

# Book reviews . . .

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## In Search of the Real “HeLa”

### *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

by Rebecca Skloot, New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2010, Hardcover, 368 pages, \$26.

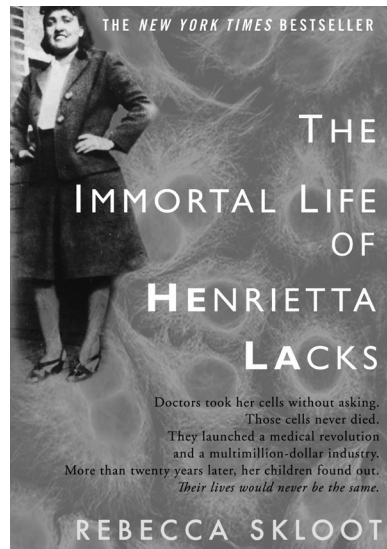
Reviewed by Douglas Whyntott, Emerson College, U.S.A.

I always find it interesting and instructive to read a first book by an author, and especially a first book of literary journalism. Part of the pleasure is in watching the writer make her choices. How will she structure the narrative, what ways will she attempt to draw the reader in, how heavily might she rely on suspense? What sort of transitions will she make? And importantly, for someone writing literary journalism or narrative nonfiction, how will she depart from the factual and expository narrative to develop the human, novelistic story that gives literary journalism its identity?

One such book is the recently published scientific narrative, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, by Rebecca Skloot, an American writer. In this book, her first, Skloot tells the story of a famous line of cultured cancer cells, the “HeLa” line, named after its donor, Henrietta Lacks. HeLa cells were the first ever to be successfully cultured in a laboratory, when in 1951 a doctor at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, during an examination of Henrietta Lacks for cervical cancer, cut off a small section of her tumor and placed it in a Petri dish. Researchers had been trying for years to grow human cells successfully under laboratory conditions, but none had survived more than a few days. The cells of Henrietta Lacks not only survived but did so astoundingly, and soon the HeLa line was distributed to researchers working with various diseases. Jonas Salk was among the first to use them. In 1951 Salk announced that he had developed a polio vaccine but couldn’t offer it until after testing—ultimately the vaccine was tested using HeLa cells. The rest of that story, with the tens of thousands of lives saved, is one of the most famous in medicine. The infant field of virology was born.

Skloot writes:

The discovery of HeLa cells was an epiphany for researchers of all kinds, because Henrietta’s cells allowed them to perform experiments that would have been impos-



sible with a living human. They cut HeLa cells apart and exposed them to endless toxins, radiation, and infections. They bombarded them with drugs, hoping to find one that would kill malignant cells without destroying normal ones. They studied immune suppression and cancer growth by injecting HeLa into rats with weakened immune systems, who developed malignant tumors much like Henrietta's. And if the cells died in the process, it didn't matter—scientists could just go back to their eternally growing HeLa stock and start over again.

She continues, in a key paragraph that indicates this book is not just a science story but something more, something literary and artistic: "But there were no news stories about the birth of the amazing HeLa cell line and how they might help stop cancer. In [George] Gey's one appearance on television, he didn't mention Henrietta or her cells by name, so the general public knew nothing about HeLa. Even if they had known, they probably wouldn't have paid it much mind" (58).

A fine and important story of a great historical moment in medical science. Skloot could have focused on that story alone and likely written a fine book. But she decided not to do that; she decided to go further and tell of Henrietta Lacks and her family, to tell not only of how the woman lived and died but what life has been like for her husband and offspring. The human story, the one that makes this book a form of literary journalism.

She found resistance in various ways. The Lacks family foremost did not want much to do with Rebecca Skloot when she came calling. The Lacks family is poor and black, and Skloot is white, so some differences are obvious, but Skloot didn't at the time know the deeper reasons for their reluctance. Yet she kept pushing. Sometimes she called one of the Lacks sons every day, and was told that they would not talk to her. She kept calling though, and kept talking to whomever she could.

Skloot also met resistance from the editorial front. She writes of this in the prologue. By then Skloot had gotten to know members of the Lacks family and become close to Henrietta Lacks' daughter Deborah Lacks. Skloot writes that an editor ordered her to take the Lacks family out of the book. It must have been difficult for Skloot, an unpublished writer, to have resisted the demands of an editor who held a key to publication. But Skloot did resist. Deborah Lacks, a religious woman who believed that her mother's spirit lived on in those cells, and who came to believe that Henrietta had guided Skloot her way, would weigh in on this decision. When the editor who insisted on the removal of the family was injured in a mysterious accident, Deborah said, "that's what happens when you piss Henrietta off."

Actually it would have been impossible for Rebecca Skloot not to write about the progenitor of the HeLa line, as she also accounts in the prologue of the book. As a high school student sitting in a biology class, totally lost in the terminology of cell division, Skloot listened to the teacher describe mitosis as a beautiful dance, but also add that things could go wrong, that an enzyme could misfire or a protein could activate incorrectly and the result could be cancer. He said we know these things from studying cells in culture and told briefly about Henrietta Lacks, saying, as he erased the board, that she was a black woman. Skloot was stricken with interest and followed the teacher to his office. What about the woman, she wanted know? Who was she? Nobody knows anything about her, the teacher said.

An interest seems to have grown into an obsession, the kind that can fuel a book. After an undergraduate degree in biology and while working on a graduate degree in creative writing, Skloot funded her research trips to Baltimore and the small tobacco town Henrietta Lacks was born in, (and her trips to interview scientists), by means of student loans and credit cards.

By writing about the family of Henrietta Lacks, Skloot writes about her own quest to find them, as well as the result of knowing them. Though her book is not a memoir her quest is part of the narrative line, and ultimately that leads into spiritual realms, given the religious interpretation of the Lacks family upon the role of the HeLa cell line. One sees the cells as a form of angel, the divine infused into human form. At one point in her travels Skloot, an atheist, holds a Bible and reads aloud from it on the bidding of a Lacks cousin, who says to her, “And when the Lord chooses an angel to do his work, you never know what they are going to come back looking like.” It could almost be a scene out of a Flannery O’Connor short story, a moment of grace.

Skloot is fundamentally a science journalist and the science story is well told. Some of the scientists come off as heroic, particularly George Gey. He started the program that led to the cell line, didn’t charge any money for the cells he distributed (though others would) and once he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, gave his own body up to research while still alive. Other researchers don’t come off quite so well. When Deborah Lacks seeks to know something about her mother, who she doesn’t remember, she goes to one scientist for information. He has directed a study of the Lacks blood for its genetic makeup, but he doesn’t explain much to Deborah. Instead he hands her a copy of his book on genetics and tells her to read it. A slow reader, Deborah gets a dictionary and tries to understand the book’s elevated language. She comes upon another book, a scientific treatise on the HeLa line, only to stop—and have a nervous breakdown—after encountering a photograph of her mother’s autopsy.

Yet ultimately Deborah Lacks talks to Skloot, writer on the prowl, writer on a quest to understand, (I think it’s possible to say the primary theme of this book is understanding; the word is used again and again, and it is what the characters are seeking, and Skloot is delivering). Ultimately the quests of these two women converge and they become reporter/researchers in partnership. Off they go to find medical records, and Deborah greets people, in stores, in gas stations, along the way: “Hi, my name’s Deborah and this is my reporter, you probably heard of us, my mama’s in history with the cells, and we just found this picture of my sister!”

Their trail leads to Johns Hopkins. A young researcher who believes that the Lacks family has been treated poorly, that they should be entitled to some of the proceeds from sales of their mother’s cell lines, (they would like most of all to have health insurance), invites Skloot and two of Henrietta Lacks’ children to come and see the HeLa cells at the university hospital in Baltimore.

The researcher, whose name is Christoph Lengauer, says, “Her cells are how it all started. . . . Once there is a cure for cancer, it’s definitely largely because of your mother’s cells” (269).

“Amen,” Deborah says. They look at the cells through a microscope, and at

one point Christoph calls out to them—the cell is dividing right before their eyes! Mitosis! The beautiful dance! (269)

“‘Lord have mercy,’ Deborah says, and her brother Zachariyya, who has had a very difficult life, says, “‘If those our mother’s cells . . . how come they ain’t black even though she was black?’” (267)

Cells don’t have color under the microscope, Lengauer says. Afterwards, as they leave, when Deborah puts an arm around Skloot’s shoulder she proclaims, “‘Girl, you just witnessed a miracle’” (269).

Such are the rewards, first book and all, a book of literary journalism, multiple in form and intent and meaning.

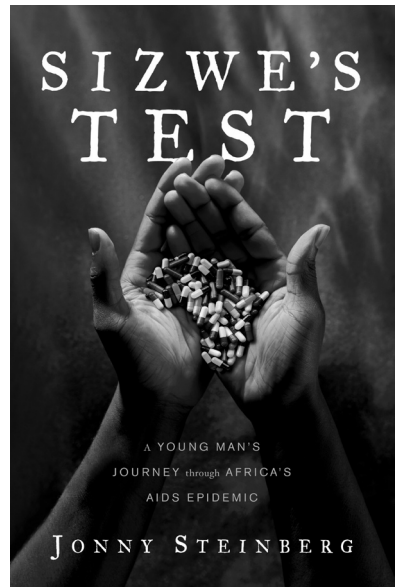
## Trying to Survive AIDS in South Africa

*Sizwe’s Test: A Young Man’s Journey Through Africa’s Aids Epidemic*

by Jonny Steinberg. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008. Hardback, 349 pp., \$26.

Reviewed by Nick Nuttall, University of Lincoln School of Journalism, UK.

In many respects AIDS and South Africa is an old story. Most of us are aware of the terrible toll it has taken on men, women and children in sub-Saharan Africa. So it’s with a certain amount of smugness we read of the inadequate response of the South African government under Thabo Mbeki to HIV and AIDS. I have in front of me a *Guardian* newspaper article dated 7 October 2001 headlined: “Aids Toll Soars as Mbeki Looks the Other Way.” The intro reads: “At the Entabeni clinic in Izingolweni, near Durban, another father is convinced that his family is bewitched. ‘It’s happening more and more,’ he says. ‘People think you’ve got a nice house or beautiful children. They are jealous and they put a curse on you. That’s what’s happened to us.’ In fact, this father has full-blown Aids. So do his wife and six-year-old daughter, who is dying. His twin babies, six months old, are both HIV-positive.”



Back then such stories highlighted the gulf between a “Western” understanding

of AIDS and that of the Black population of South Africa. Or at least so we thought. But with typical Western hubris nothing could have been further from the truth. And it is this truth that Jonny Steinberg, a white South African award-winning journalist, attempts to uncover in *Sizwe's Test*, his account of how AIDS was confronted and treated in the rural district of Lusikisiki in Eastern Cape province. Steinberg doesn't fall into the "bewitched" trap but the hypothesis that drives his narrative proves to be equally slippery: "When people die en masse within walking distance of treatment, my inclination is to believe that there must be a mistake somewhere, a miscalibration between institutions and people" (2).

Steinberg's exploration of this "miscalibration" is episodic rather than strictly chronological and he deploys character as his narrative driver. So we have a number of possible protagonists in this story. First, there is Sizwe Magadla, the Sizwe of the title. He is a young man aged twenty-nine who owns his own spaza shop—a kind of rural supermarket—in Ithanga, one of the three dozen or so villages that make up the district of Lusikisiki. His shop gives him a certain social cachet. He's like a local celebrity and like celebs everywhere his comings and goings are the stuff of gossip. One of the recurring themes of the book is the persistent questioning of Sizwe by the author about why he won't test to see if he's HIV-positive, hence the book's title. And one of Sizwe's excuses is that everyone will know if he does and this could harm his status and by implication his business in the village.

Then there is Dr. Hermann Reuter, the Médecins Sans Frontières medic in charge of the antiretroviral program in Lusikisiki. He is rationality writ large and is a recurring antidote to the more fanciful explanations for their plight offered by many of the villagers. He seems to be trusted and feared in equal measure by those he treats at the clinic. As a white South African he is mistrusted: "They thought Dr. Hermann had come to destroy the people with his needle and his blood test" (146). But as a doctor he won over all but the most entrenched sceptics. When Reuter finally left the district in October 2006, some two thousand people gathered in the community hall in Lusikisiki. He was draped in the traditional clothes of the Mpondo and enticed into dancing with the native girls.

Lastly, we have the ubiquitous figure of Jonny Steinberg himself, donning literary, journalistic and proselytising hats turn by turn about. He becomes a repository of native folk lore, western rationalism, personal memoir and ultimately a people's history. Steinberg offers the reader two weapons-grade history lessons. The first tells the story of the great flu epidemic of 1918, which Sizwe's grandmother still spoke about. Flu inoculation kits were distributed throughout Transkei and Ciskei territories. But as it is perfectly natural for a people to assume that the face of their oppressors will not suddenly become the face of their benefactors, the kits were treated with hostility and suspicion. The long needle of the white man was described as a "device of the Europeans to finish off the Native races of South Africa, and as it had not been quite successful, they were sending out men with poison to complete the work of extermination" (149). Such cultural baggage is not easily discarded. Oral cultures can be powerfully assimilative and Sizwe, clearly an intelligent man capable of understanding the fears of his fellow villagers, tells Steinberg with a note of ex-

asperation: “Hermann comes to Lusikisiki. Nobody has HIV. He tells the nurses to prick and suddenly everybody has HIV. Where does the HIV come from? It comes from the pricking. It doesn’t surprise me” (156).

The second story takes us back to a more recent post-colonialist scenario. South Africa’s president, Thabo Mbeki, believed established medical science on AIDS had been blinded by the racism of its practitioners. Mbeki supported a group of dissident scientists who questioned whether HIV was the primary cause of the AIDS epidemic and wove a complicated *casus belli* composed of pharmaceutical companies peddling expensive drugs, endemic black poverty, anti-imperialism and an entrenched nativism. So—the drugs were toxic and the West was dumping poisons on Africa.

These two historical glimpses clearly identify Steinberg’s territory but we have to get there first. So Steinberg begins by rehearsing the “bewitched” scenario of the *Guardian* article mentioned above. Sizwe tells us about his friend Jake who died soon after testing positive. But this is clearly Sizwe articulating the beliefs of others: “The whole village thought his uncle had bewitched him. Jake had money and could be generous with people. His uncle had no money and could not be generous. He was jealous. And the rash in his crotch—it is a common means of witchcraft. The jealous one slips the *Muthi* [medicine] into Jake’s girlfriend’s food. The next time Jake has sex with her, he gets the poison” (26).

Set against such arguments the reader is always taken back to the rationality of the Médecins Sans Frontières doctor, Hermann Reuter. Rather than rehearse the simple nostrum of refrain or take precautions, Reuter, according to Steinberg, offers a cogent reason for what he considers to be the high-level sexual activity of typical Black youths, by implication the main reason for the pandemic nature of AIDS and HIV in South Africa. They have become deracinated—divorced from their land and their family, and “when one cannot give expression to one’s manhood by becoming a household patriarch or careerist, the whole of manhood becomes endowed in sexual performance. It is made to do too much work; it is a source of anxiety” (80).

Episodic in structure, *Sizwe’s Test* is the kind of story where statistics, heavy background and official “positions” are endemic. So a straightforward beginning-middle-and-end narrative may not be ideal. But despite this, the chronological drive of much literary journalism is perhaps too often absent here. This absence would seem to be connected to the lack of a central protagonist. In book-length literary journalism there is the perennial dilemma of the ego—the “I” issue. Truman Capote faced this problem with *In Cold Blood*. He quickly saw that the detached tone he sought could only be realized if the author was absent. Steinberg’s presence ironically often dilutes some of the emotional highpoints of the narrative.

A more serious issue, from a literary journalism perspective at least, is Steinberg’s use of the interior monologue. No quibble with attempts at communicating complex emotions but invading people’s interior life, their personal dreamscape, if you like, seems a trick too far. Steinberg mentions that he used a tape recorder but it’s one thing to transcribe conversation and quite another to ascribe emotion unsourced. Reuter, for example, “senses my irritation,” “makes an extravagant performance,” and “has dedicated his life to health-care activism, moving from place to place, bury-

ing body and soul in work.” Such examples seem to be so subjective as to bring into question their veracity. This may be a niggle but the risk of interior monologue segueing imperceptibly into “making things up” is very real. A work of fiction of course can accommodate any kind of analysis—it is ego personified—but literary journalism is on dangerous territory when it pursues what Norman Mailer called the “factoid” rather than the verifiable fact.

One last cavil. The Sizwe of the title is not the character’s real name. Should we accept this pseudonym at the heart of a fact-based story? Steinberg is aware of this seeming contradiction but knows he doesn’t have a story without Sizwe. Can we live with a pseudonym, however? If yes, what is our assurance that he exists? We have to trust the author. Should we do so? Who knows? But in the hands of Jonny Steinberg the answer, on the evidence of this book, would appear to be yes.

Steinberg suggests that AIDS ought to be understood as a “metaphor that describes the fate of the men of Sizwe’s generation. Their fate is to fail to procreate as patriarchs do. AIDS represents this failure as a disease” (252). *Sizwe’s Test* provides one of the most coherent and believable accounts of how and why HIV and AIDS became the modern plague of southern Africa. In the process it lays bare many of the myths beloved of the West and at the same time offers valid and cogent explanations for their origins. “Lest we forget” might be this book’s most fitting epitaph.

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## Teaching Narrative Nonfiction

*To Tell the Truth: Practice and Craft in Narrative Nonfiction*

by Connie D. Griffin. Longman, 2009. Paperback, 322 pp., \$48.

Reviewed by Patsy Sims, Goucher College, U.S.A.

Twenty-five years ago when I first taught literary journalism, I compiled my own teaching materials after a search for a good textbook or an anthology turned up nothing. And for the next few years, that’s what I continued to use until I discovered Norman Sims’s classic anthology *The Literary Journalists*, which became a staple—and an excellent one—for me and many others who taught literary journalism in those early years. In 1995, Sims (no relation) and Mark Kramer followed with *Literary Journalism: A Collection of the Best American Nonfiction*, and good anthologies and collections of narrative nonfiction have been appearing regularly ever since.

Textbooks, however, have not been as numerous—or as good. Jon Franklin’s *Writing for Story*, first published in 1986, continues to be a favorite with writers and teachers alike, as do the various texts by Lee Gutkind and Philip Gerard. Still, there is room, and a need, for more substantial texts, and Connie Griffin has set that as her mission.



In the preface of *To Tell the Truth*, she writes of the need for a “comprehensive” textbook that both addresses the craft of narrative nonfiction and engages in analytical discussions of craft. I insert the quotation marks here because frankly the word gave me pause, after having read any number of disappointing review copies that failed to live up to their own equally ambitious goals. Unlike many of her predecessors, however, Griffin delivers with a first-rate book that takes the reader, in considerable depth, from the generating of ideas, through writing and revision, to ways to avoid plagiarism and lawsuits.

In fact, by the end of the book, it is impressive to look back at how much Griffin has managed to fit into 322 pages: Nine chapters, each with a lengthy discussion of some aspect of narrative nonfiction, essays on process and craft by well-known writers, still more selections of exemplary writing that serve as teaching models, and numerous exercises and practice strategies. The ultimate goal, says Griffin, is to demonstrate to writers that fact and creativity can be skillfully, and artfully, integrated.

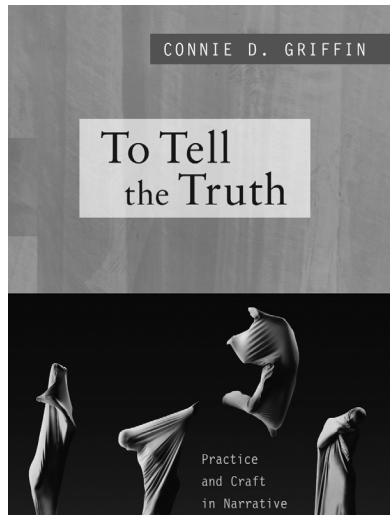
An assistant professor at Commonwealth College (the honors college of the University of Massachusetts Amherst), Griffin has written and taught both journalism and creative writing, and it is the blending of these two approaches to teaching that sets her book apart. Unlike many narrative nonfiction texts, she focuses as much on the creative process as she does on research and reporting, and includes such unexpected topics as the value of keeping a journal, writing workshops, and how to respond to the other members’ work.

Like many others, Griffin sees narrative nonfiction as falling into the categories of memoir, the essay (and its many variations), and literary journalism, though, she says, the lines between those forms are sometimes blurred in ways that are one of the genre’s greatest strengths.

“The memoir, for instance, may incorporate literary elements often associated with the essay, such as meditation and reflection,” she illustrates, “or, the essay in its various guises, may incorporate a strong sense of narrative persona, thus bringing elements often associated with memoir to bear on the essay. Literary journalism and the essay are frequently interchangeable, but there are a few distinctions that tend to tilt the scale in one direction or another.”

Overall, she defines narrative, or creative, nonfiction (she uses the terms interchangeably) as writing that is based on real people, places, and events, and that has a special concern for language. It also tends to be more personal and informal than other forms of nonfiction. Because of its reliance on scene-setting, imagery, and characterization as much as it does expository, analysis, and reflection, she devotes considerable attention to use of tools most often identified with fiction.

Still other areas explored by Griffin are the importance of research to memoir and the essay, the development of a narrative persona, finding theme and meaning in



your writing, and the need to establish a regular writing routine. Although the book tends to focus more on the writing of essays and memoir, there is a great deal here that the literary journalist will find helpful, especially the chapter on the role and uses of scenes and another on developing rounded characters through the use of detail, dialogue, and action.

While Griffin's own analysis is excellent, her bringing together of a rich mix of essays and commentary on craft by a range of writers makes the book especially valuable. There are familiar standbys like Joan Didion's "On Keeping a Notebook" and Phillip Lopate's "Writing Personal Essays: On the Necessity of Turning Oneself Into a Character," as well as lesser known (at least to me), but no less useful essays, such as Michael Pearson's "Researching Your Own Life" and "Saying Good-Bye to 'Once Upon a Time'" in which Laura Wexler reminds us there is seldom a single version of any one story or event.

The book also includes examples of exemplary narrative that Griffin often uses to discuss elements of craft. Thus, Madeleine Blais's "Serviam" becomes a vehicle for exploring beginnings and endings and the shaping of story, while Alfred Lubrano's "Bricklayer's Boy" serves as an example of a writer's effective use of detail to bring a character to life.

As the book's title would suggest, Griffin does not shy away from the thorny issue of memory, imagination, accuracy, and sticking to the facts. "While most narrative writers would agree that their task is not simply to capture the facts, but to make something of those facts, there is a great deal of disagreement about where to draw the line in 'making something' of the facts," she writes.

In the ensuing discussion, Griffin includes the views of a range of writers, from memoirists who discuss how they deal with their imperfect memories to literary journalists like Philip Gerard, who takes the firm position, "You're stuck with what really happened—you can't make it up."

Griffin sees the hard line as a challenge, but not a roadblock for the writer trying to integrate fact and creativity. "This doesn't stop creative nonfiction writers from being as metaphorical as any poet," she insists, "as adept with dramatic action as any fiction writer, as nimble with dialogue as any playwright."

She ends the discussion with this observation by Judith Kitchen and Mary Paumier Jones, editors of *In Short* and *In Brief Short Takes on the Personal*: "Nonfiction writers often admit that the places where they were tempted to invent can, if they stick with the scrupulously factual, end up yielding the deepest genuine insight and best writing."

The book's final chapter focuses on research, including advice on preparing for interviews, a brief discussion of the Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics, the availability of public records, and definitions for such legal terms as libel, slander, and invasion of privacy. An appendix also provides a brief discussion of plagiarism, along with examples of proper documentation and advice on note-taking. There are also an index and biographical sketches of the writers whose work is included in the various chapters.

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# Journalism as an Aesthetic

## *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform Without Informing*

by Alfredo Cramerotti. Bristol, UK; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2009. Paperback, 138 pp., \$35.

Reviewed by Isabelle Meuret, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

In this second volume of the series *Büchs'n'Books—Art and Knowledge Production in Context*, Alfredo Cramerotti addresses the crossover of art and journalism in contemporary culture, and how their coalescence questions the essence and ethics of journalism. In our increasingly mediated world, where producing and distributing news have become part of a mass-marketed process, artists offer an alternative approach to reality using documents, photos, interviews and reportage. The author argues that by taking over journalistic tools artists turn the spotlight on topics and events that are silenced in mainstream media. *Aesthetic Journalism* is an invitation to explore how the apprehension of reality and the search for truth might fall within the province of art, rather than traditional journalism.



In this pedagogical book, the author calls for a reevaluation of the potential of journalistic techniques used for artistic purposes and suggests that they help raise relevant questions and open up perspectives. Cramerotti does not present aesthetics and journalism as mutually exclusive. Rather, he emphasizes their commonalities and fruitful interactions. While aesthetics is at the forefront of his work, there emerges a compelling dialogue between both practices. Because contemporary artists increasingly use journalistic tools as forms of cultural expression, it is worth examining the artifacts they produce at a time when traditional journalism is foiled in its attempt at producing truth.

Alfredo Cramerotti's versatility shows in the number of subjects he tackles. His expertise as an artist, theorist, and curator leads him to explore a number of cultural practices including, albeit briefly, literary journalism. One of the great merits of *Aesthetic Journalism* is that it brings together two disciplines that are in constant evolution and the object of all attention. Both fields are overlapping and even blending, blurring the lines between art and information. Hence the subtitle—*How to Inform without Informing*—which points to the author's argument that the process of learning and knowing can follow other routes than those marked out by mainstream media. This seminal book proposes a timely discussion of the nature of art and journalism, at a watershed moment in the development of knowledge production and consumption.

The aestheticization of information is not a new phenomenon. Photojournalists who worked in the United States for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) during the Depression are a case in point, and Cramerotti's tribute to artists like Walker Evans, whose documentation work on sharecroppers in the Dust Bowl and photographs of commuters taken unawares on the New York subway, are evidence thereof. Yet the way news is currently being produced and distributed to large audiences eager for "infotainment" questions these dangerous acquaintances. Technologies have made it possible to transform and renegotiate reality by digitally modifying pictures, editing or even doctoring documents. But what is new is the breakdown of trust in the media. As a result, artists strike back and use investigative techniques to probe rather than truncate reality. The crisis of confidence is turned into a crisis of conscience as the mirror of the world is turned back to the viewers, who are urged to look beyond the surface of forged narratives.

The topicality of *Aesthetic Journalism* is also reinforced by the rich illustrations of works by contemporary artists who appropriately use art as a means to pass on political, cultural or social messages. The examples presented in Chapter 2 illuminate Cramerotti's arguments, namely *Western Deep*, a documentary by British artist Steve McQueen, which makes the audience experience physically the descent into a South African mine. In such documentaries, Cramerotti explains, art becomes "an expansion of (and in some cases an alternative to) mass-media journalism" (32). These examples support Cramerotti's premise that aesthetic journalism is concerned with the production of an effect, the striking of the right cord, rather than the comprehension of facts. Indeed, he insists that "art is not about delivering information; it is about questioning that information" or, to put it differently, "where journalism attempts to give answers, art strives to raise questions" (29-30).

It may be the case that some might find *Aesthetic Journalism* too ambitious, as it purports to delineate what aesthetic journalism is, and yet it leaves the reader with a blurred image of the concept. Indeed, Cramerotti notes that journalism can be aesthetic, provided we define "aesthetics [as] the process in which we open our sensibility to the diversity of the forms of nature (and manmade environment), and convert them into tangible experience." Therefore, it is not "a state of contemplation. It is rather the capacity of an art form to put our sensibility in motion, and convert what we feel about nature and the human race into a concrete (visual, oral, bodily) experience" (21). Yet while art can make us dream for change and hope for political action, we would be mistaken to dehumanize mainstream journalism. Art is not vying with journalism to produce the absolute truth, but it is difficult to resist the conclusion that they are not aiming for the same target. Aesthetics may also be the art of illusion, and that aspect is hardly questioned by the author. More definitions of aesthetics—the philosophy of beauty or that which appeals to our senses—would have enriched the discussion.

The interdisciplinarity of the book is another of its assets, as Cramerotti does not limit himself to visual arts but also addresses film and nonfiction writing. Therefore, any reader with an interest in aesthetics will draw substantial information from *Aesthetic Journalism*. Also, the volume's architecture makes it a good candidate for pedagogical use. It is organized in eight chapters, all of which end with suggestions for further reading. Chapter 1 presents the author's methodology, while most definitions of "aesthetic journalism" are to be found in Chapter 2 ("What is Aesthetic

Journalism”). The author makes clear that while mainstream broadcast and printed news produce a certain type of corporate-led information, “art tends to use investigative methods in order to achieve a certain amount of knowledge about a problem, situation, individual or historical narrative.” This, he says, constitutes “an attempt to construct an alternative to such mainstream apparatuses” (21).

The other chapters develop in a sequence of five Ws and one H. Chapter 3 (“Where Is Aesthetic Journalism?”) widens the scope of art and focuses on the advertising industry. Chapter 4 (“When Did Aesthetic Journalism Develop?”) emphasizes the role played by visual art, theatre, cinema and literature in collecting and distributing important information at certain moments in history, and under some political regimes. The author also highlights the emergence of art as a journalistic form in the 1990s, above all thanks to trailblazing events like the exhibition *Documenta X* in Kassel (1997). Chapter 5 (“How Shall We Read Aesthetic Journalism?”) points to possible readings of aesthetic journalism and offers a more theoretical understanding of the notion, buttressed with references to Foucault, Gramsci, and the Frankfurt School. Chapter 6 (“Who Produces Aesthetic Journalism Today? From Which Position?”), and Chapter 7 (“Why Is Aesthetic Journalism Relevant, Now and in Perspective?”), deal respectively with institutionalization and the relativity of the notion of time in both art and journalism. The last chapter lists an extensive bibliography ranging from philosophy to art criticism to sociology.

*Aesthetic Journalism*, given its structure, organization, and vignettes with definitions and references to major theoreticians, is a comprehensive handbook for students and researchers interested in the rapprochement between these two disciplines. I would not recommend it as a book on literary journalism *per se*, even though the author makes relevant connections with nonfiction writing to clarify his argument. For instance, Ryszard Kapuściński’s work is evoked as a good example of journalism aware of its own limitations and pretense to truth, while David Foster Wallace’s essay “Host” (2005) is cited for its sound criticism of journalism respectability. Cramerotti conflates literary journalism and aesthetic journalism since they share similar concerns, namely with regards to subjectivity and objectivity. So, while the book is not about nonfiction writing, it certainly opens a few avenues worth exploring.

Cramerotti is well aware that journalism is news-making, i.e. the result of a negotiation between several parties (source, journalists, power, public, etc.). But he fails to insist on the enormous pressure journalists are subject to, which gives them neither time nor space to produce quality news. Similarly, I would also relativize the elasticity of time, which is not the privilege of artists. There is a general sense of urgency, due to economical factors and the demands to produce fast news. But not all information is corporate-led and the product of mainstream media. Also, the author reckons that “to bring the investigative tradition back to a societal or political function, implies more than changing the site of reportage from press or TV to the art exhibition.” (29) In the end, what matters is the power of the artists to scrutinize reality and to foreground issues that are eclipsed by mainstream media. Such visibility is the lifeblood of aesthetic journalism. Cramerotti undoubtedly succeeds in drawing our attention to the potential of aesthetic journalism. His cogent study is a source of inspiration and an inexhaustible mine of references on the topic.

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## The Southern Press: Bound by Geography

*The Southern Press: Literary Legacies and the Challenge of Modernity*

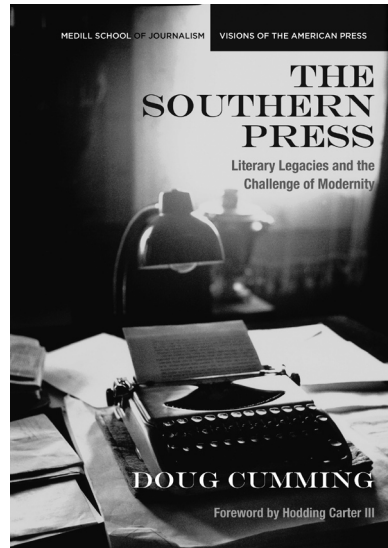
by Doug Cumming. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 2009. Paperback, 317 pp., \$24.95.

Reviewed by Ginger Carter Miller, Georgia College & State University, U.S.A.

In the forward of *The Southern Press: Literary Legacies and the Challenge of Modernity*, Southern journalist Hodding Carter III (son of legendary southern journalist Hodding Carter, II,) wrote, “The South has historically turned out ferociously engaged editors, tenacious reporters, and elegant writers by the wagonload, more than any other region of America.” But those reporters and editors, he adds, never quite got their due while still living and writing in the South. “Many of the South’s finest journalists had to flee ‘north toward home’ to find newspapers and magazines willing to publish their voices. Suffice it to say that at one time or another over the past one hundred years they ran virtually every great paper, magazine, and news organization.”

This is the motivation and history that Doug Cumming, who has long lived in the South, chronicles in a book that clearly places him among the elegant writers of that region. Cumming traces the history of southern journalism since the nineteenth century to today. In the book’s eight chapters, Cumming, once reported for Southern papers including the *Atlanta Constitution*, the *Raleigh Times* and the *Raleigh News and Observer*, and southern magazines including *Southpoint*, mixes the historical facts with his own journalistic past that “glimmered with something inside me I had forgotten” (xvi). In an interview, Cumming was quoted as saying, “All of these parts of myself were there: nineteenth-century American history, Southern history, Southern literature, the civil rights movement,” he said. “My heroes growing up were journalists like Ralph McGill and Gene Patterson, both editors of the *Atlanta Constitution*. Then I realized that New Journalism, which is a love of mine, was part of this because some of the seminal figures in New Journalism are Southerners.”

Throughout the book, published by the Northwestern University Press as part of the Medill School of Journalism’s series, *Visions of the American Press*, Cumming portrays the southern journalist as possessing a sort of “manifest destiny” to



be published in the best publications in the country. Cumming calls this “the deepest riddle of a journalistic tradition that braids literary aspiration with the realism of facts” (248).

To discuss the book, then, it’s important to first discuss Cumming’s use of the term “Southern press.” The term is misleading, because Cumming is not talking about specific newspapers and magazines per se, or what most people consider the press, but he is referring to the actual corps of journalists who filled the slots and desks at these institutions in the south. By Cumming’s interpretation, the southern press is a group of people with a specific mindset, something akin to a “southern press corps,” a group of journalists bound by their geographic location and their desire to communicate, in newspapers and magazines, with an audience much larger in scope.

It is important to note that Cumming’s book is not a dictionary or encyclopedic-style examination of the southern press and its editors and reporters; nor is it an all-inclusive compendium of the work of the southern press. But it certainly is a who’s who of the men and woman who wrote from, in, and about the South. The book critically delves into the work of reporters and editors including some personal favorites that include Henry W. Grady, Lafcadio Hearn, Ralph Emerson McGill, Joel Chandler Harris, and H. L. Mencken, noting each journalist’s contribution to the history of the field of journalism as a whole, as well as in the South.

In fact, according to an article from the Washington and Lee University, where Cumming is an associate professor of journalism, the more he explored the history of Southern newspapers and, especially, some of the legendary editors and writers, the more Cumming realized he was working on a “disguised autobiography.” As Cumming put it: “Instead, the daily press was a gateway for aspiring writers who were too poor to live on a legacy. It was a gateway to a world of letters, to being a writer. I think every Southern journalist secretly wanted to write a novel eventually. I think it is truer of Southern journalists than other journalists. I think many Southerners historically got into journalism not because of the All-the-President’s-Men idea that we’re going to change society, but rather to be a writer, to learn writing, to see herself or himself in print.”

Each chapter of this fascinating book deals with a different era of journalism, from before the Civil-War era of the 1860s to after the Civil-Rights era of the 1960s. Cumming begins with a discussion of Poe, his prose, and his own journalistic desires. The chapter titled “The Mencken Club” is a fluid, vivid examination of the “prince of journalists.” Another chapter provides an expansive and extensive discussion of the role of the southern press in the Civil Rights movement.

One chapter of particular interest to those who study literary journalism and its developments is a chapter called “The Southern Roots of New Journalism.” It begins by telling the story of a pimply faced Gay Talese on his way to The University of Alabama—a vision vastly unlike the collective memory of the suave, flamboyant, literary journalist. This background about Talese’s immersion into southern culture as a budding journalist sheds an entirely new light on Talese’s classic work of New Journalism that is part of the literary journalism canon, the *Esquire* magazine article

“Joe Louis: The King as a Middle-Aged Man.” In this chapter, Cumming makes a bold statement about the origins and source of the best of the New Journalism, “an argument overlooked in all the commentary: much of the movement drew on the traditions of the Southern press and was advanced by a disproportionate number of journalists marked by southern culture” (170).

This is not simply a geographic comment; instead, Cumming writes, “The argument here is that certain aesthetic sensibilities and ‘outsider’ attitudes characteristic of southern writers and southern intellectual history were imported, in vivid color, into the movement” (171). Consider the practitioners that Cumming notes: Willie Morris; Marshall Frady; Joseph Mitchell; William A. Emerson (who died in 2009); and George Leonard. This reviewer was especially fascinated with the story of Emerson, whose son is a veteran reporter and feature writer at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. It is yet another example of a reporter who followed a parent into the field of journalism. And of course there’s the “father of New Journalism,” Tom Wolfe, who was born and reared in Virginia and who attended Washington and Lee. Cumming wrote of Wolfe’s “old southern romance of the gentleman writer,” adding “those whose talent brought them into the hot magazines of New York smuggled their perspectives into journalism as if in the false bottom of a suitcase” (200).

The section in the chapter, “Assimilation and its discontents” that dealt with the demise of the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain, hit especially close to home to this reviewer, who is a lifelong southerner and a southern journalist by trade. In the section about the Knight-Ridder chain, Cumming discussed *The Columbus* (Georgia) *Ledger-Enquirer* (newspaper of Julian and Julia Harris) and *The Telegraph* of Macon, (Georgia) two papers chiseled off in the sale of this chain. Both were sold to the McClatchy chain. Cumming wrote that the demise of the chain “reflected trends that were vexing every metropolitan daily. Loyal readers were growing old. Young readers demanded free information online or simply did not pick up the newspaper habits of their parents (202). And while both newspapers still exist, they are shadows of their former journalistic prowess.

*The Southern Press: Literary Legacies and the Challenge of Modernity* is a thoughtful book about history and about the south, and readers who are interested in both will not be disappointed. For those who have never understood what it means to be “southern,” this book points to stubbornness and tenacity that flowed freely into the writing of the journalists who lived there.

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# Trailing a U.S. Election with Beer in Hand

*Down to the Crossroads—On the Trail of the 2008 US Election*

by Guy Rundle, Camberwell, Australia: Penguin, 2008, Paperback, 438 pages, \$26.

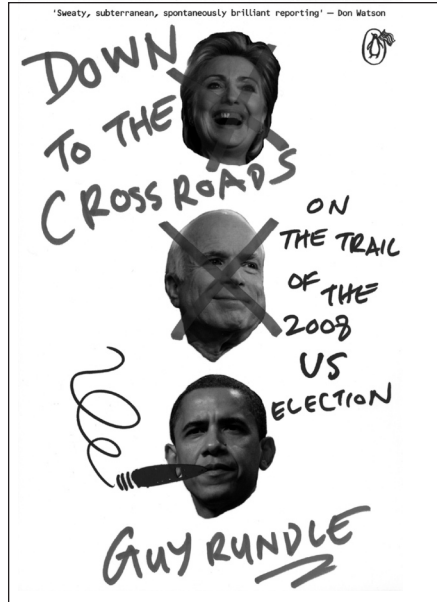
Reviewed by Kayt Davies, Edith Cowan University, Australia

By most accounts, 2008 was an extraordinary year, one that saw the world tilt on its axis. Headlines screamed about “The Death of Capitalism” and a young black U.S. Senator used the words ‘hope’ and ‘change’ to do something no one thought was possible.

What value, now in 2010 and beyond, is a book that is a collection of articles written on the trail of the 2008 U.S. election? After all, we know the result, so why would we want to relive the suspense? Perhaps to remind us of how far we have come since 2007, and as a snapshot of the world, taken through the sensory organs of a Gonzo journalist. No matter how much the history gets rewritten, the journalism of the time retains the authority of being the first draft.

Crikey is an Australian news service. Around 13,000 people pay to receive twenty-five stories a day as an emailed bulletin (others consume content from the website for free). Most Crikey readers are educated and its editorial policy favors balance. In sending Guy Rundle to the U.S. to cover the election then-editor Jon Green gave his readers something they had never had before—blow-by-blow coverage that went beyond the bare facts. It was something much more akin to Hunter S. Thompson’s (1973) *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* than the standard journalistic version of events. Rundle’s articles for Crikey (and a smattering of other publications) were bundled together in the dying days of 2008 and published as *Down to the Crossroads—On the trail of the 2008 US election*. The book was crowned 2009 Book of the Year by Melbourne newspaper *The Age*.

Rundle’s copy reflects its tailoring for Australian audiences whose U.S. geography is in many cases a bit shaky, and who can’t be assumed to understand how the primary system works. The added fruit is that his writing is charming. He’s a journalist seeking and telling the truth, but he sometimes steps away from it just enough to make the oddness of it perfectly clear. His description of the suburban streets of Alexandria, Virginia, is a succinct example of his Australian-tilt plus quirkiness. He wrote: “they’re the sort of places where you can get six kinds of antique chafing iron or a Vietnamese fusion takeaway, but not milk. No capital, not even Canberra, is so differentiated from the daily life of the mass of people it represents.”



As time passes and the book becomes less about news and more about history, the presumption of audience naivety that it was written with may stand it in good stead. As Thompson observed in the preamble to his campaign trail book (in the midst of a complex metaphor about jackrabbits) “when a journalist turns into a politics junkie he will sooner or later start raving and babbling in print about things that only a person who has Been There can possibly understand” (1973, 13). In having to produce copy for readers half a world away Rundle, in the main, resisted the decent into incomprehensible jargonism.

Like Thompson, who was refused White House media accreditation because he was reporting for *Rolling Stone*, Rundle came to the gig of trailing a campaign with curious credentials, resulting in limited media access. According to his Penguin biography, he was a co-founding editor of the progressive socialist publication *Arena Magazine*, and has published with *Arena* for twenty years. He’s been a frequent contributor to Australia’s major newspapers, he wrote a biography of former Australian Prime Minister John Howard and had authored three (now four) hit stage shows for veteran comedian Max Gillies.

Rundle’s campaign book shares much of the rollicking narrative charm of Thompson’s ’72 book, but it isn’t quite so psychedelically brain-breaking. Where Thompson is fuelled by a mad candy cocktail, Rundle seems to run mostly on beer, with occasional mentions of whisky. What they have in common, though, is a good eye for the events on the periphery of the political main stage that work as metaphors for, or portents of the next stages in, the unfolding drama.

Both authors describe the airports, hotel rooms and landscapes they travel through; both step easily from anecdotes to statistics and back; and both move with graceful cool through the many levels of U.S. culture, striking up conversations with young Republicans in new suits, rumpled political operatives and strange men with impressive beards in seedy bars. Both delivering up, through these side views, a commentary on the state of the nation that goes beyond the who, what, when, where, and how and approach an answer to why. It is the flip side of the insider view of the White House that Aaron Sorkin has provided through the TV series *The West Wing*: It is insight into the daily pain and aspiration not of the elected but the electors.

It’s hard to write first person narrative without mentioning yourself, but there is a fine line between using yourself as a fleshy camera and making yourself the story. While Thompson, as the father of Gonzo, can’t be accused of breaking its rules, the genre has moved on since 1972, and in retrospect he seems a little over-indulged in himself (as well as many other things). Rundle, in contrast, shows restraint, except when telling the story requires an outpouring of anger or excruciation, or a demonstration of poignancy. Like Thompson, he sometimes starts a chapter with a random tangent, a wild taxi ride through the back streets or breakfast in a greasy diner, and like Thompson these tangents turn out not to be random at all. The taxi driver is always the story; a snapshot of the electorate the candidates are courting.

Rundle intersperses chapters that delve into the American psyche, with running commentaries of the major speeches. He watches most of them from nearby bars, in order to be able to work barfly reactions into his pieces. He cherry picks the key points and spills out his on-the-spot reactions, including jubilations, cringes and occasional hilarious mishearings. It’s a joyous, tumbling style of writing that had daily Crikey readers flooding the newsroom with praise for Rundle.

Both Thompson and Rundle allow readers into their heads to the extent that

you feel like you are seeing a cinema reel. The upshot is that when they say that they are leaning first towards one candidate and later towards another that you are not so much being persuaded by them, as just being shown the score on their personal political compasses. It is in doing this that both books are fundamentally Gonzo. It is the break with dispassionate impartiality that defines them. Both writers are unashamedly passionate. In his introduction, describing his aims, Rundle wrote: "It was an attempt to record the feel of the campaign and the character of the country, the hopes, bewilderments and sloughs of despond of a correspondent who never made any secret of his loyalties" (xxii). This is not so different from Thompson's aim to "record the reality of an incredibly volatile presidential campaign, while it was happening: from the eye of the hurricane" (1973, 16) followed by his claim (1973, 44) that the phrase "objective journalism" is "a pompous contradiction in terms" so "don't bother to look for it here."

If both are right about their methodologies, and have succeeded in recording the sentiment of their respective campaigns, then the two books together are an amazing time machine. Side-by-side analysis is a sobering before-and-after shot, with the intervention being thirty-six-recent years.

**I**n his early chapters, Thompson argues that the mood that lies, like a winter fog, over the U.S. is fear, but Rundle in his travels sees mostly bewilderment. He proposes it as the reason why Obama's 'pre-political' message of empowerment worked so well. He argues that Obama realized early and deeply that before people cared about which politician they voted for they had to understand that they were entitled to be part of the process. He accused the other campaigns of failing to recognize just how profoundly disenfranchised the people had become, how much the descent into populism had cut them adrift.

How did the U.S., the world champion of democracy get to that point? It could be that the disastrous disengagement that Thompson predicted would follow the Nixon era meandered into the bewilderment that Rundle saw. Perhaps the young voters of 1972, that Thompson held out hope for, were so turned off by the years that followed that they didn't bother telling their children about politics, and forgot anything that they had known about it, leading to widespread cluelessness, not born of anger or apathy but simply from a lack of reliable information, fuelled by populism and lies, about how it all works and who is allowed to get involved.

That said, the journey that Rundle documented was about the awakening of this sleeping giant, town hall by town hall, it was about Obama standing in the rain and saying "let's make history" (407).

While Thompson was denied the option of writing a happy ending, Rundle's challenge was how to put so much emotion into words. His final chapters are beautiful. A few lines of commentary of the acceptance speech make the point:

"He goes into the story of a 106-year-old woman, Anne Nixon Cooper, through all the people who told her we couldn't—yes we can.

"This is the old Obama of the primaries, the prophet, getting the audience calling back: 'Yes we can!'"

"The news crew set up in front of me waiting to do a live cross after the speech are clearing their throats, trying to look professional as they choke up . . . just something in my eye . . ." (420).

From a literary journalism perspective, I wish Thompson, who died in 2005, had been around to write his own account of the 2008 election, but the tradition he

started lives on and Gonzo has a new champion in Guy Rundle. The two men are very different, and while they crossed the same country reporting the same process, the people they met were different. The fact that so many comparisons can be drawn between the two works is a testimony not only to their individual talents but to the stability and validity of the methodology they used and that, from an academic standpoint, is what counts.

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## The Fear and Loathing of Gonzo

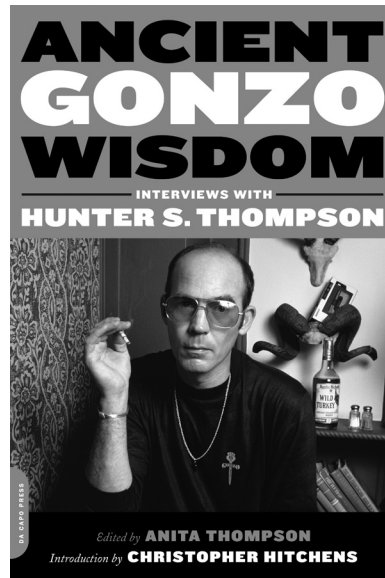
*Ancient Gonzo Wisdom: Interviews with Hunter S. Thompson.*

Edited by Anita Thompson. Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2009. Paperback. 412 pp., 22.95.

Reviewed by Jason Mosser, Georgia Gwinnett College, U.S.A.

The first point to be made about this collection is that it contains some interviews that were published as recently as two years ago in a book called *Conversations with Hunter S. Thompson* (University Press of Mississippi, 2008): specifically, interviews with *Playboy*, 1974; *High Times*, 1977; *Spin Magazine*, 1993; *Atlantic Unbound*, 1997; *The Paris Review*, 2000; *Razor Magazine*, 2003; and *Salon.com*, 2003. Nevertheless, I would advise any reader considering buying one or the other to pick up *Gonzo Wisdom* simply because it features twice as much material. The interviews are arranged chronologically from 1967 through 2005, paralleling Thompson's career from the publication of *Hell's Angels* to *Kingdom of Fear*. The interviews offer insight into the mind of one of the most influential New Journalists of the 1960s-1970s, a radical countercultural figure who saw journalism as Orwell saw his own literary work, as "a political act" (289).

Christopher Hitchens introduces the collection, relating that he first met Thompson in 1990, just after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, setting the stage for "the mother of all wars," and indeed, the post-September 11, 2001 interviews are filled with caustic references to both Bush administrations, the loss of civil liberties, and the decline of the American media. Identifying himself as "essentially an anarchist" (60), the man who



identified with the '60s counterculture and declared himself the lifelong scourge of Richard Nixon surprisingly claims that he had "never really been a liberal" (156). In these interviews, Thompson cites the Free Speech Movement of the sixties as having been a more formative influence on his politics than the "Acid Club," the hippies and flower children, even though, by his own admission, the good doctor was a long-time psychedelic devotee. By the 1970s, however, there was no more counterculture, no more revolution, just people working within the system rather than against it; our social "malaise" had settled in. By the 1990s, we hear Thompson complaining about "the corporatization" of everything which produced "No visible enemy" (280); without an enemy, it was hard for radicals like Thompson to get politically and emotionally engaged, and his writing suffered accordingly.

One of the consistent themes of these interviews is the true meaning of the term Gonzo and Gonzo journalism, a subject on which Thompson is characteristically all over the map, in one interview claiming "It never really meant anything to me" (283); in another, admitting that the creation of Gonzo was "just carelessness" (135); in another, stating that Gonzo is "some old Boston word meaning a little bit crazy and off the wall. Sort of a high crazy. Demented craziness" (62); and in yet another, adding, "It's a Portuguese word (actually it's Italian), and it translates almost exactly to what the Hell's Angels would have said was 'off the wall'" (230). Thompson's struggle to articulate the meaning of Gonzo is understandable, however, because Gonzo is all at once a lifestyle, an attitude, a narrative technique, an improvisational style, a mode of perception (in the sense that deliberate derangement of the senses through drugs and alcohol opens the doors to paradoxically clearer perceptions), even a kind of journalistic ethic, as Thompson tells one interviewer: "If I'm going to go into the fantastic, I have to have a form grounding in the truth. Otherwise, everything I write about politics might be taken as a hallucination" (153). As he says repeatedly, however, Gonzo was partly a way for him to differentiate himself from other literary journalists of the same era, those writers anthologized along with Thompson in Tom Wolfe's 1973 collection, *The New Journalism*. On the subject of the New Journalism, Thompson claims that it was not really new (11); instead, he says, it "was really a leap forward from the old wire service kind of journalism. Mark Twain, in that sense, was a New Journalist" (154), acknowledging a point made by historians of literary journalism. On the journalistic convention that requires reporters to write objectively, Thompson argues that most great journalists have not been objective and that he doesn't "quite understand this worship of objectivity in journalism" (235), adding that "You can't be objective about Nixon" (234).

Among the better interviews are the two that P. J. O'Rourke conducted for *Rolling Stone* in 1980 and 1987. The O'Rourke interviews are the only ones where the reader gets the sense that Thompson is speaking to someone whom he actually regarded as a peer, a fellow craftsman. O'Rourke makes some astute and amusing prefatory remarks to the second interview, stating that Thompson's best-known work, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, was a "perspicacious, seminal, nonpareil, virtuoso work" (197) and that the book addressed "the great themes of twentieth century literature—anomie, being and nothingness, existential terror" (197). O'Rourke compares some of the great European modernists and existentialists unfavorably to Thompson, compared to whose work "Albert Camus's *The Stranger* becomes a lame jailhouse whine, and all of Sartre is just some French doofus sitting around in a café,

saying, "Wherever you go, there you are." One of the wittiest, most humorous exchanges occurs between Thompson and a reporter from *Vanity Fair* who gives him the "V.F. Proust Questionnaire."

One regrettably missed opportunity arises when one interviewer draws an interesting parallel between Thompson and Norman Mailer, another notable New Journalist; both share an interest in the psychopath. Mailer's interest in the subject can be traced back as early as his essay "The White Negro" and to his later interest in real-life murderers Gary Gilmore and Jack Henry Abbott; Thompson's interest, of course, originated with his research into the Hell's Angels. Unfortunately, Thompson doesn't seem very interested in exploring the subject. The comparison between the two is worth pursuing, however, simply because both writers' literary work demonstrates the same depth of insight as their interviews, and in both cases Mailer proves himself to be more reflective and articulate on a broad range of subjects. Take, for example, women and sexuality. Mailer's preoccupation with the female and the feminine psyche is reflected in any number of works from his early fiction to his book on Marilyn Monroe, and he was, infamously, at the forefront of controversy about the Women's Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. On the other hand, when Thompson is asked in one of these interviews about the absence of female characters in his narratives, he admits, "I don't understand women. That's one of the reasons I don't write about them" (62), and the subject is simply dropped, another missed opportunity, especially given that the characterization of women in Thompson's narratives is often as misogynistic as one finds anywhere in Mailer's work.

Two of the collection's interviews, one by Norma Jean Thompson and the other by Phoebe Legere, could have been omitted at no great loss. Thompson and Legere insist on injecting themselves into the interviews by referring to their personal relationship with Thompson. Legere, for instance, prefaces a question with "You're very good in bed . . ." (245). Moments like these are simply embarrassing, and to his credit, Thompson does his best to deflect this kind of sycophancy. Interviewer Thompson prefaces her interview with the quote "He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man," an epigram that Hunter Thompson uses as an epigraph to the beginning of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and correctly attributes to Samuel Johnson, but Norma Jean Thompson attributes the quote to Hunter himself, an unfortunate error that the editor of this collection, Thompson's second wife Anita, really should have caught.

Thompson's major New Journalistic works, *Hell's Angels*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, as well as all of the early journalism collected in *The Great Shark Hunt*, had all been published by 1979. One of the reasons for this decline that comes through in these interviews is that, having become a cultural icon and celebrity author, Thompson lost his anonymity. As a relatively unknown *Rolling Stone* reporter in the early '70s, he could remain in the background and elicit frank information from his sources. However, "Once you're part of the club," Thompson says, "you're locked in and they have you. It's when you don't owe them anything that you're dangerous" (144). Success and notoriety had become Thompson's worst enemies. Hitchens alludes to the "strain" imposed on Thompson by people who expected him always to live up to his wild and crazy Gonzo persona (xiv). Thompson tells one interviewer, "I'm so tired of myself . . . having to explain . . ." (303). In the end, fame took its toll on the writer who took his own life on February 20, 2005.

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## Recovering the ‘Congested’ Districts

*J.M. Synge Travelling Ireland. Essays 1898-1908*

Edited by Nicholas Grene. Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2009. Hardcover, 185 pp., €25.00.

**Reviewed by Giulia Bruna (Government of Ireland International Scholarship 2009/2010), University College Dublin, Ireland.**

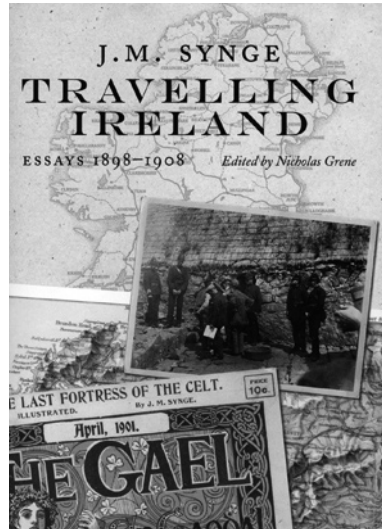
John Millington Synge’s travel journalism about Ireland has always been overlooked in comparison with his theatrical pieces that won him fame over the years. Synge, who was one of the first directors of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin during the Irish political and cultural struggle for independence, worked with W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory and produced groundbreaking plays, including his 1907 masterpiece, *The Playboy of the Western World*. Synge also wrote various travel articles and a book about Ireland, and *J.M. Synge Travelling Ireland*, one hundred years after Synge’s death, re-publishes Synge’s journalistic pieces about Aran, Wicklow, West Kerry and the Congested Districts of Connemara and Mayo, as they appeared in newspapers and magazines of the time.

This new edition compiled by Nicholas Grene—Synge expert and lecturer in Irish drama at Trinity College Dublin—draws critical attention to Synge as a literary journalist, showing how Synge’s essays capture the unfolding present with a lyrical sensibility, and originally interweave it in the wider social, historical and political reality of rural Ireland in the transition from the Nineteenth into the Twentieth century. For instance, in one of the articles about Wicklow describing “The People of the Glens,” Synge talks about how:

When they meet a wanderer on foot, these old people are always glad to stop and talk to him for hours, telling him stories of the Rebellion, or the fallen angels that ride across the hills, or alluding to the three shadowy countries that are never forgotten in Wicklow—America (their El Dorado), the union, and the madhouse. (107)

Before giving vent to the actual stories and first-hand testimonies narrated in direct speech by the locals, in this introductory paragraph Synge manages to convey the sense of the socio-historical present, touching on aspects indissolubly tied with rural Ireland: emigration to America and nineteenth century government measures to contrast poverty and vagrancy, the workhouses and the asylums.

*J.M. Synge Travelling Ireland* is also an important critical contribution in re-historicizing Synge’s essays. This new appraisal is supplied with an erudite introduction by Grene, aimed at setting the scene for the articles and placing them in the context of travel, tourism and journalism in Edwardian Ireland. The scholarly essay gives a bet-



ter sense of Synge's use of up-to-date technology such as his portable camera, typewriter, bicycle and public transports, and newly implemented railway connections. The critical excursus is accompanied by interesting visual material such as historical maps of the counties visited by Synge and title pages from some of the papers such as *The Gael*, *The Green Sheaf*, *The Shanachie*.

Grene's rigorous historical excavation in *J.M. Synge Travelling Ireland* becomes pivotal in relation to the place that the topographical articles occupy within Synge's canon. Grene delineates some of the reasons why Synge's literary journalism has always been thought about as of minor weight in comparison with his drama. The first who contributed to this misjudgment of his travel articles was the same person who participated in the myth-making of Synge as playwright of genius and artist *par excellence*, W.B. Yeats. Grene recalls how, despite Yeats's opposition to collecting Synge's journalism (especially the articles about the Congested Districts), after Synge's premature death in 1909, the executors finally won the battle. In 1910, the prose volume of the *Collected Works* contained Synge's travel journalism and a juvenile melancholic piece titled *Under Ether*. The following year another edition left out *Under Ether* and published the topographical essays under the new, all-encompassing headline "In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara," trying somehow to assemble for posterity a sequel to the fully-shaped travel book *The Aran Islands*. Subsequent editions which appeared in the early sixties followed the pattern of the 1911 prose volume of the *Collected Works*, integrating the travel pieces with excerpts from Synge's unpublished material from the manuscripts, such as prefaces, juvenile prose writings and miscellaneous articles about literature, all accompanied with scholarly notes which contributed to a broader and more accurate understanding of Synge's aesthetics.

However, partly because of these inevitable anthologizations, in critical analysis the travel articles seem to be read as a collective block, rather than referred to as individual and separate pieces worthy of a more specific investigation. In this sense, *J.M. Synge Travelling Ireland* re-directs the focus towards each single piece, therefore restoring the lost aura of Synge's journalistic artifacts. Turning the pages of the book is quite like turning the pages of the periodicals where the essays were first printed, since Grene manages to include not only the original text, but also the extraneous visual material that accompanied it.

To some extent, Grene's historicization challenges the settled orthodoxy of the Synge canon. For instance, in relation to *The Aran Islands*, Grene's edition reproduces four articles never anthologized before, which became available before the book was finally published after years of struggle with different editors. Their importance is crucial not only because they shed some light on Synge's progress in finalizing the book, but also because they exquisitely reflect the different perspectives of Synge on Aran. Particularly, in "A Story from Inishmaan" (published in the *New Ireland Review* in 1898), Synge's folklorist vision emanates, exemplified by his transcription of a story collected from a storyteller and compared with European variants. An anthropological vision characterizes "The Last Fortress of the Celt" (1901) printed in the Irish-American bilingual periodical *The Gael* together with Synge's photographs of the inhabitants in their traditional homespun clothing. Synge's photographs have been subjected to much posthumous attention and were collected in 1971 by Lilo Stephens—descendant of the Synge family—in a book titled *My Wallet of Photographs*. The article for the *Gael*, therefore, is the only instance where Synge's photographs were published while he was still alive. Synge was an amateur photographer and very



attached to his photos. He refers to them also in *The Aran Islands*, using them from year to year as a tool of interaction with the locals who posed for him and commented on the results of his shots.

This brings us to Synge's investigative reportage *In the Congested Districts* reprinted with the original fifteen plates illustrated by the painter Jack Yeats, who travelled with Synge in 1905 under the commission of the English newspaper *The Manchester Guardian*, to witness the distress in the most impoverished areas of Ireland. Jack Yeats' original line drawings capture in rough traits the people they met on the road who shared their story, and participate in Synge's critique of organizations at work in the districts such as the Congested Districts Board (CDB). As Grene notes, the title of the reportage (*In the Congested Districts*) as it appeared in the *Guardian*, was amalgamated in the successive anthologizations under the headline "In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara." Thus, the new combination becomes an aestheticization and a removal from the historical and political context in which the articles were written. The editorial choice not only leaves out a geographical place (Mayo) where poverty was even more rampant, but also removes the immediate reference to the colonial and constructive Unionist agency CDB, together with all the implications that the name evokes. In a way that is different from other sociological pamphlets and travel narratives dealing with the same areas, Synge's literary journalism for the *Guardian* subvert a colonialist rhetoric, by using many first-hand testimonies in order to create a plurality of voices and a historical perspective. Furthermore, Synge is extremely keen in de-mythologizing stereotypes, such as in this analysis from the article "The Peasant Proprietors":

The car drivers . . . seem to be the cause of many of the misleading views that chance visitors take up about the country and the real temperament of the people. These men spend a great deal of their time driving a host of inspectors and officials connected with the various Government Boards, who, although they often do excellent work, belong for the most part to classes that have a traditional misconception of the country people. It follows naturally enough that the carmen pick up the views of their patron. . . . The car driver is usually the only countryman with whom the official is kept in close permanent contact, so that while the stranger is bewildered, many distinguished authorities have been pleased and instructed by this version of their own convictions. (75-76)

Grene's project of re-historicization emphasizes the need to situate the articles in a specific social, historical and cultural background, opening new threads for researchers in the field of literary journalism. His compelling introduction can be a useful compendium also for scholars working in the realm of history, sociology, anthropology and visual culture, given the richness of visual material that this edition includes. The general reader will be fascinated by the humane experience of Synge as a traveler, sharing the same bedroom of his storytellers, as in the account published on *The Shanachie* in 1907 about his visit to the Blasket Islands in County Kerry. Here, before falling asleep, Synge engages in an intimate conversation with the host of the cottage, who lit his pipe in bed and talked about life at sea, mackerel-fishing, emigration to America, and the younger generations.

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