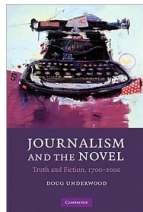



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JOURNALISM AND THE NOVEL: TRUTH AND FICTION, 1700-2000



By **Doug Underwood**
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Reviewed by **Jack Vespa** on 2009-09-01.

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The words *novel* and *romance* share a rich history. While used interchangeably during the eighteenth century to denote a long prose narrative, the former came to denote a realistic narrative of ordinary, everyday life, and the latter a narrative of heroic adventures and questing knights (such as the chivalric romances satirized by Don Quixote) or aristocratic protagonists performing extraordinary feats while caught up in great love affairs (such as the historical romances satirized by The Female Quixote). All this is well known. But for all the ostensible differences between the two types of narrative, realist novels can and do regularly feature romance discourse, as my students noticed in a course on the British Novel (1700-1900) that I taught recently. This apparent anomaly became a recurring motif in our ongoing conversation on narration and narrative. (We talked, for instance, about the ways in which realist writers reworked conventions of the romance mode, as when some of the "romantic Turns" of Lennox's *Arabella* in The Female Quixote become a means of female agency for her protagonist; it was a pleasure to see my students make these sorts of connections.) During that semester I remember thinking at one point that my students, several of whom major in journalism, might be fascinated by the intercourse of journalism and fiction, provided of course that I could help them see how certain novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries trafficked in the discourse of the journalism of their time, freely importing and/or reworking its conventions. My thinking was inspired by what I knew of the parallels between Defoe's novels and his work as an editor of a partisan newspaper, the Review, as well as by the "news/novels matrix" that Lennard Davis traces in his *Factual Fictions* (Columbia, 1983), which I was using in the course (along with Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel* [1957; reissued U of California, 2001]) as a source for student presentations. In his new book on fiction and journalism, Doug Underwood follows a long line of scholars including Watt, Davis, and others who have traced the connections between fiction and journalism. As Professor of Communication at the University of Washington, Underwood acknowledges this lineage in a book that, as he says, straddles the border of English Studies and Journalism. A capacious interdisciplinary primer of "journalist-literary figures" from the eighteenth century to the present day, this book thoroughly synthesizes scholarship drawn alike from English Studies and Journalism-on the myriad writers who have worked as both journalists and novelists. Though Underwood's strongly biographical emphasis may leave specialists in literature feeling undernourished, students and general readers will find much to admire about the book.

Early on, Underwood notes that scholars of literature and scholars of journalism frequently treat journalistic-literary figures from incompatible perspectives. Less mindful than literature scholars of the postmodern condition, journalism scholars are less inclined to see the gap between any fact/phenomenon and what purports to represent it: signs, language, or interpretation (12). Underwood strives for a more "hybrid form of scholarship that mirrors that hybrid nature of much journalistically influenced literature" (13), and to sidestep potential conflicts over critical or theoretical terminology, he shrewdly employs such terms as "journalist-literary figure" and "journalistic literature." His introduction makes this promise:

I will be advancing three major conclusions from my reading of the journalist-literary figures that I have identified as having crucially influenced the literary heritage in the US and the British Isles. First, I will be contending that

journalists and journalistic values have played critically important roles in the creation of the British and American literary canon, and I will describe the values and the experiences these writers gained from journalism and show that they played a vital part in the development of their literary visions. Second, I will be arguing that the field of journalism deserves more recognition for its contribution to the literary tradition in the broadest of contexts. Third, I will be examining why journalism's influence upon the fictional and literary writing tradition is not better understood, and why it is that many of these well-known journalist-literary figures themselves didn't always acknowledge their debt to the profession that helped to shape their writing so powerfully. (13-14)

In doing all of this, Underwood puts more stress on "biographical details" than literary specialists in the English novel have recently done. Biography, he contends, can help to explain the writer's historical moment, and as we have learned from scholars working in Media Studies and American studies, each of these moments has its unique cultural and sociological characteristics. Underwood finds biography particularly helpful to those engaged in discovering "the influence that journalism has had upon these writers' lives-in finding similarities in their careers and their works of art, in examining how the experiences they shared in journalism influenced their views of literary and journalistic developments, and in noting the connections between their literary viewpoints and the cultural currents of their age" (14). Covering several "epochs" over the course of three centuries, Underwood tracks the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century, the "Age of Periodicals" in the early nineteenth century, the "heyday" of literary realism followed by literary naturalism (from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries), the "Age of Newspapers" (from the late nineteenth century through World War I), the decades spanning the 1920s-1940s (typified by cosmopolitan/disillusioned/expatriate writers in the US or abroad), and the rise of the "new journalism" in 1960s and 1970s. Underwood documents these periods in a valuable appendix of over 300 significant journalist-literary figures.

His major conclusions about the various epochs he defines turn upon the work of diverse scholars in English Studies and Journalism. Working chiefly as "a synthesizer and interpreter" in order to make specialized scholarship along with biography available to broader audiences (28), he deftly explains the intersections of journalism and literature in the lives of major journalistic-literary figures ranging from Defoe and Dickens to Didion (including figures whose experience in journalism is seldom remarked upon, too, such as Wallace Stevens). The result is an engaging collection of cameos. In his treatment of Dickens, for instance, Underwood skillfully blends extant scholarship and biographical detail to show how Dickens' early political reporting and sketch work for London periodicals nurtured the investigative and entrepreneurial skills that drove Dickens's literary career. His reporting experience not only gave him the material for some of his most memorable characters but also bred the skills with which he made his novels thrive-through serial plotting and publication (65-68). Not surprisingly, given Underwood's "synthetic" approach to his task, he is most informative with writers who have been studied extensively.

Nevertheless, Underwood's strongly biographical method is a mixed blessing that sometimes leads to overgeneralization, if not oversight. In his account of Fielding, for instance, Underwood adroitly shows how Fielding honed his satirical skills in moving from drama through journalism to fiction. But he overstates his case when he claims that Fielding's novels were an "outgrowth" of his time as a partisan journalist, that "the years he spent perfecting his style as an essayist, polemicist, and moral critic helped pave the way for the authorial voice of his novels" (54-55). Though Underwood aptly states that "[Fielding] saw his novels, his plays, and his anonymously written political journalism as seamlessly linked" (55), he fails in the end to reconcile Fielding's formative experiences in the theatre with the novelist's "authorial voice." Fielding's beginnings as a dramatist mark the beginning of a satirical bent that persists throughout his writing career. If anything, Fielding's time in the theatre inflects the art of his fiction, where-as George Eliot's narrator observes in *Middlemarch*- "he seems to bring his arm-chair to the proscenium and chat with us in all the lusty ease of his fine English" (141), staging the follies, quirks, and vices of his characters accordingly. Fielding brings to his novels the mind of a satirical playwright. In any event, putting his novels into play with his contributions to *The Champion* (ed. W.B. Coley, Wesleyan, 2003) would have strengthened the case for the sort of "authorial voice" that Underwood ascribes to Fielding. Likewise, Underwood's cameo of Eliot hardly probes her journalistic experience. It simply sketches the work she did as an editor and journalist-in association with such men as John Chapman and George Henry Lewes-before re-inventing herself as a novelist. How did her editing and writing for the *Westminster Review* or the *Leader* shape her literary vision? Neglect of questions such as this expose the limits of Underwood's biographical method.

In supplementing his syntheses of scholarship with biographical detail rather than close reading of primary texts, Underwood aims for an audience beyond specialists in literature, and anyone with a casual interest in the connections

between fiction and journalism will find his book useful and informative. At his best, moreover, he juxtaposes works of fiction with relevant journalistic pieces in order to show how the fiction grew out of journalistic experience. To show, for instance, how Hemingway's fictive prose trades in some of the material and verbal fluency that he developed as a journalist, Underwood reads a bullfight passage from *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) beside an essay titled "Pamplona in July" (1923) written for the *Toronto Star* magazine. While "one can see the incipient outline of the fictional version in the original *Star* article," he writes, "the novel's prose has a finer, more flowing verisimilitude, not the least because Hemingway's writing is more confident and refined-and because, it is clear, he was reaching for a higher literary effect in the writing of his fictional version" (146-48). Though his critical terms here are rather generalized, Underwood's comparative reading of specific texts tells us more about the relation between journalism and literature than his biographical sketches do.

That said, Underwood's book is timely. Its capacious sweep, its systematic synthesizing of secondary scholarship, and its valuable appendix make the book useful if not vital. Non-specialist readers in particular will find much to like about it. Underwood's anecdotal flair, coupled with his conversational prose style, is congenial and informative.

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