

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

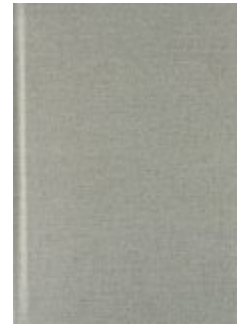


John S. Bak, Bill Reynolds, eds. *Literary Journalism Across the Globe: Journalistic Traditions and Transnational Influences*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011. x + 306 pp. \$28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-877-8; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-876-1.

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The “legitimization” of literary journalism and the study thereof hasn’t been forthcoming from the publishing industry and academia, editor John Bak writes in the introduction to *Literary Journalism Across the Globe*. “We have to take charge of the discipline ourselves, conduct the research that needs to be conducted, and wait for the rest to catch up with us. They will, eventually. This book is betting on that” (p. 19).

So who are the “we” in this message? Chances are they’re the members of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies, dedicated to research and education in a field they describe as “not journalism about literature but journalism that is literature,” according to its Web site. Ten of the eighteen contributors to this volume of sixteen essays are officers and chairs of this organization, including Bak, who was the founding president in 2006, and his co-editor Bill Reynolds, the current president. The book features three parts: “Toward a Theory of International Literary Journalism,” “Journalistic Traditions,” and “Transnational Influences.”

The book takes a step toward recognition of research on the history and practices of literary journalism around the world. They trace its roots back through the cultural histories of North and South America, Europe, and Asia, including vignettes on seventeenth-century Dutch pamphleteering and Chinese reportage of the Qing Dynasty. Even more intriguing are profiles of individual writers such as Australian Helen Garner and Pole Ryszard Kapuściński, for example. The international scope of this book might boggle the minds of readers whose exposure to literary journalism has been limited to the New Journalism of 1960s and 1970s America and writers such

as Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, Gay Talese, and Hunter Thompson.

When Wolfe described the four main techniques of New Journalism in 1973 in a book by the same name, he created an easily identifiable structure, some might say a “package,” for his brand of literary journalism and established a base that would give him hero status. Among fans of Wolfe and other New Journalists, the Bak/Reynolds book should find readers interested in seeing his influence on literary journalism outside the United States.[1] Media historians can appreciate seeing the American tradition depicted within a global context.

Wherever found on the global stage, Bak writes, “Stop referring to literary journalism as a genre, or even as a form, and start calling it what it is: a discipline” (p. 18). He goes on to distinguish “genre” and “form” from “discipline” in the introduction, yet the explanation heralds a barrage of related terms that follow. It takes a world of words and phrases to describe the numerous relatives of literary journalism, which keep alive the mystery of whether literary journalism is more literary or journalistic. Terms such as *literary reportage*, *creative nonfiction*, *narra-descriptive journalism*, *documentary prose*, *factographic fiction*, and *personal reported essay* also appear in the discussions. By the time foreign terms, such as the Russian *ochercki* for essay and the Chinese *lishi baogao wenxue* for historical literary reportage, are added throughout the text, readers might start wishing for a glossary to keep all the terms straight.

The International Association for Literary Journalism Studies on its Web site found a smoother way to interweave the multitude of terms (and thereby help the

reader) by establishing their connections upfront rather than doling them out one by one: “the importance of Literary Journalism—a genre also known around the world as literary reportage, narrative journalism, creative non-fiction, the New Journalism, Jornalismo Literário, el periodismo literario, Bao Gao Wen Xue, literary nonfiction and narrative nonfiction.”[2]

Bak and Reynolds should also have considered another time-honored journalistic tradition: “Show, don’t tell.” In a book as text-heavy as this one, the points might be better clarified with more examples of the writing itself for contrast and comparison. Granted, a few chapters are sprinkled with passages, particularly those in part 3, “Transnational Influences.” However, more selections or a collection of readings might help readers connect familiar works with the more exotic. Norman Sims, one of the book’s essayists, chose the readings format for some of his books on literary journalism.[3]

Sims and the other essayists offer impeccable credentials, and their output can be fascinating. For example, David Abrahamson’s essay proposes a “Counter-Coriolis Effect” in which the literary journalism of the Northern Hemisphere leans toward the political left with a reformist view and critical eye on social institutions while that of the Southern Hemisphere tends to the right with

traditional and self-critical perspectives (p. 81). All the information in the book seems well researched and supportive as the editors build a strong case for literary journalism’s rightful place in the market. Yet, it might have been “packaged” to make it more accessible, identifiable, and memorable for readers, appropriate since readability is one of the hallmarks of literary journalism.

Notes

[1]. Wolfe is mentioned more than thirty times in the book and cited as influential in how literary journalism has been practiced in Australia (p. 272), Brazil (p. 178), China (p. 154), Finland (p. 192), Slovenia (pp. 238-39, 249-50), and Spain (pp. 139, 144).

[2]. [Http://www.ialjs.org/](http://www.ialjs.org/).

[3]. Sims’s books include two anthologies, *The Literary Journalists* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), and, with Mark Kramer, *Literary Journalism* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995). He also has written a history, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), and has compiled a book of scholarly articles, *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2008).

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