



New York City Skyline, December, 1941. Lower Manhattan seen from the S.S. Coamo leaving New York. Photograph by Jack Delano.

Research Review . . .

Recent Trends and Topics in Literary Journalism Scholarship

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This essay is the first installment of what we hope will be an annual survey of literary journalism scholarship. It is intended as a guide to recent trends and topics in the field rather than a comprehensive listing of all scholarship and commentary. The inaugural offering covers works published in English during 2015. It focuses primarily on peer-reviewed journal articles but also makes reference to books, book reviews, and Internet publications. Special thanks to Ilina Ghosh, Ryerson University, Canada, who provided research assistance.

The publication of Thomas Kunkel's biography of Joseph Mitchell¹ in 2015 (see page 172 for book review) received wide notice in major newspapers and magazines. It also coincided with several pieces of scholarship that provide important perspectives on Mitchell, his iconic status among practitioners of literary journalism, and the genre itself. If Kunkel took Mitchell's reputation down a notch by showing a wider pattern of problems with his reporting practices than had been previously documented, Harvard historian Jill Lepore went even further, calling into question the writer's standing as a model for literary journalists. Writing in the *New Yorker*, where she is a staff writer, Lepore shows that Mitchell's conclusion to what many consider his masterpiece, "Joe Gould's Secret," is factually wrong. She further suggests

that more thorough research by Mitchell would have revealed the truth, that Gould's "Oral History of Our Time" was real, not a figment of Gould's imagination. Based in part on archival research that turned up four chapters of Gould's written recordings of speech, Lepore concludes that Mitchell's pursuit of truth was far more artistic than journalistic. In both of the articles he wrote about Gould, one assuming the existence of the oral history and one declaring it a fraud, Mitchell seems to have been more intent on telling a good yarn than arriving at either the facts or the truth. "I don't think [Mitchell] was especially interested in reading the Oral History when he first met Gould. It made a better story in 1942 if it existed; it made a better story in 1964 if it didn't,"² she writes. Lepore's research also provides yet another possible explanation for the writer's block that emerged after the publication of "Joe Gould's Secret." It turns out that Mitchell had a secret as well, that evidence had been presented to him showing that Gould had been working on an oral history, large fragments of which did exist. Mitchell told one correspondent that he would like to use this information if he ever wrote another piece about Gould, which, of course, he did not.

The ambiguity that will continue to surround Mitchell's purposes, methods, and achievements is a natural extension of the ambiguity that marked the midcentury literary journalism of the *New Yorker* as described by Tamar Katz, an English professor at Brown University. Writing in *American Literary History*, Katz argues that *New Yorker* contributors, and preeminently Mitchell, forged a new kind of writing by mixing newspaper conventions with modernist concerns for subjectivity. Scholars of literary journalism may be put off by some of Katz's observations, such as referring to "the middlebrow status of this writing, which has made the genre negligible, even faintly embarrassing to critics." But her work is notable for the way that it credits Mitchell for a continuing influence on contemporary culture. She writes, "His writing influenced how current residents imagine the city and reminds us of the surprising ways that the intersection of middlebrow and modernist culture extends into a postmodern culture that critics claim has left them behind."³

Katz's essay is valuable for its analysis of Mitchell's technique and the role, and shortcomings, of the anecdote in literary journalism. For Mitchell and other *New Yorker* contributors the anecdote is a way of achieving intimacy and credibility, a way of uniting the writer's experience with that of the reader. But therein lies a danger—that the anecdote lapses into triviality or excessive individuality. The solution is to maintain a degree of ambiguity so that the "city's objects . . . yield supremely particular presence and gesture beyond themselves."⁴ By resisting full definition, these people and places point to a layer of meaning and yet do not fully reveal its ramifications. Katz concludes

by connecting Mitchell to Joe Gould, arguing that the journalist's work has become an oral history of New York that serves as a way for readers to engage with urban experience.

A similar point about Mitchell's role in shaping New Yorkers' conceptions of the city is made by Fiona Anderson in *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures* in an article examining preservationist attitudes toward the waterfront.⁵ Mitchell's use of names is explored by Michael Adams in "'The Course of a Particular': Names and Narrative in the Works of Joseph Mitchell." Adams writes that for Mitchell "names are strangely significant: they are textual loci at which narratology, epistemology, and ontology enmesh."⁶

Nobel Laureate Svetlana Alexievich

In October 2015, the Swedish Academy awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature to a journalist, Svetlana Alexievich, of Belarus. Writing in the *New York Review of Books*, translator Jamey Gambrell calls Alexievich's work "a distinctive kind of narrative based on journalistic research and the distillation of thousands of first-hand interviews with people directly affected by all the major events of the Soviet and post-Soviet period."⁷ Her reporting technique, as described in a *New Yorker* blog post, depends on hours of patient listening to her subjects to arrive at authentic memory. First come "the rehearsing of received memories: newspaper accounts, other people's stories, and whatever else corresponds to a public narrative that has inevitably already taken hold," writes Masha Gessen. "Only beneath all those layers is personal memory found."⁸

John C. Hartsock, in *Literary Journalism Studies*, notes that the new laureate's work will likely prove to be a fertile field for future researchers, since English-language scholars, of both literature and journalism, have paid little critical attention to her work up to this point. For his part, Hartsock emphasizes the literary aspects of her work, noting that "her literary values frame her examination" and that literary techniques are key to her efforts to assault and subvert the political order.⁹ But others have not been as willing to acknowledge Alexievich as either literary artist or journalist. Writing in *Quadrant*, six months before the prize announcement, Michael Connor argues that Alexievich "appears to be an inspired interviewer, editor and assembler, but not a writer." He also questions whether her application of literary techniques has led her to cross the line from nonfiction into fiction. One example he gives is of the use of an incident, first documented in 1946, in which Germans tossed candies to children who had been thrown into a pit and were about to be buried alive. Connor counts three versions of this story and asks, "Is this genuine new Holocaust testimony, questionable oral history, or 'faction'?"¹⁰

Attention for Female Literary Journalists

The role of women in literary journalism received significant attention in 2015 in a wide range of venues. Marieke Dubbelboer, writing in *French Cultural Studies*, explores Colette's career in journalism, describing how the French author, best known for the novella *Gigi*, used an anthropological approach that was marked by a "sort of personal, participatory reportage."¹¹ In *Prose Studies*, Hilde van Belle examines *Back to the Congo*, by Lieve Joris, and describes how the author engages readers' aesthetic interests while simultaneously reporting on complex social conditions.¹² In *Journeys*, Mary Henes reviews the work of Freya Stark over a forty-year period and shows how her work at the *Baghdad Times* led to the publication of her book *Baghdad Sketches*.¹³ A series of travel dispatches in London's *Jewish Chronicle* by Amy Levy, better known for her poetry and fiction, is the subject of a study in *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* by Richa Dwor.¹⁴

Marcus O'Donnell, writing in *Journalism*, uses Rebecca Solnit's book *Savage Dreams* as a case study to develop an argument for a type of literary journalism he calls "polyphonic open journalism." He argues that Solnit's "writing pursues a range of open-ended associative strategies that create a choral effect rather than merely constructing a traditional prose argument or narrative plot" as "she moves from evocative to proclamatory to exegetical modes of writing."¹⁵

In spring 2015 *Literary Journalism Studies* devoted an entire issue to women and literary journalism. Guest editor Leonora Flis writes in her introduction about taking an approach that explores gender while making it neither too much nor too little of an issue. The collected essays "make gender an organic part of the analysis rather than a special mission or central characteristic."¹⁶ Included in the special issues were essays by Roberta S. Maguire on Zora Neale Hurston;¹⁷ Nancy L. Roberts on Meridel Le Sueur and Dorothy Day;¹⁸ Bruce Gillespie on Edna Stabler;¹⁹ Isabelle Meuret on Martha Gellhorn, Gerda Taro, and Andrée Viollis;²⁰ Sue Joseph on Margaret Simons;²¹ Pablo Calvi on Leila Guerriero;²² and Anthea Garman and Gillian Rennie on Alexandra Fuller.²³

National Differences in Professional Values and Practices

Numerous scholars highlighted national differences in professional values and practices in 2015. Writing in the *Journal of European Studies*, Sandrine Boudana explores the way that political and literary traditions inform the work of French war correspondents and affect their view of reportorial detachment.²⁴ Hedley Twiddle, writing in *Research in African Literatures*, examines how the 1966 assassination of the South African prime minister set

off “a wide range of literary and artistic treatments: from memoir and micro-history to avant-garde fiction and filmic montage.”²⁵

Matthew Ricketson and Sue Joseph served as guest editors for the *Australian Journalism Review*, which published a special section devoted to literary journalism outside the Anglo-American tradition. Included were essays by Willa McDonald and Kerrie Davies on the role of narrative journalism in constructing cultural mythology,²⁶ Christopher Kremmer on truth claims in literary journalism,²⁷ Isabel Soares on Portuguese literary journalism,²⁸ Carolyn Rickett on Pamela Bone,²⁹ Patrick Mullins on the writing of political history,³⁰ Pablo Calvi on Jorge Luis Borges,³¹ Marcus O’Donnell on David Marr,³² Ben Stubbs on travel writing,³³ and Richard Lance Keeble³⁴ on the personal and political in literary journalism.

Transparency, “Slow Journalism”

Three articles in the April 2015 issue of *Journalism Practice* address matters of concern to scholars and practitioners of literary journalism. First, Lindsay Morton uses a book-length example of literary journalism, Dave Cullen’s *Columbine*, to call into question the emerging reliance on transparency as a hallmark of credible journalism. “Measures taken to disclose sources, methods and motives can obscure gaps in a journalist’s knowledge, and build a picture—or ‘truth’—that is not necessarily justifiable, despite the evidence provided and processes used to attain it,” she warns.³⁵ Morton believes that despite the associated pitfalls, transparency remains an important tool for journalists to use as they strive for authentication and validation and that literary journalists may well create models that could be adopted in mainstream journalism. A second article in that issue raises doubts about the extent to which transparency will be pursued across the profession. In that piece Kalyani Chadha and Michael Koliska report, based on interviews at six major news organizations, that journalists are “still grappling with the notion of transparency as a professional norm”³⁶ and seem to be settling into practices that serve to create the illusion of transparency without actually providing it. Also in that issue Megan Le Masurier explores the concept of “slow journalism.” Although Le Masurier credits literary journalism scholar Susan Greenberg with coining the term, this essay makes only a passing reference to literary journalism, which Le Masurier seems to equate solely with book-length journalism. Le Masurier poses the question of whether slow journalism is just an elitist reaction to the hyper-speed production of news that dominates the mainstream media but rejects that formulation. Instead she projects that it will continue as an alternative form of discourse that operates alongside the more traditional types newsgathering that emphasize rapid reporting.³⁷

Studies of Single Authors

Writing in *Journalism Studies*, Matthew Winston looks to the sports journalism of Hunter S. Thompson and argues that Gonzo allows for a more critical approach to the subject, highlighting its “exploitative, corrupt and negative aspects.” Winston (see page 182 for a review of Winston’s *Gonzo Text*) explores the ways that Gonzo contrasts with the conventions of covering sports, concluding that “the stylistic methods associated with Gonzo journalism facilitate a hybrid form of sports journalism which, though highly subjective, is nonetheless strongly tied to critical social and political commentary.”³⁸

Other studies in 2015 that focused on a single author included an essay in *Literary Journalism Studies* by Kate McQueen on German court reporter Paul Schlesinger. She describes how Schlesinger used literary techniques to raise the profile and prestige of the act of covering criminal trials and to demonstrate that “the reach of a politically neutral, literary approach can extend beyond empathetic engagement to concrete political change.”³⁹

Julien Gorbach, also in *Literary Journalism Studies*, turns his attention to Ben Hecht, the journalist turned playwright turned screenwriter. In this essay, Gorbach argues that Hecht’s literary skill has been overlooked because of his success in Hollywood. Gorbach pays particular attention to an unpublished biography by Hecht of Jewish mobster Mickey Cohen and finds stylistic traits there that anticipate the New Journalism that would emerge decades later.⁴⁰

Magdalena Horodecka, also writing in *Literary Journalism Studies*, analyzes Ryszard Kapuściński’s *Travels with Herodotus* and shows how the journalist used the historian’s words as a way of defining the work of the reporter. “In many respects, the historian seems to be Kapuściński’s alter ego, a mirror in which the reporter not so much watches himself as is watched by the reader,” Horodecka writes. “That is why the role of the other text in understanding oneself—the crucial idea of hermeneutics—is deeply present in *Travels*.”⁴¹

This kind of juxtaposition is highlighted in the writing of Tom Wolfe by Michael Jacobs in another *Literary Journalism Studies* article. Wolfe’s challenge in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Jacobs explains, was to present and explain Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters to a mainstream audience. “Wolfe’s juxtaposition of Prankster perception with journalistic observation,” Jacobs writes, “affords the reader the requisite number of perspectives to understand and even identify with the documentary subjects while cutting through the allegorical haze they create.”⁴²

Mark Heberle, in a chapter included in *The Vietnam War: Topics in Contemporary North American Literature*, casts Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* as an example of “posttraumatic literature,” a feature that distinguishes it, he argues, from “nearly all the canonical works of New Journalism.”⁴³

Writing in *Literature and Medicine*, Ralph F. Smith explores the evolution of the views of Charles Dickens toward sanitation reform as expressed in his journalism. Drawing on the flâneur tradition and other modes of expression, Dickens attempted to shift the political debate away from engineering solutions toward a recognition of the need for economic changes to lift common people out of poverty and alleviate the ravages of disease.⁴⁴

George Augustus Sala, a Dickens contemporary, is the subject of Peter Blake's book-length biography. Blake describes the writing style of Sala as one that included literary flourishes while remaining accessible to a middle-class audience.⁴⁵

From “Neoliberalism” to the “New Sincerity”

In an *American Literature* essay on Alex Haley and Hunter S. Thompson, Daniel Worden considers the interplay between literary journalism and the public sphere. Worden argues that Haley and Thompson helped to give rise to a style that can be termed neoliberalism, with a heavy emphasis on individualist, entrepreneurial, and consumerist behaviors that have disrupted the idea of politics as a collective activity. “Neoliberal style has also shaped creative nonfiction more generally,” Worden writes, “from the memoir boom starting in the 1990s to the ‘new sincerity’ of contemporary writers influenced by David Foster Wallace.”⁴⁶

Truth, “Truthiness,” and Trustworthiness

New perspectives on the line between fiction and nonfiction are presented in a pair of scholarly works in 2015. In a contribution to a book on unreliable narration and trustworthiness, Beatrice Dernbach examines the way that reliability in journalism is related to concepts of legitimacy and utility by considering cases in which individual journalists were criticized for reports that called reliability standards into question.⁴⁷ And in a *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism* article, Annjeanette Wiese explores the way that “truthiness” fits into definitions of fiction and nonfiction, and argues for its role in hybrid texts as a way of forcing the reader to consider the distinctions between these categories in an effort “to say something true.”⁴⁸

A special issue of *CrossCurrents*, a peer-reviewed journal from the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life, is devoted to exploring the use of creative nonfiction in telling stories of religious experience, and specifically the tension between truth and non-truth. “Each of these works of creative nonfiction exists in the mysterious nexus between self and other, faith and doubt, ideology and experience, that is the stuff of religion today,” writes Brook Wilensky-Lanford in her introduction to the issue.⁴⁹

Laura Tanja King, in *New Writing: The International Journal for the Prac-*

tice and Theory of Creative Writing, takes a slightly different approach to the problem of separating fact from fiction by considering the way that travel writing is often poised between memoir and fiction, occupying what she describes as a “complex, delicate and problematic space.”⁵⁰

Poetry and Journalism Scholarship

Writing in the *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, Cristina Archetti makes a case for using poetry as a methodological tool in journalism scholarship. “Not only can poetry complement traditional ‘academic’ texts by filling the gaps of the vivid details of the situated practices of journalism as they are lived in real life,” she writes. “It also has far-reaching epistemological and ontological implications: it raises, in other words, fundamental questions related to what we assume the world where journalists operate to be, the role of imagination, sensory perceptions and emotions in everyday practice, as well as the very place of the scholar in the research process.”⁵¹

Miles Maguire contributed “Literary Journalism: Journalism Aspiring to Be Literature,” a historical overview of major themes in literary journalism scholarship, to The Routledge Handbook of Magazine Research: The Future of the Magazine Form, edited by David Abrahamson and Marcia R. Prior-Miller (see page 176 for review).⁵²



Notes

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3. Tamar Katz, “Anecdotal History: the *New Yorker*, Joseph Mitchell, and Literary Journalism,” *American Literary History* 27, no. 3 (2015): 480.
4. Katz, 476.
5. Fiona Anderson, “An Unhemmed Dress: Popular Preservation and Civic Disobedience on the Manhattan Waterfront from the 1960s–2010s,” *Shima* 9, no. 1 (2015): 1–18.

6. Michael Adams, "'The Course of a Particular': Names and Narrative in the Works of Joseph Mitchell," *Names* 63, no. 1 (2015): 3.
7. Jamey Gambrell, Introduction to "The Man Who Flew," by Svetlana Alexievitch, *New York Review of Books*, November 19, 2015, 10.
8. Masha Gessen, "Svetlana Alexievitch's Nobel Win," Page-Turner (blog), *New Yorker*, October 8, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/svetlana-alexievichs-deserved-nobel-win>.
9. John C. Hartsock, "The Literature in the Journalism of Nobel Prize Winner Svetlana Alexievich," *Literary Journalism Studies* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 46.
10. Michael Connor, "Writers on the Foggy Frontier," *Quadrant Magazine* 59, no. 4 (April 2015): 70.
11. Marieke Dubbelboer, 2015. "Nothing Ruins Writers Like Journalism': Colette, the Press and Belle Epoque Literary Life," *French Cultural Studies* 26, no. 1 (2015): 38.
12. Hilde van Belle, "An Image of Sheer Bliss: Stereotypes in Back to the Congo (Lieve Joris)," *Prose Studies* 37, no. 1 (2015): 21–32.
13. Mary Henes, "Autobiography, Journalism, and Controversy: Freya Stark's Baghdad Sketches," *Journeys* 16, no. 1 (2015): 98–118.
14. Richa Dwor, "'Poor Old Palace-Prison!': Jewish Urban Memory in Amy Levy's 'The Ghetto at Florence' (1886)," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 13, no. 1 (January 2015): 155–169.
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16. Leonora Flis, "On Recognition of Quality Writing," *Literary Journalism Studies* 7, no. 1 (2015): 8.
17. Roberta S. Maguire, "From Fiction to Fact: Zora Neale Hurston and the Ruby McCollum Trial," *Literary Journalism Studies* 7, no. 1 (2015): 16–34.
18. Nancy L. Roberts, "Meridel Le Sueur, Dorothy Day, and the Literary Journalism of Advocacy During the Great Depression," *Literary Journalism Studies* 7, no. 1 (2015): 44–57.
19. Bruce Gillespie, "The Works of Edna Staebler: Using Literary Journalism to Celebrate the Lives of Ordinary Canadians," *Literary Journalism Studies* 7, no. 1 (2015): 58–75.
20. Isabelle Meuret, "Rebels with a Cause: Women Reporting the Spanish Civil War," *Literary Journalism Studies* 7, no. 1 (2015): 76–99.
21. Sue Joseph, "Preferring 'Dirty' to 'Literary' Journalism: In Australia, Margaret Simons Challenges the Jargon While Producing the Texts," *Literary Journalism Studies* 7, no. 1 (2015): 100–117.
22. Pablo Calvi, "Leila Guerriero and the Uncertain Narrator," *Literary Journalism Studies* 7, no. 1 (2015): 118–130.
23. Anthea Garman and Gillian Rennie, "Alexandra Fuller of Southern Africa: A White Woman Writer Goes West," *Literary Journalism Studies* 7, no. 1 (2015): 132–145.

24. Sandrine Boudana, "Le spectateur engagé: French War Correspondents' Conceptions of Detachment and Commitment," *Journal of European Studies* 45, no. 2 (2015): 137–151.

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27. Christopher Kremmer, "The Longer the Better?: Calibrating Truth Claims in Literary Journalism," *Australian Journalism Review* 37, no. 2 (2015): 51–65.

28. Isabel Soares, "Pioneers and Millennials: Two Moments in Portuguese Literary Journalism," *Australian Journalism Review* 37, no. 2 (2015): 67–79.

29. Carolyn Rickett, "Bad Hair Days and the Good of Pamela Bone's Literary Journalism," *Australian Journalism Review* 37, no. 2 (2015): 81–93.

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33. Ben Stubbs, "Travel Writing: An Exploration of Its Place within Journalism," *Australian Journalism Review* 37, no. 2 (2015): 139–149.

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42. Michael Jacobs, "Confronting the (Un)Reality of Pranksterdom: Tom Wolfe and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*," *Literary Journalism Studies* 7, no. 2: 133.

43. Mark Heberle, "Michael Herr's Traumatic New Journalism: *Dispatches*," in *The Vietnam War: Topics in Contemporary North American Literature*, ed. Brenda M. Boyle (London, England: Bloomsbury, 2015), 31.
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