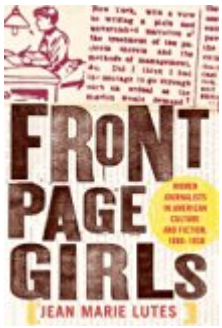
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jean Marie Lutes. *Front-Page Girls: Women Journalists in American Culture and Fiction, 1880-1930.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. 226 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-4235-3.

Reviewed by Kimberley Mangun

Published on Jhistory (April, 2007)

After years at the margins--literally and figuratively--of journalism history, women's stories finally are taking their rightful place in the canon. Columnists Fanny Fern and Jennie June, muckraker Ida Tarbell, stunt journalist Nellie Bly, reporter Rheta Childe Dorr, and publisher Mary Ann Shadd Cary are just a few of the women whose careers have been explored in scholarly articles and books published during the past thirty years. Early studies focused on biography and were an important counterpoint to the countless tomes about Joseph Pulitzer, Willian Randolph Hearst, Horace Greeley, and other publishing "heroes." More recent scholarship has examined the interplay between race, class, sexuality, and gender, and how those markers helped or hindered the careers of women journalists and editors.

In keeping with this important line of research, Jean Marie Lutes, author of *Front-Page Girls: Women Journalists in American Culture and Fiction, 1880-1930*, considers how newswomen's bodies became synonymous with their stories. Beginning with the stunt journalism phenomenon, women journalists were typecast as empathetic rather than objective and emotional rather than rational beings. Lutes, an associate professor of English at Villanova University, argues that the rigid role of "girl reporter" had long-lasting ramifications for future generations of newswomen and also affected "fictional characterizations of female reporters" as well as "the authorial vision of women journalists who went on to write fiction" (p. 7). The scope of Lutes's book is impressive. She discusses the gendered exploits of stunt reporter Elizabeth "Nellie Bly" Cochran; the anti-lynching crusade of Ida B. Wells; the journalism of "sob sisters" Winifred Black, Dorothy Dix, and others; the depiction of female reporters in Henry James's novels and other fiction; and the careers of three journalists-turned-writers: Edna Ferber, Willa Cather, and Djuna Barnes.

Unfortunately, the breadth of *Front-Page Girls* also is its downfall: Lutes tackles too many topics during the course of the book and the focus is uneven. One explanation for this may be that two of the five chapters were published previously in journals. Lutes tries to connect the new and older work with an overarching discussion of "the

spectacle of the female journalist" and how the female journalist "forged a vibrant tradition of sensation journalism" that made its way from the front page to literature (p. 5). But this intriguing idea becomes difficult to sustain, particularly in the chapter about Wells. Ultimately, the chapters often read better as stand-alones rather than as part of a cohesive work.

In chapter 1, Lutes argues that female journalists working during the late 1800s and early 1900s redefined male-dominated reportage by using their bodies to obtain sensational stories. In turn, the women became the "heroines of their own stories" in these early versions of participatory journalism (p. 14). The chapter promises to follow "girl stunt reporters" on their assignments into doctor's offices, hospitals, and factories to demonstrate how the women were both "objects and agents" of publicity (p. 14). But the focus is almost exclusively on Bly's expose of the insane asylum on Blackwell's Island in New York, which was covered thoroughly in Brooke Kroeger's biography *Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist* (1994). Lutes notes that the successful Bly inspired a number of imitators, including *San Francisco Examiner* reporter Winifred Black; the *St. Louis Republican*'s Ada Patterson, dubbed "the Nellie Bly of the West"; and Patterson's Eastern counterpart, the *Boston Post*'s Caroline Lockhart, who was nicknamed "the Nellie Bly of Boston." A more complete examination of their articles would have enhanced the chapter and added support to Lutes's contention that Bly and the other stunt journalists acted with considerable agency. She writes that they "offered themselves as mediators between their readers and the city, deliberately embracing situations in which the female body was likely to be viewed as suspect, oversexed, out of control" (p. 36). In the process, Lutes suggests that the journalists "transform[ed] threatening urban terrain into a manageable landscape by inserting themselves into it" (p. 36). But it is doubtful the twenty-three-year-old Bly was thinking about social activism when she checked into a New York City boardinghouse to prepare for her ruse. More likely, Bly was excited and apprehensive about her "big break" at the *New York World*, especially since every editor along the city's Park Row had refused to hire her. A final point about this chapter: a short discussion about the "threatening urban terrain" would have been helpful for scene-setting and placing the newswomen in context, especially since Lutes points to the problems in New York City at the turn of the twentieth century and mentions women journalists working in Boston, St. Louis, and San Francisco.

Chapter 2 seems like an awkward attempt to include African American women journalists into a book that focuses on white reporters and novelists. Lutes devotes most of the discussion to Ida B. Wells, who has been the subject of countless journal articles and books since her autobiography *A Crusade for Justice* was first published in 1970. Lutes acknowledges that Bly and Wells had nothing in common, apart from achieving professional success in the 1890s, so she argues that black women journalists used their bodies "not as sources of sensation,... but rather as vehicles for racial uplift" (p. 43). This is not a new theme, though Lutes correctly places Wells's eight-year anti-lynching crusade in the context of the post-Reconstruction growth of the black press and editors' support of the burgeoning careers of newswomen such as Victoria Earle Matthews, Alice McEwen, and Gertrude Bustill Mossell. This chapter seems even more like an "interloper," by the end of the book, when Lutes attempts to show how the evolving public image of (white) newswomen figured into novels such as James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881 and 1908). By the epilogue, the legacy of African American women journalists is overlooked altogether in Lutes's discussion of the "popular image of the female reporter" in movies and the HBO comedy *Sex and the City*.

In chapter 3, Lutes shifts her attention to a few of the "sob sisters" who covered the sensa-

tional 1907 trial of Harry Kendall Thaw, the rich playboy charged with murdering architect Stanford White in the rooftop restaurant of Madison Square Garden--the building White had designed sixteen years earlier. Winifred Black, Dorothy Dix, Nixola Greeley-Smith, and Ada Patterson were among the reporters who wrote about the trial for New York newspapers. Although women had covered other trials, including that of the alleged axe-murderer Lizzie Borden in 1893, Lutes argues that the murder case "gave white female reporters unprecedented visibility and new opportunities to cover serious news" (p. 65). On the other hand, she notes that their stories were supposed to reflect "the courtroom's emotional temperature" as well as their own feelings about covering such a salacious trial (p. 71). This chapter is the most thorough, with examples drawn from many of the stories the four women wrote for the *New York Evening Journal*, *New York American*, and other papers. We hear briefly, too, from other newswomen--Clara Morris, Beatrice Fairfax, Viola Rodgers, Annette Bradshaw--though Lutes could have made them more visible, or omitted them and focused additional attention on the women she introduces at the beginning of the chapter. Black and her colleagues are "plopped" into the courtroom without the benefit of background information; biographical details would have given the chapter more depth, especially since Lutes discusses the trial's key players at length. Ultimately, Lutes argues that the sob sisters, like their stunt-reporter counterparts, became objects and agents of publicity in order to get their story. In the process, their articles helped the public make sense of a complicated trial involving class privilege and the sexual vulnerability and purity of white women.

In chapter 4, Lutes critiques the "reporter-heroine in fiction" and her resemblance to the sob sisters and manipulative stunt reporters who made public spectacles of themselves (p. 11). This chapter could have been a rich exploration of the depiction of fictional female journalists; unfortunately, Lutes attempts to discuss too much and ends up with an unsatisfying mix of examples. Her focus is on James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, but she does not provide sufficient plot summary or complete her analysis of the character Henrietta Stackpole before jumping to other examples of fictionalized reporters. Lutes includes, among other things, brief paragraphs about Elizabeth Garver Jordan's *Tales of the City Room* (1898) and the 1899 bestseller *Gentleman from Indiana* by Booth Tarkington; a summary of Miriam Michelson's *A Yellow Journalist* (1905); and a misplaced section about Jordan, who covered the 1893 trial of Lizzie Borden and then wrote a short story about a newswoman for *Cosmopolitan*. More interesting, topical, and informative than the lengthy discussion of Stackpole might have been an analysis of female characters doing stunt journalism (such as "Rhoda" in *A Yellow Journalist* and "Edna" in Jack London's "Amateur Night" [1906]). Or, since Lutes cites books by male and female writers, it might have been fascinating to see whether gender affected treatment of the reporter-heroine, or whether the body of the fictional journalist was uniformly portrayed as the "catchall receptacle of public feeling, public interest, and public passion" (p. 97). A final sticking point for this reviewer is that James's female character, Stackpole, who was "in Europe" to write a series of letters for the *New York Interviewer*, does not live up to her billing as "one of American fiction's most vivid images of the female reporter" (p. 94). Because Stackpole does not actually "do" journalism, unlike the characters in the other novels and short stories mentioned, Lutes's discussion of the character focuses on her personality rather than her profession. Consequently, it is difficult to become swept up in the argument that Stackpole represents the "changing position of newspaperwomen in American culture" (p. 95).

The final chapter offers brief biographical sketches of three journalists-turned-writers: Edna Ferber, Willa Cather, and Djuna Barnes. Lutes argues that the "unlikely threesome" illustrate the

"depth and complexity of newswomen's impact on American fiction" (p. 119). In particular, she suggests that "skepticism about the value of women's journalism" ultimately shaped how the writers viewed their careers and the subjects they explored in their novels (p. 120). Ferber was proud of her "cub reporting days," notes Lutes, and used her on-the-job training to hone observational skills that would be put to good use in novels such as ***Showboat*** (1926), ***Giant*** (1952), and the Pulitzer Prize-winning ***So Big*** (1924) (p. 127). Cather, on the other hand, was adamant that "journalism [was] irrelevant to serious art" and her career remains largely a mystery (p. 135). Lutes argues that her "rejection of journalism" was in keeping with her "resistance to America's emerging mass-market culture"--a theme that appeared in ***The Troll Garden*** (1905) and "Coming, Aphrodite!" (1920) (p. 139). Djuna Barnes also was ambivalent about her career, calling her reporting "rubbish" (p. 148). Nevertheless, she freelanced for newspapers in New York City in the 1910s and 1920s before moving to Paris to write for ***McCall's*** and ***Theatre Guild***. By 1931, she had retired from journalism and turned her attention to literary work. For journalism historians, the section on Barnes's career may be the most interesting. Lutes notes that "her flamboyant career ... rivaled" Bly's, even though stunt journalism had passed its prime two decades earlier (p. 145). Barnes wrote about the trivial, such as interviewing a caged gorilla, and the unimaginable: force-feeding. Lutes devotes six pages to a discussion of this stunt, which was inspired by the news that British suffragettes staging hunger strikes in jail were being forcibly fed. The lengthy examination is fascinating, but eclipses the sections on Cather and Ferber. It might have been better to consider Barnes's career in chapter 1, when Lutes explores Bly's imitators and the legacy of stunt journalism. Overall, this chapter offers an interesting analysis of the themes that Cather, Ferber, and Barnes tackled in their literary works, and Lutes does a good job illustrating the ways in which the journalists-turned-writers considered "the newspaperwoman's legacy of public embodiment" in their literature (p. 120).

In the brief epilogue, Lutes suggests that the "same qualities that relegated newspaperwomen to the margins of literary history" also have informed the depiction of female journalists in films ranging from the 1940 classic ***His Girl Friday*** to the recent ***The Life of David Gale*** (2003) (p. 161). Reporter-heroines "have been celebrated and mocked, rewarded and punished" in movies that poke fun at the "sentiment and spectacle" that has been thought to be "women's journalism" (pp. 161, 162). Lutes suggests that numerous films since ***His Girl Friday*** have perpetuated stereotypes of newswomen and "kept alive the sensational legacy of the stunt reporters and the sob sisters" (p. 164). She points to Renee Zellweger's portrayal of the bumbling Bridget Jones (2001, 2004) as proof of the mythical status of the girl reporter who will do anything for a story even as she seeks a husband and the "security" of marriage. But Lutes believes the most compelling example of the fusion of sexuality/journalism/public embodiment can be found in the now-cancelled HBO comedy "Sex and the City," which has been discussed at scholarly conferences and in the popular press. When the columnist Carrie Bradshaw "transform[ed] her life into a kind of stunt," notes Lutes, she abandoned any chance of claiming "authorial persona" as a "postfeminst." Instead, the character became both an agent and object of publicity not unlike Elizabeth "Nellie Bly" Cochran and the other stunt journalists of a century ago (p. 165). As professors who teach journalism history are wont to tell their students, the more things change, the more they--apparently--stay the same.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory

Citation: Kimberley Mangun. Review of Lutes, Jean Marie. *Front-Page Girls: Women Journalists in American Culture and Fiction, 1880-1930.* Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. April, 2007.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13087