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Just as cops and lawyers and coaches and politicians complain about how they are treated in newspaper stories, journalists lament their treatment at the hands of fiction authors.

An inspection of six novels of newspapers or newspaper characters yielded some nuggets of reality, but these nuggets were hidden among the negative stereotypes, cliches and myths.

The most troubling aspect of these books is the attitude toward journalism conveyed by the authors. If fiction mirors society, there is little doubt the public distrusts the news media or that reporters are viewed as an arrogant pack feeding on society's ills.

THE INK TRUCK

Let's start with Bailey, the hero of The Ink Truck by Pulitzer Prize-winner William Kennedy—a 1969 novel that might find some sympathetic readers in Detroit, were it not for some incredible stretches of the author's license.

Bailey is a striking newspaper columnist from the old days, back when newspapers were gossip and crime sheets printed with hot lead, edited by pencil and patched together with glue. He drinks heavily and dallies with just about any female who happens his direction—except his shrew of a wife.

Bailey is a loyal friend to his compatriots, a small band of four strikers, whittled through buyoffs and attrition from the original force of more than a hundred. And he is obsessive in his Quixotic effort on behalf of the doomed-to-fail strike.

He perseveres through some wild escapades involving a clique of characters that would challenge the imagination of even the most ardent publisher-hating union supporter: a general manager who laces the drinks of his guests at a soiree, gypsies in cahoots with management to torture and kidnap strikers, sex-starved elderly women participating in newspaper-sponsored orgies, and a succession of Bailey beatings that would floor any legitimate heavy-weight boxer. In a last act of defiance, Bailey, who has been staging a final, one-man protest against the newspaper, slips beneath an ink trunk and drains it, bleeding the newspaper's lifeblood down the city streets. There likely is some symbolic meaning in that act, but it is lost in the grandiose epic of Bailey's trials.

THE LOST HONOR OF KATHARINA BLUM

You gotta love Bailey for his dog-like persistence and for his idealism—a trait common to the heroes of all these novels except Nobel prize-winner Heinrich Boll's 1974 indictment of journalism, The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum.

This eccentric work contains elements found in the other newspaper novels: sensationalism, inaccuracies, disdain for the reading public by journalists and a general distrust by the reading public of the press—call it a mutual disadmiration society.

But the central character of Boll's novel is not a newspaper reporter. It is a young woman whose life is upended—along with the lives of her friends—by the work of a hack reporter for an unprincipled European scandal sheet. Katharina Blum's undoing begins with a newspaper account of her romantic liaison with an on-the-run leftist revolutionary. The newspaper undertakes a campaign to ruin her reputation—and Boll leaves no doubt this is its purpose—using unreliable sources and unscrupulous reporting techniques (such as sneaking undercover into a hospital room to interview

Blum's dying mother) to paint Blum as a Communist-sympathizing slut who abandoned a loving husband and who left her mother to die in the hospital while she engaged in a tawdry fling with a common criminal.

Of course, none of this is true, and were it not for the fantastic and unbelievable abandonment of all journalistic principles by the newspaper and its reporter, we might be more appalled by the newspaper's shoddy, libelous work. But though Boll is guilty of overkill, Blum's melodramatic plight will engage readers unfamiliar with the journalistic abuses that Boll depicts to the extreme.

As it is, the reader is left to enjoy Blum's revenge—she shoots to death the newspaper reporter when he shows up at her apartment for an interview and tries to seduce her.

Just deserts, Boll would have us believe.

And after two novels filled with libel, sensationalism, lax morality, greedy, violence-prone publishers, and other human failings, newspapering is down in the score of the general reader's mind, 2-zip.

TRUST ME ON THIS

The idealistic reporter returns as the protagonist in Donald E. Westlake's Trust Me On This, a 1988 comedic skewering of sensational tabloid journalism.

Sara Joslyn, a young and beautiful—remember, this is tabloid journalism—victim of a daily newspaper downsizing, quickly learns what kind of publication her new weekly is when she tells her editor about a dead body she discovered on the roadside her first day on the job.

His only question: "On what series is he a regular?"

Sara quickly understands: This newspaper is not about government misconduct, state politics, school board meetings and budgets or elections. It is not even about the lowest denominator of most mainstream newspapers, crime. This newspaper's interests are celebrity, aliens and two-headed cows.

Rapidly, Sara discards all she has learned about truth, objectivity and fairness. She has entered a world similar to that of the newspaper in Boll's novel, where fantasy, lies and exaggeration lead to success and acclaim. And yes, she jumps into bed, first opportunity, with her editor. All of our heroes in this tour of newspaper fiction are libidinous souls, in search of truth and corruption and a frolic in the sack wherever they may find it.

Though that darned dead body on the side of the road bothers Sara from time to time, she learns some useful tabloid reporting techniques at this Florida weekly, where tape on the floor delineates offices (thank you, WKRP in Cincinnati), where the publisher's office actually is a huge elevator that can stop and pop open on any floor at any time, where reporters pose on the telephone as doctors or lawyers to obtain the quotes they seek, where the newsroom budget meetings consist of what movie star is sleeping with whom instead of how much over budget the new road project may be, where to a movie star in exchange for an exclusive interview—checkbook journalism at its finest—and where reporters storm a celebrity's island wedding on horseback, by helicopter and from the sea in an effort to get a photo exclusive.

Exaggeration? Yep. But, though Westlake's novel is not a serious treatment of journalism, it is a peek at newspapering's darker side, nonetheless—the side where reporters sell out all journalistic principles.

Score one more against the press.

CONTENTS UNDER PRESSURE

Novelist Edna Buchanan makes a strong pitch for idealism, truth and justice in her 1992 crime novel, Contents Under Pressure.

Buchanan's man-hungry cop-beat reporter, Britt Montero, is a half-Cuban feminist who stumbles upon a suspicious death when a star black football player and community activist dies while in police custody. The police say he died in a car crash eluding justice. Britt figures out, with some help from sources inside the department, that he was murdered by a gang of overzealous cops—and that the blame for this one is at the top of the force.

Along the way to solving the crime, Britt gives the reader a few small sidebars of social commentary. She spouts off about the joys of gun ownership, she philosophizes about the evils of the Castro regime that killed her Cuban, anti-Castro father, she frets over her failed relationship with her mother, and she beds a gorgeous police lieutenant who also happens to be a source. To her credit, she worries about how this coupling might affect her credibility. But, when the guy shows up with those bedroom eyes and muscular arms, ethical concerns move to the back seat—along with Britt and her lover.

Those diversions aside, the novel depicts a believable newsroom.

Buchanan, a Miami police-beat veteran, knows the territory. When she moves into newsroom politics, she writes convincingly of the lousy assignments that come from ladder-climbing editors who often don't understand the work involved in reporting and editing, or who have forgotten. Her carping about editors who hack copy and expunge its meaning is straight out of the newsroom.

It is when she moves off her beat, into the make-believe world of human relationships, that this novel suffers. Her protagonist's Cuban ancestry is not believable. The scenes involving her mother and boyfriend (she just hates the purse her mother buys for her, and she has little use for the cuckoo clock that is her boyfriend's Christmas present) seem forced.

Are reporters really this shallow? the reader must ask.

Nonetheless, score one for credibility with this novel, despite its character weaknesses. The newsroom and the streets, the reporter's belief in getting the story right, her zeal on behalf of accuracy and exposing the police department's corruption—all are authentic.

THE SHIPPING NEWS

Equally genuine is the world created by E. Annie Proulx in her Pulitzer Prize-winning The Shipping News.

Written in a lyrical style, this work invokes the cold, harsh climate of an economically depressed coastal town in Newfoundland, contrasting it with the warmth and comfort of family and friend relationships.

The novel's hero, Quoyle, is no hard-nosed journalist. He is an overweight, insecure widower and father of two who has regularly been fired from the only job he ever loved, covering community meetings for a small-town daily in New England. After the death of his father, Quoyle hooks up with a long-lost aunt and joins her in her trek to claim the long-abandoned family homestead in Newfoundland.

It is here that Quoyle, and the reader, enter the world of community journalism after Quoyle lands a job with a weekly newspaper that devotes most of its space to sex-abuse stories and car wrecks. The publisher's genius, one of the long-time reporters tells Quoyle, is understanding what the readers want and giving it to them—an apt description of a number of weekly and small-daily publishers.

Proulx's talent lies in characterization. While no real weekly or daily might have the reporters found on her weekly, the quirks and frailties of her characters humanize the newsroom and demonstrate the eccentricities that exist in any reporting corps. Besides Quoyle, who is put in charge of the weekly Page One auto wreck story and the shipping beat—reporting on the comings and goings of the ships in the nearby

harbor—the newspaper has a crime reporter who concentrates on sex-abuse stories (he was the victim of sex abuse as a child); a crony of the publisher, a former fisherman who grew up in the community and reports the social news and gossip, half of it libelous if this town only had a lawyer who recognized libel; and free-lance correspondents who provide the weekly restaurant reviews. The managing editor is a drunk who habitually rewrites the copy and routinely lets a few typos slip through—one of the newspaper's credos is that typos give it a unique identity.

But this novel is Quoyle's story. It is about finding success in a life that has known only failure until, at age 36, Quoyle finally does something right and produces a well-done feature on the shipping beat. The readers like the story, and so does the publisher's wife—a grain of truth here—so Quoyle gets a regular column as reward. And, his weekly car crash story assignment is expanded to include boating mishaps.

This is a coup for a man whose wife died in a car crash while driving to take up residence in a new state with her lover, who was the No. 2 son in his father's eyes, who has been unable to hold a job for any length of time.

One victory leads to another. The managing editor rewrites one of Quoyle's environmental columns dealing with the greed of oil companies and the danger of oil spills, transforming it into a pro-oil industry diatribe; the publisher orders the managing editor to run Quoyle's columns untouched. And, when the managing editor moves on, Quoyle is named the new managing editor; he immediately sets out to improve the news content, to eliminate the fake ads his predecessor had been running and to develop new talent. His newspaper successes mirror those of his personal life; he remarries to live happily ever after in Newfoundland.

Now this may not be every journalist's career goal—to end up as editor of a second-rate weekly on a frigid North Atlantic island. But Proulx's book, with its intense characterization and mythical, Norse-like atmosphere, creates a world where such a career climb is an achievement.

And, it presents a newsroom that represents the best and worst of this newfangled "community journalism" that editors and reporters struggle with in today's newsrooms—trying to provide what the readers want while continuing to provide the news the readers need and advertisers and publishers' wives enjoy. Crashes, shipping news, community gossip and regular restaurant reviews happen to be that mix for Proulx's small community.

List this one as a novel that not only is an upper but also offers realistic newspaper characters, even if a couple of them are losers. But, despite its accuracies—or perhaps because of them—this novel's portrayal of journalism does not instill confidence in the reader on behalf of truthful, fair and accurate reporting or of a newspaper's mission to adequately inform its readers.

THE PAPERBOY

Comes now the most compelling of the bunch, Pete Dexter's The Paperboy.

Published in 1995, this novel combines a thorough character study of a newspaper family—the father owns a small six-day daily in northern Florida; the oldest son is an investigative reporter at a big-city daily in Miami; the second son drives a delivery truck for his father's paper—with an authentic rendering of the ambitions and egos of a newsroom.

The plot is deceptively simple. The son, Ward Just, and his investigative reporting partner, Yardley Acheman, come to the father's home county to do a story on the murder conviction of Hillary Van Wetter, who appears to be innocent. Just is the thorough reporter, Acheman the superficial wordsmith—an accurate representation of a division that can be found in any big-city daily, where the legmen and beat reporters

gather the day's facts and routine information and the dazzling writers with their feature leads park on the front page.

Dexter sets down the mechanics of putting together an investigative piece. The reporting team digs through trial transcripts and crime records; they interview trial participants, including the defense attorney (and good friend of Just's publisher father); they visit the crime scene; they find an anonymous source who places the convicted man in another location, far away, the night of the murder. They publish their findings; the convict is freed; the Miami newspaper wins the Pulitzer Prize.

That is the surface story. The real story, though, is the behind-the-scenes stuff—the anonymous source that tweaks at the conscience of every good editor and reporter; the reporter who sleeps with a key source; the clash of egos whenever two creative people team up on a project; the cronyism that taints small-town, and even some big-town, newspapering; the snarls involved in any investigation (stonewalling government sources, uncooperative witnesses); and, reporters' own ghosts (Just's closet homosexuality, which interferes with the newspaper investigation at a key point).

Finally, there is every newspaper toiler's biggest dream undone by his or her most frightening scenario. Winning the Pulitzer Prize only to have it tainted by the revelation that the key anonymous source that pulled it all together cannot be found—may, in fact, have been made up.

Dexter puts it all together, plot and depth of character, in this book: failed family relationships; fame-driven egos; human miscalculation that can destroy a career; physical lust that can derail good work; a realistic portrait of the newsroom community.

But, while well-produced, the picture is not necessarily attractive. What begins as a study of idealism, the best of newspapering—Just has superior newspaper genes and education and all of the right intentions—ends in egos run amok, greed (the Pulitzer can do this to editors) and errors destroying it all.

Those who enjoy symbolism and metaphor in novels—and this novel has them—will see newspapering done in by inbreeding, cronyism and pride. They will see the suicide of Just as the self-destruction of American print journalism in its lust for prestige and power.

Despite the fine writing in the novel, this one goes up in the minus column as a not-pretty picture of American journalism.

It is the novel's narrator, the protagonist's younger brother—the least journalistic member of the family—who offers the work's most damning observation.

"No one who is touched personally by such a story," he says of a newspaper account of a college student who died from an overdose of booze, "and then watches a newspaper report it ever trusts newspapers the same way again."

That's the thing: Trust.

The primary commodity of a newspaper is truthful information. These novels deal with reporters and editors who withhold it to protect a friend or an advertiser, who offer it incomplete to win an award, who bend it for political purposes or for self-promotion, who define it trivially.

Though some of these fiction authors overstate the violence, sex and deceit that occur in the news business, their stories are about reporters, editors and publishers who abuse the people's trust—who cede their responsibility to provide full and accurate information.

That these violations occur in fiction does not mean they are fictitious occurrences. That such abuses appear in popular fiction should bother those who make their living in the world of nonfiction.

The characters of these novels are a sex-hungry, scandal-loving lot, and many of the situations are too fantastic to be believable. But despite this, editors and reporters

also know, from their telephone calls and letters to the editor, that the public is more likely to side with those who criticize the press, even in such make-believe settings. They also know from events in their communities and from reading their own newspapers that sometimes these characterizations are on the mark. That's what is most troubling.

Added material

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