [children] grow and are both sheltered from and introduced to their surroundings."<sup>27</sup>

For all their similarities in literary appreciation, the way writers used their words also reflected the variations inherent in individual style. "Willie wrote prettier than I wrote—a little more flowery," King said. "Willie used a dueling sword, and I used a dagger. That's the difference the best I could put it. I told him that he made the world greener than God had made it when he wrote. He'd put a positive spin on nearly everything."<sup>28</sup> These individual styles sometimes came into conflict with the larger vision of what *Harper's* writing came to represent. King gave evidence of this by telling the story of an article he wrote that was rejected. Morris had asked King, a native Texan, for a piece on Dallas, "which is not a town I liked and still don't," King said. "Somehow I couldn't get my hand around that story very well and I turned in a piece that I didn't think was very good. Willie just said, 'Larry, this is not you. This is a piss-poor piece, and I'm not gonna publish this.'"<sup>29</sup>

In an ironic twist, once Morris asked King to make an exception to their shared appreciation for evocative journalism. *Harper's* owner John Cowles Jr. wanted Nelson Rockefeller to be president. One day, King recalled, Morris called him into his office:

"Larry, I hate to ask you to do it, but I'm gonna ask you for the first time in my life to go in the tank for me."

I said, "What do you mean?"

And he said, "Well, Cowles wants a piece on Nelson Rockefeller and, need I say, he wants it to be a favorable one. I'm not gonna tell anyone else that I'm telling you this, but that's the way it's got to be and I expect you to do it that way."

I really hated doing it, and I hated the piece. But I was never satisfied with the piece and was always sorry I agreed to do it, but Willie had always done so much for me I didn't feel like I would tell him no.<sup>30</sup>

Morris and his cohort were not happy with arranging words in conventional ways, and their new approaches signaled a bold departure from the carefully clipped and simplified style upheld by Fischer. Robert Kotlowitz, Morris's managing editor, identified a line between inner-circle editorial standards incubating under Morris and the old-guard sentiment when he said, "We were all pointed in the same direction, except the publishing end and some of the older editors [like] Catharine Meyer and Russell Lynes."<sup>31</sup> Larry King felt Morris led a definite divergence from the magazine's prior editorial voice. "[O]ld Jack Fischer . . . neither comforted the afflicted or afflicted the comforted. And Willie changed all that."<sup>32</sup> King's assertion about Fischer's editorial approach makes an interesting contrast to Fischer's own self-evaluation, presented in the Easy Chair column, which he continued to pen after handing the chief editor's title to Morris. Fischer said, "This column has kept me embroiled in almost continuous combat for the last fourteen years. . . . From the time George William Curtis began writing the column in 1853, it has been a running affront to the genteel and the leisured."<sup>33</sup>

Fischer's submission also laid out his vision of meaningful writing. He said: "A prime goal must be clarity . . . the simplest, most precise, and most direct words."<sup>34</sup> Note how this style contrasts with the sybaritic sesquipedalism employed and advocated by Morris. Fischer advocated E. B. White's "Plain Style," typified by a favored phrase of William Strunk, Jr., White's writing teacher at Cornell University: "Omit needless words."<sup>35</sup> That statement, through the multiple printings of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, has influenced the writing culture of manifold journalistic and literary practitioners over the generations.

Fischer contrasted Plain Style with alternatives cast in a more unfavorable vein, "stylistic modes . . . so much easier." These included "the Murky Academic, as found in practically every doctoral dissertation, or the Rococo Breathless, typified by Tom Wolfe (the youth culture kid, not the novelist), and the Long-Winded Profound, a specialty of *The New York Review of Books*."<sup>36</sup> The challenge to the validity—or at least the skill—of Wolfe, considered one founding fathers of the New Journalism, a form to which the inner circle subscribed and promoted if not by name at least by style, reflects a clear division between the editorial values of Fischer and Morris, the man he handpicked to follow him as *Harper's* top editor.

During a eulogy at Morris's 1999 funeral in Mississippi, David Halberstam used the expression, "We, who were his writers...."<sup>37</sup> By using such a statement, Halberstam evoked the bond amongst members of the inner circle built on Morris's approach, which aimed to create "a magazine young and courageous enough to carry the language to its limits."<sup>38</sup> In pursuit of his ambitious brand of reporting, Morris made quick bets on informal story pitches, often made in the course of spirited barroom banter. Lewis Lapham, who as a freelancer benefited from such a bet, said: "He was a good editor in that way because he would take chances, and he loved talent. He was himself a very talented writer."<sup>39</sup>

### **"Bitter Hostility Between Art and Money"**

The archive of articles published under Morris features classic New Journalism tailored to suit a style characteristic of his controversial *Harper's* leadership: first-person reporting that chronicles direct experience in the search to define a rapidly changing sense of American

identity. Examples of this style are found in King's "Confessions of a White Racist" and Morris's own paean to the integration struggles in his native Mississippi, "Yazoo... Notes on Survival."<sup>40</sup> Beyond that, articles published by Morris revealed internal and external conflicts within Morris himself, his editorial staff, and within the national cultural consciousness. In Morris's first year, the September 1967 issue excerpted 45,000 words of William Styron's novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.<sup>41</sup> The piece, recalled *Harper's* writer John Corry, caused a critical backlash from black intellectuals.<sup>42</sup> Joseph Epstein's piece, "Homo/Hetero: A Way Out," in the September 1970 issue, condemned homosexuals to a state of "permanent niggerdom among men."<sup>43</sup> Soon after the article's publication, Midge Decter arrived to work one morning to find a group of men waiting with pastries and coffee. They greeted her and said, "Come on up. We're having a protest."<sup>44</sup> When Morris was notified about it, he refused to appear—a strategy he employed during times when a socially uncomfortable situation loomed.<sup>45</sup> Decter and Kotlowitz spent the day tending to the situation, which diffused after they met with protesters and discussed the piece.<sup>46</sup>

Morris's efforts to have *Harper's* "carry the language to its limits, to reflect the great tensions and complexities and madneses of the day," culminated in March 1971 with Norman Mailer's "The Prisoner of Sex," an exploration of the women's liberation movement.<sup>47</sup> Morris often complained that the magazine management's search for profit conflicted with his editorial vision, and when he resigned after publishing "Prisoner" his public narrative focused on a battle between "the money men and the literary men [in which] as always, the money men won."<sup>48</sup> Mailer's article, Morris wrote in his resignation letter, "deeply disturbed the magazine's owners. Mailer is a great writer. His work matters to our civilization."<sup>49</sup>

### Lapham's Alaska Story Foreshadows Morris's Own Plight

As a freelancer, Lewis Lapham pitched a story to Morris about Alaska's handling of a \$900-million influx of oil money. Morris made Lapham a *Harper's* contributing editor on the basis of that article. When considered with respect to Morris's fate and the evolution of *Harper's* writing culture, the conclusions of Lapham's May 1970 oil piece seethe with irony.

The economic imperatives Alaskans faced in Lapham's story foreshadowed a similar situation in which Morris found himself less than a year later. Lapham discovered that Alaskans were presented with "a question not of what you want, but of what you're willing to give up. . . . 'You want gas in the car? Okay, you get oil on the beach.'"<sup>50</sup> In Morris's situation, the survival of his *Harper's* writing culture hinged on how much he was willing to compromise his leadership style to accommodate the fiscal concerns of the publishers. Morris knew he wanted a wild, open literary frontier and, in his attempt to leverage his star-level literary status to secure his vision from the executives, he sacrificed himself.

As Lapham observed the dynamic at work in Alaska, he reflected: "Maybe it is the voices that discourage me, or maybe it is the predictable transformation of the frontier. No doubt I suffer from a literary and therefore false nostalgia."<sup>51</sup>

In acknowledging the discomfiting conflict between an economic imperative and his own "literary and therefore false nostalgia," Lapham unknowingly identifies common ground that he shared with Morris. His passage captures the philosophical underpinnings driving a man yearning for a story apart from capitalistic reality. But the sword cuts both ways: Reflecting on his state's capitulation to oil interests, an Alaskan told Lapham, "Yeah, well, that's the irony in it. We end up destroying the thing we loved."<sup>52</sup> In his confrontation with the economic

imperative, Morris destroyed the object of his affection, too.

After recounting how Morris had been surprised when *Harper's* owners accepted his hastily mailed resignation, managing editor Kotlowitz said Morris went "running around the office [in shock] shouting, 'They accepted it! They accepted it!'" He did just what they wanted him to do. . . . He was naïve in many ways. He really was 32."<sup>53</sup> Such reflections capture a sense that his relative youth blinded Morris to the possibility that his brash, perhaps impetuous, posturing on behalf of journalistic excellence provided the owners an easy opportunity to release the weight—and cost—of such heady editorial pressure.

### **"An Age of Tinsel" and "A Crowd of Self-Important Pharisees"**

Almost forty years after Morris's departure, the journalism community's interest in the interpersonal drama surrounding the editorial resignations continues to eclipse the actual work these journalists accomplished. For instance, when the *Columbia Journalism Review* plugged King's 2006 biography of Morris, the magazine led with the title, "What Happened in Minneapolis, Willie?" King's book runs over three hundred pages,<sup>54</sup> but the *CJR* excerpt focused on the contentious relations between Morris and *Harper's* owner John Cowles of Minneapolis, and the headline referenced a meeting that occurred in Minnesota prior to Morris's resignation.<sup>55</sup> The circumstances have been documented under which Morris resigned in the spring of 1971, inspiring all but one of the magazine's top editors to quit, but academics have not offered a scholarly treatment of this event in particular or any other detailed holistic analysis of the journalistic offerings of Morris and his crew.<sup>56</sup> Interpersonal vitriol highlights most of the popular coverage, most of it unflattering to Morris's eventual successor as editor-in-chief, Lewis Lapham—the last man standing in the great editorial exodus. But an insistence that commonality must exist among a writing culture's participants releases them from the isolation of historical positioning. It acknowledges that webs of intimacy and influence often evolve in separate ways, but suggests that the points of intersection are also important.

In a review of *New York Days*, Lapham distanced himself from the cult of personality that formed Morris's inner circle. "What Morris presents as a golden age I remember as an age of tinsel," Lapham wrote. "His cast of fearless prophets I remember as a crowd of self-important Pharisees."<sup>57</sup> In a recent interview, Lapham was asked to unpack the phrases "age of tinsel" and "crowd of self-important Pharisees." His criticism, it seems, was not specific to *Harper's*, but more focused on the 1960s in New York City. "I thought the revolutionary rhetoric of the Sixties was a pose," Lapham said. "It was a charade; a toy revolution. The journalists were just along for the ride, to make as much money as possible. I did not take them seriously. They wanted it both ways: romantic/revolutionary figures paid large sums of money for their displays of conscience."<sup>58</sup>

Aside from his review of *New York Days*, Lapham's other work sidesteps Morris. In *An American Album: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Harper's*, Lapham gave Morris only passing mention<sup>59</sup> and did not include "Yazoo . . . Notes on Survival," Morris's sole article submission during his chief editorship. But when asked for specific details about his direct, though limited experience, at *Harper's* under Morris's direction, Lapham's comments echo members of the inner circle. He appreciated Morris's willingness to take chances in his pursuit of literary talent. And, Lapham said, "Willie and I both agreed about good writing."<sup>60</sup>

Popular accounts of this time report less-than-complimentary words reserved for Lapham by



inner circle writers such as Marshall Frady, David Halberstam, and Larry King. Reflecting their sense of betrayal at Lapham's ascent in the shadow of Morris's fall, they called Lapham "spoiled" and a "pathological liar."<sup>61</sup> The tales make for sensational reading, usually locked in a narrative dichotomy of hero and villain. But, as many inner circle participants acknowledged, ideological divisions among the staff and Morris's notorious proclivity for heavy drinking could not be discounted in understanding the evolution and dispersal of his coterie.

To Morris, said John Corry, "the issue was not unreturned phone calls, the issue was censorship." But Corry felt "a sense of inevitability, a sense it was over" during the months before the mass resignation. "We were on pretty shaky ground," he said. "We could talk about artistic rights and freedom to publish, but the magazine belongs to the person who owns it. Willie'd been good to us and he called in the markers—never overtly, never consciously."<sup>62</sup>

These comments capture Corry's appreciation and allegiance to Morris, but in his reference to unreturned phone calls, Corry calls attention to the editor's habit of eschewing the more unpleasant demands associated with editorial management. Other inner circle members also noted such patterns. Decter recalled how Morris avoided the protest of readers angry about the coverage of homosexuals.<sup>63</sup> King mentioned how Morris would go into hiding before a new issue was published so he could avoid answering writers' questions about whose story would receive top billing for the month.<sup>64</sup>

In an interview, Morris's managing editor Kotlowitz summarized the greatness and vulnerability embodied in his boss:

[Morris] was so talented, so gifted; he was so unfair to his gifts and talents so often. . . . He had a serious drinking problem. That's no secret. That became a problem for everybody else. Willie often didn't get in till noon and then would leave around 2:30.

He had a wonderful generous spirit and personal warmth. What you sensed in what you read about him and by him reflected the man. Without his self-destructiveness, he would have been the greatest American editor of the twentieth century.<sup>65</sup>

However, the *Harper's* staff also suggested that beyond Morris's neglect of editorial management details, an ideological chasm formed. Later, it crystallized in such a way that polarized the former colleagues. These issues seemed to be less related to Morris. Societal unrest of the day fueled a counter-counterculture, a movement known as neo-conservatism; Midge Decter and her husband, *Commentary* editor Norman Podhoretz, were instrumental in its establishment. "Everybody drank," she said, but Decter grew fearful as "drugs took over" amongst the younger members of the literary world.<sup>66</sup> Watching as "some people were destroyed," Decter said that facing the drug culture while she had the responsibility of raising teenagers was "one of the things that turned us conservative. I felt the radicals were out to get my children."<sup>67</sup> The pressure of the "radicalized" scene "cut very close to the bone," Decter said, noting that divisions in philosophy were evident within the *Harper's* inner circle. "We were all so very different; probably we were all on the way to a political break-up. It exploded right about the time Willie lost the magazine."<sup>68</sup>

In a piece titled "The Politics of Style," John Corry suggested that left-leaning protesters were often defined by style, not substance.<sup>69</sup> Leaders of the Black Panthers and the women's liberation movement shared similar tendencies to "tantrum a lot" and "wear their oppression

like both a badge and an excuse, and they do not seem to be seriously engaged in anything other than being oppressed.<sup>70</sup> In response, Corry recalled Halberstam warning him “to be careful” in his approach to political and cultural criticism.

Morris was not party to such ideological divisions, Decter said, noting he did not condemn her aversion to the era’s radicalism. “He was drunk on fine writing,” she said. “That was uppermost with him. Willie was always wooed by a nice sentence. Not so much the politics of the era. Willie was a sucker for a writer—there are not too many editors who are. Now, there’s a lot of ideology.”<sup>71</sup>

The experience of losing “the perfect job” was heart wrenching, but it was temporary in a way that the legacy they left behind was not, Kotlowitz said. “We knew in our heart of hearts it [the work they created at *Harper’s*] was very serious—it would last—that we would all be all right,” he said. “We knew that, too.”<sup>72</sup>

When Lewis Lapham opted to stay on at *Harper’s*, he became lumped in with the money-men, an enemy of the literary men of Morris’s inner circle. In writing his 2006 memoir, King skewered Lapham: “‘They will never say of you as they said of FDR, that you are a traitor to your class,’ I hissed to Lapham. ‘You saw the opportunity to cozy up to power and another rich man’s spoiled son and zoomed in like a goddamned homing pigeon.’”<sup>73</sup>

When asked in a recent interview whether he felt his well-heeled upbringing inflamed the vitriol directed at him following his decision to remain at *Harper’s*, Lapham identified a cultural bias: “Because my family was in banking and the oil business and I went to Yale, it was unthinkable I could become a writer. I was always under suspicion.”<sup>74</sup> Lapham was critical of Morris’s brand of idealism. “Willie Morris had this whole idea that there was a bitter hostility between art and money,” Lapham said. “That’s not necessarily true. J. P. Morgan saved *Harper’s* in the 1890s. Morgan gave a \$1.5 million loan and never called it. He said it [*Harper’s*] was a national treasure.”<sup>75</sup> Several scholars, however, including Exman and Winship, suggest that Morgan was no benevolent paternalist, positing the Harper family paid the price of their loan default by relinquishing control of the company.<sup>76</sup> But Morgan was not only the capitalist to intercede on behalf of *Harper’s*, Lapham noted. In 1980, *Harper’s* was rescued by the largess of Robert O. Anderson, the wildcat oil operator at the helm of the Atlantic Richfield Company who, together with the MacArthur Foundation, established the *Harper’s* Magazine Foundation to ensure the magazine’s survival. “I thought Willie could have worked things out with [*Harper’s* owner] Cowles,” Lapham said. “I thought that then. I think that now. That whole attitude: ‘You’re a philistine,’ is wrong, romantic, fantastical.”<sup>77</sup>

As for the reporting following the editorial exodus, Lapham said: “You can count on the media most of the time to get the story wrong. The only one to get it right was the London *Economist*.”<sup>78</sup> *The Economist* did not embrace the polarized account of capitalism versus art; it gave Morris credit for his editorial accomplishments. It noted that “Mr. Morris’s disagreement with the management of *Harper’s* was all the more surprising in that his journalistic flair had made the magazine far more readable—in most people’s opinion.”<sup>79</sup> With regard to Morris’s statement that the magazine’s management objected to Norman Mailer’s “The Prisoner of Sex,” *The Economist* editorialized that “it would be a strange management that would object to an article which caused the magazine to be sold out in New York City.”<sup>80</sup> Still, the article acknowledged the publisher’s dilemma: “*Harper’s* had been losing money—just how much is not clear but the amount is considerable—and the search for a scapegoat seems to have brought about the clash between the editorial side and the management.”<sup>81</sup> *The*

*Economist* acknowledged that contemporary magazines focused on specific audiences “such as yachtsman or golfers” were having more luck generating advertising revenue than general interest magazines such as *Harper’s*. It concluded, however: “A general slaughter of journalists hardly seems likely to help towards a solution of their problems.”<sup>82</sup>

Lapham said his previous experience working for two journals that ceased publication—the *Saturday Evening Post* and *The Herald Tribune*—profoundly influenced his decision to stay at *Harper’s* even as others resigned. Prior to their time at *Harper’s*, John Corry and David Halberstam worked at *The New York Times* and Morris edited *The Texas Observer*—both publications still in print. “I was in a position unlike the other people,” Lapham said, “like an old cavalry officer who had a lot of horses shot out from underneath him.”<sup>83</sup> Other members of the editorial inner circle felt Lapham was more like a soldier who had pledged loyalty to their cause only to go absent without leave. But in the present line of inquiry, it is important to remember that when the object of inquiry shifts away from such drama, moving instead toward the foundations of writing culture, seemingly dissimilar characters return to a common table—in this case a shared appreciation for the pursuit of outstanding, long-form, New Journalistic writing. Lapham and, indeed, *Harper’s* in the decades after Morris has continued to practice variations of Morris’s style of editing and publishing of literary journalism. One evolutionary example occurred in an April 1975 cover story, Tom Wolfe’s “The Painted Word.” Later evidence appeared in a 2008 book that collected early twenty-first century versions of *Harper’s* “reporting in the radical, first-person,” a direct descendent of the once *au courant* New Journalism of the Morris era.<sup>84</sup>

### **Conclusion: An Influential, Fluctuating Force**

Willie Morris achieved lofty success as a young writer and editor with a maverick approach to editorial leadership. He supported journalism that would excite people, even anger them, in the course of fulfilling his mission to “give the country some feel of itself and what it is becoming.”<sup>85</sup> This research set out to ask what more could be learned about writing from a man and a magazine that had already served as the central subject for several magazine articles and books. It found that while anecdotes of New York’s late 1960s literary society abounded in published material, an undercurrent that defined the life of journalists lay scattered in fragmented allusions. This study yielded a harvest of cultural artifacts that, taken together, help to shape an idea of writing culture as an influential, fluctuating force in the lives of journalists.

During interviews, when writers were asked to reflect on the cultural significance of their experience with the writing and editing process, they offered insights not previously documented or they built on previous comments in new ways. While King’s affection for Morris was no secret, King earlier had not detailed his scrapped story on Dallas, Texas, or Morris’s request that King write a favorable piece on presidential candidate Governor Nelson Rockefeller. Lapham’s voice has never been synthesized with the voices of Morris and his inner circle to elucidate a greater understanding of the cultural environment that nurtured their journalistic development. By focusing on writing as a common bond among the writers analyzed, this research allowed Lapham—whose historical positioning had been at odds with Morris’s inner circle—to express appreciation for Morris’s gifts as an editor, to move beyond the drama of the editorial resignations and remember the writers’ bond that first served to connect him with the magazine he served for more than thirty years.

Also, in looking to Lapham's notion of a "literary and therefore false nostalgia," this research found that the *Harper's* archive foreshadowed a dilemma that ensnared the magazine's writers—the notion that there are idyllic pastures where great verse is born, which must lie apart from the lowly troughs where those hungry for profit feed. While Lapham acknowledged a weakness for the literary perspective, his Alaska article recognized its place within a larger economic framework. Conversely, Morris rejected the economic imperative within a larger literary framework. Interviews with *Harper's* staff members suggest that this hardened sense of right and wrong may have been a reflection of youthful idealism, inflamed by the poor choices alcoholism inspires.<sup>86</sup> Still, this choice to take a dramatic—if not reckless—stand in support of his beliefs is part of what made Morris who he was. Regardless of whether they would have taken the same stand, the inner circle issued their resignations as a sign of solidarity with a Morris—whom they loved for all his strengths and in spite of his weaknesses. These stories suggest that writers are complicated individuals operating in complex environments; the study of writing culture offers an avenue to explore these nuanced truths.

The writing in *Harper's* reflected the influence of the larger New Journalism movement, but no other publication of the day inspired work that could be considered as an equivalent to "The Prisoner of Sex" or "Confessions of a White Racist." These articles do not represent a singular apex of New Journalism, but they do exemplify how *Harper's* broke the bonds of traditional journalistic expectations and engaged the magazine's readers in an intimate consideration of compelling cultural issues of that era. Bold and evocative writers flourished in the *Harper's* edited by Morris. He bet on unusual talent that produced journalism that otherwise would have been unsupported. In the process, a rambunctious collective of *Harper's* writers and editors liberated newswriting from the bounds of impersonal predictability.<sup>87</sup> In addition to funding the journalistic evolution of Mailer and the inner circle members, several ancillary characters credit Morris's vision for nurturing prize-winning work. Gay Talese, for instance, said a capital infusion from *Harper's* allowed him to finish *The Kingdom and the Power*, his book-length chronicle of the legacy of *The New York Times*.<sup>88</sup> The ideology captured in interviews and memoirs, along with the published archive of the magazine, offers a glimpse into a writing culture that belonged to *Harper's* magazine of the Willie Morris era alone.

Linking the textual archive into the concept of writing culture allowed words committed long ago to paper to lend themselves to fresh insight about the forces that shape writers' work. Cultural anthropologists and journalism studies in the past have explored communities of writers.<sup>89</sup> Earlier studies offered inspiration for exploring "how journalists construct knowledge about themselves" and then create "community through discourse."<sup>90</sup> Now this approach has been extended to consider the evolution of a group of writers working at *Harper's* under Morris. Recognizing that academics never before asked what could be learned from Morris's concept of the "common burden of writers," this work posits that writers' ever-evolving creative drive presents a field for continued cultivation by researchers. It found that definitions of what constitutes "good writing" offer common ground for writers of similar values to come together, but that these definitions are subject to shifting politics.

Still, the oral histories reflect an understanding that the value of their shared work trumped all the drama. Robert Kotlowitz felt that he lost a valued friendship when Midge Decter's evolving political stance steered her to take a sudden "sharp right turn and out of our lives."<sup>91</sup> While the hurt of being snubbed offers a lesson, he said, "It makes you weary, not a useful lesson."<sup>92</sup> He advocated greater perspective. Kotlowitz said he took solace in the fact that

the work he helped create at *Harper's* “was very serious—it would last—that we would all be all right.”<sup>93</sup>

His understanding of the value of a legacy of hard work allowed Kotlowitz to emphasize the importance of following one’s calling. “Do what you want to do. Don’t compromise,” he said. “[Compromise] will cause you to live your life in agony. It’s living death.”<sup>94</sup> This harkens another defining theme indicative of the *Harper's* writing culture of the Willie Morris years. In different words and in different ways his former colleagues all embraced the philosophy Kotlowitz articulated—they are writers committed to living and working on their own terms. Despite their differences, a central tenet of the culture that brought them together—the commitment to “strong and brave and evocative”<sup>95</sup> work—survived.



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82. Ibid.
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84. See Bill Wasik, ed. *Submersion Journalism: Reporting in the Radical First Person* (New York: Free Press, 2008).
85. Morris, *New York Days*, 9.
86. Corry, Decter, Kotlowitz and King interviews.
87. See Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism: With an Anthology*, eds. Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson (New York: Harper, 1973), and David Eason, "The New Journalism and the Image-World," in Norman Sims, ed., *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990; reprint, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 191-205.
88. King, *In Search of Willie Morris*, 115.
89. See Clifford and Catherine A. Luther, "Reflections of Cultural Identities in Conflict," *Journalism History* 29, no. 2 (2003), 69-81.
90. Zelizer, 222 and 223.
91. Kotlowitz interview.
92. Ibid.
93. Ibid.
94. Ibid.
95. Morris, *New York Days*, 9.



# The Literary Mind of a Cornfield Journalist: Joel Chandler Harris's 1904 Negro Question Articles

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*There may be more to the man whose black dialect folk tales have been deemed paternalistic, even derogatory. In particular, Harris's Saturday Evening Post series sheds more light on his views about race and the power of education to transform minds*

While touring The Wren's Nest, the historic house museum of Joel Chandler Harris, famed author of the Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit tales, I had an epiphany. Noticing four color sketches of black children learning to read and spell hanging on the wall facing Harris's bed, I thought: Perhaps a broader, more complex understanding of Harris's interest in and understanding of the black experience could be achieved through further examination of his journalistic writings. As an African-American journalism educator, I thought aspects of the damaged legacy of the man—whose black dialect folk tales have been deemed offensive by some—might warrant further consideration.

The lingering shadow of Disney's *Song of the South*, released in 1946, long after Harris's 1908 death, significantly darkened his reputation. Based on plot motifs from *The Tales of Uncle Remus*, the film, for some, was and still is deemed offensive because of its portrayals of "idyllic master-slave" relationships.<sup>1</sup> And yet within this charming Victorian house museum, which once barred black visitors, one encounters endearing images of unmistakably black children learning to read and spell that convey something about Harris's belief in the power of the written word, whether literature or journalism, to transform and liberate minds.<sup>2</sup>

Touring Harris's former home, a short walking distance from the largest consortium of privately operated historically black institutions of higher learning founded after the Civil War,<sup>3</sup> I became increasingly curious about how Harris weighed in on the "Negro Question" dialogue prevalent from the post-slavery Reconstruction era through the early decades of the twentieth century. Also, what did he think of these colleges founded to uplift formerly enslaved men and women that occupy one of the city's highest hills, where Union and Confederate troops faced off during the 1864 siege of Atlanta? What were his editorial thoughts on education as a strategy for Negro advancement? How did this New South editor describe the social complexities of his changing world? This paper explores the contexts in which Harris considered these questions.

Throughout Harris's career, including twenty-four years at the *Atlanta Constitution* as associate editor and lead editorial writer, he denounced racism among southern whites, condemned lynching as barbaric, recognized the legitimacy of black suffrage and economic advancement, and supported higher education for blacks. The earliest study of Harris's representative journalistic work was conducted by his daughter-in-law and biographer, Julia Collier Harris, who published two seminal works, *The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris* (1918), and *Joel Chandler Harris: Editor and Essayist* (1931). Both works contain substantive examples of Harris's commentaries on these issues.<sup>4</sup> Recently I examined Harris's social

commentaries within the context of the Atlanta University-sponsored Negro problem studies, Atlanta's racial tensions during the late 1890s and early 1900s, and the extent to which his views of liberal learning resonated with educators who promoted intellectual autonomy as the primary means of black uplift.<sup>5</sup>

Harris's literary works and the criticisms they garnered in the wake of *Song of the South* unfortunately obscure his journalistic writings. Capturing the paradox of this misperception of Harris's work and the relative obscurity of his journalism, R. Bruce Bickley, Jr., explains that:

Harris' importance as the recreator of the Uncle Remus stories and as a major southern local colorist often overshadows his role as associate editor for the *Constitution*, where, in thousands of signed and unsigned editorials over a twenty-four-year period, Harris set a national tone for reconciliation between North and South after the Civil War.<sup>6</sup>

A complex understanding of the intended impact of Harris's journalism begins with examining his stated and demonstrated editorial philosophy.

### **The Cornfield Journalist**

A self-described 'cornfield journalist,' Harris, early in his newspaper career, espoused a New South editorial ideology that set him apart from his southern editor counterparts. In 1878 he stated:

An editor must have a purpose . . . when I think of the opportunities the editors in Georgia are allowing to slip by. It grieves me to see them harping steadily upon the same old prejudices and moving in the worn ruts of a period that was soul searching in its narrowness. . . . There never was a time when an editor with a purpose could accomplish more for his state and his country than just at present. What a legacy for one's conscience to know that one has been instrumental in mowing down the old prejudices that rattle in the wind like weeds.<sup>7</sup>

Walter Brasch's study of Harris's journalism career shows consistent efforts on the part of the editor to present balanced discussions of race relations. As does Bickley, Brasch casts Harris as a man consumed by two distinct, often warring, personalities: journalist and literary writer.<sup>8</sup> In this 1899 letter to his daughters, Harris acknowledges his other storyteller voice. He told them:

You know all of us have two entities, or personalities. That is the reason you see and hear persons "talking to themselves." They are talking to the other fellow. I have often asked my other fellow where he gets all his information, and how he can remember, in the nick of time, things that I have forgotten long ago; but he never satisfies my curiosity. He is simply a spectator of my folly until I seize a pen, and then he comes forward and takes charge. . . . I go on writing editorials, and presently my other fellow says

sourly: *What about that story?* Then, when night comes, I take up my pen, surrender unconditionally to my other fellow, and out comes the story, and if it is a good story I am as much surprised as the people who read it...<sup>9</sup>

Written in March of that year, this letter was an uncanny foreshadowing of what was perhaps the most ideologically challenging period of Harris's journalism career, a time when that other voice, the editor's voice, had to say or advocate views he himself apparently despised. Less than one month later, Harris, known as a progressive-minded editor who opposed lynching and advocated social rights for blacks, and the *Atlanta Constitution* editorial staff produced inflammatory editorials that may have incited the torture and lynching of Sam Hose, a black farm worker.

In my analysis of the *Constitution's* coverage of this mob-driven murder, I discuss the dissonance Harris undoubtedly experienced in perpetuating coverage that resulted in the lynching.<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, Wayne Mixon notes: "To understand his difficulties in presenting his iconoclastic views on race, one must remember that Harris was a white man working for a major southern newspaper during the South's most viciously racist era. In that capacity, he sometimes did what was expected of him."<sup>11</sup> Jay Martin says that Harris was constrained by his public responsibilities as an editor of a major newspaper and could not always say what he believed.<sup>12</sup>

By early 1900, Harris, along with his seemingly warring selves, resigned from the newspaper to pursue other writing projects. The sense of being half-journalist and half-creative writer is a tension many journalism literary figures have experienced, according to Doug Underwood, who also notes that Harris had a "front row seat on history" from his fortuitous position as an editor at a major daily.<sup>13</sup> Recall those color sketches of black children on his wall. Harris's journalistic self sought to write essays and editorials that promoted mutually beneficial dialogue and understanding between the races. His creative writer self wrote Brer Rabbit trickster tales embedded with layers of meaning, and local color stories such as "Billy Sanders" and "The Chronicles of Aunt Minervy Ann," which explored the complexities of black-white relationships in the decades following the War Between the States.<sup>14</sup> The pressing Negro Question provided the opportunity for Harris to interpret these critical issues for local and national audiences.

### **The Negro Question**

"Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question... How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word."—W. E. B. Du Bois<sup>15</sup>

The prolific sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois and the progressive editor Harris never met. Yet both, at one time, lived in Atlanta within walking distance of each other, had mutual acquaintances, and shared a belief that race relations would improve with attitudinal changes and, that intelligent leadership of both races should pursue solutions—a theme captured in the Harris's editorial writings throughout his career.

Across the south after the Civil War, as historically black universities evolved and promulgated higher education as a vehicle for race uplift, Harris took a keen interest in the teaching and scholarly advances occurring at Atlanta University. Beginning in 1897, the university sponsored a series of studies under the aegis of Du Bois that addressed issues affecting almost every aspect of black life, from mortality to urbanization. Moreover, these Negro studies

influenced other analyses of America's race problem. Harris often cited Du Bois's work in *Atlanta Constitution* editorials, and the *Bulletin*, an Atlanta University publication that featured commentaries on political and social issues, often ran reprints of *Constitution* editorials addressing these topics.

The *Bulletin* reprints of the *Constitution*'s February 14, 1894, editorial heralds Atlanta University's excellent "teachers, pupils and their progress" in solving the problem of colored education, and the *Constitution*'s January 1898 editorial refers to the informative nature of Du Bois's studies of Negro life and how such inquiries provide the best opportunities for understanding the conditions under which Negroes live.<sup>16</sup> These are two of numerous examples of the attention the *Constitution* editorial staff under Harris's direction paid to the university's work, as well as acknowledgement by advocates of higher education for blacks that Harris's views resonated with theirs.

### The Negro Question Articles

Three articles Harris wrote in 1904 for the *Saturday Evening Post* encapsulate his key commentaries on the Negro Question. "The Negro as the South Sees Him," "The Negro of To-day: His Prospects and His Discouragements," and "The Negro Problem: Can the South Solve It—And How?"<sup>17</sup> reveal Harris's role as interpreter of southern views of blacks and the personalities, needs, and aspirations of blacks based on his intimate, lifelong observations. Here Harris's literary and journalistic sensibilities coalesce to convey a vivid, engaging story that captures the complexities of this transitional period in America's social history.

Born of poor white parents in 1845, Harris became a teenage apprentice to Joseph Addison Turner, a newspaper publisher and plantation owner. At that plantation, he first heard the African-inspired folk tales that would make him famous. He based the character Uncle Remus and several other African-American storytellers on slaves who worked there. In large part, these animal tales, as Harris retold them, are complex allegories of slaves' real lives. The tales often conveyed a violent, predatory world in which oppressed people struggled to survive.

Unlike his animal stories, Harris's newspaper commentaries on race and North-South factionalism were prescriptive and intended to promote reconciliation. So, too, were his *Post* articles. The theme of neighbor-knowledge, that is, the value of mutual knowledge and understanding between blacks and whites in the South, based on complex circumstances unique to the South, permeates Harris's *Post* commentaries. Within "The Negro as the South Sees Him," a rant in which Harris manages to assert the need to create a place for genuine dialogue between the races, there are recurring themes of plantation-day nostalgia and the Reconstruction's adverse effect on race relations. Referencing Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harris observes that the book features admirable characters who were the products of the system the text condemns, and that the real moral of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "is that the possibilities of slavery anywhere and everywhere are shocking to the imagination, while the realities, under the best and happiest conditions, possess a romantic beauty and tenderness all their own."<sup>18</sup> He explains:

We live and move in a harsh and unfeeling world; it is so hard and cold and practical that we dare not give an inkling of our real thoughts and feelings to our next door neighbor, lest we become victims of his derision. . . . And if there were ever human relations

that were romantic and picturesque they were found on the old plantation in the days of slavery.<sup>19</sup>

Writing from his direct experiences as well as popular anecdotes, Harris posits that the nature of some of the idealized old South relationships still persist and could form the basis for dialogue and understanding between the races during the twentieth century. Describing Negroes of the older generation, like the confidential family servant and Mammy, Harris says such persons possess temperaments ideal for these dialogues and still play a role in imparting valuable knowledge to the younger generations. He asserts:

[I]n Middle Georgia the relations between master and slave were as perfect as they could be under the circumstances; and down to this day . . . the negroes in that region are more intelligent, better disposed and have a clearer understanding of their responsibilities as citizens than those of any other part of the country.<sup>20</sup>

Ironically, Disney's "idyllic portrayals of the master-slave relationship" in *Song of the South*, undoubtedly culled from Harris's own musings, have fueled lingering negative reactions to his much adored—by both blacks and whites—Uncle Remus stories that pre-date the film. Similarly, Darwin Turner criticizes Harris's predilection for idealizing slavery, stating, "It is not easy to organize Harris' images of Negroes into a coherent pattern because Harris himself responded to divergent magnets" and "persuaded his readers to accept them."<sup>21</sup> Harris encoded the threatening, predatory world of master-slave relationships in the allegories of the animal tales, but in these essays, he apparently wanted to salvage and emphasize what he deemed valuable from the slavery era.

Indeed, Harris's penchant for advancing a progressive idea while cleaving to a paternalistic, even racist, framework is evident in the "The Negro of To-day," where he counters the view that blacks could not learn beyond their presumed limited capacity. Many of the article's thematic points are framed as his direct response to a Northern friend's prejudiced observations, which, in Harris's opinion, epitomizes the inherently misinformed, pessimistic views of black people's potential. While slow, he writes, the educational process will inevitably bear fruit in current and future generations, and it is unfair to compare the accomplishments of blacks in this regard to those of whites. He notes, that the black man "is only about three centuries from a state of barbaric slavery in Africa compared with which his term of servitude in the United States was Christian freedom."<sup>22</sup> Optimistic that over time blacks would develop intellectual capacities in line with standards of whites, Harris challenges his white, and potentially prejudiced, readers:

If such a comparison is to be made, why not go back to the first forty years of the freedom of those who, in Great Britain, were held as serfs by England's invaders. There can be no doubt, though history has a gap here, that these English serfs were brothers to the ox, just as it has been said that the negroes are brothers to the mule. If we are to make any comparison at all, why not measure what the negro is doing with what our ancestors were doing at the same stage of development?<sup>23</sup>

This particular article resonated with black educators,<sup>24</sup> including Booker T. Washington, president of Tuskegee Institute, who wrote to Harris on February 1, 1904:

It has been a long time since I have read anything from the pen of any man which has given me such encouragement as your article has. It has been read already by a large number of colored people, and it would surprise and delight you to hear the many pleasant things which they are saying about it. In a speech on Lincoln's Birthday which I am to deliver in New York, I am going to take the liberty to quote liberally from what you have said.<sup>25</sup>

While supporting economic mobility and education for blacks, Harris did not support integration. In "The Negro Problem: Can the South Solve It—And How?" he addresses what he calls the "bugaboo" of social equality:

Judging from the protests that went up when the President dined with Booker Washington, it might be supposed that the problem which has for so long disturbed the politicians and publicists is social equality, and yet a little reflection should show the most ignorant of those who shrink back affrighted at so impalpable a ghost that social equality cannot be made a problem. For where, on the face of the earth, will you find social equality? You will not find it among the whites, nor will you find it among the negroes. It is simply a bugaboo; for there is not now, and never has been, since the dawn of civilization, such a thing as social equality except as a matter of taste and preference.<sup>26</sup>

The notion of social equality is impractical, Harris posits, and the responsibility for a successful solution must be shared by both whites and the Negroes in the south through patient and constructive cooperation without Northern political interference, the latter having encouraged blacks to inappropriately thrust "themselves into places where they were not wanted."<sup>27</sup>

At times, Harris is critical, even vitriolic, regarding black politicians and preachers whom he feels could better serve their race by embracing Booker T. Washington's moderate philosophy. Washington expressed his perspectives during his famous 1895 Cotton States speech in Atlanta, he urged blacks to temporarily forgo political power and insistence on civil rights and intellectual education. Instead, they should concentrate their energies on industrial education and traditional trades. Washington's conservatism resonated with many whites, including Harris, who lauded him as "wise counselor and a safe leader."<sup>28</sup>

Summing up the exhaustive Negro Question in his final *Post* commentary, Harris again evokes Washington's strategy of moderation as the proper pace and example for the Negro, who "can only be advanced as he deserves to be advanced." Furthermore, "his proper level is that which he has won, and must win, through the work of his hands and his brains."<sup>29</sup> On this point, Harris's view of balanced education is more aligned with that of Du Bois who, a few years earlier, eloquently asserted that both industrial and liberal arts education were "supplementary and mutually helpful in the great end of solving the Negro problem" and that "thrift and skill among the masses" as well as "thought and cultural among the leaders"

provided for the overall educational development needs of the race.<sup>30</sup>

Between 1880 and 1946, Harris was held in high esteem as a writer who captured an authentic dialect in which he retold African-originated tales, publishing them in the *Atlanta Constitution* and, starting in 1881, in book form. In doing so, he helped to preserve a unique storytelling form valued by many, including black cultural leaders and educators who—long before the *Song of the South* film release and Civil Rights-era protests about The Wren’s Nest’s discriminatory practices—endorsed the Uncle Remus stories as literary masterpieces. James Weldon Johnson, famed writer of the Negro National Anthem “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” promoter of African-American arts, and an 1894 graduate of Atlanta University, said the “Uncle Remus stories constitute the greatest body of folklore that America has produced.”<sup>31</sup> Stella Brewer Brookes, an African-American scholar who taught English and American literature at Clark College for forty-five years, wrote the first substantive book on Harris’s folklore and lauded his thorough knowledge of Southern black storytelling forms.<sup>32</sup> Harris, the literary writer, compiled, retold, and published stories created by the African ancestors of black children, such as the young people learning to read in the four color sketches. He thus ensured that generations would enjoy the benefit of the stories’ wisdom, wit, and insights. A major theme in these trickster tales is that the weaker animals, like Brer Rabbit, need to use both their intelligence and their sheer determination and courage to survive. This psychological and literary sensibility, in various incarnations, also informed Harris’s editorial forays intended to promote understanding and to reconcile differences.

This analysis of Harris’s 1904 Negro Question articles reveals that he possessed earnest, albeit complex—and often conflicting—views of race. Yet, as a consciously historical and conscientious Southern editor, he used his journalism to challenge injustice and promote black advancement. Indeed, while stressing the necessity of attitudinal changes, he clung at times to his own smoldering biased views about Northern interference in Southern affairs. Still, his enduring beliefs that education transforms minds and honest dialogue improves human relationships are largely realized in the place that inspired much of his work. Today, Harris’s former Atlanta West End neighborhood is culturally diverse, and his adored Wren’s Nest is abuzz with integrated gatherings of children enthralled by the antics of Uncle Remus storytellers—as well as a healthy variety of creative writing programs open to communities of learners.<sup>33</sup>



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### Endnotes

1. The folk tales were originally published in book form in 1881. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), while acknowledging the artistic merits of the 1946 film, was a leading critic of its paternalistic and stereotyped portrayals. Quoted in Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1992), 136.
2. The Wren's Nest became a museum in 1913, five years after Harris's death. For years, a group of society women ran it and maintained a whites-only admission policy until 1968, when a U.S. District Court order required the museum to admit blacks.
3. The original Atlanta University Center institutions were founded either the decade before or during Harris's tenure at the *Atlanta Constitution*: Atlanta University (1865), Clark College (1869), Morehouse College (1867), Spelman College (1881), and Morris Brown College (1881).
4. Julia Collier Harris, *The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918); Julia Collier Harris, ed., *Joel Chandler Harris: Editor and Essayist* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1931).
5. Cheryl Renee Gooch, "Solving the Negro Problem: Social Commentary in the Journalistic Writings of Joel Chandler Harris," *Communication and Social Change*, 1 (2007), <http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/comsocchg/vol1/iss1/> (accessed 9 June 2009). This is the first and perhaps only analysis of Harris's journalistic commentaries within the context of: Booker T. Washington's ideology of racial compromise popularized by his 1895 Atlanta Cotton States Exposition speech; the Atlanta University-sponsored Negro problem studies under the direction of W. E. B. Du Bois; the *Atlanta Constitution's* sensationalized coverage of the 1899 lynching of Sam Hose; and racial tensions that spurred the 1906 Atlanta riot.
6. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr., "Joel Chandler Harris and the Old and New South: Paradoxes of Perception," *The Atlanta Historical Journal* (Fall-Winter 1986-87), 12.
7. This widely quoted editorial appeared in the *Sunday Gazette*, 5 October 1878. The unnumbered clipping is contained in the Joel Chandler Harris papers housed in the Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Library at Emory University.
8. Walter M. Brasch, *Brer Rabbit, Uncle Remus, and the 'Cornfield Journalist': The Tale of Joel Chandler Harris* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2000).
9. Quoted in Hugh T. Keenan, ed., *Dearest Chums and Partners: Joel Chandler Harris's Letters to His Children, A Domestic Biography* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 274.
10. Gooch, *passim*.
11. Wayne Mixon, "The Ultimate Irrelevance of Race: Joel Chandler Harris and Uncle Remus in Their Time," *The Journal of Southern History* 56 (August 1990), 461.
12. Jay Martin, "Joel Chandler Harris and the Cornfield Journalist," in R. Bruce Bickley, Jr., ed., *Critical Essays on Joel Chandler Harris* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), 92-97.
13. Doug Underwood, *Journalism and the Novel: Truth and Fiction, 1700-2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 159, 172.
14. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr., *Joel Chandler Harris, A Biography and Critical Study* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), provides a detailed discussion of these trickster and local color stories. William Bradley Strickland analyzes Harris's conscious craftsmanship of layered meanings in "Stereotypes and Subversion in *The Chronicles of Aunt Minervy Ann*," *The Atlanta Historical Journal* (Fall-Winter 1986-87), 129-139.



15. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903), <http://www.bartleby.com/114/1.html> (accessed 9 June 2009).
16. "Boston and Atlanta," *The Bulletin of Atlanta University*, February, 1894, 53; and "A Study of Negro Life in the South," *The Bulletin of Atlanta University*, November, 1898, 3.
17. Joel Chandler Harris, "The Negro as the South Sees Him," *Saturday Evening Post*, 2 January 1904, 1-2, 23; "The Negro of To-day," *Saturday Evening Post*, 30 January 1904, 2-5; "The Negro Problem: Can the South Solve It—And How?" *Saturday Evening Post*, 27 February 1904, 6-7.
18. Joel Chandler Harris, "The Negro as the South Sees Him," 2.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. Darwin. T. Turner, "Daddy Joel Harris and His Old-Time Darkies," *The Southern Literary Journal* (December 1968), 39.
22. Joel Chandler Harris, "The Negro of To-day," 3.
23. Harris, "The Negro of To-day," 4.
24. Quoted in Julia Collier Harris, 1918, 505-506. Isaac Fisher, the principal of the Branch Normal School in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, wrote to Harris complimenting him on presenting "candid and fair expressions relative to the colored people" and for expressing optimism of the race's future. R. R. Wright, a graduate of Atlanta University and president of the Georgia State Industrial College, told Harris, "I regard the article as one of the fairest and most sympathetic that I have read from the pen of any Southern man," and invited Harris to visit the school to observe its successful work in educating more than five hundred country boys.
25. Louis R. Harlan and John W. Blassingame, eds., *The Booker T. Washington Papers: Volume 1: The Autobiographical Writings* (Open Book Edition, University of Illinois), <http://www.historycooperative.org/btw/Vol.7/html/421.html> (accessed 10 June 2009)
26. Joel Chandler Harris, "The Negro Problem: Can the South Solve It—And How?" 6.
27. *Ibid.* While Harris purported to encourage reconciliation of the North and South, he never quite rid himself, as reflected in his commentaries, of the predilection for blaming the imported "carpet-bagger and the native scalawag" for encouraging Negroes to insist on social equality, and the Freedmen's Bureau for engendering dependency and irresponsibility among Negroes. See "The Negro of To-day."
28. Quoted in Julia Collier Harris, 1931, 109. The *Constitution* carried an editorial on 20 September 1895, the day after Washington's address was delivered at the Cotton States and International Exposition. Harris wrote: "The speech stamps Booker Washington as a wise counselor and a safe leader. It was a very dignified and eloquent oration, and if it could reach the hearts and touch the minds of the colored people, it would undoubtedly accomplish great good . . . what he says ought to illuminate the minds of those Northern philanthropists who imagine that the political advancement of the negro means his social advancement."
29. Joel Chandler Harris, "The Negro Problem: Can the South Solve It—And How?" 7.
30. W. E. B. Du Bois, ed. *The College-Bred Negro* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1900), 114.
31. James Weldon Johnson, ed., *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), <http://www.bartleby.com/269/1000.html> (accessed 9 June 2009).
32. Stella Brewer Brookes, *Joel Chandler Harris, Folklorist* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1950).
33. The Wren's Nest website is [www.wrensnestonline.com](http://www.wrensnestonline.com).



# Getting Away From It All: The Literary Journalism of David Foster Wallace and Nietzsche's Concept of Oblivion

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*Wallace, best known for the novel Infinite Jest, greatly admired literary journalism's power to keep both practitioners and readers alert, curious, and conscious of the world. Yet the literary journalism he himself produced must be understood within the context of what Nietzsche termed 'oblivion'*

On a dry Saturday morning in late May 2005, the writer David Foster Wallace delivered the commencement address to the graduating class at Kenyon College in central Ohio. He sought to tell them why their liberal arts degree had “actual human value instead of just a material payoff.” For Wallace that value lay not in the old cliché of learning how to think, but rather in learning how to exercise control over what to think about: “It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience. Because if you cannot or will not exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed.”<sup>1</sup> The speech, both colloquial and compassionate, was the clearest articulation of a philosophy that guided Wallace's writing and life.

A little more than three years later, on a warm September evening, Wallace went into the backyard of his home in Claremont, California, bound his hands with duct tape, and hanged himself from his deck. He was forty-six years old.

In the weeks and months that followed his death, remembrances and tributes abounded online and in print. *The Guardian* of London called him “the most brilliant American writer of his generation.”<sup>2</sup> *The New York Times* said the same.<sup>3</sup> Author Jonathan Franzen told the audience at one of the four public memorials given for Wallace, that he was “as passionate and precise a punctuator of prose as has ever walked this earth.”<sup>4</sup> Most notably, David Lipsky of *Rolling Stone* and *The New Yorker's* D. T. Max each produced lengthy and well-received profiles that led to book deals to write biographies of Wallace.<sup>5</sup> Rather than hagiographic, these posthumous accolades were actually a continuation of the praise that Wallace received during his literary career.

Wallace is perhaps best known for his second novel, the one-thousand-seventy-nine-page *Infinite Jest*, published when he was thirty-four years old. Critics at the time called the novel “a genuine work of genius” and described Wallace as a “writer of virtuosic talents who can seemingly do anything.”<sup>6</sup> They greeted his collections of nonfiction with equal enthusiasm, often noting their irreverence. Reviewers described *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* as a collection of “vivid, hilarious essays” and “irrefutable proof of his comic genius.”<sup>7</sup> Equally, Wallace garnered praise for “holding up the high comic tradition—passed down from Sterne to Swift to Pynchon” with the publication of his second collection of nonfiction, *Consider the Lobster*.<sup>8</sup>

As these critics make clear, Wallace greatly influenced the direction of American fiction and nonfiction during the past twenty years. But none of the past reviews or current obituaries

describe his magazine and newspaper stories as literary journalism. Although this omission may point more to a mainstream marginalization of the term rather than a willful oversight on behalf of critics, it is nonetheless important to understand that Wallace wrote in the tradition of the literary journalist, because the form and its field of study provide a whole catalogue of approaches to understanding his stories in relation to his reviews, speeches, and essays. Specifically, Norman Sims has said, “[L]iterary journalists recognize the need for a consciousness on the page through which the objects in view are filtered.”<sup>9</sup> Wallace was awash in this consciousness; in fact, it is the defining feature of his literary journalism. It compelled him to be curious and caused him to chronicle nearly everything he encountered.

Although Wallace himself never commented explicitly about literary journalism, there is evidence that he knew the form, and that he regarded it highly. In his introduction, as guest editor of *The Best American Essays 2007*, he cited Mark Danner’s story, “Iraq: The War of the Imagination,” as one of several pieces of literary journalism in the collection. He lumped many of these stories with other essays into a subgenre he called the “‘service essay,’ with ‘service’ here referring to both professionalism and virtue . . . but what renders them most valuable to me is a special kind of integrity in their handling of fact. An absence of dogmatic cant.”<sup>10</sup> For Wallace, such journalistic dependability was in woefully short supply. In a 2003 interview with Dave Eggers, he lamented that “there’s no more complex, messy, community-wide argument (or ‘dialogue’); political discourse is now a formulaic matter of preaching to one’s own choir and demonizing the opposition. . . . How can any of this possibly help me, the average citizen, deliberate” about any number of complicated policy issues?<sup>11</sup> Of course, not all literary journalism attempts or achieves this service, but Wallace believed that stories which did, helped readers live the type of conscious life that he advocated in his Kenyon speech. He called the stories he selected for the collection “models—not templates, but models—of ways I wish I could think and live in what seems to me this world.”<sup>12</sup>

Wallace’s beliefs about this style of writing are congruent with what some of the leading scholars in the field have said about the power and purpose of literary journalism. In a foundational statement, Sims wrote, “Whether or not literary journalism equips me for living differently than other forms of literature, I read it as if it might.”<sup>13</sup> Later, in his historiography of the form, John Hartsock claimed that literary journalism’s “purpose is to narrow the distance between subjectivity and the object, not divorce them.”<sup>14</sup> And most recently, Kathy Roberts Forde promoted the idea that literary journalism realizes a Deweyian relationship between art and politics: “To my way of thinking, the American profession of journalism would better serve democratic ends by giving up its quixotic claim of representing ‘objective truth’ in news reports and working instead toward the discovery and presentation of pragmatic truth (or truths).”<sup>15</sup> Wallace both affirmed and practiced these ideas in his own journalism. His reporting does not simply chronicle who, what, when, and where; rather, it examines the larger cultural assumptions and significances imbued within a topic.<sup>16</sup> He believed in the power that Sims identifies. He abided by Hartsock’s purpose. And he sought the type of contingent truth, and its attendant political consequences, that Forde advocated. The paradox, unfortunately, is that while Wallace was professionally and politically compelled to ask and interpret, he was also personally troubled by much of what he encountered. What made him a great journalist also caused him great anxiety.

Moreover, I submit that the best way to understand that anxiety—which is to say, the best way to understand his journalism—is to view it through the lens of Friedrich

Nietzsche's idea of 'oblivion,' defined in his second essay of *The Genealogy of Morals* as "an active screening device, responsible for the fact that what we experience and digest psychologically does not, in the stage of digestion, emerge into consciousness any more than what we ingest physically."<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche is useful here because Wallace's journalism displays his extreme consciousness, both in the details of the observable world and the impressions they make on his psyche. Often, he was plagued by what he could not let go. And his stories are beset by digressions and introspections—most of which are collected in footnotes. He suffered from an absence of oblivion, whose active role, according to Nietzsche, is "that of a concierge: to shut temporarily the doors and windows of consciousness; to protect us from the noise and agitation ... to introduce a little quiet into our consciousness."<sup>18</sup> But as a journalist, Wallace's job was to collect and organize the noise and agitation of the phenomenal world.

For example, reporting from the 2003 Maine Lobster Festival for *Gourmet* magazine, Wallace faces a question that he says is unavoidable: "Is it alright to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure?"<sup>19</sup> He admits that addressing this question opens up a Pandora's box of related concerns that are not only complex, but uncomfortable, especially for anyone, himself included, who "enjoys a variety of foods and yet does not want to see herself as cruel and unfeeling."<sup>20</sup> Wallace confesses that his main way of dealing with conflicts, such as this one, is to dissociate, to "avoid thinking about the whole unpleasant thing."<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, his professional obligation trumps his attempts at oblivion and since the "assigned subject of this article is what it's like to attend the 2003 Maine Lobster Festival ... it turns out there is no honest way to avoid certain moral questions."<sup>22</sup> If dissociation brings peace, then journalism brings pain, as Wallace admitted years later, saying, "Writing-wise, fiction is scarier, but non-fiction is harder—because nonfiction's based in reality, and today's felt reality is overwhelmingly, circuit-blowingly huge and complex."<sup>23</sup> But as a journalist he must explore that reality, and his stories bear the marks of that processes psychic pain.

That story, "Consider the Lobster," is one of the eleven pieces of literary journalism, among dozens of other works of nonfiction that Wallace authored in his lifetime.<sup>24</sup> Although the topics ranged widely from the Adult Video News Awards, which he covered for the now-defunct *Premiere* magazine, to riding the Straight Talk Express for *Rolling Stone* during John McCain's failed bid for the 2000 Republican presidential nomination, the trope that structures these stories is escape, which, for Wallace, was tantamount to sadness. Pornography is sad: "Much of the cold, dead, mechanical quality of adult films is attributable, really, to the performers' faces."<sup>25</sup> Politics is sad: "Modern politicians make us sad, hurt us deep down in ways that are hard even to name, much less talk about."<sup>26</sup> Sports are sad: "Midwest junior tennis was also my initiation into true adult sadness."<sup>27</sup> And vacations are sad: "There is something about a mass-market Luxury Cruise that's unbearably sad."<sup>28</sup> All of these subjects involve supplanting everyday reality with fantasy, which Wallace believed was a too-common American phenomenon.

Vacations are the most literal embodiment of that escape trope, and Wallace wrote three stories exploring it. Along with the aforementioned "Consider the Lobster," which he wrote for *Gourmet* in 2003, Wallace also penned pieces on the 1994 Illinois State Fair ("Getting Away From Already Being Pretty Much Away From It All"), and a 1996 Caribbean cruise ("A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again") for *Harper's*.<sup>29</sup> David Lipsky called the two *Harper's* stories "some of the most famous pieces of journalism of the past decade and a half."<sup>30</sup> Vacations for Wallace are not relaxing. He describes them as "radically constricting

and humbling in the hardest way.”<sup>31</sup> The point of a vacation is to escape the everyday, to be oblivious to the attendant concerns and responsibilities of daily life, which is something Wallace is both unwilling and unable to do. Consequently, he believes mass tourists are “alien, ignorant, greedy for something you cannot ever have, disappointed in a way you can never admit.”<sup>32</sup> The key to understanding this contempt comes in that second adjective: ignorant. To be ignorant is to lack consciousness, which is why vacationers cannot admit their disappointment: they cannot perceive it. But for Wallace a lack of consciousness has larger ramifications. To get away from it all is to abdicate a moral responsibility, to dire effect. In 2007, he wrote, “We are in a state of three-alarm emergency—‘we’ basically meaning America as a polity and culture.” He believed such an emergency would not have happened “if we had been paying attention and handling information in a competent grown-up way.”<sup>33</sup>

This imperative to be present is a clear thread that runs through all of Wallace’s nonfiction, from his reviews, speeches, and essays, to his literary journalism. For instance, the people in all three of his vacation stories indulge in escapism. They have allowed oblivion to close the door on their consciousness and in exchange they are happy—or at least believe they are happy. Rural Midwesterners get away from their isolated existences by flocking to public events like state fairs to share in community and celebrate land.<sup>34</sup> Passengers aboard the Zenith luxury cruise ship—which Wallace immediately rechristens the Nadir, an ironic joke that loses its humor in the aftermath of his suicide—get away from their landlocked worries via onboard pampering and “Managed Fun,” which infantilizes them to a preconscious state.<sup>35</sup> And carnivores at the Maine Lobster Festival indulge gourmet fantasies by consuming discounted lobster en masse and thus lose their class consciousness.

Each embodiment of escape, however, unsettles Wallace. Unconsciousness leads to group-think, gluttony, and self-delusion. He notes that the fairgoers exhibit a herd-like quality as they unconsciously react to the fair’s various stimuli. Cruise passengers mistake pampering for actual human compassion, and, worse, are never satisfied with the amount of indulgences they receive. And lobster eaters attain a false sense of taste (and class) because they deny the essential questions at the heart of the gourmet experience.

Despite these perditions, the vacationers’ countenance is unchanged because the very structure of these vacations discourages awareness. Of the “Managed Fun” aboard the Nadir, Wallace notes bitterly: “They’ll micromanage every iota of every pleasure-option so that not even the dreadful corrosive action of your own adult consciousness and agency and dread can fuck up your fun. Your troublesome capacities for choice, error, regret, dissatisfaction, and despair will be removed from the equation.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, the vacationers are unaware and unbothered by these contradictions. Wallace, however, is aware of them and feels doubly burdened. He is not only troubled by their lack of consciousness, but the excess of his own weighs on him. During his cruise, Wallace becomes agitated by the insincerity of the staff’s “Professional Smile,” the affected disposition that he calls “the pandemic of the service industry.” He spends three hundred twenty-two words in a footnote chronicling not only the despair-inducing effects of its insincerity, but also how its absence now causes him psychic harm. He wends through various hypothetical situations to reach the conclusion that “the Professional Smile has now even skewed my resentment at the dreaded Professional Scowl.” Clearly shaken by his mind’s capacity to dwell, Wallace ends the footnote despairingly: “What a fucking mess.”<sup>37</sup> This mess embodies what Nietzsche makes clear: a surfeit of consciousness is unhealthy.<sup>38</sup> He wrote, “The concierge maintains order and etiquette in the household of the psyche;

which immediately suggests that there can be no happiness, no serenity, no hope, no pride, no present, without oblivion.<sup>39</sup>

One can find further evidence of the paralyzing effects of consciousness in Wallace's sports journalism. Wallace wrote one essay that is almost a memoir ("Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley"), one book review ("How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart"), and three pieces of literary journalism ("Tennis Player Michael Joyce's Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff About Choice, Freedom, Discipline, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness"; "Democracy and Commerce at the U.S. Open"; and "Roger Federer as Religious Experience") about tennis, which he told *Salon.com* was "the one sport I know enough about for it to be beautiful to me."<sup>40</sup> In all of these pieces, Wallace belabors the point of the sport's difficulty, but he identifies a trait that he believes allows top-tier players to perform at such a high level: like the happy vacationers, successful tennis pros possess an ability to suspend consciousness. He is fascinated by the fact that top athletes bypass their head and simply act. For example, in a footnote in "Tennis Player Michael Joyce..." Wallace admits that he is "kind of awed by Joyce's evident ability to shut down lines of thinking that aren't to his advantage."<sup>41</sup> Wallace himself was a regionally ranked junior tennis player growing up outside of Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, but he said the experience "was also my initiation into true adult sadness."<sup>42</sup> This sadness occurred because he lacked Joyce's ability to close out all distractions; consequently, he never excelled beyond that level. In his review of Austin's book he included a sample meditation on how hard it is not to be consumed by one's thoughts while under both the pressure of an important moment and the gaze of a watchful audience: "Don't think about it ... yeah but except if I'm consciously not thinking about it then doesn't part of me have to think about it in order for me to remember what I'm not supposed to think about ... shut up, quit thinking about it and serve the goddamn ball."<sup>43</sup> Wallace knew what it took to be a great tennis player, but he could not replicate it in himself. He possessed the physical, but not the psychic ability to excel; his lack of oblivion always got in the way.<sup>44</sup> Conversely, while oblivion helps athletes perform, Wallace also believes it prevents them from offering any meaningful insight into their own achievements. He concludes that "blindness and dumbness" are not the price for great athletic gifts, but are actually "its essence," and to write well is to be aware and have access to one's consciousness, and to present honestly life with all its flaws and imperfections; Austin does not have this and Wallace skewers her in a review of her autobiography.<sup>45</sup>

Wallace's excess of consciousness presents itself stylistically in the form of footnotes, which may be the most outwardly identifiable aspect of both his nonfiction and fiction.<sup>46</sup> When considered as literary journalism, Wallace's appropriation of this academic practice broadens the definitional characteristics of the genre, which also include "immersion reporting, complicated story structures, character development, symbolism, voice, a focus on ordinary people ... and accuracy."<sup>47</sup> The notes become an embodiment of those other characteristics; within them Wallace is able to achieve and accentuate each individual feature. At the same time, the notes allow Wallace to mirror his vision of American culture in his writing style:

There's a way, it seems to me, that reality is fractured right now, at least the reality I live; the difficulty about writing about that reality is that text is very linear, it's very unified. I, anyway, am constantly on the lookout for ways to fracture

the text that aren't totally disorienting. I mean, you can take the lines and jumble them up and that's nicely fractured, but nobody's going to read it, right? So, there's got to be some interplay how difficult you make it for the reader and how seductive it is for the reader to do it.<sup>48</sup>

Some critics, however, argued that the numerous footnotes were arrogant and evidence that Wallace needed a better editor.<sup>49</sup> The point that these critics miss, however, is that Wallace could have easily integrated many of the footnotes into the body of his main text. By designating them as notes, he not only complicates the narrative story structure, but he also indicates that they are pieces of information that are important, but not integral. In other words, remnants of his consciousness that he cannot part with. Wallace told Charlie Rose that the "footnotes get very, very addictive and it's almost like having a second voice in your head."<sup>50</sup> They illustrate his physical need, and psychic inability, to not only chronicle, but also interpret all of the stimuli he encounters during his reporting. He once told a reporter that he "received 500,000 discrete bits of information today, of which maybe 25 are important. My job is to make some sense of it."<sup>51</sup> It is a job whose responsibility becomes greater when it is institutionalized by a magazine assignment. Nietzsche characterizes this overtime as a desire for perfectionism. He said people without oblivion "can't be done with anything," but not in a way that is "purely passive succumbing to past impressions"; rather, they exhibit "active not wishing to be done with it."<sup>52</sup> In short, the footnotes exemplify Wallace's inability to be done with anything.

Nietzsche was a trained philologist who scrutinized etymologies in order to unmask firmly held truths and meta-narratives (and in that sense, he was a forerunner of deconstruction and postmodern philosophy). Wallace shared that obsession with genealogies and was, in fact, considered by many as his generation's foremost practitioner of postmodern aesthetics.<sup>53</sup> But despite having a philosophy degree and not being shy about incorporating past thinkers into his work, he only mentioned Nietzsche once in all of his nonfiction.<sup>54</sup> It comes in a parenthetical aside, embedded in the fourteenth footnote, in his review of literary scholar Joseph Franks's five-book study of Fyodor Dostoevsky. But the note is instructive. Wallace writes, "[I]n our own culture of 'enlightened atheism' we are very much Nietzsche's children, his ideological heirs."<sup>55</sup> When Wallace says we are all "Nietzsche's children," he is referring to an atomized culture where individuals eschew meta-narratives and will their ethical belief systems. But Wallace makes it clear in his Kenyon speech that such "enlightened atheism" is, in fact, a false prophet: "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship." For Wallace, it is important to revere "some spiritual-type thing" and not material, ideological, or status gods because "anything else you worship will eat you alive.... It's the truth." This earnest appeal for "keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness" is actually an antidote to the irony that Wallace felt was pervasive and corrosive in American literature and culture, causing him to wonder "why we seem to require of our art an ironic distance from deep convictions or desperate questions."<sup>56</sup> Early in his writing career Wallace noted that irony is "not a rhetorical mode that wears well" because it "serves an almost exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive; a ground clearing.... But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks."<sup>57</sup> Equally, irony is not a useful tool in his literary



journalism. If the entire point is to write “stuff about what it feels like to live, instead of being a relief from what it feels like to live”<sup>58</sup> then irony is, in fact, an impediment to that goal because it widens that gulf between subjectivity and its object.

It is perhaps ironic that Wallace argues so vehemently against irony because many critics felt that it was the defining feature of his literary aesthetic.<sup>59</sup> And while his short stories and novels do exhibit a fractured style and an arch, self-knowing tone, such an overarching label is an easy caricature. It conflates style with content and disregards ideology, whether latent or manifest. Moreover, Wallace’s nonfiction is decidedly not postmodern, ironic, or avant garde. Although it does share the same maximalist writing style as his fiction, and utilizes rhetorical techniques like parody and pastiche, the narratives are also linear, realistic, and, most importantly, earnest. For example, near the end of his story about John McCain’s 2000 presidential run, Wallace stops the article “for a quick *Rolling Stone* PSA” in which he directly addresses young voters:

If you are bored and disgusted by politics and don’t bother to vote, you are in effect voting for the entrenched Establishments of the two major parties, who please rest assured are not dumb, and who are keenly aware that it is in their interests to keep you disgusted and bored and cynical and to give you every possible psychological reason to stay at home doing one-hitters and watching MTV on primary day. By all means stay at home if you want, but don’t bullshit yourself that you’re not voting. In reality, there is *no such thing as not voting*; you either vote by voting, or you vote by staying home and tacitly doubling the value of some Diehard’s vote.<sup>60</sup>

This public service announcement is decidedly unironic and exemplifies the ideological gravity that undergirds Wallace’s journalism.

In a 2006 interview in Italy, Wallace described his writing style as “using postmodern techniques, postmodern aesthetic but using that to discuss or represent very old traditional human verities that have to do with spirituality and emotion and community and ideas that the avant-garde would consider very old-fashioned so that there’s a kind of melding, it’s using postmodern formal techniques for very traditional ends, if there is group . . . that’s the group I want to belong to.”<sup>61</sup> This distinction helps explain why one critic called Wallace an “old-fashioned moralist in postmodern disguise all along.”<sup>62</sup> Still, I would argue that the disguise was as much a projection by critics as it was a cloak to cover Wallace’s true intentions. Both modern and postmodern writers have examined fractured cultural landscapes. The difference is that “the modernist laments fragmentation, while the postmodernist celebrates it.”<sup>63</sup> And Wallace makes it clear throughout his literary journalism that he is not at all happy to be witnessing the events that he does. Of his onboard experience during the Caribbean cruise, Wallace wrote: “I have felt as bleak as I’ve felt since puberty,” later adding, “there’s something deeply mind-fucking about the Type-A-personality service and pampering on the *Nadir*.”<sup>64</sup> And yet, those comments and that story do not come across as smug or condescending. During a radio interview about his Caribbean cruise Wallace explained how “it’s very easy just to be mean. Let’s make some very easy, mordant comments about Sybaritic pleasure and commercial American culture.”<sup>65</sup> Instead, Wallace displayed a strong fidelity to the reader by casting himself as complicit in culture. He spells his writing philosophy out

clearly in letters he wrote to Anne Fadiman's (herself a literary journalist) creative nonfiction writing class at Yale. In two of the letters, published posthumously in *Harper's*, Wallace once again emphasizes his obligation to his readers:

Maybe the root challenge here is to form and honor a fairly rigorous contract with the reader, one that involves honesty and unblinkingness (if the latter's a word). So that the reader gets the overall impression that here's a narrator who's primarily engaged in trying to Tell the Truth . . . and if that truth involves the putziness of other people or events, so be it, but if it involves the narrator's own schmuckiness, limitations, prejudices, foibles, screw-ups at the event, etc., then these get told too—because the truth-as-seen is the whole project here (as opposed to just mockery, or just self-ridicule, or just self-superiority, etc.).<sup>66</sup>

Wallace's commitment to an empathetic awareness of the humanness of himself and his subjects epitomizes Thomas B. Connery's belief that "literary journalism attempts to show readers life and human behavior, even if what actually emerges is life's incomprehensibility and the inexplicability of human behavior."<sup>67</sup>

The literary journalists whom Wallace most closely resembles are Hunter S. Thompson and Joan Didion. Wallace shares Thompson's dark worldview and manic prose style. Thompson's 1970 piece, "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," chronicles "the inexplicability of human behavior" in much the same way as Wallace's later stories about the state fair and his Caribbean cruise. Similarly, Wallace shares Didion's eye for the revealing detail sharp as well as her personal dread. In much the same way that Didion's *The White Album* chronicles the peculiarly personal anomie of the 1960s, Wallace's journalism of the last two decades examines the "lostness" of Generation X.<sup>68</sup>

In his taxonomic essay, "The New Journalism and the Image-World," David Eason categorizes Thompson and Didion as modernists in contrast to realist writers like Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese. According to Eason, "[R]ealism assures its readers that traditional ways of making sense still apply in society," whereas modernist texts "describe the inability of traditional cultural distinctions to order experience."<sup>69</sup> Extending Eason's classification beyond the 1960s, and continuing my earlier argument that he is not postmodern, I would also place Wallace in that modernist camp. Similar to Connery's description, Wallace had little faith that his observations or interpretations would reveal a larger symbolic truth. He once said that writing fiction (and presumably nonfiction) is "about what it is to be a fucking human being."<sup>70</sup> And humanity does not always make sense.

As Sims has written: Literary journalism stands as "a humanistic approach to culture as compared to the scientific, abstract, or indirect approach taken by much standard journalism."<sup>71</sup> Such an understanding helps explain why pieces such as "Consider the Lobster" are more than just individual digressions packed around a central journalistic purpose: "Consider the Lobster" is as much about defining what it means to be a gourmet as it is about animal rights. Although he goes to great lengths to discuss the neurological, bioethical, and philosophical factors that come into play when deciding the ethics of cooking lobsters, he ultimately leaves the matter unresolved—except to resign and say that the decision is still, ultimately, up to an individual's principles. (And that lackluster

conclusion doesn't come until the second paragraph of footnote twenty, two pages from the article's end.) For Wallace, the bigger question is whether or not we should think about these matters at all; whether we should be conscious. He ends the essay with a series of earnest rhetorical questions directed at *Gourmet* readers. "After all," he asks, "isn't being extra aware and attentive and thoughtful about one's food and its overall context part of what distinguishes a real gourmet?"<sup>72</sup> Here Wallace elevates taste to the level of consciousness—and it's not hard to make the leap from that question to the larger ontological question: Isn't questioning everything the essence of what it means to be alive? But just as soon as he raises the proposition he resigns and ends the piece by saying, "There are limits to what even interested persons can ask of each other."<sup>73</sup> Translation: Although these questions may be important, he recognizes that it's too much to ask readers, much less vacationers, to also shed their oblivion.<sup>74</sup>

Wallace's death sent critics and fans alike scrambling back to his texts in search of clues and explanations. But this is a mistake. I abide by *New York Times* critic A. O. Scott's admonition that "the temptation to regard Mr. Wallace's suicide last weekend as anything other than a private tragedy must be resisted." But, Scott admits, "the strength of the temptation should nonetheless be acknowledged. Mr. Wallace was hardly one to conceal himself within his work; on the contrary, his personality is stamped on every page—so much so that the life and the work can seem not just connected but continuous."<sup>75</sup> This is no truer than in his literary journalism, as he told Lipsky: "The *Harper's* pieces were me peeling back my skull. You know, welcome to my mind for 20 pages, see through my eyes."<sup>76</sup>

It is easy to see this anxiety and sadness in Wallace's stories now that he is dead. But the despair, of course, like his decades-long battle with clinical depression, was there all along. And Wallace, in fact, did little to hide it. In this regard, Wallace's two biographers Lipsky and Max misread his non-fiction in their profiles. Lipsky said, "[T]he difference between the fiction and the nonfiction reads as the difference between Wallace's social self and his private self. The essays were endlessly charming.... Wallace's fiction, especially *Infinite Jest*, would turn chilly, dark, abstract. You could imagine the author of the fiction sinking into a depression. The non-fiction writer was an impervious sun."<sup>77</sup> And early in his profile, Max claimed that "depression often figured in his work." He then cited copious details from one alarmingly sad short story called "The Depressed Person." As a counterpoint, Max added: "He never published a word about his own mental illness."<sup>78</sup> While technically correct, it is inaccurate to say that his depression was not apparent in Wallace's nonfiction. For example, early in "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" he devotes an entire section to explaining how being on the ship leaves him suicidal:

The word's overused and banalified now, despair, but it's a serious word, and I'm using it seriously. For me it denotes a simple admixture—a weird yearning for death combined with a crushing sense of my own smallness and futility that presents as a fear of death. It's maybe close to what people call dread or angst. But it's not these things, quite. It's more like wanting to die in order to escape the unbearable feeling of becoming aware that I'm small and weak and selfish and going without any doubt at all to die. It's wanting to jump overboard.<sup>79</sup>

Often, though, Wallace supplanted his anguish in both the readers' and reviewers' minds by

his unexpected description (for example, at the state fair he notes that horses' faces are "long and somehow suggestive of coffins"<sup>80</sup>), his humor (on the first night of his Caribbean cruise he confesses to an "atavistic shark fetish" and asks the wait staff for "a spare bucket of *au jus* drippings from supper so I could try chumming for sharks off the back rail of the top deck"<sup>81</sup>), and his intelligence (in Maine he says that solving the lobster question requires "metaphysics, epistemology, value theory, ethics"<sup>82</sup>). These are the descriptions that readers and critics remember, but it is equally important not to forget that, as Wallace told Charlie Rose, "[U]nfortunately a lot of [the stories] I think are about me."<sup>83</sup>

Wallace often attributed the source of his anxiety to his particular geography. He blames his unease at the fair to the fact that he is "not spiritually Midwestern anymore."<sup>84</sup> Aboard the *Nadir*, he sublimates his nervousness onto the ship's confined space and his semi-agoraphobia, and at the Maine Lobster Festival, he blames his unhappiness on his inability to understand why "so many people's idea of a fun vacation is to don flip-flops and sunglasses and crawl through maddening traffic to loud, hot, crowded tourist venues."<sup>85</sup> Perhaps a more accurate location for his disquietude rests in what he calls his "default setting, hardwired into our boards at birth."<sup>86</sup> In fact, Wallace alludes to his nervous psychological state in several stories. Early in "Getting Away From Pretty Much Already Being Away From It All" he half-jokingly admits that his neurological make-up is "extremely sensitive: carsick, airsick, height sick," before adding hauntingly, "my sister likes to say I'm 'life sick.'" What Wallace meant as a joking aside reveals, when probed, a "great and terrible truth." His sister, Amy Havens Wallace, told *Rolling Stone* that in high school her brother "pinned an article about Kafka to [his bedroom] wall, with the headline the DISEASE WAS LIFE ITSELF."<sup>87</sup> As an adult, Wallace taught and admired Kafka's literature. In 1998, he delivered a speech entitled "Laughing With Kafka" to the PEN American Center. In that speech Wallace claimed that the central joke in Kafka's fiction is "that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home."<sup>89</sup> The joke, of course, is terrifying, and it does not take a substantial leap to recognize that the same paradox presided over Wallace's life and is reflected in his writing.

Although his journalism illustrates how despair results from consciousness, his Kenyon College commencement address argues that consciousness can also be a way to alter or get free "of my natural, hardwired, default setting."<sup>90</sup> Wallace begins his speech by retelling a familiar parable: Two young fish encounter an older fish swimming the opposite direction. He greets them, saying, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" The younger fish swim on for a bit and then one asks the other, "What the hell is water?" Wallace explains that the point of this story is to illustrate that "the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about." Wallace uses the rest of the speech to argue that the value of consciousness is to "keep from going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable, adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone day in and day out." He ends the speech by urging the students to cultivate simple awareness of the seemingly obvious; to repeat the incantation of the enlightened older fish: "This is water. This is water."<sup>91</sup>

But Wallace's advice takes on a darker resonance when it's read against his introduction to the 2007 edition of *Best American Essays*. Again imploring readers to be more conscious of their surroundings, Wallace invokes another water metaphor, this time to emphasize the

difficulty in processing all the information necessary to be a mindful, moral adult: “Or let’s not even mention the amount of research, background, cross-checking, corroboration, and rhetorical parsing required to understand [it all] . . . There’s simply no way. You’d simply drown. We all would.”<sup>92</sup> This contradiction epitomizes the insufferable paradox of Wallace’s philosophical worldview: It is imperative to be conscious, but to be conscious is to be impaired.

In the end, two words resonate for Wallace more than any other: infinite and oblivion. These words not only factor into book and story titles, but also signify an ongoing tension in his work. They are the warring themes that bookend his prose. The endless, limitless, and immeasurable competing with the need to limit, close off, and forget. Infinite consciousness leads to an infinitesimal amount of oblivion.

Wallace reconciled these two forces, if only for a moment, at the end of his state fair story. In the original *Harper’s* publication, he ends the piece with a revelation that the real draw for fairgoers is not the rides and shows, but the crowd itself. In the collected essays edition, however, Wallace moved that insight to the middle of the story and instead allowed his final experience at the fair to resonate with the reader. The fact that Wallace changed the ending underscores the resonance of this final scene where he witnesses a thrill seeker being harnessed and hoisted into the air on a ride called the SKYCOASTER. A crane raises the man hundreds of feet off the ground, suspending him above the onlookers, before a clip is released and the man is dispatched to swing like a pendulum across the fairgrounds. The tension is too much for Wallace. Just before the man drops, Wallace dissociates. He closes his eyes. He confesses, “[J]ust then I lose my nerve, in my very last moment at the Fair . . . and I decline to be part of this, even as witness—and I find, again, in extremis, access to childhood’s other worst nightmare, the only sure way to obliterate all; and the sun and the sky and plummeting go out like a light.”<sup>93</sup> And that’s how the story ends. A foreshadow of a more lasting getaway, a more permanent oblivion.



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### Endnotes

1. David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 11, 55.
2. “Plain Old Untrendy Troubles and Emotions,” *The Guardian*, 20 September 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/sep/20/fiction>.

3. A. O. Scott, "The Best Mind of His Generation," *The New York Times*, 20 September 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/weekinreview/21scott.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1&hp](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/weekinreview/21scott.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&hp).
4. Jonathan Franzen, "Tribute" (Presentation, "Celebrating the Life and Work of David Foster Wallace," Skirball Center for Performing Arts, New York University, 23 October 2008), collected in *Celebrating the Life and Work of David Foster Wallace*, [http://snevil.com/DFW/Memorial%20book/DFW\\_Memorial\\_1stpass.pdf](http://snevil.com/DFW/Memorial%20book/DFW_Memorial_1stpass.pdf).
5. Motoko Rich, "Another David Foster Wallace Biography Is Planned," *The New York Times*, 26 June 2009, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/26/another-david-foster-wallace-biography-is-planned>. Also, Little, Brown and Company will publish Wallace's unfinished novel *The Pale King* in 2010. After his death, the company also collected and published Wallace's Kenyon speech in a devotional-sized hardcover and gave it the title, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts Delivered on a Significant Occasion About Living a Compassionate Life*.
6. Will Blythe, quoted in Frank Bruni, "The Grunge American Novel," *The New York Times*, March 24, 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/03/24/magazine/the-grunge-american-novel.html>. Michiko Kakutani, "A Country Dying of Laughter," *The New York Times*, 13 February 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/13/books/books-of-the-times-a-country-dying-of-laughter-in-1079-pages.html>.
7. Laura Miller, "The Road to Babbittville," *The New York Times*, 16 March 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/03/16/reviews/970316.miller.html>. Adam Begley, dust jacket of *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*.
8. Jeffrey Eugenides, dust jacket, *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*.
9. Norman Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 7.
10. David Foster Wallace, "Introduction: Deciderization 2007—A Special Report," in *The Best American Essays 2007*, ed. David Foster Wallace (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), xxiii.
11. David Foster Wallace, interview with Dave Eggers, *The Believer*, November 2003, [http://www.believermag.com/issues/200311/?read=interview\\_wallace](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200311/?read=interview_wallace).
12. Wallace, "Introduction," xxiv.
13. Norman Sims, introduction to *The Literary Journalists*, ed. Norman Sims (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), 6.
14. John C. Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 132.
15. Kathy Roberts Forde, *Literary Journalism on Trial: Masson v. New Yorker and the First Amendment* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 205.

16. Wallace never considered himself a journalist (much less a political one), and he would often include his own reportorial ineptitude in his stories. For example, reporting from the Illinois State Fair he says, "I ask a kid to describe the taste of his Funnel Cake and he runs away." Later, while examining yearly prize-winning vegetable displays, he encounters a 17.6-pound zucchini. All he can say is, "One big zucchini, alright." These and other instances indicate to the reader that the traditional topics and tendencies of journalism fail to capture much beyond surface-level description. David Foster Wallace, "Getting Away From Already Being Pretty Much Away From It All" in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 128. Readers of his Caribbean cruise article will find further evidence of Wallace's skepticism of conventional journalism. He begins the third section of that story with an anecdote about a sixteen-year-old man who had recently jumped to his death from an upper deck of a similar cruise ship. He concludes, "The news version was that it had been an unhappy adolescent love thing, a shipboard romance gone bad, etc. I think part of it was something else, something there's no way a real news story could cover." David Foster Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 261.
17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Anchor Books, 1956; reprint 1990), 189.
18. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 189.
19. David Foster Wallace, "Consider the Lobster," in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 243.
20. *ibid.*
21. *ibid.*
22. *ibid.*, 247.
23. Wallace, "Introduction," xiv.
24. In chronological order, those pieces are: "Getting Away From Already Being Pretty Much Away From It All," "Democracy and Commerce at the U.S. Open," "David Lynch Keeps His Head," "Tennis Player Michael Joyce's Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff About Choice, Freedom, Discipline, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness," "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," "Big Red Son," "Up Simba: Seven Days on the Trail With an Anticandidate," "The View From Mrs. Thompson's," "Consider the Lobster," "Host," and "Federer as Religious Experience." All of these pieces, except "Democracy and Commerce at the U.S. Open" and "Federer as Religious Experience," are collected in either *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* or *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*. Wallace revised and renamed nearly all of his nonfiction from its original publication form to its collected book form. He makes it clear on the copyright page of both books that he prefers the book versions of his pieces. In *Consider the Lobster* he writes, "The following pieces were originally published in edited, heavily edited, or (in at least one instance) bowdlerized form in the following books and periodicals." Therefore, all of my citations will refer to the book versions of his essays and journalism because they represent Wallace's vision for them.
25. David Foster Wallace, "Big Red Son," in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 17.

26. David Foster Wallace, "Up, Simba: Seven Days on the Trail of an Anticandidate," in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 187.
27. David Foster Wallace, "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York, Little Brown and Company, 1997), 12.
28. Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing...*, 261.
29. Their respective *Harper's* titles are "Ticket to the Fair" and "Shipping Out: On the (Nearly Lethal) Comforts of a Luxury Cruise."
30. David Lipsky, "The Lost Years and Last Days of David Foster Wallace," *Rolling Stone*, 30 October 2008, [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the\\_lost\\_years\\_last\\_days\\_of\\_david\\_foster\\_wallace](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the_lost_years_last_days_of_david_foster_wallace).
31. *Ibid.*, 240.
32. *Ibid.*, 240.
33. Wallace, "Introduction," xxi.
34. Wallace, "Getting Away...," 108.
35. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing...," 320.
36. *ibid.*, 267.
37. *ibid.*, 290.
38. Wallace once told Lipsky: "There's good self-consciousness, and then there's toxic, paralyzing, raped-by-psyche-Bedouins self-consciousness." Lipsky, "The Last Days...," [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the\\_lost\\_years\\_last\\_days\\_of\\_david\\_foster\\_wallace](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the_lost_years_last_days_of_david_foster_wallace).
39. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 189.
40. David Foster Wallace, interview with Laura Miller, *Salon.com*, 8 March 1996, <http://www.salon.com/09/features/wallace1.html>.
41. Wallace, "Tennis Player Michael Joyce's Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff About Choice, Freedom, Discipline, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 222.
42. Wallace, "Derivative Sport...," 12.
43. David Foster Wallace, "How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart," in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 154.
44. This theme is also evident in Wallace's short story, "Good Old Neon," where the narrator responds to his analyst's question about whether he plays chess by saying, "I used to in middle school but quit because I couldn't be as good as I eventually wanted to be, how frustrating it was to get just good enough to know what getting really good at it would be like but not being able to get that good, etc." David Foster Wallace, "Good Old Neon" in *Oblivion* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2004), 146.
45. Wallace, "How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart," 155.
46. In fact, Wallace footnotes his footnotes and then occasionally appends those notes with asterisks and daggers and whole mini-essay interpolations.



47. Sims, *True Stories*, 6-7. Wallace, himself the son of two professors, believed that actual academic prose was the epitome of bad writing. In a footnote in his review Bryan Garner's *Modern American Usage*, he both excoriated and lampooned the genre: "The truth is that most of U.S. academic prose is appalling—pompous, abstruse, claustral, inflated, euphuistic, pleonastic, solectistic, sesquipedalian, Heliogabaline, occluded, obscure, jargon-ridden, empty: resplendently dead." David Foster Wallace, "Authority and American Usage," in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 81.
48. David Foster Wallace, interview with Charlie Rose, *The Charlie Rose Show*, 27 March 1997, <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/5639>. Wallace had a tendency to repeat himself in his interviews, often drawing his responses from his written work. Several years after his appearance on *The Charlie Rose Show* he told Steve Paulson of the public radio program *To the Best of Our Knowledge*: "I often feel very fragmented and as if I have a symphony of different voices and voice overs and factoids going on all the time and digressions on digression on digressions. I know that people who don't much care for my stuff see a lot of the stuff as just sort of vomiting it out. That's at least my intent. What's hard is to seem very digressive and bent in on yourself and diffracted and also have there be patterns and significances about it and it takes a lot of drafts, but it probably comes out just looking like a manic, mad monologue." David Foster Wallace, interview with Steve Paulson, *To the Best of Our Knowledge*, 19 July 1998, <http://www.wpr.org/book/98book3.htm>.
49. "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" contains one hundred thirty-seven footnotes in ninety-seven pages of text, while the three hundred eighty-eight endnotes in his novel *Infinite Jest* span ninety-six pages, leading Kakutani, in her *Times* review, to quote Henry James in calling the novel a "loose baggy monster."
50. Wallace, interview with Charlie Rose, <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/5639>
51. Lipsky, "The Last Days..." [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the\\_lost\\_years\\_last\\_days\\_of\\_david\\_foster\\_wallace](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the_lost_years_last_days_of_david_foster_wallace).
52. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 190.
53. For a stunning example of Wallace's interest in, and command of U.S. lexicography, see his sixty-one-page review of Bryan A. Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (Oxford University Press), first published in *Harper's* as "Tense Present: Democracy, English, and the Wars Over Usage" (April 2001) and then collected in *Consider the Lobster* as "Authority and American Usage."
54. The title of Wallace's senior philosophy thesis at Amherst is "Richard Taylor's 'Fatalism' and the Semantics of Physical Modality." That same year he also wrote a four-hundred-page novel for his senior English thesis in English, which later became his first novel, *The Broom of the System*.
55. David Foster Wallace, "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky," in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 264.
56. Wallace, "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky," 271.
57. David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 67.
58. Lipsky, "The Last Days..." [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the\\_lost\\_years\\_last\\_days\\_of\\_david\\_foster\\_wallace](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the_lost_years_last_days_of_david_foster_wallace).

59. In her somewhat controversial review of *Infinite Jest*, Kakutani called Wallace a “pushing-the-envelope postmodernist.” In her “Appreciation” of him after his death she referenced his “mastery of postmodern pyrotechnics.” Michiko Kakutani, “Exuberant Riffs on a Land Run Amok,” *The New York Times*, 14 September 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/15/books/15kaku.html>.
60. David Foster Wallace, “Up Simba: Seven Days on the Trail of an Anticandidate,” in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 207.
61. David Foster Wallace, interview, *Le Conversazioni*, 2 July 2006, [http://www.leconversazioni.it/index.php?lingua=2&sezione=programma&evento=1&edizione=2&scheda=19&area=&ext ra=&page\\_news=1&page\\_multi=1](http://www.leconversazioni.it/index.php?lingua=2&sezione=programma&evento=1&edizione=2&scheda=19&area=&ext ra=&page_news=1&page_multi=1).
62. Pankaj Mishra, “The Postmodern Moralist,” *The New York Times*, 12 March 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/12/books/review/12mishra.html>.
63. Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1995), 84.
64. Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing . . .*, 258, 298.
65. Wallace, interview with Steve Paulson, <http://www.wpr.org/book/98book3.htm>.
66. David Foster Wallace, “It All Gets Quite Tricky,” *Harper’s*, November 2008, 32. In an interview with David Lipsky in the late 1990s, Wallace admitted that in his journalism, “There’s a certain persona created, that’s a little stupider and schmuckier than I am.” Yet his allegiance to the reader is real. In “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again” he spends a substantial amount of time criticizing the acclaimed author Frank Conroy for a promotional essay he wrote on behalf of the cruise ship. The Nadir’s brochure does not present the essay as an advertisement, but rather as an “authentic response” to his experience aboard. Part of what bothers Wallace is his admiration of Conroy, especially his memoir *Stop-Time*, which Wallace confesses “is one of the books that first made poor old yours truly want to try to be a writer.” Wallace finds Conroy’s essaymercial “graceful and lapidary and attractive and assuasive. I submit that it is also completely sinister and despair-producing and bad” because “an essay’s fundamental obligations are supposed to be to the reader. The reader, on however unconscious a level, understands this, and thus tends to approach an essay with a relatively high level of openness and credulity.” The essay is one more instance of the ship’s dubious advertisements which “don’t flatter your adult agency, or even ignore it—they supplant it.” The Conroy essay is a prime example of this loss of control. The attempt is to “micromanage not only one’s perception of a 7NC Luxury Cruise, but even one’s own interpretation and articulation of those perceptions. . . . As my week on the Nadir wore on, I began to see this essaymercial as a perfect ironic reflection of the mass-market-Cruise experience itself.” Wallace, “A Supposedly Fun Thing. . .,” 288-291.
67. Thomas B. Connery, *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism: Representative Writers in an Emerging Genre* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), 8.
68. In an interview with Laura Miller of *Salon.com*, Wallace described living in America at the turn of the millennium as “particularly sad . . . something that doesn’t have very much to do with physical circumstances, or the economy, or any of the stuff that gets talked about in the news. It’s more like stomach-level sadness. I see it in myself and my friends in different ways. It manifests itself as a kind of lostness.” Wallace, interview with Laura Miller, <http://www.salon.com/09/features/wallace1.html>.

69. David Eason, "The New Journalism and the Image-World," in *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Norman Sims (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990; reprint, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 194.
70. Wallace, interview with Laura Miller, <http://www.salon.com/09/features/wallace1.html>.
71. Sims, *True Stories*, 12.
72. Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, 254.
73. *Ibid.*, 257.
74. Wallace's conclusions at the Maine Lobster Festival are variations on a theme he chronicled earlier in his career. He came to the same conclusion during his Caribbean cruise: "Here's the thing: A vacation is a respite from unpleasantness, and since consciousness of death and decay are unpleasant, it may seem weird that Americans' ultimate fantasy vacation involves being plunked down in an enormous primordial engine of death and decay." Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing....," 263. He also believes it is also the reason that David Lynch's film *Fire Walk With Me* got terrible reviews: "It required of us an empathetic confrontation with the exact same muddy *bothness* in ourselves and our intimates that makes the real world of moral selves so tense and uncomfortable, a *bothness* we go to the movies to get a couple hours fucking relief from." David Foster Wallace, "David Lynch Keeps His Head," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York, Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 211.
75. Scott, "The Best Mind of His Generation," [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/weekinreview/21scott.html?\\_r=2&pagewanted=1&hp](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/weekinreview/21scott.html?_r=2&pagewanted=1&hp).
76. Lipsky, "The Lost Years..." [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the\\_lost\\_years\\_last\\_days\\_of\\_david\\_foster\\_wallace](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the_lost_years_last_days_of_david_foster_wallace).
77. *ibid.*
78. D. T. Max, "The Unfinished," *The New Yorker*, 20 March 2008, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/09/090309fa\\_fact\\_max](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/09/090309fa_fact_max).
79. Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing...*, 261.
80. Wallace, "Getting Away..." 92.
81. Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing...*, 261.
82. Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, 246.
83. Wallace, interview with Charlie Rose, <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/5639>.
84. Wallace, "Getting Away..." 132.
85. Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, 240.
86. Wallace, *This Is Water*, 38.
87. Wallace, "Getting Away..." 99.
88. Lipsky, "The Last Days..." [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the\\_lost\\_years\\_last\\_days\\_of\\_david\\_foster\\_wallace](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the_lost_years_last_days_of_david_foster_wallace).
89. David Foster Wallace, "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness From Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed," in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 64-65.
90. Wallace, *This Is Water*, 44.
91. Wallace, *This Is Water*, 3-4, 8, 60, 132-133.
92. Wallace, "Introduction," xxii.
93. Wallace, "Getting Away," 137.



## Book Reviews

Jan Whitt on

*The Rediscovered Writings of Rose Wilder Lane: Literary Journalist*

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John S. Bak on

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and the Redemptive Power of Music*

By Steve Lopez



### ***The Rediscovered Writings of Rose Wilder Lane: Literary Journalist***

Edited by Amy Mattson Lauters. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007.

Hardback, 192 pp., \$29.95.

**Reviewed by Jan Whitt, University of Colorado, U.S.A.**

For those of us who grew up watching *Little House on the Prairie* (1974-1983) and reading the books that inspired the television series, there is something indescribably comforting and reassuring about the stories told by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Played by Melissa Gilbert, Laura Ingalls was one of the few television heroines during the 1970s and 1980s.

The tales of childhood innocence into experience, of adventure in the wilderness, of achievement in the classroom, and of townspeople and farmers who believed in generosity, community, and commitment to family were significant to a generation of television viewers and reinforced a particular worldview. It is well known that Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote a series of books, one of which is entitled *Little House on the Prairie*, although it is less well known that her daughter Rose helped her edit them. Even less well known is that Rose Wilder Lane herself produced a significant body of writing.

A former journalist and editor of *The Rediscovered Writings of Rose Wilder Lane: Literary Journalist*, Amy Mattson Lauters describes her delight when she learned that “baby Rose” in the final book of the *Little House* series had been a writer and a journalist. In graduate school, she formally began to explore the life and work of Rose Wilder Lane. Now, as an assistant professor in the Department of Mass Communications at Minnesota State University in Mankato, Lauters has produced a collection that is especially valuable to those interested in history, journalism, literature, regionalism, and women and gender studies.

Although Lauters raises the tantalizing idea that Lane belongs in the company of other women literary journalists, she does not develop her argument as well as she might. Lane’s journalistic articles and essays, commentary and editorials, and personal reflections suggest that she is capable of great range but do not necessarily make a case for the book’s subhead, *Literary Journalist*.

In the nine-page introduction, two pages are devoted to the complex and often perplexing genre that stymies those of us who debate the place of American naturalism and realism, memoir, novels based on fact, and other literary movements and genres in art journalism, creative non-fiction, literary journalism, and literary nonfiction. Lauters lists several characteristics of literary journalism: One, many literary journalists once worked for newspapers and magazines;

two, what they write is often factually verifiable; three, their writing emphasizes narrative and literary techniques; and four, their writing suggests a larger or universal truth. Although these characteristics are present in the writing of many of those considered literary journalists, they do not constitute an exhaustive or even comprehensive list, and hence Lauters's claim that Lane is a literary journalist is unconvincing.

This is not to say, of course, that *The Rediscovered Writings of Rose Wilder Lane* does not stand on its own as a compelling contribution to the study of women writers who have been overlooked. Among other things, Lane was a novelist, political essayist, and short story writer. Her commentaries and editorials dealing with historical events and women's issues are colorful and compelling.

From articles in *Sunset* magazine in 1918 to those in *Woman's Day* in 1965, Lane addresses American mythologies such as freedom from government interference in our personal lives, individualism, and self-reliance. Lane writes about having been an extra in a Douglas Fairbanks film. She interviews film producer and director D. W. Griffith. She writes about women with families during wartime. In addition, Lane worked as a ghostwriter for business and political celebrities such as Henry Ford and Herbert Hoover, respectively.

In a study that is useful in classes in American culture, literary journalism, popular culture, and women's issues, Lauters draws from work Lane produced for *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper's*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Sunset*, *Woman's Day*, and other publications. One of the highlights of *The Rediscovered Writings of Rose Wilder Lane* is an article about Vietnam written when Lane was seventy-eight years old.

Those who have read the *Little House* books or watched the television series loosely based on the narratives are already familiar with a few facts about Rose Wilder Lane. Born December 5, 1886, in De Smet, South Dakota, Lane was the daughter of Laura Ingalls Wilder and Almanzo Wilder. She lived for a time with her aunt, Eliza Jane Wilder Thayer, also featured in the television series *Little House on the Prairie*. Rose Wilder met and married Claire Gillette Lane in California, although the marriage was a difficult one. Lane was eighty-one when she agreed to report on international affairs for *Woman's Day* and died in her sleep the day before she was scheduled to depart.

Lauters asserts that Lane made great strides as she developed as a writer, publishing "biographies, travelogues, political commentary, news features, short fiction stories, fiction novels, documentary novels, history, and how-to features." (8) "The sheer volume and variety of her work makes it difficult to place her into any one category as a writer, but emphasis has been placed in previous scholarship on her fiction writing and on her political commentary," (8) Lauters writes. She argues that Lane's articles taken as a whole "shade in a rainbow of genres that is the signature of a literary journalist." (9)

*The Rediscovered Writings of Rose Wilder Lane* is divided into eight sections, making further reference to Lane's experimentation and facility with various genres unnecessary. Section one, "Mrs. Lane Goes to Hollywood," includes three essays for *Sunset* magazine; section two, "Mrs. Lane Writes About the War," includes an article for *Sunset* and one for *Ladies Home Journal*; and section three, "Mrs. Lane Writes for the Red Cross," includes "The Children's Crusade," a heartfelt analysis of the plight of families in Europe after World War I, and "Mother No. 22999," an article about maternal health. Both of these articles for the Red Cross were published in *Good Housekeeping*.

Section four, "Mrs. Lane Writes From Abroad," provides travelogues for *World Traveler* and

*Harper's*. Section five, "Mrs. Lane Writes About Herself," includes an article for *Cosmopolitan*, compellingly entitled "I, Rose Wilder Lane, Am the Only Truly HAPPY Person I Know, and I Discovered the Secret of Happiness on the Day I Tried to Kill Myself." Section six, "In Mrs. Lane's Opinion," is a collection of editorials about everything from cultural constructions of masculinity to how women can become more politically engaged. Section seven, "Mrs. Lane Writes From the Heartland," and section eight, "Mrs. Lane's Final Work," take the reader from the American Midwest to Vietnam.

Lane's writing often is descriptive and engaging. Her personal voice—even in her news features and even when she is not writing in the first person—is obvious: "After all, studio children are what their mothers make them, as all children are." (17) Leads are often brief and powerful, as in an article for *Sunset* magazine: "It all happened because Douglas Fairbanks is a philosopher." (24) Women's issues are at the heart of many of Lane's articles, as in the first sentence of a paragraph in "The Girls They Leave Behind Them": "There is no normal girlhood left in the civilized world. Women today are in the swirl of the world-wide whirlpool; they have been swept from safe moorings of home and habit as ruthlessly as their sweethearts and brothers." (33)

Lane's description, while spare and direct, is often evocative. The essay "The Children's Crusade" begins: "In the houses on that pleasant American street, it was not necessary to look at the clock to know that it was noon." (48) Lane's personal journalism, too, is descriptive and is peppered with vulnerability and candor: "When we were married we would be happy ever after. The numbers of persons who are not happy, though married, should have suggested to us that there was a flaw somewhere in our reasoning. But it didn't. We were married, and we were not happy." (94)

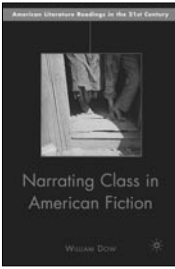
The collection includes a few references that suggest Lane reflected on the nature of writing. In an essay for *The Writer*, Lane states, "Fiction writing is essentially an auto-hypnotic process. No story is real to the reader unless it is real to the writer, and the only experience which we know to be unreal but feel to be real is a dream." (100)

A committed and meticulous scholar, Lauters has much to contribute to the discourse on women and media, and whether or not Lane's writing can be characterized as literary journalism is in some ways unimportant. There is no doubt that Lane merits inclusion in this and other collections about women writers who are traditionally overlooked. As Lauters writes:

Each of the stories reprinted here was chosen because it in some way reveals the inner woman behind the text, reveals her particular truths, and encapsulates a watershed moment for her or for the times in which she lived. Together, printed in more or less chronological order, the articles here tell the story of a writer whose first priority, at times, was to put food on her table; a writer whose philosophies stiffened and strengthened into principles that infused all of her work, fiction and nonfiction alike, with American values as she viewed them; and a writer who assumed the mantle of custodian to Americanism through women's arts. (9)

Lauters's characteristically descriptive and compelling prose and her investment in making Lane's contributions known to the reading public make *The Rediscovered Writings of Rose Wilder Lane* a distinct treasure.





### *Narrating Class in American Fiction*

By William Dow. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Hardback, 271 pp., \$89.95.

Reviewed by John S. Bak, Nancy-Université, France

In examining the “narration and narrating” (15) of class in America’s realist literature from 1850 to its social realist literature of the 1930s and 1940s, *Narrating Class in American Fiction* proffers what William Dow calls “a rethinking, reworking, and reformulation of class” (8) as a heuristic method for literary criticism on a par with those of race and gender today. Because many of the American writers discussed here also published nonfiction that complements their literary representations of the under- and working classes, Dow feels that they should be considered as having contributed to “the legacy of literary journalism, whose cultural interventions and inscriptions of class must be more clearly recognized.” (15-16) A book, then, equally about canonized American literature *and* literary journalism, *Narrating Class in American Fiction* not only provides ample proof that any study of class, literary and journalistic alike, is unavoidably phenomenological in nature, but also counters existing claims from academics in both disciplines that the two genres are ideologically irreconcilable.

Dow builds his argument around the polemical stance that class should not to be taken as a “totalized structure” but rather as a “dynamic, discursive product of history” (219) that informs us less about a writer’s political motivations than about the discourse that that writer uses to represent the socially disenfranchised of a given political economy. At the conclusion of his opening summary of how class has been perceived in philosophy and in literary criticism over the last century as the byproduct of these political and economic interrogations, Dow offers to view class as a literary aesthetic alongside of the more traditional definition as “an objective set of material conditions (or relations) that can be observed in society.” (219) Literary representations of class, he claims throughout this study, are “most visible in [their] discursive and aesthetic effects,” (16) with discourse being one of the best “means to access the way class becomes part of subjectivity: how it forms, in conjunction with race and gender, a discursive subject.” (1) Given these theoretical parameters, Dow then proceeds to examine how Walt Whitman, Rebecca Harding Davis, Stephen Crane, Jack London, Jean Toomer, Meridel Le Sueur, Agnes Smedley, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Agee all adopt a “class vocabulary” in their imaginative and nonfiction writings that invokes the real language of experience to “bridge the abyss” (89) between their working-class subjects and their middle-class readers and to represent “a reality lived by others in the face of readership often far from such realities.” (219)

Essentially relational like class itself, language more than politics lies at the heart of class representations in American literature, Dow argues. Democracy, for example, is less a “realizable mode of form of government” (18) than a classed body politic for Whitman, who endeavors to overcome national sectarianism with literary tropes that bind laborers and newsmen, poets, and immigrants. For London and Le Sueur, “class is a matter of a corporealized identity” (76, 141) based on “real experience as the legitimating source of narrative authority.” (219) And if Harding Davis and Crane depict class through a language of performance that reproduces the social transformations responsible for growing urban class divisions at the turn of the century, Toomer, Hurston, and Smedley all view class in the opening decades of the twentieth century as a means to negotiate an identity, racial and sexual alike. Each of these writers, Dow posits, demonstrates that class is to be expressed “in language rather than in the material conditions of production,” (8) and privileging the latter configuration alone in one’s literary analysis of their work not only risks distorting that writer’s relationship to his or her subject but also diminishes their capacity to represent the “truth value” of their subject’s reality, no matter how harsh that life may seem to their middle-class readers. And while all literature engages with social nature in general, literary journalism in particular best puts these classed elements of aesthetic representation into relief, since writers position themselves here more transparently between the subject and the reader than they do in fiction.

Since most of these writers were “involved with journalistic writings that fused with their literary objectives” (2)—in effect, “problematizing . . . distinctions between literature and journalism” (97)—Dow includes at the end of each chapter a discussion of that writer’s literary journalism and contribution to the debate over the literary merits of phenomenological writings. And it is here that readers of this journal may find the book most beneficial. Whitman, for example—who printed his famous preface to *Leaves of Grass* in two columns to make it appear like a news story—was not just a journalist in order to finance his poetic aspirations; rather, his many journalistic pieces provide “a blueprint for his class sympathies” (37) as explored in *Leaves of Grass*. A similar case concerns the novelist Crane, who wrote much of his literary journalism after his novellas *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and *The Red Badge of Courage*, (66) disproving the widely accepted theory that a writer’s journalistic efforts prepare him to become a novelist: “Crane’s performative artistry [as Dow argues for *Maggie*] can help explain the complex class subtexts in his newspaper pieces of the 1890s.” (65)

For Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* “is based on how an observer slides into his role as participant to justify his truth claims,” (94) while his journalistic writings, “The Dignity of Dollars” (1900) and “Mexico’s Army and Ours” (1914), “purport to tell the ‘truth’ while at the same time differentiating themselves from nonfiction, and, for London, remaking the relationship of truth to his ideological agenda.” (97) As for Le Sueur,

[H]er reportage/journalism [was] a catalyst for social change, bringing her readers the direct experience of injustice, poverty, and oppression. Yet, like [Dorothy] Day, Le Sueur also believed that the most compelling way to get her political ideas across was to use fictional techniques. Thus, she deployed scene setting, “lyricism,” characterization, juxtaposition of contrasting images, tropic language, and reportorial realism in ways and degrees rarely found in conventional journalism. (154)

And finally, Agnes Smedley's "insistence immersion" (a term Dow describes earlier in the book to mean a writer's willing or unwilling immersion in an environment that he or she wants, through factual reporting and fictional representation, to change and not just to describe) demonstrates how documentary case-studies—"self-conscious 'ethnographies'"—like hers on radicalized working-class women have "address[ed] the relationships of their narrators to their subjects and readers." (14)

In their fiction, just as in their literary journalism, each of these authors sought to represent class via language rather than situation alone, thereby narrowing the epistemological gaps between writer-subject-reader. Class representations in literature, as in literary journalism, are not intended to be divisive but rather inclusive, and only by breaking down those class barriers between subject and reader through language can a writer hope to impress upon the upper and middle classes the need to improve social conditions of the poor and to respect the positions and "truth" values of the underprivileged. One way to accomplish such a feat, Dow proposes in his conclusion, is to "elevat[e] the genre of reality-based writings" (220) and thus narrow the existing divide between literary journalism and literary criticism:

What are the consequences of documentary fiction and its claims of "truth" for literary studies? . . . What are the formal and political issues raised by literary journalism: namely, the problematics of capturing "realism," the desire for the objectivity of "experience," the dangers of manipulation and propaganda, the narrative problems inherent in the documentary synthesis of bringing together the culture in a comprehensible whole? (220)

The ability to actualize such a paradigm shift, Dow optimistically suggests, is within reach, and *Narrating Class in American Fiction* can be seen as one "literary" step, among the several "journalistic" studies today, toward that goal of drawing literature and journalism closer together.

*Narrating Class in American Fiction* is indeed a fine book, but not without its minor flaws, in particular the manner in which Dow structures several of his chapters. Chapter five on Le Sueur, for example, reads like two separate chapters fused together. After nearly twenty pages on *Salute to Spring*, which ends in a conclusion that we think is to this chapter, we are launched into another lengthy subchapter of twelve pages on her literary journalism. Like many in the book, this digression is not without interest. In it, Dow refutes Robert Boynton's claim that the public-private divide was initially bridged by these writers Dow discusses in this book and not, as Boynton claims, by the "close-to-the-skin" reporting of the New New Journalists. But this subchapter reads more like a separate article on Le Sueur's literary journalism than a conclusion to this chapter of the book or as a transition to the following two chapters on Hurston and Smedley and on Agee.

This criticism, it should be reiterated here, is minor in a work of such quality. *Narrating Class in American Fiction* responds confidently to the glaring need not only in literary studies for class-based analyses that moves beyond issues of capital and material production but also in literary journalism studies for textual criticism written by literary scholars that complements the work already done by journalism scholars. With a foot firmly planted in both disciplines, Dow sets out a path here that other literary scholars of journalistic nonfiction would be advised to follow.



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

By Doug Underwood. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2008.  
Hardback, 269 pp., \$90.

**Reviewed by Kathy Roberts Forde, University of South Carolina, U.S.A.**

**T**he 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.

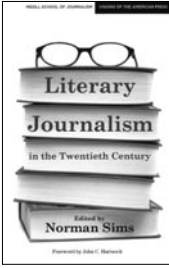
Viewed from another angle, the strength of the book—its survey of three centuries—is also a weakness. Historians often face vexing problems in determining how best to divide the past into useful and sound periods of study. In this case, the historical narrative is at times troubled by unclearly delineated 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.



### *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*

Edited by Norman Sims. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2008. Originally published New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. Paperback, 297 pp., \$19.95.

Reviewed by James Silas Rogers, University of St. Thomas, U.S.A.

The first challenge a reviewer faces is that of making sure that he or she responds to the book at hand, rather than to the book the reviewer would have written. When the book is a reprint—as in this case, a title in the Medill Visions of the American Press series, with a new, perceptive foreword by John C. Hartsock—the reviewer contends not only with the author’s original work, but also with the publisher’s judgment that the title is, indeed, deserving of renewed attention.

Sims’s volume withstands scrutiny on both fronts. *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century* made a major contribution when it first appeared in 1990, and now the Medill reissue—under the general editorship of David Abrahamson—reminds us of its centrality to the development of literary journalism studies. Although certain of the essays hold up better than others—a contributed volume is always a constellation in which some stars are brighter than others—this remains a charter document. In many ways, Sims’s book made it possible to teach literary journalism as a distinct genre. Now, it assumes an historic standing as a turning point in the discipline’s understanding of itself.

And the central question in the endeavor of literary journalism studies understanding was, and is, that of definition: the genre remains a slippery beast, and in recent history, seems to risk being absorbed into the umbrella term “creative nonfiction.” For a long time those who sought to identify literary journalism had to fall back on a variation of Justice Potter Stewart’s infamous remark on obscenity, that he might not be able to define it but he knew it when he saw it. Or they could fall back on the default answer that literary journalism was whatever it was those whiz kids called the New Journalists were up to.

This volume refutes any such facile definitions. To my mind, the most compelling reasons for reprinting this book are found in the five essays in part one, which broadly address the history of the genre; these chapters make it impossible to settle for the claim that literary journalism emerged full grown from Tom Wolfe’s forehead (a legend that Wolfe himself seemed only too happy to promote). A number of twentieth-century titans come under examination. John Steinbeck’s critical reputation has admittedly fallen like a stone off a bridge lately, but *The Grapes of Wrath* remains a formidable book. William Howarth’s essay shows that much of the novel’s power comes from its fruitful intertextuality with Steinbeck’s earlier practice as a

reporter and documentarian. He concludes that the 1939 novel “endures as literature because it sprang from journalism, a strong and vibrant mother.” Ronald Weber engages with Hemingway’s *Death in the Afternoon*, *The Green Hills of Africa*, and *A Moveable Feast* not as puzzling departures from the fiction but as assertions of Hemingway’s restless talent, and as palpably more personal than the novels and short stories. In what Weber calls the “fragile mosaic” of *Feast*, the blurring of fact and fiction is especially vexing. But that is one of the inescapable conclusions to be drawn from Sims’s collection: that boundary crossing is itself a defining attribute of literary journalism. (And, indeed, the permeability of boundaries is the explicit point of Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s essay in part two, “The Borderlands of Culture,” which considers experimental journalism from James Agee, Tillie Olsen, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Gloria Anzaldúa.)

Sims’s own contribution to the volume, “Joseph Mitchell and *The New Yorker* Nonfiction Writers,” is indispensable to anyone writing about Mitchell (who belongs on any shortlist of candidates for the title of the twentieth century’s finest stylist). The Mitchell enigma of non-publication rivals that of J. D. Salinger or Ralph Ellison, and Sims’s essay—based on the only interview Mitchell ever granted after *Joe Gould’s Secret* in 1964—opens one of the very few windows we have on the last three decades of the author’s life.

The essay that opens this historiographic section is Thomas B. Connery’s “A Third Way to Tell the Story: American Literary Journalism at the Turn of the Century.” Connery scuttles any residual thought that the New Journalists were, in fact, “new.” He retrieves journalism written more than a century ago that refused to limit itself to mere reportage, but rather, wove interpretation into the telling itself. The chapter calls our attention to such obscure figures as Adelaide Lund and Hutchins Hapgood, as well as to authors who are far better known for their work in other genres, among them the novelist Stephen Crane and the investigative reporter Lincoln Steffens. More important than the biographical annotation, though, is Connery’s insight that literary journalism is driven by an impulse to tell the story in a new way.

That impulse to try a different approach runs close to the surface in every essay here, both the studies of individual authors and the overview essays. Re-reading Sims’s volume, one gets the sense that the project of literary journalism has been a species of modernism, inasmuch as modernism, too, originated in the conviction that conventional ways of making meaning had failed. The literary journalist’s impulse to try something new, to set out to perturb our assumptions, appears everywhere. Hugh Kenner’s “The Politics of the Plain Style,” which looks closely at Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*, asserts, “Plain prose, the plain style, is the most disorienting form of discourse yet devised by man.” In Kathy Smith’s luminous chapter, “John McPhee Balances the Act,” she examines the ways in which McPhee’s strikingly measured and “poised” writing actually seethes with the subversion of objectivity. “When one calls oneself a journalist,” she reminds us, “one takes up a judicial position in regard to differentiating between fact and fiction.” McPhee, she shows, “constantly crosses and tests those boundaries.” And sometimes Sims’s contributors make the connection explicit. Fishkin says of her subjects, “The formal experiments they embraced were the sort of thing modernist poets tended to fool with; these four writers pressed them into the service of nonfiction.” In Mitchell’s conversation with Sims, he cites Joyce, Eliot, and Lawrence as literary inspirations. David Eason’s “The New Journalism and the Image World”—which, along with John Pauly’s “The Politics of the New Journalism” is the essay in this volume most concerned with the 1960s and 1970s—concludes that “the modernist school of New Journalism is a mode of excessive



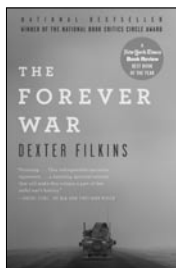
speech that finds its home in the space between realism and relativism.”

And now we come to the point where the reviewer starts talking about the book he would have written...

The third section of *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century* stands apart from the rest of the book. It comprises a 1953 piece by Mary McCarthy, “Artists in Uniform,” an account of McCarthy’s encounter with an anti-Semitic army officer on board a train; a touchy 1954 essay by McCarthy, in which she objects to those readers of the original story who imposed a symbolic superstructure on what she insists were observed facts; and a 1976 essay by Darrel Mansell that persuasively takes issue with McCarthy’s *fervorino*, suggesting that she was not—and could not have been—as objective as she wants us to think. The idea of bringing together an original text and two diverging readings of the same is an excellent idea, and the three pieces more than repay reading, for anyone interested in issues of the creative process and issues of autobiography’s relationship to literary art (not to mention the disturbing issues of anti-Semitism and anti-intellectualism raised in the original essay).

But the problem is, I see no way to classify McCarthy’s piece as literary journalism. It’s a personal essay. This isn’t just a matter of “knowing it when we see it,” as Sims himself enumerated six traits of the genre in his 1984 volume *The Literary Journalists*. Specifically, immersion on the part of the author, attentiveness to structure, unswerving commitment to accuracy, a distinctive and sometimes subjective authorial voice, a sense of moral responsibility toward those who are being reported upon, and a sensitivity to symbolism and what Wolfe called “status details.” True, “Artists in Uniform” at least partially exhibits certain of these qualities, but what essay wouldn’t? This is not to say that the book’s third part ought to be skipped, but one cannot help but wonder if its inclusion in the original edition was not prompted by McCarthy’s star appeal, and to wonder if a more apposite example might not have been found for this edition.

Maybe this is a quibble, and a didactic one at that. We do not study literary journalism in order to parse its definition ever more subtly. We study it for the art of its practitioners; for the ways in which it inevitably involves us in larger discussions about subjectivity and objectivity, about the ethics of writing; and for the sometimes miraculous achievement of turning routine reportage into a high-octane discussion of epistemology and truth itself. *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century* deepens our understanding of all of these matters. It is a book that helped to frame and crystallize a scholarly conversation when it appeared in 1990. Nearly two decades later, we can greet this reissue as we would an old friend, one with whom the conversation continues as if it never left off. Welcome back.



### *The Forever War*

By Dexter Filkins. New York: Knopf, 2008. Hardback, 368 pp., \$25;  
New York: Vintage, 2009. Paperback, 384 pp., \$15.

**Reviewed by Todd Schack, Ithaca College, U.S.A.**

Here is a reason that Michael Herr's *Dispatches* is the book most often cited as directly comparable to *The Forever War* by Dexter Filkins. When Herr wrote, "Our machine was devastating. And versatile. It could do everything but stop. As one American major said, in a successful attempt at attaining history, 'We had to destroy Ben Tre in order to save it,'" he managed to cut the heart out of the matter, and hold it up to the reader, still beating, and demand our reckoning of Vietnam. (Herr, 71)

Filkins does the same with the two wars we are currently—and forever—fighting, and when the word most used to describe the book is "visceral," there's a reason for that as well. Filkins himself admits: "There's been a lot of books written on Afghanistan and Iraq, a lot of very good ones, but most of them have been written from 10,000 feet up, you know, decisions made in Washington, decisions made in Iraq, and I've seen all this stuff up close. So I wanted to write a book that was kind of less intellectual than visceral and emotional." (World Affairs Council)

This is not to say that the book is gory; it's not all *viscera*, although that is certainly there: "The craziest thing about the suicide bombings were the heads—how the head of the bomber often remained intact after the explosion." (172) Rather, it is visceral in the way Filkins is able to situate the reader in the experience, how he makes us emote, relate to and see what he saw, smell the dust, diesel, and death, feel the heat and the fear and the concussion of B-52 bombs. His narration is not only immediate and sensory, full of HD quality detail, but it also demonstrates other characteristics of exemplary literary journalism, such as dialogue and point-of-view shifts. So much so, that the entire work does exactly what Wolfe described as axiomatic of the genre: creating the "social autopsy" (Wolfe and Johnson, 32). Only here, the metaphor of examining a corpse is no metaphor—there are plenty or real ones to describe.

The book is comprised of short, staccato vignettes taken from his *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* reports over several years, about a quarter of which are on Afghanistan, with one small episode back in New York on 9/11 (aptly titled "Third World"), and the remainder written from Iraq. Filkins is at his best when describing such things as getting shot at:

The wind from the bullets brushed my neck. Marines were withing in the street, tangles of blood and legs, while other marines were stooping and helping them and also getting shot. I kept

running, pumping, flying toward the other side as fast as I could with my seventy pounds of gear when I saw a pair of marines standing in a doorway and waving to me to come on, come on. I ran straight for them and I could see by the looks on their faces they weren't sure I was going to make it. (8)

Or the way it feels to be on the ground when a B-52 unloads its bombs on you:

It wasn't just the bombs they dropped that were so unnerving; it was the lumbering, dissociative way they let them go. One of the bombers would make an appearance, usually at thirty thousand feet, a tiny gray V in the sky, all the way from Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean three thousand miles away. Gliding like a crane. Then, without warning, the sharp, titanic bursts, the clouds tumbling upwards, the ground moaning as if something crucial in the world had broken off and fallen away. (48)

What Filkins also does better than anyone currently writing about this perpetual war is offer a sometimes humorous, sometimes deathly serious reflexivity that most audiences of journalism had probably forgotten possible. The humorous side can be quite endearing, such as when he describes the many times he decides—for sanity's sake—to go running in downtown Baghdad: “I pulled on my running shoes and stepped into the street. It was a Thursday in July, twilight and well over 100 degrees. I was feeling a little reckless. If this ended badly, the only thing anyone would remember was how stupid I was.” (111)

The deathly serious side is however something altogether different, and in one of the most honest—and tragic—admissions of culpability in modern journalism, Filkins devotes an entire chapter (and indeed dedicates the book) to a Lance Corporal William L. Miller, who might still be alive were it not for the presence of Filkins and his photographer, Ashley Gilbertson. This episode should not be summed here in brevity, so I'll simply say that it certainly demonstrates the journalistic equivalent of Heisenberg's observer effect, and Filkins demonstrates courage, candor, and responsibility for including it in this book.

While there have been criticisms, it seems that most of what critics point to as weaknesses are in fact strengths, if they accept the book for what it is—an impeccable model of literary journalism—and cease faulting it for what it is not. Had Filkins, for example, offered a meta-analysis of why we are in Afghanistan and Iraq, it would have forced him to destroy his point of view, his subjectivity and experiential voice that are in fact the strength of the narrative. Instead of a lesson in why we fight, Filkins's vignette structure and his focus on contained moments add up to a greater truth: What it feels like to be there. Or, as he puts it: “I wanted to kind of take people with me, and show the reader what it felt like to go to a car bombing, or to sit across from a Sunni sheik who you think is lying to you, what it's like to be shot at in a battle. So that's what I'm trying to do, so it's a very strange book, it's not terribly linear, and it's got sort of pieces and glimpses.” (World Affairs Council)

Another accusation is that the book provides little context to the events because it fails to give time-specific cues as to when they occurred—there are few actual dates associated with the vignettes. Yet readers even vaguely familiar with the timeline of this war have enough context to understand the when of what happened; what led up to and followed, say, the siege of

Falluja, or the assassination of the Northern Alliance warlord Massoud. Further, the paucity of chronological coding provides what Filkins most likely hoped to achieve: a sense of the utter timelessness of this “forever war.”

Filkins might also be criticized (as with most Western journalists) for his reliance on interpreters to both translate and provide context for events outside his cultural and linguistic limits: “I didn’t speak Arabic myself,” (118) and, “Very few of the Americans in Iraq, whether soldiers or diplomats or newspaper reporters, could speak more than a few words of Arabic. A remarkable number of them didn’t even have translators. That meant that for many Iraqis, the typical nineteen-year-old army corporal from South Dakota was not a youthful innocent carrying America’s goodwill; he was a terrifying combination of firepower and ignorance.” (116)

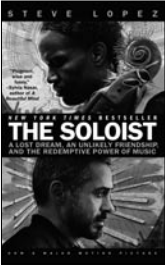
In passages like this, rife with reflexivity and self-implication, Filkins not only suggests the disastrous potential consequences brought on by the limits of understanding, but he also widens his point-of-view to include that of the Iraqis (“how they view us”), something more important (and unheard of) in most war reporting. In addition, Filkins demonstrates the effects dramatically when, in Diyala, he happens across Omar, a young boy sitting “. . . on the roadside weeping, drenched in the blood of his father, who had been shot dead by American marines when he ran a roadblock.”

“‘What could we have done?’ one of the marines muttered.”

Then, in a line that demonstrates perfectly the consequences of mixing “firepower and ignorance,” a Corporal Eric Jewell says to Filkins: “We yelled at them to stop. Everyone knows the word ‘stop.’ It’s universal.” (116)

Ultimately though, the critics are nearly unanimous in praising *The Forever War* and it has repeatedly been awarded the best non-fiction book of 2008. Critics have fawned over the style, the tone, the scope, the structure, and the message, and note the precision of Filkins’s eye for detail, his exhaustive reporting, and even cite his subjective point of view as a strength, not a weakness.

However, they also unanimously fail to call it what it is: literary journalism. Baffling, really, how both professional critics and journalists alike laud the accomplishments of this work, yet fail to recognize the reason it is so strong: precisely in its rejection of conventional journalism’s staid objectivity. There is, inherent in the praise of this book, an unstated indictment of today’s standard journalism. Filkins shines so brightly because the rest of the writing on this “forever war” simply acts as foil to his star. Unfortunately for us, that may be the extent to which most contemporary conventional journalism is good for: making us know good writing when we see it. In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare wrote: “The dullness of the fool is the whetstone of the wits.” Today’s dull fool (journalism, especially war reporting) provides the whetstone that makes cutting-edge literary journalism seem so sharp.



***The Soloist: A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship,  
and the Redemptive Power of Music***

by Steve Lopez. New York: Berkley Books, 2008. Paperback, 289 pp., \$15.

Reviewed by Bill Reynolds, Ryerson University, Canada

For much of his professional life Steve Lopez has been a newspaper columnist, calling it like he sees it in eight hundred- to one thousand-word bunches for the *San Jose Mercury News*, the *Oakland Tribune*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and lately the *Los Angeles Times*. By definition, Lopez is obligated to inject personality into his work and take liberties by putting himself in the story. It is the columnist's prerogative.

Grinding out column after column is wearying, so a writer might find a compelling character to write about. Then, upon receiving appropriately impressive positive (or negative) feedback, he might turn said subject into a recurring character, someone the reader might get caught up with now and again. Such were the cards Lopez was dealt when he stumbled across Nathaniel Anthony Ayers, a fifty-something, black street musician standing on a corner playing Beethoven passages on a violin with two of its four strings intact. Ayers was definitely column-worthy—a paranoid schizophrenic who had played in an orchestra with Yo-Yo Ma in the early 1970s at New York's Juilliard School. His story became so popular with readers that Lopez wrote a book based on his original columns, and so popular with Hollywood that Robert Downey Jr. played Lopez to Jamie Foxx's Ayers in a big-time buddy flick (not the usual buddy flick, of course, but one nonetheless).

What relates *The Soloist* to literary journalism—aside from the writer's comparison in passing of Lopez/Ayers to Joseph Mitchell/Joe Gould, and the name-checking of Mike Royko and Jimmy Breslin as his two favorite writers—is that Lopez transformed Ayers's story into a legitimate non-fiction narrative, with a beginning, middle, and end. In other words, Ayers's is a true tale told in classic storytelling mode. It is also very much a search story: Lopez delves into Ayers's past in order to discover the true nature of the young Cleveland native's precipitous fall from the vertiginous heights of prestigious Juilliard. Lopez's search becomes our search—we need to know why Ayers broke down on the cusp of performing classical repertoire at the highest level of difficulty, and Lopez parcels out of this information in judicious fashion, like a good mystery whodunit.

Inevitably, given Lopez's penchant for writing in columnist mode, *The Soloist* is also the story of the writer's ongoing and developing interpersonal relationship with his subject. That he breaks one of the conventional rules of journalism, if not the cardinal rule, by getting too close

to his subject—buying replacement strings and sheet music and instruments, coaxing him off the streets and into a residence for street persons called Lamp Community—is questionable for a columnist but unremarkable for a literary journalist. That Lopez does his research into the lack of civic political will and the brave if nearly futile medical response to the homeless problem in east downtown Los Angeles is commendable. That Lopez’s story has a feel-good ending is why Foxx and Downey spent time perfecting their Ayers and Lopez impersonations for mass entertainment consumption.

Where Lopez falls short, from the literary journalism point of view, is the insistent, almost belligerent interjection of his every ponderous bit of fretting and his every *pensée* on every little setback his new friend encounters, at nearly every juncture in the story. While this might be expected of a newspaper columnist who has no trouble getting in front of a story being told, over the course of two hundred eighty-nine pages the technique of worrying out loud becomes an irksome narrative impediment. There is a pinch of empathy for the writer’s position—Ayers is an unpredictable man, after all. Yet it is Lopez the columnist who decides to write about Ayers. It is Lopez the journalist who controls the setting of the prose. And, alas, it is Lopez the worrywart who poses repeated, fatuous questions. This forces the reader (well, this reader), to see Lopez’s grovels—Woe unto me, what if my latest ploy should fail?—as an appeal to pity the poor journalist’s plight. Wherever these passages occur, the narrative spine slips a disc.

This disturbing weakness in what is otherwise a good story inflicts a nagging ache on the reader early. Lopez writes, “Getting sick at Juilliard was a subject I didn’t know how to bring up with Nathaniel, nor did I know whether I should. Is it too personal? Will it upset him? Can I trust the answer of a man who has mental problems?” (14)

Aside from the low-rent soul-searching, this sort of cutaway is disingenuous—of course Lopez is going to ask, and of course we’re going to find out! Allow me to add just three exclamation points (there are so many more), to this criticism:

“Every time the phone rings at night, my stomach does a flip. I’m always sure it’s the police, calling to say Nathaniel is hanging by a thread after a mugging, and nice going Mr. Columnist. Along with giving him two brand-new instruments, why didn’t I paint a bull’s-eye on his back?” (59)

And:

“Is this the worst idea I have ever had? ... Have I exploited Nathaniel?” (92)

And:

“Once again I wonder if I’m the one, not Nathaniel, who needs to have his head examined.” (125)

And so it goes. Just before wondering whether he himself needs a shrink, when he is writing a column about the horror show that exists after dark just a few blocks east of City Hall, Lopez clues in the reader to some advice he has received from his editor:

“Don’t sweeten it, my editor, Sue Horton, tells me. Serve it up for breakfast raw and unfiltered.” (124)

Lopez followed Horton’s first rule, but not her second. In many scenes he does indeed serve it up raw. In others, he covers the rawness of Ayers’s predicament with the shawl of the angst-ridden columnist’s interpretation. We’re treated to the filter of how the writer feels about situations, leaving little room for readers to interpret. By providing this running touchy-feely commentary, Lopez plays it cute and comes dangerously close to insulting the reader.

Moreover, as the conversational tone of the writing bogs down every time Lopez jumps out

of the narrative to ask himself whether he is doing the right thing, the underlying structure is exposed to reveal a lack of layers to the enterprise. What you read is what you get. There are no underlying themes; there is no grand metaphor about Los Angeles, or California, or America; or the political establishment; or the medical institutions. There is a sense of the beleaguered, but that is all. Lopez takes the reader through a downtown no-man's-land to witness the zombification of poor urban dwellers, but then leans on the heart-warming response of Ayers's small victories. For all his grit, he chooses the saccharine. Accentuating the positive, Lopez's glass remains half-full, not half-empty. The reporting is solid, but he overdoses on cheerleading for Ayers. Should this not have been left for the reader to decide?

*The Soloist* flirts with the realm of literary journalism, yet never commits. If the writer had resisted the temptation to turn away from the narrative and toward the reader to fuss at every available moment, the result may have been different.

# Mission Statement

## Literary Journalism Studies

*Literary Journalism Studies* is an international, interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journal that invites scholarly examinations of literary journalism, a genre also known by different names around the world as literary reportage, narrative journalism, New Journalism, *nuevo periodismo*, reportage literature, literary nonfiction, creative nonfiction, and narrative nonfiction, among others. Published in English but directed at an international audience, the journal welcomes contributions from different cultural, disciplinary, and critical perspectives. To help establish comparative studies of the genre, the journal is especially interested in examinations of the works of authors and traditions from different national literatures not generally known outside their countries.

There is no single definition of the genre, but the following descriptions help to establish a meeting ground for its critical study:

“The art and craft of reportage—journalism marked by vivid description, a novelist’s eye to form, and eyewitness reporting that reveals hidden truths about people and events that have shaped the world we know.”

—*Granta*

“Reportage Literature is an engagement with reality with a novelist’s eye but with a journalist’s discipline.”

—*Pedro Rosa Mendes, Portugal*

“I think one of the first things for literary reportage should be to go into the field and to try to get the other side of the story.

—*Anne Nivat, France*

“A good reportage must not necessarily be linked with topical or political events which are taking place around us. I think the miracle of things lies not in showing the extraordinary but in showing ordinary things in which the extraordinary is hidden.”

—*Nirmal Verma, India*

Literary journalism is a “journalism that would read like a novel . . . or short story.”

—*Tom Wolfe, United States*

Such definitions are not comprehensive and may at times conflict, but they should help to establish an understanding of this fundamentally narrative genre, which is located at the intersection of literature and journalism.

At the critical center of the genre lies cultural revelation in narrative form. Implicit to the enterprise are two precepts: (a) that there is an external reality apart from human consciousness, whatever the inherent problems of language and ideology that may exist in comprehending that reality; and (b) that there are consequences in the phenomenal world, whether triggered by human or natural agency, that result in the need to tell journalistically-based narratives empowered by literary technique and sensibility.



# International Association for *Literary Journalism Studies*

The International Association for Literary Journalism Studies is a multi-disciplinary learned society whose essential purpose is the encouragement and improvement of scholarly research and education in literary journalism (or literary reportage). For the purposes of scholarly delineation, our definition of literary journalism is “journalism as literature” rather than “journalism about literature.” Moreover, the association is explicitly inclusive and warmly supportive of a wide variety of approaches to the study and teaching of literary journalism throughout the world. The association’s web address is [www.ialjs.org](http://www.ialjs.org).

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