

The Journalist in British Fiction

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Histories of journalism tend to be written by academics: historians and social scientists have charted the ups and downs—mainly the latter—of the newspaper press. As such they tend to concentrate on newspaper economics and the decision-making of editors and proprietors and their often too-close relationships with politicians. Biographers, too, focus on the lives of the movers at the top, the press barons Lord Northcliffe, William Randolph Hearst, and Rupert Murdoch, the great editors from John Thadeus Delane of *The Times* to Ben Bradlee of *The Washington Post* and the *Sun*'s notorious Kelvin Mackenzie.

But what about the footslogging reporters who have contributed millions upon millions of words that, over the decades have shaped our cultural discourse and who worked through the seismic changes wrought upon the industry since the dawn of the mass press?

From the early years of the 20th century, these—often anonymous and ill-educated—scribblers have presented the newspaper reading public with a view of the world upon which readers base their decisions, from which political party to vote for to images of minorities, to which books to read and where to go on holiday.

What if there was a way of seeing inside their heads, of distilling their attitudes to their work over the years. What if we could see the wonder of the young man, saved from laboring and given a collar and tie to wear just because he could read and write? If we could experience

the crushed idealism of the reporter asked to fabricate a salacious story on a popular newspaper in the grips of a circulation war? What if we could experience the exhilaration mixed with dread of the lone female reporter in an early 20th century newsroom, or the disappointment of the foreign correspondent whose copy is massacred by the editors back at home? What if it were possible to ascertain the psychological impact of being the smallest cog of the vast news machine?

Well, there is a way.

Reporters are, by their very nature, inveterate, obsessive writers. Most journalists have a novel in their bottom desk drawer and many of those novels are about their trade. The public's fascination with this rather dubious and shady profession has meant that over the decades, dozens of reporters have published their novels—although most are long-forgotten, gathering mildew on second-hand booksellers' shelves, with enigmatic titles like *Mightier Than the Sword*, *Paperchase End*, and *The Paper Palace*.

For my research project I tracked down dozens of novels, short stories, and plays—98 in total—written by journalists from 1900 to the present day and read them with a view to piecing together an alternative history of the British newspaper press, told by its reporters.¹

Fiction, of course, is a work of the imagination, a miraculous alchemy combining experienced reality, fantasy, personal opinions, individual prejudice, and the bravely exposed secrets of the human heart. Are fictions from history evidence that something actually happened, or merely evidence of a particular writer's sour and inaccurate prejudice? Fiction, even literary fiction, must perforce generalize, stereotype, and exaggerate. Of course, no journalist would actually try to assassinate his megalomaniacal proprietor (*Fatality in Fleet Street* by Christopher St. John Sprigg, 1933); as far as I know, no actual reporter has discovered a plot to fake Christ's tomb and thus bring down Christian civilization (*When It Was Dark* by Guy Thorne, 1903) and no journalist—on any self-respecting newspaper

anyway—has actually invented an entirely fictitious fallen woman who sold her innocence for glitter and furs and then confessed all to a newspaper (*A Crooked Sixpence* by Murray Sayle, 1961).

However, neither was the journalist Christopher Hitchens wrong when he described Evelyn Waugh's intricate fantasy of the life of the foreign press pack, *Scoop* (1938), as "a novel of pitiless realism." Journalists know there is an inescapable truth at the heart of Waugh's novel; that the country many reporters inhabit, for better or worse, as they attempt to fix and explain a fluctuating and inexplicable universe, is "Absurdistan." Similarly, fabrication of stories within the pages of newspapers and on television has always taken place. Former *Guardian* Woman's Page editor Mary Stott's memoirs, for example, contain fond reminiscences of a colleague on the *Co-operative News* in the 1920s who "amused us greatly by keeping going for days a totally fictitious story about a well-known violinist's war-time exploits." Contemporary high profile examples of fabrication include *The New York Times* journalist Jayson Blair and former *Independent* commentator Johann Hari. The examination of large numbers of fictions produced within the same time frame, if read carefully and critically, can be dredged for the contemporary commentary they construct about the state of journalism at a particular point in time, as well as writers' particular prejudices both for, and against, "the old black art we call the daily press," as old newspaperman Rudyard Kipling fondly called it.

The early 20th century Edwardian reporters who saw themselves as truth-telling superheroes, describe Fleet Street, with its burgeoning newspaper buildings burning with electric lights and ticking with telegraph wires, as a place where democracy itself is being nurtured. Working for the new daily popular newspapers such as the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, and *Daily Express*, these reporters were immensely proud of telling the stories of working men, the miners, farmers, and industrial laborers whose stories had been ignored by the great Victorian journals.

So we have Humphrey Quain, the protagonist of *Mightier Than the Sword* (1912) written by *Daily Express* reporter Alphonse Courlander, who dies, triumphantly, while covering a French farmers' protest. As he takes his last breath, "an odd, whimsical idea twisted his lips into a smile as he thought: 'What a ripping story this will make for *The Day*.'" It is a willing martyrdom. Quain's death will literally transform him into the front page story he so desires. Then we have an early P.G. Wodehouse novel, set in New York, *Psmith Journalist* (1909) about an upper class Cambridge undergraduate who exposes the immoral New York tenement owners in the unlikely-named *Cosy Moments* paper he takes over. Wodehouse, before he became a famous novelist, started his writing career as a freelance writer for the *Globe* newspaper, earning himself enough money to buy a car—quite an achievement in 1907.

By the 1960s and 1970s, the picture is very different. The popular newspaper press, now well established and highly competitive, is starting to go downmarket, asking its reporters to commit immoral and barely legal acts to win fierce circulation wars. Reporter-protagonists in novels written by journalists are now bewildered, cynical, and verging on nervous breakdowns. One such reporter is Andrew "Ming" Menzies, in Gordon M. Williams's *The Upper Pleasure Gardens* (1970), who sees everything and everybody as a potential story, betraying friends and lovers in his quest to fill his paper, the downmarket *Hampport Recorder*, with salacious trivia. He experiences a brief moment of remorse, as he thinks: "I wish I could go back to everybody I ever wrote about and tell them I was sorry." However, realizing there is no other job he can do, he grimly returns to the paper—not before selling another victim's pictures to the *News of the World* for "fifty-sixty quid"—aware he will need to rely on alcohol to stay sane. Long since out of print, *The Upper Pleasure Garden*, though crudely told, is a raw, Faustian tale of a man who knowingly sells his soul to survive in "the only job where they paid you a wage for finding men who built the Taj Mahal out of empty beer bottles."

Novels written by women journalists reveal a double distress: of being stereotyped as only suitable for writing about domestic issues, and of having to disguise their femininity to get on in a man's world. So we have the cross-dressing "Henry Beechtree" in Rose Macaulay's *Mystery at Geneva* (1922) right up to Honor Tait, the "unnatural mother" who ignores her son to pursue her career in Annalena McAfee's *The Spoiler* (2011). Novels about women journalists written by men are less sympathetic. The lantern-jawed, gin-swilling lesbian Mabel Warren in Graham Greene's *Stamboul Train* (1932) is a predatory, unsympathetic betrayer of victims of crime. The prim, "virginal," and completely humorless Miss Geraldine Smithers in Harold Nicolson's *Public Faces*, also written in 1932, is based partly on Nicolson's experiences as the *Evening Standard's* gossip columnist.

So, what are contemporary journalist-novelists saying about the future of their trade as it mutates in the Internet age? For former *Guardian* reporter James Meek, the unaccountable, murky world of celebrity-news websites represents a backward step. In his novel *The Heart Broke In* (2012), "evil tabloid editor" Val Oatman leaves the struggling world of newspapers to set up a website, "The Moral Foundation," with a brief to expose celebrity immorality. When celebrities' lawyers try to issue writs against the website, "They found it had melted away. Its offices had been shut down a month earlier and its staff paid off. Its servers in Chile were paid up a year in advance and no one seemed to know how the data could be accessed."

Unlike a newspaper, which at least has a physical presence, a postal address, and visible reporters, this semi anonymous, unaccountable, yet deeply intrusive site represents a bleak image of the future of journalism after the death of newspapers. This idea is discussed by journalists in the National Theatre of Scotland production *Enquirer* (2012). The young people hired to write the online edition of a national newspaper "won't leave the office, they just sit there like battery farm chickens."

Similarly in Annalena McAfee's *The Spoiler*, journalism today bears as much

resemblance to the journalism of a mythical newspaper “golden age” as does “lavatory graffiti to the Sistine Chapel.” Veteran journalist Honor Tait wonders how important stories about injustice can possibly be distinguished by readers amidst the deluge of information that now surrounds us: “These timeless stories of injustice now bleated ineffectually, shouted down like Calvinist preachers at a carnival, by brash accounts of the private lives of royalty and popstars, actors and footballers. Political coverage, too—its trivial bellicosity, puffed-up personalities, old-fashioned sex scandals... was reduced to the parochial, a subset of show business.”

Maybe it is in the British character to be pessimistic. Certainly there are signs in U.S. movies like *Shattered Glass* and *State of Play* that there maybe light at the end of the online tunnel—and anyway, print publications were never perfect. Even the *Boston Globe* journalists in *Spotlight* missed several chances to expose the story of pedophile priests. Maybe it is more fashionable in British literary circles to construct a negative image of journalism. The only character in contemporary British narratives who has any hope in journalism’s online future is “Gabe” in *Enquirer*, a woman journalist with a successful blog that has enabled her to reach her audience directly, bypassing the masculine newspaper structure: “I don’t mourn the end of all this shit. I’m off to do my blog... You know the great thing about new media: it allows a girl from Bumfuck College of Further Education to come out and raise her voice. My Twitter account already has 20,000 followers. More people read me than the *Independent*.”

Considering the recent physical demise of that newspaper, maybe Gabe has a point.

Endnote

¹ Sarah Lonsdale, *The Journalist in British Fiction and Film: Guarding the Guardians from 1900 to the Present* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).