# On Recognition of Quality Writing

by Leonora Flis

As Bill Reynolds has already mentioned, about two years ago a casual conversation after one of the panels during the IALJS conference in Tampere, Finland, touched upon the issue of women writers, female journalists, and more precisely, upon the question of how noticeable and laudable they are, or rather, are able to be. We never expressed doubts about the impact and quality of their work. The concern we raised was clearly a gender concern, a quota concern, even. He asked me if I thought the IALJS made enough room for women as writers and women talking about women writers. I paused for a second and could not give a straight answer right away. In my mind I added women as subjects of news stories to the list. More questions started popping up in my head. What I knew for sure was that our special IALJS panels dedicated to female writers were needed and perhaps beyond timely. For, yes, it did seem that we had, most likely unintentionally, put more focus on the male reporters in the past. And so, Bill, Robert Alexander, and I began conversing about how it was high time to create something tangible under the auspices of *LJS* that would highlight the literary journalism of women.

Did we set out to engage in a meticulous debate on whether or not there is such a thing as *écriture feminine,* specifically in the journalistic discourse? Did we have harsh gender clashes in mind? Was the question of sexism the one that primarily guided our endeavors? Interesting as these questions may be, they were not central to our discussion and, consequently, our decision. The concluding idea was to dedicate a special issue of *Literary Journalism Studies* to female writers who should have gotten more general exposure, and more detailed scholarly examination, earlier on. We set out to illuminate exceptional female writers, some of whom have been marginalized because they were, or are, women. In fact, some have been completely forgotten, erased from the journalistic world, and only a few have managed to enter the canon of the grand works of journalism.

Things have surely changed regarding the position of women in our society since the days of suffragettes marching in the streets. Still, it is difficult not to make this conversation at least in part a discussion of male dominance and centrality that, after almost fifty years of intense female activism, legal action, and social change, still characterize our culture. The persistent, ongo-

ing problem of gender discrimination has affected the careers of some of the female writers in this special issue, and so it is inevitable that some of the essays will expose various obstacles these writers have encountered. Moreover, their political orientation and social engagement was, and is, sometimes problematic (perhaps even more so because of the gender aspect), as some articles reveal. However, in essence, our central focus became exposing high quality long-form journalistic writing on issues that have stirred us throughout history. The only condition was that women should hold the pen. Clearly, there is scholarship on female (also literary) journalists out there. However, apart from the obvious names, such as Joan Didion, Martha Gellhorn, Jane Kramer, Susan Orlean, Gail Sheehy, and Gloria Steinem, female journalists who cultivate a more subjective and immersive kind of reporting have been left out of scholarly examination to a certain degree.

The truth is, female writers have often times been involved—voluntarily or involuntarily—in a struggle to evade or resolve a typical professional and gender-role conflict, yet the essays in this issue do not seek to overexpose that aspect of reality. Rather, they make gender an organic part of the analysis rather than a special mission or central characteristic. Having acquired some journalistic experience myself, I would have to agree with Barbara Ehrenreich, who in our Scholar-Practitioner Q&A for this issue says "the overwhelming problem for journalists right now is not sexism; it is the disappearance of our way of life." Indeed, there is no way anyone but a few "consecrated" journalists could survive as a freelancer today. It's not so much sexism or elitism that is killing the profession, but the rapidly devolving journalism business model over the past decade and a half has reduced the number of legitimate job opportunities drastically, and continues to do so. Traditional journalism is practically dead, and corporate news media, now in survival mode, have mutated radically. A crisis reporter from Slovenia, Boštjan Videmšek, recently expressed a similar concern. He was speaking of war journalism mainly, but his view can be stretched over other areas of journalism as well. Videmšek said young reporters are working for little or no money at this point. The media houses and their editors have used the financial crisis as an excuse to not pay more experienced journalists to cover stories in the field. Thus, older journalists with a substantial opus are losing the opportunity to work, while younger colleagues often times must work for free, not infrequently covering life-threatening events, risking their lives. Of course, the heightened development of communication technologies has reshaped the journalistic landscape as well. Now anyone can report and send out information from just about anywhere in the world in real time. This brute fact has affected the status, structure, and authority of journalism.

The essays collected in this issue view the status, structure, and authority of journalism produced by women across time, while also debating issues such as: the line between fact and fiction; the phenomenon of the immersion journalist; the relation between the danger of war reportage and feminine sensitivity; social and political activism as they merge with journalism; the questions of a writer's nationality and ethnicity, and the impact of those identities on the writing; the question of the (allowed) depths of empathy in reportage; the relation between objectivity and subjectivity in reporting; and many more. In *The White Album*, Didion noted that "we tell ourselves stories in order to live." I hope this collection of essays has the potential to expand our understanding of the world of journalism and its core subject, life, just a bit more and perhaps add up to our knowledge of how literary journalism in its various forms and shapes grasps hold of life and processes it.

We have tried to create national versatility in our selection of essays. Still, writers from the United States prevail, no doubt in part also because the American journalistic space is rich in its collection of noteworthy writers and has a long tradition of literary journalism. The three Americans appear in the company of one journalist each from Canada, France, Germany, Australia, and Argentina, plus a writer (originally from England) who spent years living in Rhodesia and other parts of southern Africa. The writing ranges over a reasonably large time frame, from the late nineteenth century to present times. Topicality, superior writing, and integrity in reporting—these are the strands and guiding principles that connect the pieces forming our special issue.

In the first essay, Roberta Maguire foregrounds the work of a writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, particularly her stories describing the trial of Ruby McCollum for the murder of Dr. LeRoy Adams in Live Oak, Florida. Hurston's stories, written with a noticeable "literary flair," as Maguire notes, were published in African American newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier*. The series, which began to appear in February 1953 and ran weekly for just over two months, echoes Hurston's 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This observation led Maguire to investigate the relation between the novel and the McCollum series. Maguire explores the journalistic function of these echoes and discusses the importance of Hurston's stories within the context of the African American tradition in literary journalism. The interaction between journalism and literature is well known in literary journalism, but in Hurston's case we have a reversal of the more frequent route of a writer developing her fiction writing out of earlier journalistic work—an aspect that intrigues Maguire. Moreover, the essay searches for a truth revealed in Hurston's writing that goes beyond the official narrative of history. She points to gender

and racial expectations in the South at the time of the trial, and the inevitable schism between what was reported in the national mainstream press and the actual, complex realities of the court case. These realities never became part of the official narrative, but were captured in Hurston's accounts. Hurston set out to write about "the undertones, the overtones, and the implications" of the case, all of which become part of Maguire's close reading of Hurston's trial series. Maguire's essay provides the reader with an innovative insight into a fascinating series of stories, and moreover, into a captivating life story—that of McCollum and of Hurston. After Maguire's essay, we reprint two of Hurston's McCollum trial columns.

In the next essay, Nancy L. Roberts discusses the work of Dorothy Day and Meridel Le Sueur during the tumultuous times of the Great Depression. Both Day and Le Sueur wanted to highlight the lives of the poor and the oppressed, or, in the words of Roberts, "literary journalism gave these writers [Day, Le Sueur and other social activists-writers of the time] an effective platform for advocacy for the dignity and the fair treatment of workers and the impoverished." Further, Roberts talks of an exclusively feminine perspective on oppression and poverty, which brings in the question of a special, gender-marked sensitivity. Roberts describes Day and Le Sueur's writing as "literary journalism of advocacy" that not only exposes the poor and the tormented but also often puts its central focus on women—a rarity for those times. The essay also explains the particularities of Depression-era journalism and how those are reflected in Day and Le Sueur's writing, illustrated by examples from various texts. For instance, "inductive storytelling" happens when the writer focuses on a specific individual in order to inspire a more general conclusion. Day and Le Sueur, who were not only reporters but also active participants in the depicted situations (Roberts discusses the importance of the usage of "I" in this context), search for a larger truth, or truth of coherence, one that penetrates the deepest layers of the Depression era's harsh realities, as reflected in the lives of carefully selected individuals (women in particular). Day and Le Sueur both practiced immersion journalism in its best form, and Roberts gives us a lucid portrayal of how their private lives merged with their professional aspirations. During the repressive literary and political climate of the Cold War and McCarthyism, as Roberts writes, Day and Le Sueur had problems because of their social activism, but the more liberal climate of the 1960s helped them regain their position within the public sphere. Roberts, finally, appeals to the scholarly community to further investigate the work of Day and Le Sueur, their mutual areas of interest, and their outstanding journalism of advocacy.

Bruce Gillespie takes us across the border to Canada with his analysis of Edna Staebler's journalism. Gillespie describes Staebler—who always had aspirations to become a novelist rather than a journalist—as one of Canada's early literary journalists, but points to her magazine work being overshadowed by her later success as a cookbook writer (her books with Mennonite-inspired recipes continue to sell well today, as Gillespie tells us) and philanthropist. The essay brings to the fore Staebler's magazine profiles from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s (published in *Maclean's* and *Chatelaine*, two of Canada's leading magazines) that mostly portray the lives of ordinary Canadians who lived in isolated communities or belonged to marginalized cultural, ethic, and religious groups such as African American slave descendants in Nova Scotia, Hutterites of Alberta, or families of Italian immigrants in downtown Toronto. These profiles, which helped shape Canada's postwar multicultural identity, are solid examples of immersion reporting, complemented with prominent ethnographic traits. Gillespie examines different Staebler's profiles searching for the various qualities we have come to identify as aspects of immersion and participatory journalism. Staebler was a "storyteller at heart," writes Gillespie, so it was relatively easy for her to use, almost instinctively, the writing techniques associated with narrative journalism. Gillespie's essay invites us into Staebler's world, showing us how important it is to expand the usually discussed and accepted range of or canonized scope of literary journalism, not only in Canada but worldwide.

Isabelle Meuret's essay bridges continents and cultural identities, as she draws parallels between the work of three women who reported from the Spanish Civil War (while connecting the Spanish tragedy to transnational, global concerns) and were bound by a common political stance, determination, and approach to reporting: Martha Gellhorn, Gerda Taro, and Andrée Viollis. Meuret thus introduces a specific thematic field of journalism: war journalism, a proverbially male-dominated area of reporting. Meuret calls the work of the three reporters a case of "emotional journalism," alluding to some characteristics in the selected reports that may stem from the fact that it was women who channeled, selected, and eventually reported the horrors of the war. At the same time, Gellhorn's, Taro's, and Viollis's work is presented as highly informative, factual, and accurate. Meuret's essay at times reads as the most feminist-theory-marked piece in our selection, introducing the notions of the "Subaltern" and the "Other." As Meuret notes: "Emotional journalism was a strategy to alienate the reporters' inner selves and get closer to their subjects, which their own subaltern positions facilitated. Their femininity was used to serve their journalistic calling and access an almost exclusively male public sphere." Meuret, by examining the work of the three women report-

ers, explores the specificities of war journalism written by women; namely, she examines the unique textual (sometimes, especially in Gellhorn's writing, colored with visual and filmic features) and photographic (Taro) production of the three women, which, in the words of Meuret, "reflects the many circumstances that brought them on the battlefield including, but not limited to, their gender." Meuret's article draws the links between the select reporters by means of charting three focal points: the reasons why they came to Spain and the circumstances in which they wrote their work reportages; secondly, "the poetic qualities of their journalism," shown through specific examples of their work; and, lastly, their political engagement and activism.

With Sue Joseph's essay, we land on Australian shores. In this piece, which highlights the work of academic, award-winning (literary) journalist, author, and social commentator Margaret Simons, questions concerning the narrative-journalism-related terminology are raised as well, since there is no consensus in Australia yet as to what the most appropriate term describing this type of writing is or should be. This is naturally not just an Australian dilemma, but Joseph specifically points out that Simons doesn't want to label herself as a literary journalist but prefers to speak of "disinterested" and "dirty" journalism as her trademark (while still feeling relatively comfortable with the term "narrative journalism," as the article informs us). As Joseph notes, "Australian creative nonfiction writers as a rule do not identify themselves as such"; they prefer to simply call their work "writing." Joseph also explains that most substantial Australian creative nonfiction can be found in long-form literary or book-length journalism. The essay is mostly based on an interview Joseph conducted with Simons, but it also offers an analysis of one of her works that has "deep political and cultural impact and significance," as Joseph states: *The Meeting of the Waters: The Hindmarsh Island Affair* (2003). Before Joseph introduces us to the life and work of Simons and gets into a detailed analysis of the book, showing that the work is a solid example of book-length literary journalism, she also talks about book-length journalism in Australia in general and female writers within that context. Through the analysis of Simons's book that unfolds complex relations between the indigenous people of Australia and non-Aboriginal Australians, Joseph's text poses pertinent questions that relate to objectivity and subjectivity in journalism. Moreover, she debates—together with Simons—what it means to be a journalist and what makes a good story.

Pablo Calvi's essay discusses the work of Argentinian literary journalist Leila Guerriero, a leading voice of *crónica*, the dominant form of Latin American literary journalism. Calvi focuses on Guerriero's journalistic narrator, while noticing a special constant in her texts, namely, an equal measure

of certainty and doubt (even self-doubt). Guerriero works this tension to reach a boiling point of journalistic truth. Calvi builds his analysis mostly on texts contained in the collection, *Frutos extraños* (2009). Guerriero is not driven primarily by factual precision, or as Calvi says, "in her stories, doubt exists not as something to be overcome, ignored, avoided or corrected, but rather as an essential element of truth itself." In fact, an integral aspect of her style is deliberate imprecision. This does not imply that she is not meticulous in conducing her research, Calvi says, but rather points to Guerriero's belief that absolutely objective reporting does not exist. In other words, there is no such thing as a completely reliable narrator who feeds the reader nothing but objective facts. Calvi shows that "intense reporting often renders the exact opposite effect to mathematical precision and quantifiable fact." The more a reporter becomes involved in a specific story, the more she becomes aware "of all the nuances. . . . the unknowable elements that are part of the sum total." Calvi introduces the notion of the "uncertain narrator" (also, splintered narrator) who is interested in the plurality of truths, in information coming from different, sometimes contradictory, sources. This is the sort of journalistic truth that Guerriero works towards. Calvi finds another telling example of such writing also in Guerriero's 2013 work, titled *Una historia sencilla* (*A simple story*), which talks about González Alcántara, a professional malambo dancer. Other examples of Guerriero's writing cited in the essay include Guerriero's book of profiles, *Plano Americano* (2013), which also clearly show how Guerriero prioritizes truth over fact. Calvi's essay shows how applying uncertainty in narratives can in fact contribute to the complexity of journalistic texts and enable the reader to become even more immersed in the story.

South African scholars Anthea Garman and Gillian Rennie co-wrote the final essay in our special issue. The center of their study is writer Alexandra Fuller, who was born in England and brought up in Southern Africa (mostly in the former Rhodesia). Fuller's work ranges from autobiographical narratives to magazine feature writing, and Garman and Rennie show how Fuller's geographical and national backgrounds (they describe her as "a nonfiction writer of Southern Africa") influenced her writing, as well as how she became a fixture on the mainstream American magazine scene (precisely by developing a distinctive literary voice born from her extended exposure to Africa). Once she moved to America in 2005, Fuller started publishing for magazines such as the *New Yorker, Harper's, National Geographic*, and *Vogue*. Her mixed identities and simultaneous closeness to and distance from Africa gave her an unusual point of view that was desirable to editors and benefited her writing career. These days, Garman and Rennie explain, Fuller's long-form journalism mostly revolves around two main thematic premises: she

is either addressing the political situation in Southern African countries or writing about the American West. In the past, it was mostly white men who wrote about Africa, contributing significantly to the Western world's idea of the African society, history, and culture. Fuller has had to face this male writers' legacy as well when venturing into journalism and, before that, autobiographical writing. The essay's authors list both negative and positive reviews of Fuller's work and her portrayals of the experiences of white people living in Africa. Fuller's fluid and unstable (or liminal, as Garman and Rennie describe it) identity—geographical, cultural, literary, and journalistic—is central to Garman's and Rennie's view of the writer and he work. Their project, in essence, is an exploration into mapping Fuller's work, and into grasping the meaning of liminality, in writing as well as in life as such.

As is the case with special issues, they attempt expose a specific aspect of a specific notion, phenomenon, situation, or event. What ideas, what "shifting phantasmagoria" of life, to use Didion's words again, we manage to successfully freeze onto the following pages depends on readers' states of mind, views on life, problems to deal with, and battles to fight. Whatever reaction the collected essays generate will surely be appreciated. My thoughts are not only with the female journalists who are out there reporting every day, bleeding life force faster than blood in order to make it in this precarious business, or even just to survive, either because that is the nature of their reporting, or because they are indeed involved in gender battles for equality and recognition. I also extend my hopes to all journalists whose work brings enlightenment, encouragement, and integrity into our lives, and who work twenty-four/seven for negligible paychecks. I hope the reader will forgive this preaching, but I find it of the utmost importance to stress the significance of the fight for decent lives for journalists, for a fair salary, and finally, for an improved reputation of the journalistic profession, which that has been besmirched in part by the demands and logic of corporate media and the system that feeds them.

As for concluding words, my first word of gratitude goes to Bill Reynolds, who was the leading force behind this project, offering advice and guidance, and my second goes to the IALJS editorial board for its initial input. I would like to thank William Dow specifically for his interview with Barbara Ehrenreich, which contributes significantly to the theme of this issue. Finally, to all the writers who contributed their scholarship, time, and patience to help make this project a reality, my heartfelt thanks.