

Book Review: A New Generation of Great Literary Journalists

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Next Wave: America's New Generation of Great Literary Journalists. Walt Harrington and Mike Sager, editors. The Sager Group, 2012. 370 pp. \$18.95 paper.

In the introduction to their anthology, *Next Wave: America's New Generation of Great Literary Journalists*, Walt Harrington and Mike Sager rightfully pay tribute to notable "New Journalists" of the 20th century. Authors such as John Hersey, Lillian Ross, Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, John McPhee, Susan Orlean, Tracy Kidder, and Jane Kramer are praised for combining in-depth reporting with compelling storytelling: "In their hands, the craft of journalism is raised to art" (p. xi).

Next Wave showcases the work of a new generation of literary journalists—19 writers under 40 whose articles have been published in major magazines and newspapers, including *Esquire*, *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, *Rolling Stone*, *Sports Illustrated*, *ESPN the Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and the *St. Petersburg Times*. These long-form stories range from extended character studies and issue-driven pieces to nonfiction narratives and true-crime dramas. Although the reportorial skills of these writers are evident throughout the anthology, there are many shortcomings as well. As those of us who teach literary journalism courses can appreciate and we practitioners know all too well, literary journalism is a challenging genre, requiring a rare mix of talent and technique.

I believe successful narrative nonfiction comprises journalistic credibility and artistic merit. To be called literary journalism, the writing must inform and enlighten. The reporting must be transparent, verifiable, and ethical. The use of narrative skills should be compelling but not clichéd. A metaphor I incorporate in my classes is that a work of literary journalism should be both a window and a mirror. It should provide the reader with a greater understanding of a person, place, subculture, event, or issue, and it should rise to the level of art by producing an emotional, introspective experience. The bar is set very high for aspiring authors wishing to be the next Capote, Didion, or Mailer.

Harrington and Sager should be commended for attempting to identify the next generation of "New Journalists." Although these are "young" writers, most have established

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their credentials as traditional reporters, and this is illustrated by their ability for detailed information gathering, extensive interviewing, and secondary research. However, often their storytelling skills fall short, as an accumulation of facts, quotes, and detailed exposition dominates these pages.

To illustrate, “Tonight on Dateline This Man Will Die” by Luke Dittrich, “A Brevard Woman Disappeared” by Michael Kruse, and “The Boy Who Died of Football” by Thomas Lake include impressive saturation reporting and credible sourcing. But effective narrative structure is missing, as is compelling characterization. Sometimes, there are confusing, unexplained tense shifts or distracting point-of-view insertions (e.g., “You should know a few things about Lois...”) (p. 171). Certainly, there are well-crafted passages but also frequent instances of overstatement, generalization, and “telling, not showing.”

Of greater concern are stories by writers whose work is dominated by hyperbole, indulgent first-person perspective, and questionable journalistic techniques, such as scene reconstruction. “Hannah and Andrew” by Pamela Colloff and “The Last Days of Tony Harris” by Wright Thompson focus on true crime. While striving to be engaging, each story fails to achieve artistic merit. “The Tragedy of Britney Spears” by Vanessa Grigoriadis is a celebrity profile that settles for trite observations and commentary in place of original writing that could provide true characterization instead of caricature.

By contrast, Todd C. Frankel’s “The \$1 Million Bill” is a remarkable examination of an ordinary person confronted by an extraordinary situation. Frankel utilizes sensory details and a sympathetic protagonist to build dramatic tension (e.g., “That was the last tangible proof of his dream”) (p. 67). The reader follows the man’s “quixotic quest” through twists and turns, culminating in a hopeful ending for a life transformed.

Another successful article in the *Next Wave* anthology is “Either/Or” by Ariel Levy. Like Frankel, Levy opens her fascinating chronicle with dramatic complication and riveting sensory details. Her story is set in the bleak countryside of South Africa, “where few people have cars or running water or opportunities for greatness” (p. 196). Levy combines impressive historical and scientific research on gender, genes, and sexuality to put a face on an issue by portraying the exceptional and controversial tale of a world-class woman runner who endured a life of poverty and prejudice. The author is a trustworthy narrator, leading the reader through an uncertain future for her protagonist (“There’s another scenario, in which Semenya’s story could become one of against-all-odds victory”) (p. 216). Levy ends her account poignantly with the main character’s own words: “Now I just have to walk away” (p. 217).

Other effective examples of literary journalism in the collection include “The Assassin in the Vineyard” by Maximillian Potter, “The Final Furlong” by Seth Wickerham, and “Going Under” by Jason Zengerle. In each of these stories, the authors understand how to construct a narrative with a balance of exposition, description, characterization, and dramatization. They enhance mystery and avoid melodrama by appreciating the adage that

“less is more.” Their immersion journalism pays dividends by engaging the reader’s interest and emotions.

A star that shines the brightest in the *Next Wave* is “Lost in the Waves” by Justin Heckert, a riveting chronicle that reconstructs the life and death drama of a night at sea for a father and his young autistic son. Heckert, who was “weaned on fiction” and cites Stephen Crane’s story “The Open Boat” as inspiration, deftly incorporates reportorial and fictional techniques. He opens his article in media res with the haunting words: “The ocean at night is a terrible dream.” A father has been floating on his back for hours in the darkness miles from shore. To try and save his panicked and disoriented son, he had set him adrift alone, hoping the waves could take him to shore. But now all seemed lost: “... he had been responsible for his son’s death” (p. 103). Heckert extends the complication for several harrowing paragraphs until he foreshadows the uplifting ending with “The ocean at dawn is a wonderful dream.”

In closing, *Next Wave* provides students of literary journalism, both young and old, with an eclectic assortment of subjects, writing styles, and narrative experiences. Not all qualify as literary journalism, if, as noted earlier, the dual, demanding requirements of journalistic credibility and artistic merit must apply. But this anthology is valuable for revealing the talents of several authors who are bound to make significant contributions to the genre in future years and, quite possibly, join the ranks of their notable predecessors.