

Scoop! Journalists in Fiction

THE INKY PATH

- Journalists appear in fiction in many guises and play many roles. Sometimes they provide central characters, often they intrude on the action, their attentions as unwelcome as they often are in real life. Scoop! gathers together these appearances under a variety of themes, some amusing, some trivial, some giving an insight into how the Press works and how it is seen to impact on our society. If you have favourite representations of journalists in European fiction or insights into ways they are portrayed, please email Scoop!



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Annika's back: Liza Marklund's Prime Time



"Crime is a blot on society in every democracy," Torstensson replied. "One of the most important obligations of the press is to investigate criminals at all levels of society and expose them."

Oh really, Schyman thought. And I thought that's what the police are supposed to do.

By and large, I agree with Schyman. But the irony is that one of Schyman's reporters, Annika Bengtzon is about to expose a criminal in a most public and spectacular way. Indeed, for English readers, the denouement of *Prime Time* will be the fourth time in which [Liza Marklund's](#) character has solved a crime, as ever one step ahead of the police.

I like Annika and I like Marklund. *Prime Time*, written in 2002 but only now published in the UK, is in some ways a conventional 'whodunnit', featuring a murder in a stately home that follows a formula that would be familiar to Agatha Christie, but at the same time giving endless insights into journalism (at least as it is practiced in this Swedish fiction).

The central plot concerns the brutal murder of a television show host, Michelle Carson, during the filming of a series rendered in English as *Summer Frolic at the Castle* (apparently it doesn't sound as dreadful in Swedish). The isolated location means there are 12 suspects, all loosely connected with the show, and all with some motive for doing away with Michelle. To add claustrophobic spice, one is Annika's best friend, two others work for her newspaper, *Kvallspressen*, another used to share a desk with her; yet another is a Nazi activist from her hometown.

This is played out against a backdrop of domestic strains in Annika's relationship with her partner, brought about in large part the pressures of being for a journalist, and high level power politics played out at the newspaper.

As in her earlier books, Marklund is keen to locate the action in real places (the murder takes place at [Yxtaholm Castle](#)) and it would be quite easy to walk Annika's Stockholm - something I intend to do shortly). But I don't expect to find an 'Annika lived here' plaque in Katrinesholm:

"In her hometown no-one was impressed by her work, her career, and ambitions. They felt sorry for her."

As her Aunt Martha asks:

"Writing about violence and crime, is that really a suitable job for a woman?"

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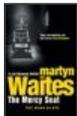
MINOR CHARACTERS



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Like all good fictional journalists, Annika has an ambivalent view of her job. Looking through her own paper's rather tawdry cuttings on murdered Michelle, she says: "This is insane. Why have we written so much about this girl?"

It is a theme picked up by the chairman of the *Kvallspressen* board:

"What about the rest of you (journalists), like this Annika Bengtson - what kind of person is she? How can she write garbage like this?"

As so often, Annika can write it because it happens to be true; it only became garbage because it involved a member of the chairman's family. As before, Marklund puts journalistic ethics to the forefront, and although (certainly in translation) she can be rather heavy handed in the dialogue she uses to frame them, the issues she raises are compelling, not least for an English reader fascinated by the different perspectives of Swedish practice.

Here's an exchange that is worth pondering...

"You don't always put everything in the paper," Annika explained in a serious voice.

"Why not if it's the truth?"

"Well, there's personal integrity to consider."

Many an editor would claim that the decision on what to publish lay with them, and not with the personal scruples of a reporter whose job is to report.

Likewise, at one point Annika is asked to use her journalistic talents to uncover information that may not be relevant to her job.

She wasn't here as a journalist - she was a snoop, a secret agent, possibly even a traitor.

This begs the question, is there something about being a journalist that transports the individual into a different moral sphere? Are some actions that might seem ethical if carried out by a journalist unethical if carried out by the rest of us?

Certainly Annika feels the need to adopt two separate personas, one for work, one for home. Right at the beginning, her plans for an important family trip are thrown into turmoil by the newsdesk wanting her to report on Michelle's murder. Her partner is not impressed: "Are you serious? Are you really going to work?"

And then, "A fine mother you are."

There can be few journalists - male or female - who have not felt this pain. And then walked out of the door. However much you dislike some aspects of it, the job comes first.

Annika blinked, at one level stung by his words, at another, untouched. The armour that protected her working persona had kicked into place and made her impervious.

Posted by [Philip Young](#) on **October 08, 2006 at 11:55 AM** in [Only doing their job](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Thinkers, scribblers and cattle



...Let me tell you something. There are three sorts of people - thinkers, scribblers and cattle. It is true I secretly count almost all who are called thinkers and poets among the scribblers, and most of the scribblers belong among the cattle. But that's not the point. The business of thinkers is to search out the truth.

There is, however, a secret about truth which, oddly enough, is but little known, although I should have thought it as clear as

daylight - and it is this: truth is like the sun, its value depends wholly upon being at a correct distance away from it. If the thinkers were allowed to have everything their own way they would steer our globe straight into the sun and burn us all to ashes. Small wonder, then, their activity sometimes causes the cattle to become restive and bellow: Put out the sun, in the name of Satan, put it out! It's the business of us scribblers to preserve a correct and satisfactory distance from the truth. A really good scribbler - and there aren't many! - *understands* the thinker and *feels* with the cattle. It's our job to protect the thinkers from the rage of the cattle and the cattle from too hefty doses of truth. But I admit the latter is the easier of the two and the one we make the best job of in the ordinary way of things.

- *Doctor Glas*, Hjalmar Soderberg

Posted by Philip Young on August 28, 2006 at 10:49 AM in News | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

The art of sub-editing

"There's nothing to it, really," said Bob modestly. "It's just a matter of checking the facts and the spelling, crossing out the first sentence and removing any attempts at jokes."

- *Towards the End of the Morning*, Michael Frayn

Posted by Philip Young on June 04, 2006 at 11:42 AM in Bloody subs | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Folly, fear and mistrust

"In matters of economic science," Julian would say, "the layman knows nothing, assumes much and fears more. All the press ever does is compound that ignorance, folly and fear; deliberately it fosters mistrust of change. Therefore, Eleanor, when faced with the ladies, gentlemen and guttersnipes of the media, let it be our policy to remain silent."

Unfortunately Eleanor/ Ellen/ Apricot (it's complicated) goes on to forget this rule when talking to Freddie Howard of the Daily Mail.

"Do you have a pet name for him?" asked Freddie.

"I call him Rasputin," said Eleanor.

Bad move.

- *Darcy's Utopia*, by Fay Weldon

Posted by Philip Young on May 01, 2006 at 10:02 AM in Making it up | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Boris beckons...

Several journalists appear as minor characters in Boris Johnson's *Seventy Two Virgins* (2004). **Sam Smith** alerted me to Baghdad veteran and *Daily Mirror* hack Barry White, but here's a bit about the MP Roger Barlow discovering quite what another *Mirror* journalist, Debbie Gujaratne, has in store for him.

"Well of course, it's very embarrassing for me to talk to you like this," she said, and then recited what purported to be a recent series events in Barlow's life.

It was not the truth. It was an abstract impressionist representation: crude, impasto blotches that might or might not stand for an object in the 'real world.' But she knew she had enough to go on, and Barlow knew it too.

At length he said: "It's all rubbish, and besides, it was ages ago."

The reporter went for the crack. "It is either all bollocks or happened ages ago. It can't be both.

Barlow decides to speak his mind - at length.

Poor chap, thought Debbie, as he ranted on. She could picture it all. The basically happy family life... She pitied him, although she had no family herself (she was of course sleeping with her married news editor). And yet even as she pitied him, she knew she would have no mercy. It would be more than her job was worth.

Posted by Philip Young on April 24, 2006 at 08:43 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

A perversion of normal existence

It is hard to conceive of a bleaker portrayal of journalism than that offered by Gordon Burn in *Fullalove* (1995), a forensic and pitiless examination of the demons of self-loathing that shape Norman Miller, 'a hack, a scribbler' at the 'wall-shinning, nose-poking, leg-in-the-door, end of the trade.'

Reporting is a perversion of normal existence. Even (ex-wife) was forever telling me, "You get to know them so that they feel relaxed with you, ask them the questions you have no natural right to expect answers to, ask to see things you weren't meant to see, they open a window on the most intimate parts of their lives, and then you walk away."

Posted by Philip Young on April 18, 2006 at 12:40 PM in News, Only doing their job | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Font of all knowledge

Veteran hack Walter Brand is in the pub, reminiscing over fonts:

"Degenerate, Manson, Exocet, Dead History Bold, Skelter, Arbitrary..."

- Brilliant, from Gordon Burn's *Fullalove* (1995)

Posted by Philip Young on April 14, 2006 at 08:47 AM in Jargon and technicalities | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

The Inky Path 4

Newsworthiness does not depend on an absolute standard of what is or is not news.

- Quoted from *The Inky Path*, in Martyn Bedford's *Exit: Orange and Red*

"Well, it (*Molecross's Miscellany of the Mysterious and Misunderstood*) doesn't have a large audience. It's esoteric."

- Molecross, in *Dr Who: The Algebra of Ice*, by Lloyd Rose

Posted by Philip Young on April 11, 2006 at 07:56 AM in News, The Inky Path | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Who is Doctoring the truth?

After **Fred Cree** it is heartwarming to meet Adrian Molecross, 'plumpish and bearded', 'scrupulously neat and clean', 'spotless and tidy', 'a scrupulous researcher'...

After all, he was a journalist, one of the world's highest callings. He pursued truth. Not just transcendent truth, but the ordinary, small earthly sort, too. Such as: what exactly happened last night?

Never fear, Molecross is a resourceful investigator and is particularly committed to uncovering Government cover-ups. As he remarks...

Someone from a marginal publication was more likely to find out about this crop pattern than any mainstream reporter, because mainstream reporters had to have their imaginations surgically removed before they were allowed to apply for their jobs.

As Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart says, Molecross is...

"A journalist. More or less. Writes one of those nonsense web magazines. Complete idiot."

Idiot or not *Molecross's Miscellany of the Mysterious and Misunderstood*

...had an impressive number of subscribers. This was because he could be counted on to get his details right

Molecross never leapt to conclusions... he stuck strictly to what he had seen and heard. No speculation. Well, except for saying the military were obviously covering something up and you couldn't really classify *that* as speculation, could you.

- Adrian Molecross appears in *Dr Who: The Algebra of Ice*, by Lloyd Rose. Thanks to Neil Perryman of *Tachyon TV* for the tip.

Posted by Philip Young on April 10, 2006 at 01:00 PM in Only doing their job | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Fred Cree, reptile

In Fred Cree, Michael Shea presents a particularly unattractive journalist. And every time *Spin Doctor* (1995) reveals more of Cree's character ("vicious, friend to no one, enemy to all") the reader remembers that Shea spent a decade as Press Secretary to the Queen.

Cree's motivation in life was envy; envy of those richer, better placed,

better looking, more successful than himself. Like some Victorian beggar, he had his nose pressed enviously against the windows of society and privilege. He felt he was always missing out on life, constantly haunted by a regret for things never done, places never visited, people never known. Affectionate relationships were strangers. Bitterness or spite defeated ambition in the confines of his mind. It was inevitable he should have chosen journalism as his career.

His 'deeply unattractive' appearance, his 'red and watery little eyes,' are a metaphor for his life:

Fred Cree was a born misfit. He had a complexion of unappealing texture, the victim of a pockmarking impetigo of childhood, further harmed by heavy beard growth which gave him a permanently scarred and unshaven appearance. He was a hairy man all over; fringes of coarse black pile sprouted from the cuffs and collars of his shirts. Those who had the misfortune to see more discovered a matted torso, back and front, which accounted for noticeable problems he had with body odour.

... Had he ended up in prison, well meaning social workers would doubtless point to his appearance as a mitigating factor in any wrongdoing.

None of which, of course, influences Cree's writing which is 'intelligent and farseeing':

He composed well with a verve and style which few could match. He was, thus, always in demand in a media that was not always choosy about the lifestyle of its journalists.

Posted by Philip Young on April 08, 2006 at 12:35 PM in Noble or savages | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

The world's best - or worst - newspaper?

Whilst on Aldous Huxley's *Island*, journalist and special agent Will Farnaby asks how many papers Pala supports. He is surprised to learn that there was only one.

"Who enjoys the monopoly?" Dr Robert assured him, "There's a panel of editors representing the half a dozen different parties and interests. Each of them gets his allotted space for comment and criticism. The reader's in a position to compare their arguments and make up his own mind. I remember how shocked I was the first time I read one of your big-circulation newspapers. The bias of the headlines, the systematic one-sidedness of the reporting and the commentaries, the catchwords and slogans instead of argument. No serious appeal to reason. Instead, a systematic effort to install conditioned reflexes in the minds of the voters - and for the rest, crime, divorce, anecdotes, twaddle, anything to keep them distracted, anything to prevent them from thinking."

Posted by Philip Young on April 08, 2006 at 08:59 AM in Newspapers | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

An artist humiliated

Will (iam Asquith) Farnaby (*Island*, Aldous Huxley) is another of those **'artistes' who feel 'humiliated'** by having stooped to earn money through mere journalism.

"And all the time I had been wanting to be a poet and finding I simply don't have what it takes. And then, after the War, I had to go into journalism to make money. What I wanted was to go hungry, if necessary, but to try to write something decent - good prose at least, seeing that it couldn't be good poetry."

...

"Wouldn't you be humiliated if you found yourself making money by turning out the cheapest, flashiest kind of literary forgery. I was a success because I was so irremediably second rate."

Island was first published in 1962, and social class is clearly a factor in Farnaby's framing of his trade. Dr McPhail diagnoses: "Upper class.. but not a member of the military or county sub species."

"Correct. My father was a barrister and political journalist. That is, when he wasn't too busy being an alcoholic."

Bloomsbury-born Farnaby is beginning life from rather a different perspective than Constance Amory, Gary Pymore or Joe Donovan. It's **as Dawn Stone remarks** in *Fragrant Harbour*:

I daresay if I'd gone to Oxbridge I would have had at least half a dozen chums who fell out of bed into useful, networkable positions on the kind of paper I wanted to work for.

- Thanks to **Jack Yan for suggesting *Island***

Posted by Philip Young on April 02, 2006 at 02:52 PM in Hack or artiste?, Social class | Permalink | Comments (0) | TrackBack (0)

The editor

In its loftiest form an editorship invites the journalist to perform a role of influence on the national stage, to engage in powerful and influential debate on matters of public interest, to challenge and shape governments (Ian McEwan's *Amsterdam*). Even at local level, the editor is well-placed, even obliged to become a pillar of the community.

Like Septimus Henry Kew, editor of the *Crow* (*The Water Clock*, Jim Kelly), and otherwise known as Woggle. Henry is tall and dessicated like a human praying mantis, with a small, stick insect body.

(His) thin frame, like a vision in a fairground mirror, enabled him to project his head around corners without revealing any other part of his body.

He has a tendency to 'extend his neck obscenely from his collar', allowing Philip Dryden to imagine his head turning through 360 degrees.

(Henry's) sex life appeared to be confined to the plain brown envelopes

(which contain videotapes) and lifetime membership of the Boy Scout movement.

A **poor manager**, Henry lives above the *Crow's* High Street office, and occasionally appears in full scout uniform, hence the nickname.

Henry was a stickler for the correct channels - one reason why was a lousy journalist.

The *Crucible's* editor (*Exit*, Bedford), Dougal Aitken-Aitken is of a different cut. No Scout uniform but his attire is just as telling - blue and white striped shirt with a white collar, pale green tie and red braces. He is the youngest editor in the group, his rise explained by the nickname Frugal Dougal.

The era of the high story count at the *Crucible* had dawned with daa appointment, an early memo setting out *story quotas* and *word ceilings* required by the redesign from broadsheet to tabloid. *If it can't be told in ten pars, it ain't worth telling.*

Posted by Philip Young on April 01, 2006 at 02:01 PM in Editor, Jobs | Permalink | Comments (0) | TrackBack (0)

Loving the news editor

News editor is one of the toughest jobs on a paper, located bang on the fault line between management and workforce. It is a high pressure position that requires a sharp news sense, quick reflexes and ordered mind, complemented by well-developed diplomatic, motivational and social skills. As very few people have this mix it usually means the incumbent is unpopular with almost everyone; as ideal candidates are hard to come by many editors resort to appointing a self-centred, slightly paranoid bully.

Not so, the editor of the *Crow* (*The Water Clock*, Jim Kelly). who has appoint the ineffectual Bill Bracken.

... a striking illustration of the editor's ability to award jobs on the basis of inverse qualification ... in line with this innovatcve policy of positive discrimination (Bracken) had got the news editor's job on the grounds that he was unable to deal with stress.

More typical is Lisa Marklund's Ingvar Johansson (*Bomber*) who can just about bring himself to briefly compliment Annika on a story.

"It's not bad," Ingvar Johansson said, turning around. "But that's all history. Tomorrow's paper is all that matters now."

Like all news editors is Johansson is driven by the constant fear that however well his team performs a rival might still get a better line (*Studio 69*).

"How the hell could we miss that angle? Maybe you could tell me that?"

Ink's news editor is Battersby

Battersby wore his hair brushed forward in a Nero style that made him look

as if he were backing into a breeze. A jagged fringe hung down over his forehead. He had an abrupt manner and was apt to shut at people without warning. It wasn't clear if this was a way of trying impose his authority, or some neurological complaint he was unable to control.

Exit's news editor, Gary, is always up against deadlines, always fearful of the next yawningly empty newlist. Hence this exchange, when Constance is interviewing the manger of a shop called Fruits of the Churn. The phone rings...

"You've to return to base immediately," said the shop manager, smiling, as he replaced the receiver.

"Did they give a name?"

"Gary someone or other on newsdesk. Nice chap. He said 'Tell her fuck the cheese feature and get her arse back to the office!'"

Quite.

Posted by Philip Young on April 01, 2006 at 12:27 PM in Jobs, News Editor | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

A Metronome with Acne

Experience counts for a lot in journalism. Partly, it gives an awareness of what needs to be done in a sometimes bewildering range of situations; partly, it gives the deeper world view needed to put what is happening to real people, living real lives, into a human context.

Which means that the stumblings of junior reporters provide a rich vein of comedy.

In *The Water Clock*, Jim Kelly has fun with the Crow's acne-ridden junior reporter Gary Pymore:

Criminal over confidence was his fatal flaw, compounded by the illusions that it was his spots.

Gary has tombstone teeth, an 'ever-present full-length coat' (for Kelly, a coat defines a man) and smokes inexpertly. He had meningitis as a youth, and lost a good part of his ability to balance.

This had been treated by fitting his shoes with blakeys - small metal plates once designed to preserve shoe leather. The treatment involved smacking his shoes against the ground as he walked and using the sound as a kind of sonic stabilizer. As a result he was, in motion, a human metronome. A metronome with acne.

Gary's real flaw is, of course, enthusiasm - both a great virtue and a heavy burden for a journalist. As Liza Marklund says of a bright young reporter:

His only flaw was his undisguised delight in accidents, murders, and various other tragedies.

And, as Kelly's central character Philip Dryden observes:

... despite some serious handicaps, including phoentic spelling and Olympic stupidity, Gary was probably a born reporter.

Posted by Philip Young on March 27, 2006 at 07:50 AM in Youth | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

The dividing line

Using a journalist as the central character in a crime novel (or, more accurately, a narrative driven by crime) is that they can get too close to the action.

Dryden recognised he had arrived at the dividing line between being a reporter and a detective. He was reluctant to cross it due to a combination of innate cowardice and the lack of a blue uniform covered in comforting buttons and insignia (*The Water Clock*, Jim Kelly)

And here's DCI Pink to Constance Amory in *Exit*:

"This is not a story; it's a crime. And you aren't a detective, you are a reporter."

Later, in *The Water Clock*:

(DCI) Stubbs turned on him. "You've got no right shadowing a police office investigation like this. Or for that matter, withholding vital evidence."

Similar to Kurt Wallander in *Firewall*:

"You and your newspaper are not the ones in charge of this investigation. We are. If you wish to draw your own judgment, we can't stop you. But the truth is going to turn out quite different. Not that you and your editor will give it much space."

Posted by Philip Young on March 26, 2006 at 01:20 PM in Police and thieves | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

The Scoop! meme nudges on

One of the purposes of Scoop! was to invite others to do my work for me by highlighting characters I'd either never heard of - or had forgotten. Partly to that purpose, and partly to see how ideas travel through the blogosphere (the day job intrudes) I set in train the Scoop! meme.

Here are some of the recommendations:

- De komst van Joachim Stiller/*The coming of Joachim Stiller* by Hubert Lampo ([Serge Cornelus](#))
- *New Grub Street*, by George Gissing ([Andrea Weckerle](#))
- Will Farnaby in Aldous Huxley's *Island* ([Jack Yan](#))
- Derkhan Bluesday, art-critic for the Beacon and secret correspondent for the illegal Runagate Rampant in China Mieville's *Perdido Street Station* ([Elizabeth Albrycht](#))
- Millon De Floss, the journalist/stalker in Jasper Fforde's Thursday Next novels *The Eyre Affair* and *Lost in a Good Book* ([Charles Arthur](#))

- Barry White, literary hack in *72 Virgins*, by Boris Johnson ([Sam Smith](#))
- *The Honourable Schoolboy*, by John le Carre ([Simon Collister](#))

Thanks to everyone... More please - and you don't have to be invited to join the meme.

Posted by Philip Young on March 26, 2006 at 09:33 AM in [Nudges](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

A great distraction

"News was a great distraction if you didn't want to think about your own life."

A splendid observation from Jim Kelly's *The Water Clock*; many more to follow, and thanks to Roger Hermiston for the recommendation.

Posted by Philip Young on March 25, 2006 at 12:10 PM in [News](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Faking it

In **Self's Punishment**, Bernhard *'The Reader'* Schlink's detective Gerhard Self suggests another category for Scoop! - fake journalists.

"Herr Mischkey, you've been a great help. In case I think of anything else may I give you a call? Here's my card." I felt around in my wallet for the business card with my private address and telephone number in which I pose as freelance journalist Gerhard Selk.

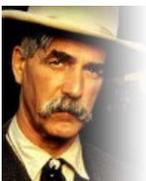
Earlier in the book, the narrator Self remarks

Tietzke, one of the last honest journalists. When the *Heidelberger Tageblatt* folded he'd got a job with the *Rhine Neckar Chronicle* by the skin of his teeth, but his status there was tricky.

There seems to be no narrative purpose for the opinion that Tietzke was an exception - a claim reinforced by the suggestion honesty threatened his job security.

Posted by Philip Young on March 20, 2006 at 11:17 PM in [Faking it](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

An inky cowboy...



Although Joe Donovan's work as a reporter is significant to the plot of *The Mercy Seat*, Martyn Waites has little say about journalism. What Donovan provides is a character rugged, Northern and, at the time of the action, a loner.

In one of the weaker exchanges in a novel of uneven dialogue, Donovan is talking to Maria Bennett, an old friend and the editor of his former paper *The Herald* about the fact that she isn't married - "I am a successful independent woman... not wife and mother material."

Not unless you marry another journalist, says Donovan.

"I know what you *inky cowboys* are like," replies Maria. Improbably, Donovan

suggests she has not lost her facility for an apt phrase.

Although I am struggling to hear any editor referring to a fellow journalist as an 'inky cowboy', it does have a resonance for Donovan. We know he is cool enough to wear a CBGB's t-shirt - and identifies with the Johnny Cash's version of *Mercy Seat* rather than Nick Cave's...

Peta describes him as...

Tall, long hair. Mid-thirties. Leather jacket and boots. Bit like that old cowboy actor from the 1970s. Sam Elliott? Yeah. But without the moustache.

We learn ... his usual type of story... involved cover-ups, corruptions or social injustice. One he did on care homes led to a change in the law.

(Maria) named a prominent Conservative politician who had been jailed on perjury and corruption charges.

"Remember him? Joe was on that team, his first assignment."

An inky cowboy anyone?

Posted by Philip Young on March 12, 2006 at 06:59 PM in [cowboy](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Tougher than the rest

Donovan brought his hands up, pushed back into Mark's twisted face. He forced the heel of his left hand on to his top lip, pushing lip and nose back as far and as hard as he could.

Clearly this reporter is cut from a different cloth than Hughie. The back cover blurb for Martyn Waites' *The Mercy Seat*, begins:

Once a renowned investigative journalist, Joe Donovan's life fell apart when his six-year-old son disappeared without trace. Now a virtual recluse, Donovan is abruptly thrust back into the limelight when a teenage boy makes contact in desperate need of his help.

Donovan is a tough Geordie who can handle himself in the (several) fights that come his way in a rather violent novel.

It's hard to imagine Hugh, Annika or Constance in this scene, right at the start...

Joe Donovan picked up the revolver from the table, felt the heft of it in his left hand, weighed the options.

Not that Waites can allow Donovan much in the way of social niceties. He is stuck in a Northumberland cottage which 'looked like a building site during lunchbreak.'

He hadn't just let himself go, he'd become abandoned.... Stale booze breath and unwashed skin.

Posted by Philip Young on March 11, 2006 at 12:25 AM in [Tough guys](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

The Scoop! meme

Thanks for your help....

Posted by Philip Young on February 25, 2006 at 05:52 PM in [What's Scoop all about?](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(10\)](#) | [TrackBack \(3\)](#)

Ambition(2)

More from Ink. Hugh and Julian are in the pub, sitting near a noisy fruit machine.

"How about you, Hughie? Any secret ambition?"

"I once thought I'd like to be a ----" he said.

The machine nearest them gave a loud, trilling squawk.

"A waiter, Hughie?" said Julian. He sounded surprised. "I would have thought you would have set your sights a bit higher than that."

"No," said Hugh, "a writer."

"Ah."

Julian's reaction suggested this was an equally unusual ambition.

"I suppose I'd like to do at least one thing I can be proud of," said Hugh.

Julian laughed, "Hardly in the right profession for that, are we?"

"No," Hugh agreed.

Posted by Philip Young on February 23, 2006 at 08:53 PM in [Hack or artiste?](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Writer's block

Battersby stared at (Hugh). "You can't have writer's block," he said. "You're not a writer. This is journalism. It doesn't matter if a few words are the wrong way round."

"You don't think so?"

"Of course not. You can't go worrying about things like that. As long as they're roughly in the right order that's as much as anyone can hope for."

- **Ink, John Preston.** See [He's a reporter, she's a writer.](#)

Posted by Philip Young on February 18, 2006 at 10:41 PM in [Hack or artiste?](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

The Inky Path 3

Journalism does not lend itself to a stereotypical office routine. The reporter must be out and about seeking and gathering the news, which is no respecter of meal-times or the demands of the reporter's private life. Take off your hat and loosen your tie, by all means, but be prepared - at a moment's notice - to return to the fray.

Or as John Preston would have it in Ink...

A number of the journalists slept under their desks, no longer having a home to go to. They could be seen first thing in the morning still huddled on the floor, fully dressed. Upon being woken, they would get up, sit down and immediately begin typing, as if this was some automatic response they had no control over.

Posted by Philip Young on February 18, 2006 at 07:37 PM in [The Inky Path](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Life after journalism

Journalists who lost their jobs seldom prospered at anything else, writes John Preston, in Ink (2000)

Careers spent recording the foibles of the world hardly prepared themselves for living in it. Mostly they drank themselves to death, or went into public relations, or bought themselves little teashops on the south coast.

Lars Magnusson, in Henning Mankell's Sidetracked, follows the first route.

Long ago Magnusson had been a journalist. After a number of years at the Express he had tired of city life and returned to his roots in Ystad... (he) was an alcoholic.

By chance Wallander had been at the station late one night when Magnusson was dragged in, so drunk that he couldn't stand up. He had been driving in that state, and had lost control and gone through the plate-glass window of a bank. He had ended up spending six months in jail.

Magnusson gives up journalism and makes a living setting chess problems for newspapers; he avoids drinking himself to death by forcing himself to hold off on that first drink until he had devised at least one chess problem.

Warren Bartholomew, the £29,000 a year and a car press officer at Urbopark in Bedford's Exit, Orange and Red admits to 'serving my time on local newspapers, you know'. naturally, this experience makes him

...consummately adept at managing information to Mall Admin's best advantage without alerting reporters to the fact that he'd steered them away from a more fruitful line of inquiry.

Any examples of fictional reporters buying teashops gratefully received.

Posted by Philip Young on February 18, 2006 at 07:25 PM in [Life after journalism](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Watching the detectives

Crime usually makes news and seldom more so than when the crime is murder. Police investigating serious - or unusual - crimes know their activities will attract press interest. Sometimes they encourage that interest, often they don't.

Henning Mankell's Inspector Kurt Wallander is both a skilled detective and an

honest and decent man. He appreciates and upholds the freedoms and openness of Swedish society - but strongly objects to the intrusions of reporters into the vital business of investigating crime. At best they get in the way, at worst they risk jeopardising his efforts to bring villains to justice.

In *The Dogs of Riga*, Ystad police chief Bjork takes a call from the *Express*. Wallander says: "It's not worth getting upset about. They'll write what they want."

Wallander particularly dislikes the ritual of the press conference. Before facing reporters in *Firewall*,

(He) could feel the symptoms of his flu getting worse. At least maybe I'll infect a journalist, he thought, and dug in his pockets for a tissue.

Journalists do have their uses, though. In *The Man Who Smiled* Walander tells colleagues it is time to call a press conference.

"It will be the first time in my life I've ever taken *that* initiative but I think it would be a good thing if we could give the autumn a helping hand to spread a bit more mist and fog."

Posted by Philip Young on January 07, 2006 at 06:35 PM in [Watching the detectives](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

The greasy pole

Whereas *Exit's* Constance Amory seems to content with life on the Hallam *Evening Crucible*, with taking over as industrial correspondent as the height of her ambition, many see weeklies and regionals as a stepping stone to national glory - perhaps well beyond the world of newspapers.

The career of Dawn (once Doris) Stone bookends John Lanchester's *Fragrant Harbour* (2002). After Durham University and a journalism course at Cardiff, she joins the *Argus*, a local paper in Blackpool (chosen because political party conferences are held there).

Nowadays ... the plan would be to bypass all that grubby cloth-capped crap about reporting and head as quickly as possible for the clean, well-lit uplands of commentary, opinion and a column with your second most flattering photo at the top... This however was the old days. So I sent eighteen months ... doing all the usual stuff from local fairs to sports to news (Granny drives Reliant Robin over cliff, survives) to gradually more intertesting court cases, to features and eventually - yes - a column.

.... I daresay if I'd gone to Oxbridge I would have had at least half a dozen chums who fell out of bed into useful, networkable positions on the kind of paper I wanted to work for.

Posted by Philip Young on January 07, 2006 at 09:53 AM in [Ambition](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

The Inky Path 2

A reporter starting out on a provincial weekly might expect to earn £10 a week. If he is disgruntled about this he ought to look elsewhere for a living,

for the true journalist measures his remuneration not in pounds, shillings and pence but in column inches.

Posted by Philip Young on January 06, 2006 at 07:45 PM in [The Inky Path](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Mr Write . . .

Journalists may get a bad press in general fiction, but it's a different matter in women's romances. For author and ex-journalist Jilly Cooper, reporters make the perfect romantic hero. In *Imogen*, a newspaper reporter called Matt is the only noble character in a group including a vicar, a tennis champion and a film producer. In *Prudence* and short story *The Ugly Swan*, journalists Ace and Danny again stand out for their integrity, and both get the girl in the end.

Cooper presents various journalistic qualities as appealing - sharp wits and intelligence, strong social conscience, energy and passion - but the one she constantly highlights is the journalist's ability to empathise with and listen to people.

This is the admiring heroine in *The Ugly Swan* speaking...

"Danny seemed to have time for everyone. At a party, he would talk to the plainest woman in the room and within 10 minutes she'd be glowing and happy, with a crowd gathering around her."

And in *Imogen*:

As always, Matt drew confidences out of her, as the sun brings out the flowers . . . He's a journalist, she kept telling herself, he's trained to ask questions and be a good listener. He'd do the same to anyone.

What woman wouldn't like this - a man whose very job it is to listen and show an interest? It could almost be described as a traditionally feminine role or quality (in Janice Radway's study *Reading the Romance*, she concludes that readers want feminine characteristics in their fictional heroes because what they're really seeking is some nurturing of the type they traditionally dole out.)

Perhaps this is why a romantic fiction writer might see journalism as an appealing profession for a man, while male writers tend to see it as slightly shameful or play up its macho elements. In Jilly Cooper, there is no stitching people up, bribery or corruption - in fact, her reporters will grant copy approval at the drop of a hat.

Posted by Julie Bradford on January 04, 2006 at 06:07 PM in [Noble or savages](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

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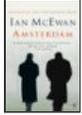
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MEDIA FICTIONS



• Ian McEwan: Amsterdam



• Martyn Bedford: Exit Orange and Red



• Gordon Burn: Fullalove



• John Preston: Ink



• Aldous Huxley: Island



• A.N. Wilson: My Name Is Legion



• Liza Marklund: Paradise



• Evelyn Waugh: Scoop: A Novel About Journalists (Penguin Modern Classics)



• Michael Shea: Spin Doctor



• Liza Marklund: Studio 69



• Liza Marklund: The Bomber



• Heinrich Boll: The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum (Vintage Classics)



• Jim Kelly: The Water Clock



• Michael Frayn: Towards the End of the Morning