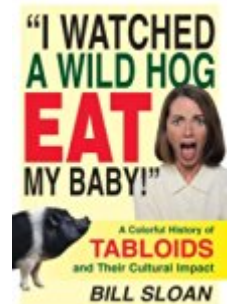


**Bill Sloan.** *I Watched A Wild Hog Eat My Baby! A Colorful History of Tabloids and Their Cultural Impact.* Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2001. 251 pp. \$27.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57392-902-8.



**Reviewed by** Martin Conboy

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I must acknowledge a vested interest here: As a cultural historian, I have a professional fascination with the excess of tabloid culture. Certain colleagues have regarded this as morbid in the extreme, but I am drawn to analyzing it, considering it to be one of the principle arenas of political and cultural power-broking in the contemporary media world. It was therefore with some interest that I took on the task of reviewing this particular book. It would certainly not be in the spirit of the book itself to superimpose one set of cultural standards on another by reviewing what is essentially a popular book by the criteria of academic criticism. There is, furthermore, no need to do this as it achieves its goal on its own terms and in fine fashion. It belongs very much in the tradition of British books such as Peter Chippindale and Chris Horrie's *Stick It Up Your Punter: The Rise and Fall of the Sun* (1991) and has much of the verve and drive of the earlier American analysis of popular newspapers provided by Simon Bessie in *Jazz Journalism* (1938).

Sloan takes the perspective of the informed insider. He draws heavily on the anecdotes of oth-

er journalists some named and others protected from their current employers. The writing, in keeping with his subject matter, is atmospheric and compelling. Yet this style does not prevent him making perceptive points on the impact of tabloids, particularly on the youth market from the 1960s, and on demographic and retail revolutions that drove the newsstands into the supermarkets from the late 1960s into the 1970s. He also points out that the process of "tabloidification" has shifted the whole news ecology and has not been an isolated phenomenon within American popular culture.

There is a fine and accessible account of the development of popular journalism in the United States in the early part of the book and it is a history that Sloan draws upon to good effect to make valuable points about both the political economy of the tabloids and their stylistic traits. He stresses throughout that the defining feature of all the manifestations of popular journalism has been the quality of its writing and the inventiveness of its engagement with popular markets, from James Gordon Bennett, through Joseph Pulitzer and

William Randolph Hearst to the *National Enquirer* of today.

There is coverage of moments of tabloid intervention into the political mainstream as in the cases of Richard Nixon, O. J. Simpson and the Bill Clinton/Jennifer Flowers, Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky stories and a timely reminder of the role of the tabloids in the elevation of Jackie Kennedy Onassis to cultural icon and symbol of the decline of an American dream. In fact, celebrity news is generally historicized and chronicled in a way that debunks any contemporary assumption that it has always featured to a large extent and in similar ways in our popular news. It is to this book's credit that it goes some way towards demonstrating how celebrity culture's representation in the press has had its ebbs and flows like all forms of popular content.

"Weird news" and "Gee-whiz" stories are the American equivalent of what Kelvin McKenzie characterized (with the intonations of social class within the vernacular of his assumed readership of his blue-collar *Sun* of the 1980s) in Britain as "Cor, Doris" stories. They illustrate the epistemology of John Langer's "anarchic existentialism" without really exploring the cultural or even political implications of reliance on the routine representation of the world as a place prey to irrational and irresistible forces. In chronicling many of these narratives, Sloan, at least implicitly, indicates the political dimension of such journalistic devices.

The book is enlivened by quotations from protagonists, and Sloan places them in a rich narrative alongside extracts from the newspapers themselves. However, the mini-biographies of the tabloid luminaries such as Generoso Pope, John Vader, Paul Azzaria, Joseph (Papa Joe) Sorrento, and Rupert Murdoch, that are so integral to the book, make it much more of a personality-driven account of this news sub-genre than a cultural analysis. It is a flaw that defines much writing on journalism by insiders. There is plenty of descrip-

tion of the activities of these protagonists that sheds light on the rivalries and machinations of the different publishing groups, but little in the way of institutional analysis or, in the case of this book, any real attempt to provide a clear account of what the author claims in the title is the "cultural impact" of the tabloids. At its best, this style of approach produces snapshots of the personal interventions in the struggle to control the political economy of the tabloid/supermarket interface that was to define this sub-genre of journalism, as in the description of the activity of Rupert Murdoch with his *National Star* in 1974. At its worst, it is reduced to pseudo-psychological reflections on the motives of Generoso Pope and others at various points in their media careers. As a counterbalance, it is good to read similarly engaging accounts by academics such as S. Elizabeth Bird from the contemporary perspective and placing supermarket journalism into the "web of significance" of anthropologist Clifford Geertz.[1] In addition, an account that puts the popular news media in a longer and richer historical vein is W. J. Campbell's recent *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies* (2001).

Despite these shortcomings, which, it may be said, come with the territory, it is nevertheless a deceptively careful exposition of the development of a highly controversial category of journalism that continues to pose questions about our news media in general and their relationships to finance and markets. Sloan is keen to demonstrate through copious examples how tabloid journalism provides a satirical, deflationary edge, a "twisted artistry," which means that it has never been short of either contributors or readers. If popular journalism continues to shape the contours of mainstream journalism acceptable to mass markets in the twenty-first century, as it has in the previous 150 years, and if tabloid journalism is the contemporary manifestation of that trend, then this book will continue to provide an accessible chronology of its development.

Note

[1]. S. Elizabeth Bird, *For Enquiring Minds: A Cultural Study of Supermarket Tabloids* (Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press, 1992); and Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

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