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Jonathan Richards | 0 comments

In *Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Pop Culture*, authors Matthew C. Ehrlich and Joe Saltzman have done a painstakingly thorough job of marshaling, assembling, organizing, and setting down in print the vast amount of material that makes up our popular culture's representation of journalism and the men and women who commit it. And there's no question about it, the press has been a favorite subject of movies, television, and literature for about as long as the first two of those have been around.

The authors approach their

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pop-culture subject in a sober, scholarly fashion. It comes as no surprise to discover that they are both university professors. This treatise is stuffed like a Strasbourg goose with footnotes, quotes, and references. “Scholars have often pointed to the affinity

between history and popular culture,” they write. “In 1966 Russel B. Nye argued that ‘history and literature are assuredly branches of the same tree,’ adding that one could not completely grasp what nineteenth-century New York City was like without the novels of Stephen Crane and Edith Wharton.”

The subject matter holds plenty of interest for readers drawn to the popular media, and that’s a lot of us; that’s why it’s called the popular media. But the presentation here can get a little stiff, like bebop played by a chamber group. Still, the rewards are there to be taken, and you can mine them to fill out your Netflix queue with journalism titles from *Absence of Malice* to *The Year of Living Dangerously* (there were no Zs).

The authors take us back to the beginnings. “The birth of modern journalism,” they write, “is vividly evoked by the 1952 film *Park Row*, written, directed, and produced by Samuel Fuller.” (You won’t find that on Netflix, but Amazon’s got it.) And they give a lot of time to the Ben Hecht/Charles MacArthur classic *The Front Page*, a fast-paced satire of the news game that started as a play and has had several movie incarnations, including the great Howard Hawks adaptation, *His Girl Friday*, with Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell.

The crux of this book is revealed in its title, and the authors examine the good, the bad, and the ugly depictions of journalists in the popular media. Much of that is fiction, like Walter Burns in *His Girl Friday*, who combines the good and the bad into one charming, bullying rascal. Journalists are categorized as “official” and “outlaw” types, the former standing for the press establishment’s view of itself as having a “commitment toward ‘sound reasoning and judgment’ in serving the greater good,” while the “outlaws” are shown as “living by their own code of conduct and thumbing their noses at polite society and authority.”

Journalism’s heroes and villains in the movies are often drawn from life. Watergate busters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein are lionized in *All the President’s Men*, and Edward R. Murrow is remembered with reverence in *Good Night, and Good Luck*; but Stephen Glass, disgraced and fired for fabricating stories for *The New Republic* magazine, is disgraced again on film in *Shattered Glass*. On the other hand, Judith Miller, whose *New York Times* reporting managed the double whammy of outing former CIA agent Valerie Plame and promoting the Iraq war with sketchily sourced stories of Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction, gets gentler treatment in the fictionalized *Nothing but the Truth*.

The granddaddy of thinly veiled portrayals of real-life journalism figures is “the most famous media owner in pop culture history, the Hearst-like publisher Charles Foster Kane in Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane*.” Kane is hero and scoundrel both. The young Kane “shows the energetic and ambitious side as he vows to use his paper to ‘see to it that the decent, hardworking people in this community aren’t robbed blind by a pack of money-mad pirates.’ The aging Kane shows the corrupt side.”

The ideal of journalistic objectivity is treated in Graham Greene’s 1955 novel *The Quiet American*. “Its protagonist Thomas Fowler is a



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middle-aged British reporter in Vietnam in the early 1950s. He harbors no illusions,” the authors write. “Fowler steadfastly refuses to take sides of any kind.” And when, finally, he does take a stand, it “does not seem to be rooted in any particular idealism.” When *The Quiet American* was Hollywoodized in 1958 by Joseph Mankiewicz, under a heavy studio hand of Cold War pressure, it “completely altered the novel’s ending,” and Greene angrily disavowed it as a betrayal of his anti-war message, saying “one could almost believe that the film was made deliberately to attack the book and the author.” A 2002 remake was faithful to Greene’s vision.

A section on futurism and sci-fi and the perspective they give to our view of the role of journalism today offers a fascinating example of the past predicting the future defining the present. In Isaac Asimov’s 1941 short story “Nightfall,” a journalist named Theremon 762 from the planet Lagash “strikingly resembles the cynical columnists on the planet Earth.” Asimov’s story deals with science deniers, and a Lagash scientist lashes out at Theremon: “You have led a vast newspaper campaign against the efforts of myself and my colleagues to organize the world against the menace which it is now too late to avert.” It’s a chilling forecast of a modern journalism that gives equal time to climate change deniers.

There’s a great deal to glean from this slim volume (it logs in at 256 pages, but everything after page 154 is appendix and notes). Its academic style hampers the going at first, but once you get deep enough into the riches of the subject matter, it ceases to be as much of a distraction. Still, it’s a little like a scholarly dissertation on sex: descriptive and even valuable, but it can’t touch the real thing.

As the authors say, a little wistfully, near the end, “We began this book by asking why scholars should study the image of the journalist in popular culture. We neglected to provide one important answer: it’s fun.” ◀

“Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture,” by Matthew C. Ehrlich and Joe Saltzman, was published in April by University of Illinois Press.

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