

Book Review: A New Admiration for the Profile

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Profile Pieces: Journalism and the 'Human Interest' Bias. Sue Joseph and Richard Lance Keeble. New York: Routledge, 2016. 247 pp. \$148 hardcover.

In this collection of research from mostly UK scholars, the profile is considered, challenged, and reframed. The result is a thorough examination of the story format we thought we knew. In their introduction, editors Sue Joseph (University of Technology Sydney) and Richard Lance Keeble (University of Lincoln UK) posit that not only has some of the best journalistic writing originated in the profile, but also that, “at its best, the profile can provide the journalist with a range of complex ethical and literary challenges” (p. 3). The volume explores these challenges in a comprehensive and readable way.

In American journalism, the profile’s origin story is rooted in the editorial offices of *The New Yorker*, founded in 1925. Several scholars in *Profile Pieces*, however, trace its history back much further. Grant Hannis (Massey University, New Zealand) suggests that Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* are, in essence, profiles of fictional pilgrims; he makes an even more compelling case for Boswell’s 1791 *Life of Samuel Johnson* as an early profile. The book is not a simple biography, Hannis writes, because “in large part we experience, through Boswell, what it is like to be in the presence of Samuel Johnson” (p. 25). Boswell spent a considerable amount of time with Johnson, posed questions to him, quoted him extensively, and often included descriptions of Johnson’s appearance and environment. Finally, he talked to others who knew Johnson, and included their words in *Life*. This combination of research, interviewing, and observing is standard practice for journalists writing profiles today.

The British poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge used similar practices to write what Nikki Hessell (Victoria University, New Zealand) identifies as “the first political profile” (p. 30) in an English newspaper: a 3,000-word piece about then-Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger. Coleridge plumbed Pitt’s life for anecdotes, and then originated what has become a political-journalism trope: “the storyline of the ambitious father and the predestination of fame” (p. 33) Hessell links Coleridge’s approach to more contemporary profiles of political figures, such as Rand Paul, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. Coleridge’s profile, Hessell concludes, “modelled a host of features that have become normalised in modern journalism” (p. 40).

In the introduction to *Profile Pieces* and repeated throughout the book is the observation that the bulk of profiles are written by men about other, often famous men. Canadian scholar Bruce Gillespie’s chapter “Edna Staebler and the Lives of Women” is a refreshing introduction to a little-known, at least in the U.S., Canadian journalist writing in the mid-20th century. Gillespie (Wilfrid Laurier University) writes a compelling, if brief, biography of Staebler’s persistent attempts at a writing career and the story that made her: a profile of a spearfishing expedition in Nova Scotia. In “Duelists of the Deep,” published in

Maclean's in July 1948, Staebler utilized literary techniques, such as rich detail and dialogue, to capture everyday people. On her next assignment, about a reserved Mennonite community, Staebler moved in with a family and joined in their daily home and social life, unwittingly practicing participatory journalism. Staebler's spent most of her reporting her time with, and therefore wrote about, women and their work. "She is able to make them come across as fully-realised subjects, not women in need of saving or saints suffering in silence" (p. 97), Gillespie writes.

For lovers of good writing, both the chapter on Staebler and Jane Chapman's argument for the international appeal of Arundhati Roy benefit from generous quoting of published profiles bylined by their subjects. Nick Nuttall's enthusiastic examination of George Plimpton's participatory journalism adds to the array of excerpts from classic profile pieces.

After sections on profiling communities, countries, and movements, and another one about profiles in sports journalism, the volume closes on a sober, but thoughtful, section: "Profiling and the Trauma Narrative." Editor Sue Joseph makes a powerful argument for trauma narrative as advocacy by drawing on performance theory. Subjects sharing a trauma narrative with a journalist do not perform in the same way as more conventional subjects, she writes, but adds that the journalists' performance in response "becomes one of ethical impulse and care, compelled by the nature of the story telling" (p. 213). Joseph warns of the ethical implications of further traumatizing subjects in the reporting of such profiles. She envisions of spectrum of profile interviews: on one side are subjects, selling versions of themselves, and hoping the journalists will view them as truth; on the other is the raw transparency of the trauma narrative "because reliving or retelling trauma can have a deep psychic affect, on both the interviewee and the interviewer" (p. 216). The ethical conundrum for the journalist, of course, is that "the more upset or re-traumatized the subject of a trauma narrative becomes, the more evocative the telling becomes" (p. 220).

The 15 chapters in this book—not all of them detailed in this limited review—create a new respect for the profile, a story form so popular it risks becoming quotidian. The historical perspective emboldens the notion that journalistic profiles sit somewhere between novels and biographies—what *New Yorker* writer John McPhee has dubbed literature of fact. The chapters that probe the writings of individual journalists offer both delightful reminders and fresh voices to be further discovered. Several scholars consider the ethics of profiles, a subject broad enough for its own volume. This book may not be appropriate for an undergraduate text, but instructors will find many entry points for further discussion in the classroom.