

By Howard Good

The Journalist in Fiction, 1890-1930

Fictional characters of the period reveal trends in views of journalists.

► Toward the end of the nineteenth century a new class of fiction began to emerge in the United States. Its central character was, for better or worse, the journalist.

The genre was given an initial push by the popularity of Richard Harding Davis' "Gallegher, a Newspaper Story," the tale of a plucky copy boy who assists in the capture of a notorious killer at a world champion boxing match and then helps his paper scoop the town with the news. Originally published in *Scribner's Magazine* in August 1890, "Gallegher" later sold more than 50,000 copies when published in book form.

With "Gallegher," the 26-year-old Davis became the beau ideal of young reporters drudging on routine assignments and cherishing literary ambitions. More importantly, its success demonstrated that fiction with a newspaper setting had popular appeal and fulfilled a public need. As Edwin L. Shuman wrote in the "Preface" to his handbook, *Practical Journalism* (1903), "There are few things concerning which the general public is more curious, and about which it knows less, than the inside of a metropolitan newspaper office."¹

The emergence of newspaper fiction followed the emergence of the journalist as a distinct type. "Social changes," George Santayana once observed, "do not reach artistic expression until after their

momentum is acquired and their other collateral effects are fully predetermined."² In the last quarter of the 19th century, American journalism acquired the necessary momentum. Between 1870 and 1890 the total circulation of daily newspapers in the United States rose 222%.³ As a consequence of this spectacular growth, the journalist began to think of his as a new and important calling and of himself, in the words of New York *World* reporter Ned Brown, as "a citizen of no mean state."⁴

Method

This study, based on a reading of 75 or so novels and short stories published in the United States between 1890 and 1930, examines the basic motifs of newspaper fiction. Curiously, the fiction often runs counter to what might be called the official history of journalism. The years 1890 to 1930 witnessed the continued professionalization of the journalist. It was an era when press clubs sprang up, when trade journals and journalism textbooks appeared, and when the movement for college instruction in journalism got seriously under way.

As early as 1900 the *Journalist* was smugly asserting that journalism had outgrown its irresponsible adolescence, its bohemian beginnings. "It was not very many years ago," the magazine said, "that Horace Greeley made a remark to the effect that he would rather have a wild bull in his office than a college graduate. To

Edwin L. Shuman, *Practical Journalism* (New York: Appleton, 1903), p. vii.

² George Santayana, "Justification of Art," *Little Essays* (New York: Scribner's, 1920), p. 112.

³ Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism*, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 507.

⁴ Quoted in Allen Churchill, *Park Row* (New York: Rinehart, 1958), p. 224.

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day college-bred men are the rule. . . . well dressed, well mannered alert young news gatherers have taken the place of the impudent, unshorn, rum-soaked old vagabonds who used to disgrace the profession."⁵ But newspaper fiction frequently contradicts such pronouncements, or at least plays down their significance.

Written primarily by newspapermen and former newspapermen, the fiction embodies the unofficial but deep-seated attitudes of journalists toward their work. The novels and short stories are true in the way that the dreams of a night are true beneath the distortions and disguises of the unconscious. Fiction gave the authors the freedom and form necessary to express the anxieties they felt while working on newspapers for a living.

Once one peels back the literary conventions of the period, a period when sentimentality was grudgingly giving way to a new realism in American literature, and exposes the core of newspaper fiction, one finds the authors preoccupied with the problem of what was the best preparation for a career in journalism. Also of a deep concern to them was whether the journalist was fundamentally a reformer or a cynic or a combination of both. As various authors struggled with these questions between 1890 and 1930, searching their personal experience for answers, newspaper fiction grew increasingly skeptical of the claim that journalism had shed, or ever could shed, its bohemianism and become a true profession.

Education vs. Experience

Occasionally one encounters in newspaper fiction the notion that the best reporters are born, not made. For example, former New York *World* editor

Joseph A. Altsheler wrote in his 1904 novel, *Gutherie of the Times*: "There are two kinds of correspondents; those who collect news and those who absorb it. Gutherie fell within the latter class, which is by far the abler of the two, and knows instinctively what things are worth."⁶

But, by and large, the authors of newspaper fiction agreed with Joseph Pulitzer's statement in his famous essay, "The College of Journalism," that "the only position that occurs to me which a man in our Republic can successfully fill by the simple fact of birth is that of an idiot."⁷ Special preparation was necessary for journalism. As Jesse Lynch Williams, a former New York *Sun* reporter, said in his *Stolen Story and Other Newspaper Stories* (1899): "Not even William Shakespeare would know what to get or how to put it without some training at reporting."⁸

The most common plot in newspaper fiction, then, has a young man enter journalism fresh from college and full of idealistic fervor and literary ambition. He immediately suffers a series of setbacks in his work. But just when he is about to be fired for incompetence, he scoops the opposition and starts on his way to becoming a star reporter. All along, he has been learning from bitter experience what it is that makes a news story and a real newspaperman. Later, he may undergo doubts about journalism, find it increasingly sordid and superficial. For the moment, though, he is simply glad to be no longer considered a cub.

An early example of this plot is found in future muckraker Ray Stannard Baker's "Pippins," published in the September 7, 1899, issue of *Youth's Companion*. "Pippins" is what everyone in the city room of the Chicago *Ledger* calls James Northcote Lawrence, who is right out of college and "beaming with confidence in himself."⁹ But the young reporter soon has his confidence shaken.

Writing about a fire one night, Pippins is "keenly conscious of his college Latin and French," and he sprinkles "a metaphor here and a simile there, to make the story sparkle. . . ." The next morning he is surprised not to see his effort on the front

⁵ "Our Seventeenth 'Special,'" *Journalist*, Dec. 15, 1900, p. 276.

⁶ Joseph A. Altsheler, *Gutherie of the Times* (New York Doubleday, Page, 1904), p. 54.

⁷ Joseph Pulitzer, "The College of Journalism," *North American Review*, May 1904, p. 642.

⁸ Jesse Lynch Williams, "The New Reporter," *The Stolen Story and Other Newspaper Stories* (New York Scribner's, 1899; reprint ed., Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), p. 69.

⁹ Ray Stannard Baker, "Pippins," *Youth's Companion*, September 7, 1899, p. 435.

page, or on the second . . . or the third. He finally locates it in an obscure corner of the paper, his Latin and French and literary flourishes "remorselessly cut out."¹⁰ (A similar scene occurs in David Graham Phillips' 1901 novel, *The Great God Success*. Howard, the Yale-educated protagonist, writes a 2,000-word story, but only two lines of it get printed, and that in the smallest type.)

Before he can succeed in newspaper work, Pippins must have the "college" knocked out of him. He must lose his false classroom notions of journalism and life. Only then will he be ready to prove at one stroke that he has the makings of a journalist.

Pippins' big chance comes one blustery December night when he is sent to discover why the men at a waterworks intake crib on Lake Michigan have run up a distress flag. After the captain of the tugboat that took him out refuses to return to the city because of ice on the lake, Pippins walks ashore at risk of his life to bring in the story. At one point, he falls through the ice, but "spurred by the thought of a beat," saves himself from drowning.¹¹

Though soaked and shivering, Pippins hurries straight to the office to write his account. He forgets in his excitement "all his Latin and French" and tells "the story as it happened in crisp, short sentences." Pippins scoops even "the great Keenan" of the rival *Times*, "who had been through half a dozen Indian wars and had brought back a long jagged scar on one cheek as a souvenir of one of them." The *Ledger's* city editor observes, "You'll do, Pippins." It is "the great praise that ever comes to a newspaper man."¹²

Baker could not have more clearly expressed the belief that practical experience is the best teacher of a reporter, even a college-educated reporter, or perhaps especially a college-educated one. In "Pippins," as in most newspaper fiction of the period, college education is more than merely useless; it is actually a hindrance to success in journalism.

On the surface, however, the fiction seems to suggest something quite different: that the college men who began enter-

ing newspaper work in some numbers in the 1890s were ushering in a golden age of journalism. This impression results from the fact that they often despise the older, jaded generation of reporters.

A typical reaction to the veterans is that of the protagonist of Wayland Wells Williams' 1920 novel, *Goshen Street*: "Not only was he repelled by their unattractive appearance, their heavy bandinage, their noisy excursions to the bar; he noticed two or three of them were gray-haired men of fifty and became afraid. What if he should degenerate into that distressing product, the elderly reporter, being sent out on less and less important stories, trying to belie his failure by boasting of past triumphs?"¹³ But such trepidation tends to be repudiated, or at least tempered, by the dynamics of the plot. It rapidly develops in most newspaper fiction that the secrets of the craft, its lore and legends, are stored away in the whiskey-addled brains of old newspapermen. "When you are done with me," declares one who has taken the young hero of Edward Hungerford's *The Copy Shop* (1925) under his wing, "you can forget all that journalism stuff that they tried to teach you in that freshwater college of yours. I am going to show you the real thing."¹⁴

In essence, the college-educated cub is faced with the unenviable choice of failing or of defecting to the ranks of hacks and alcoholic wrecks, of continuing to bumble along or of remaking himself in the battered image of the veteran journalists. But not long after choosing to emulate the old pros, he begins to question whether success in journalism is worth the cost—the death of innocence, the loss of idealism, the fading of literary ambition. He wonders, in the words of a reporter in Samuel Hopkins Adams' 1921 novel, *Success*, "if

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 435-36.

Wayland Wells Williams, *Goshen Street* (New York: Stokes, 1920), pp. 88-89.

¹⁴ Edward Hungerford, *The Copy Shop* (New York: Putnam's, 1925), p. 36.

the newspaper game isn't just too strong for us who try to play it."¹⁵

The Great Escape

Disillusioned and fearful for his future, the young reporter usually abandons journalism. He may go into literature or politics or business, but whichever path he takes, he escapes down it just as fast as he can. Journalism offers a smattering of all kinds of knowledge, and can serve as a steppingstone to something else. But those who stick to it are doomed. "There's no future for a man in the newspaper business," a veteran political reporter warns the cub in Ben Ames Williams' 1927 novel, *Splendor*. "Nothing but a lot of work and a sanitarium when your nerves play out. Late hours, long hours, dull scratching at things."¹⁶ The words echo and reecho in the pages of newspaper fiction. "Leave the game before you are forced out of it," the protagonist of Malcolm H. Ross' *Penny Dreadful* (1929) is told.¹⁷ "I don't want to burn out in this business," says the hero of former newspaperman Gene Fowler's *Trumpet in the Dust* (1930). "They use you until you are all consumed and then they toss you aside like a handful of wet ashes."¹⁸

Journalism may be a school of practical experience or a cemetery of talent, these and other authors of newspaper fiction concluded, but it is not a career.

From Crusader to Cynic

Even the crusader, the most positive literary representation of the journalist, does not regard journalism as a career. The hero of Olin L. Lyman's *Micky* (1905), a tramp newspaperman whose reporting smashes the political machine in an unidentified Eastern city, warns a cub:

You'll find this "career," as you call it a good deal like a hobby horse. Pleasant

¹⁵ Samuel Hopkins Adams, *Success* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921), p. 546.

¹⁶ Ben Ames Williams, *Splendor* (New York: Dutton, 1927), p. 205.

¹⁷ Malcolm H. Ross, *Penny Dreadful* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1929), p. 57.

¹⁸ Gene Fowler, *Trumpet in the Dust* (New York: Liveright, 1930), p. 294.

¹⁹ Olin L. Lyman, *Micky* (Boston: Badger, 1905), p. 134.

motion, but doesn't land you anywhere. There's nothing to it. I heard you talking the other day about the great equipment it gives a fellow for a start in life. That's all right if taken in time, like the measles, but let me tell you something. You stick at this, and stick and stick, and by the time you're ready for that start, you'll be backin' up."¹⁹

As the years wore on, the crusader of newspaper fiction would evolve into a thoroughgoing cynic. Under the pressure of social changes, his instinctive distrust of journalism would seep outward to darken his attitude toward the whole of life.

Novels and short stories that feature the crusading journalist follow a distinct pattern. The crusader often arrives in town a stranger. Perhaps he has inherited a struggling newspaper from a distant relative; perhaps he has drifted onto the scene in search of a job. In either case, he finds a community controlled by gangsters of one stripe or another. Acting as an extra-legal force, he routs the evildoers. He is a messianic figure who materializes out of nowhere to break the midnight conspiracies that rule the sunlit streets and to protect the innocent from the corrupt.

The pattern usually ends in one of two ways. Sometimes the crusader is rewarded with the love of a beautiful woman, fame and prosperity for his paper, and promotion out of daily journalism. He becomes a leader in the community that he helped reconstruct. His leadership may be formally recognized by election to political office, as happens to John Harkless in Booth Tarkington's *The Gentleman From Indiana* (1899), to Billy Guthrie in Joseph A. Altsheler's *Guthrie of the Times* (1904), and to Jeremy Robson in Samuel Hopkins Adams' *Common Cause* (1919). Other times the crusader disappears as mysteriously as he appeared. Such is the case in Lyman's novel, in Louis Dodge's *Whispers* (1920), and in Edna Ferber's *Cimarron* (1930). The crusader establishes the basis for civilization in what had been a moral wilderness, only to vanish once his utility has worn out.

The crusading journalist emerged as a fictional character about the turn of the

century: "a crusading time," H.L. Mencken called it, "with uplifters of a hundred schools harrying every major American city, and every newspaper of any pretensions took a hand in the dismal game."²⁰ Crusades of all kinds are carried out in the pages of newspaper fiction. Harkless battles vigilantes in Tarkington's *The Gentleman From Indiana*. Billy Woods exposes boodlers in city hall in Jesse Lynch Williams' *The Day Dreamer* (1906). Lawrence Ashmore matches wits with Wall Street swindlers in Charles Agnew MacLean's *The Mainspring* (1912). Hal Surtaine challenges the patent-medicine industry in Adams' *The Clarion* (1914).

Quite early, however, cracks appeared in the image of the crusading journalist. For example, the Hearst-like publisher in William Richard Hereford's *The Demagog* (1909) only pretends to be a crusader against oligarchy to better advance his presidential ambitions:

Holman preached against the Octopus. He had helped to make the word hateful to complaining millions, but... he might himself, as he sat at his desk in the *Epoch* office, be compared to the head and brains of a great cuttle-fish whose tentacles stretched from one coast to another and beyond.²¹

Like Howard in David Graham Phillips' *The Great God Success* (1901) and Offield in Miriam Michelson's *The Yellow Journalist* (1905), David Holman embodied the then fresh fear that a publisher would use the power of the press to enslave the masses. The fiction was acknowledging, in the melodramatic manner of popular literature, a new and disturbing fact, that journalism was big business, with enormous reach and resources. There were eight chains in 1900, and they controlled 27 newspapers and about 10% of daily circulation. By 1910 there were already a dozen chains, and the number of papers under their control had doubled.²²

The cracks in the image of the crusading journalist widened alarmingly after World War I. As prewar optimism and innocence turned to postwar disillusionment, newspaper fiction itself became less idealistic.

"...now and then when I stumble on a fact which is news, I print it," Arthur Morton, the protagonist of John C. Mellett's *Ink* (1930), says. "If readers are surprised, or horrified, or startled into action, that is all right with me. If not, all right too. I'm only interested in printing things that will interest them...."²³ Morton, though he rids his city of bootleggers, possesses none of the fire of earlier fictional crusaders. The generation that, in F. Scott Fitzgerald's words, had "grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken" had no zeal for reform.

Ultimately, newspaper fiction came to question whether reform was even possible. Seumas "Snakes" Shiel, the central character in James S. Hart and Garret D. Byrnes' 1930 novel, *Scoop*, brings down the state political boss by exposing the sales of pardons to dangerous criminals. Snakes, however, doubts that it will make much difference in the end. "The boss is ditched," he tells his editor, "and the minority party will win the next election. The board of directors (of the paper) won't like that so much. But they needn't worry. They'll win the election after that."²⁴ Snakes quits journalism in despair and ships out for the horizon on a tramp steamer.

"A reporter is no hero for a novel," Stephen Crane wrote in his notes for *Active Service* (1899), his novel with a reporter for a hero.²⁵ The evolution of newspaper fiction seems to confirm Crane's observation. Without a clear professional creed to sustain him, the fictional journalist became the archetypal alienated youth of the pseudo-sophisticated 1920s. He went from crusader to cynic, from messiah to broken idol.

²⁰ H. L. Mencken, *A Choice of Days*, selected and with an Introduction by Edward L. Galligan (New York: Vintage, 1981), p. 167.

William Richard Hereford, *The Demagog* (New York: Holt, 1909), p. 193.

²² Mott, *op. cit.*, p. 648.

²³ John C. Mellett, *Ink* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1930), p. 146.

²⁴ James S. Hart and Garrett D. Byrnes, *Scoop* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1930), p. 301.

²⁵ Quoted in Thomas Beer, *Stephen Crane* (New York: Knopf, 1923), p. 184.

Conclusions

From the beginning, newspaper fiction was a tangle of contradictions. Authors said journalism both invited college men into its ranks and knocked the college clean out of them; both nursed young writers and destroyed their talent; both crusaded for justice and provided a refuge for cynics.

Journalism, according to the fiction published between 1890 and 1930, was a trade to be toilsomely mastered and then abandoned at the first sign of a better job. Contemporary newspaper fiction holds much the same view. For example, a leading character in Philip Caputo's *DelCorso's Gallery* (1983), war correspondent Harry Bolton thinks of himself: "I don't

²⁶ Philip Caputo, *DelCorso's Gallery* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983), pp. 310, 313

want to finish as a 50-year-old bureau bum, gone in the legs and winging stories until some young wolf comes along and takes my job. . . ." He gives up journalism, "the little whore," and retreats to a North Carolina mountain cabin to write novels.²⁶

Young people who want to be journalists carry around in their heads images of what journalism is like. Some of the images may originate in newspaper fiction. All in all, they are not images calculated to inspire. The fiction darkly reflects the ambiguous status of journalism in America, the uncertainty of whether it is an art, a business, or a profession. Moreover, by failing to positively define the nature of journalism, the fiction perhaps encouraged darkness to grow.

First Amendment Danger from Within

► I don't believe that . . . the American public is going to tolerate the repeal of the First Amendment or court rulings that would effectively silence, or even seriously restrain criticism of the government . . . I fear that the press itself, in its attitudes, assumptions and limitations . . . may as seriously as any outside force limit the public's right to know, and tarnish the ideal of an informed populace.

That right and that ideal, after all, not the comfort, convenience or status of reporters and editors, are the purposes of a free press with Constitutional protection. How well the press serves those purposes is the real test of its freedom, and that standard requires us to examine our own performance more candidly than we usually do . . .

So far from being the arrogant trampers of national security and government secrets imagined by Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon before him, the press in which I've spent most of my life has usually appeared to me to be hungry for a respectable place in the established political and economic order, and apprehensive about the hostile public and official reaction that boldness and independence often evoke.

. . . So, if there's ample cause to be concerned about the First Amendment, and the courts and the national security zealots, the press has no reason for complacency about its own performance, in print or with television cameras. The First Amendment is not needed to protect staged "media events," unquestioning acceptance of official statements, ill-informed reports of complex matters, and evasions of responsibility—any more than it's needed to protect gourmet recipes and happy-talk weather reports. And even the First Amendment can't guarantee thoughtful and informed reporting of the news.—TOM WICKER in speech at the University of Arizona after receiving the John Peter Zenger Award, October 18, 1984.

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