

Journalism and the Literature of Reality

Journalism matters to us all. I believe that or I wouldn't have spent my working life as a journalist and then as a lecturer in journalism, training students in the skills they'll need if they want to be reporters and writers of features. Some of the skills have changed -- familiarity with HTML or how to produce a podcast wasn't needed when I worked for the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* or *Brides* magazine. Equally, some have not -- the ability to use words well is as vital for journalists today as it ever was, and old-fashioned shorthand remains a key skill, at least for news reporters.

Why journalism matters should be obvious. It's one of the most significant ways we have of learning about the world and ideas beyond our own immediate experience or people we know personally, and this applies to all areas of life whether domestic and private or national and public. I'm not suggesting that all journalism matters. Plenty of what appears in newspapers and magazines is prurient, vicious, nasty or even invented. There's trivia too although for me that's regrettable only in as far as it steals editorial resources from more serious things. What's trivial to one reader may represent a passionate concern to another. So I'm not going to dwell on the negative aspects of journalism here, nor on the desperate current plight of the industry with its savage slashing of staff numbers brought about, in part at least, by the collapse of advertising revenues and vanishing of readers. One of the UK's leading journalists, Nick Davies gives a forensic account of what's wrong with British journalism in his book *Flat Earth News* as does another senior journalist, Andrew Marr, in his professional biography *My Trade*. Marr's criticism, though, is more affectionate and less searing -- perhaps because it predates Davies's book by four years.

I don't want to argue here against Davies (I think he's right) but to share some of the enthusiasm I have for the best journalism, the kind that can be regarded as a form of literature and that I've managed to introduce into the curriculum of two

university courses with the further satisfaction of seeing others now follow suit. To take journalistic writing seriously as a branch of literature is common enough in the US where there has been a century-old tradition of teaching journalism in universities. But in the UK, where university-level courses in journalism arrived much later, it has taken much longer to establish.

My first course, Journalism and Literature, was launched at Strathclyde in the mid 1990s and was for English undergraduates, some of whom have gone on to successful careers as journalists even though the course was not vocational. My second course, Journalism and the Literature of Reality, was started as part of the Journalism degree at Stirling in 2005.

My own story interest started with Tom Wolfe's essay 'The New Journalism' in which he argued, controversially, that fiction, in the US at least, was no longer literature's 'main event' and that most features journalism in newspapers was drab and moribund. A new style of feature writing, though, which moved beyond the conventions of the time was worthy of serious attention. In the anthology *The New Journalism*, for which this essay acts as an introduction, he illustrates his case with his own writing and that of others such as Hunter S. Thompson, Gay Talese, Norman Mailer, George Plimpton, Truman Capote and Joan Didion. For many journalists this book was an inspiration and a strong motivation for going into journalism in the first place.

I was lucky enough to be accepted by the highly-regarded print journalism-training scheme run by the Thomson Organization. I was taught shorthand, law, government, news values and how to write short, sharp intros to my stories. I went to press conferences, industrial tribunals, inquests and to the criminal courts to hear tales of horror both exotic and mundane. I interviewed bureaucrats and actors and chiefs of police. None of this was surprising. What did surprise me, as an English graduate, was that although we were taught how to write in a formulaic news style, and encouraged to read daily newspapers, none of our

tutors ever suggested that the best journalism might have some literary value or that for newcomers to the trade it might be helpful to read the high-quality journalists writing currently or in the past such as Didion or Wolfe, Dickens or Defoe. Orwell was mentioned only in connection with his essay 'Politics and the English language', not *Down and Out in Paris and London*.

Until the late 1980s journalism training was mostly undertaken by newspaper and magazine publishers. Most recruits to newspapers came straight from school or if they had degrees, these weren't in journalism. Gradually a few university courses were established, during the 1970s and 1980s, and then burgeoned in the 1990s until we reached the current situation with more than 300 higher-education courses in journalism of some kind. This is relevant: while it may be understandable that the apprenticeship model of training could not make room in tight timetables for a literary approach, it's not so understandable when journalism is taught in universities.

As journalism wheedled its way into the academy it was regarded with suspicion by older universities who implied there wasn't really enough to teach and what there was did not require the development of rigorous intellectual skills. In the event universities accepted journalism so long as 'practical' skills were 'underpinned' and complemented by more traditional academic approaches. Journalism Studies is the term for this broader curriculum and it is usually taught by specialists in cultural studies, communications theory or sociology. Few journalism courses benefit from a contribution from a historian (the University of Lincoln is one exception), and few include the study of journalism as a branch of literature.¹

This means aspiring journalists are not routinely offered any systematic introduction to the greatest work of the masters and mistresses of the craft or the literary contexts in which they worked. Certainly none of the industry training or accrediting bodies includes the study of journalism as literature as part of the

syllabus. Yes, students are exhorted to read as much news reporting as they can but in a rather vague way, as if by reading it they will absorb by osmosis the craft mysteries without having to stop and think about *why* events are researched and written about in a particular style. I share the doubt of Andrew Marr who wonders whether this insistence on reading so much of what is written by current reporters doesn't discourage newer journalists from developing their own styles and their own ways of reporting. It may make them too familiar with existing patterns and unwilling to experiment. I raise this while noting that anyone who plans a career in reporting must absorb the conventions first even if later on there may be scope for variations in style.

This neglect of the best journalism was for many years prefigured by and then mirrored in university literature departments where the word 'journalism' was apt to be prefaced by the word 'mere' and spoken in a tone of dismissal. What I've tried to do in my teaching is to seek to overcome this mutual disregard. I believe that to accord journalism and fiction different status is to ignore the truth that writers of the best of both have much in common and, indeed, may well be the same people. Many are seeking to provide for their readers an account of reality, of the world that they as writers and we as readers encounter or might encounter if we chose to. The difference is that journalists do this by trying to provide a version of the truth that is as close to verifiable as possible. They do this with more or less success and in more or less populist ways depending on their audience.

Fiction writers also seek to convey truths (psychological, emotional and political), even if their narratives are invented. But, as John Carey, Emeritus Professor of English Literature at Oxford University as well as for many years, chief fiction reviewer for the *Sunday Times*, argues, fiction represents 'a flight from the real ... and good reportage is designed to make that flight impossible. It exiles us from fiction into the sharp terrain of truth'. For him that is an important function. In his words reportage 'lifts the screen from reality'. It may 'change its readers, may

educate their sympathies, may extend . . . their ideas about what it is to be a human being, may limit their capacity for the inhuman'. (Carey 1987 xxxviii)

Sadly, there isn't much evidence to support his last observation. Nevertheless his welcome into the literary fold of texts that might otherwise have languished unread has been beneficial. His anthology *The Faber Book of Reportage* was a valuable text when I came to set up the Journalism and Literature course at Strathclyde. There was nothing else published in the UK as accessible and comprehensive. It draws on texts from classical times until more or less the date of publication. Since then, one or two other useful books have appeared, notably *The Granta Book of Reportage* edited by Ian Jack, former editor of *The Independent on Sunday*.² It is now more common for publishers to produce anthologies of journalistic writing by individual writers (Christina Lamb, Janine di Giovanni, Anna Politkovskaya, John Pilger, Ryszard Kapuściński, Günter Wallraff) as well as book-length reportage such as *Murder on Ward Four*, Nick Davies's account of the serial child-killer, Beverley Allitt, *The Bookseller of Kabul*, by Ásne Seierstad, Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm*, Anna Funder's *Stasiland*, Barbara Ehrenreich's *Bait and Switch: the (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream* and *Scribbling the Cat* by Alexandra Fuller, which won the Lettre Ulysses award for literary reportage in 2005.³ Even Daniel Defoe's *The Storm*, an early example of book-length reportage came back into print in 2003 after centuries hidden away in research libraries, and Dent has published four volumes of the greatest of Dickens's massive journalistic output.

This development in publishing is welcome for readers in pursuit of the best journalism. So too is the fact that it is now much easier even than ten years ago to get access to books from North America. Thanks to online retailers anthologies such as Norman Sims's *The Literary Journalists* are accessible, as are works by many great writers of book-length reportage, such as John McPhee, Tracy Kidder and William Langewiesche who are not household names in the UK.

For all the expansion in the publishing of journalism in book form, it's still not that easy for readers to find unless they have the names of the authors before they search. Bookshops, publishers, libraries and web sources do not seem to have a journalism category by which to identify it. So journalism may be labelled as anthropology, history, non-fiction, biography or current affairs, to give just a few examples. *Urban Grimshaw and the Shed Crew* by Bernard Hare is called 'fiction' on the book jacket but from all the other evidence in the book is factual. Reviewers said it 'grips *like* a novel', 'it reads *like*' a novel', making clear they believed it to be a non-fiction narrative. And libraries are as confusing: you won't find Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (about tuberculosis in Haiti) or Nick Davies's *Murder on Ward Four* unless you browse in the health section of my university library.

Then there's the way factual writing is so often compared with fiction as if fiction were the benchmark. 'A gifted and humane reporter with a novelist's eye for detail' runs one review of Janine di Giovanni's *The Place at the End of the World*, a collection of her war reportage. Well, yes, but shouldn't it be the other way round? Is it not that writers of realist fiction have copied or at least shared the techniques of good reporters? The novelist and journalist Anthony Burgess argued that Defoe was the first great English novelist precisely *because* he was also the first great English journalist (Burgess 1986: 7). Yet in literature departments it's the novels of Defoe and Dickens and George Eliot that are studied, rarely the journalism.

This all reinforces the problem of invisibility that besets journalism. When Alexandra Fuller won the Lettre Ulysses Award for her 'spellbinding literary achievement' *Scribbling the Cat*, there was little publicity in the UK even though she was born here even though this prize was the world's most prestigious for literary reportage. Isabel Hilton, who chaired the LUA judges in 2005, observed that 'reportage is a critically neglected form' in the UK.⁴

Perhaps the problem is in the terminology: are we talking about reporting, or reportage, or literary journalism, or documentary narrative, or non-fiction in general? The reality is that we use several terms to cover broadly the same thing – the kind of factual journalistic writing that requires a depth of research and a literary skill that are not essential for ordinary, workmanlike, day-to-day reporting. We may look for explanations of this in the process of canon formation and the progress into the academy of journalism at a much later date than English literature. We may recall that English literature, like journalism, was once scorned for not being a proper object of study by university students. We should also remember the distaste with which modernist writers like Virginia Woolf, and critics such as Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis, viewed the growth of a mass reading public and the concomitant mass-produced culture such as journalism. For them, it seems, if something was popular it could not be, by definition, literature or art. ⁵

John Carey, however, has a more generous view. For him one of the significant things about good reportage is that it ‘reaches the millions untouched by literature, it has an incalculably greater potential’. (Carey 1987: xxxviii) And his optimism was echoed by the late Ryszard Kapuściński, one of the twentieth century’s finest reporters when, in his keynote speech, at the LUA award ceremony in 2003, he reminded his audience of the distinguished history of reportage and its importance as a way for cultures to learn about each other. He observed that reporters therefore carried huge responsibility and that to do their job properly they needed ‘passion, curiosity . . . an appetite for information, diligence and devotion.’ The reward, as he saw it, was that they help to promote ‘decent knowledge, rather than false stereotypes’.

These observations carry us far from red-top tabloid newspapers at their worst. Critics of the UK’s journalism have an easy task when they look for examples of the bad. What I’ve tried to do in my journalism and literature classes is offer

students examples of the good and encourage them to read the best. That this can be beneficial was brought home to me when I led a seminar about literary reportage with a class of visiting Indian Chevening scholars, all in mid career as news journalists. After a lively discussion several of them said they'd never thought of journalism in literary terms and that to do so made them feel inspired about their jobs. In my view that's as good a reason as any for including literary study in the training we offer to the reporters of the future.

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Jenny McKay is Director of the Journalism Programme at the University of Stirling. She is founding member of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies and Associate Editor of its forthcoming journal *Literary Journalism Studies*, the first issue of which will be published in June 2009.

¹ The universities of Lincoln, Strathclyde, Napier and Stirling universities are among those which do include literary journalism in undergraduate or postgraduate degrees journalism degrees.

² *Granta* is a quarterly magazine in book form. It carries a mixture of reportage, short fiction and photo-journalism. Ian Jack was its editor for several years.

³ This award ceased after 2007 when sponsorship ran out. It had been the foremost international prize for literary reportage.

⁴ Isabel Hilton, 2005, interview about Lettre Ulysses Award for the Goethe Institute website <http://www.goethe.de/prs/int/01/de906768.htm>

⁵ John Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses* is the source for this argument.