The Battle between Journalism and Fiction:
Doug Underwood on Genre Bending Journalists and Literary History

Between the idea
And the reality . . .
Falls the shadow.
T.S. Eliot “The Hollow Men”

It is almost the fifty year anniversary of the publication of In Cold Blood, Truman Capote’s “immaculately factual” novel that set off a still simmering controversy about whether the tactics of journalism and novel-writing can be merged into so-called “non-fictional” narrative. Capote claimed an original status for his book -- and In Cold Blood became the centerpiece for the “New Journalism” movement of the 1960s and 1970s. However, as successful as Capote was with his “non-fictional novel,” his historical perspective was a limited one. Since the early eighteenth century days of novelist and newspaper editor Daniel Defoe, the relationship of the fields of journalism and literature has been interwoven and often tension-filled. For more than a century after Defoe, fact and fiction were often inseparable in journalism, but that changed as the industrialized press of the late 1800s adopted rigid formulas for fact finding and reporting.

Since the commercialization of newspapers, many literary writers with a background in journalism, from Mark Twain and Willa Cather and Ernest Hemingway to Capote and Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson, have wrestled with the restrictions imposed by the methods of the news organizations where they worked. And they typically came to believe that they could explore the deeper truths of reality through fiction or “artistic” non-fiction in a way that was not possible in conventional journalism.

In 1973, Wolfe, who along with Capote is often credited for launching the “New Journalism” movement, claimed that modern novelists had abandoned realism and opened the field to the practitioners of “New Journalism.” This form of non-fictional writing about the real world – which Wolfe said had superseded the fictional novel in literary importance – spurned the writing formulas of traditional journalism and employed the narrative devices of fiction to convey social truths and a deeper human reality.
Journalism professor and media historian Doug Underwood, a former political reporter, examines the relationship of journalism, literature and the “New Journalism” in his new book, *The Undeclared War between Journalism and Fiction: Journalists as Genre Benders in Literary History* (Palgrave Macmillan). In this multidisciplinary study, Prof. Underwood stresses the "competition" between "new" or "literary" journalists and contemporary novelists for the hearts of the lovers of realistic literature. He focuses particularly upon the efforts of "genre straddling" journalists such as Wolfe, Thompson, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, and others to break into the literary canon by arguing that creative or narrative non-fiction should be taken as seriously by scholars as realistic fiction.

Prof. Underwood also explores whether the “new” or “literary” journalism produced since the 1960s ranks with the great novels by such journalists-turned-fiction-writers as Twain, Cather, and Hemingway, who broke with their former colleagues in advocating for fiction writing as the place to convey the most authentic picture of the human condition.

Reviewers have praised Prof. Underwood’s innovative study of journalism and literature. For example, English professor Karen Roggenkamp commented: "Doug Underwood offers a fresh, accessible, and far-reaching investigation of the tensions between fact and fiction, reportage and novel-writing. In its exploration of how journalists - both in and out of the newsroom - engaged a 'story-telling impulse' in their quest for meaningful prose, *The Undeclared War between Journalism and Fiction* stands as an important contribution to the interconnected studies of journalistic and literary histories."

Prof. Underwood began teaching with University of Washington communication faculty in 1987 after a thirteen-year career as a political journalist and investigative reporter. He was the Olympia legislative bureau chief and the chief political writer for *The Seattle Times* (1981-1987); a congressional correspondent and environmental specialist in the Gannett News Service’s Washington, D.C., bureau (1976-1981); and a labor and government reporter for the Lansing (Mich.) *State Journal* (1974-1976). Prof. Underwood teaches courses in media ethics, media and religion, journalism and literature, and media management and economics.
He has written numerous articles on media issues for popular and academic publications. His other books include *Chronicling Trauma* (2011); *Journalism and the Novel* (2008); *From Yahweh to Yahoo!* (2002); and *When MBAs Rule the Newsroom* (1993).

Prof. Underwood recently talked about journalism and fiction at a café in Seattle’s University District.

Robin Lindley: **How would you describe your new book, *The Undeclared War between Journalism and Fiction*, to a reader with a general background?**

Prof. Doug Underwood: That’s always a challenge for a book that comes out of a scholarly world, but I’ve tried to write this in a way that may appeal to fans of literary journalism and realistic fiction.

The book is about people who have written both fiction and non-fiction, which has been in competition in the Western writing world since the beginnings of the modern newspaper and the modern novel in the eighteenth century. Take someone like Daniel Defoe, a pioneer in both those fields. He ran one of the first modern-type newspapers, *The London Review*, for ten years in the early 1700s. He was forced to retire from that because his political enemies gained power and, in those times, journalists took subsidies from political factions. Defoe spent the last ten years of his life writing what we’d call today the first fictional novels in English literature.

So Defoe straddled the fields of journalism—or what we now identify as non-fiction—and the novel. Ever since Defoe, there’s been tension and controversy about the best way to present an honest picture of the world. What’s real? What factual? What’s truthful?

I’ve been interested in these questions from the time I was an English literature major in college, and particularly so since I became a journalist.

From my early days, I loved realistic novels. But as a journalist, I practiced non-fiction writing. I always sensed a tension there. There were things that I could and couldn’t say in journalism; things that I felt novelists could say that journalists couldn’t say; things that seemed more truthful to me coming from fiction writers rather than journalists.
When I had a chance to leave journalism and join the academic world, I made that a focus of my research, and that’s what I’ve been writing about for the last few years.

Robin Lindley: Your book is virtually an encyclopedic study of journalism over the past half century, and particularly the “New Journalism” that arose in the sixties with what Norman Mailer labeled the “undeclared war” between fiction and journalism. How did that happen?

Prof. Doug Underwood: You asked how the book connects to regular people. There’s an enormous amount of conversation in our society today, particularly with the coming of the Internet, about how journalism professionals present the facts of the world to people. There’s a lot of debate about bias and where to find journalism you can trust. Scholars say there’s no such thing as objective or unbiased journalism. This has become fascinating to regular people. Am I going to read The New York Times or my favorite blogger? Am I going to watch FOX News or MSNBC?

Those tensions began to show up a lot in our culture in the 1960s and the 1970s, and they took the form of the New Journalism, which Mailer became part of when he started applying novelistic techniques to the writing of non-fiction. Wolfe gave the name to the New Journalism. Now, it wasn’t a new term. Matthew Arnold had used it in describing the sensationalistic journalism of the nineteenth century British press, and it was used to describe Pulitzer and Hearst in the period of what we now call “yellow journalism.”

Wolfe was talking about a form of journalism that connected to the anti-establishment mood of those times. You had the frustrations of the Vietnam War and the sense of people who opposed the war that the conventional press was not as free and independent as people were looking for when it supported the war and didn’t probe government to get to the truth. If you were alive then, you’ll recall the underground journalism and alternative newspapers like the Seattle Weekly that were formed as an alternative to the mainstream press.

In those days before the Internet, everybody got their television news from three national networks. The news on those networks was all the same. The major national papers
were dominant, but even more so, local papers such as the *Seattle Times* were dominant. You couldn’t get *The New York Times* in most newsstands in Seattle.

The New Journalism grew out of this countercultural period of protest. It was rooted in a notion that we’re still fascinated with today and dates back to Defoe’s time: How do writers express the truth? Where can we find a truthful picture of the world? Where can we find facts? Where’s the line between facts and fiction?

Mailer labeled this tension between fiction and journalism “an undeclared war.” Most writers who deal with realistic writing experience this all of the time.

Robin Lindley: The New Journalism applies the techniques of narrative fiction to journalism’s methods of fact finding. Many of the writers you discuss—from Emerson to Hunter S. Thompson—have said in effect that the most profound truths cannot be found in journalism, but rather in fiction or art.

Prof. Doug Underwood: Yes. I try to connect this with the history and evolution of modern journalism.

We know that in the early days of the “party press” in the United States, newspapers did not present themselves as neutral. They took subsidies from politicians, and parties supported their own papers.

That changed with the coming of the industrialized newspaper in the early nineteenth century. Captains of industry came along and realized that they wanted to sell as many newspapers as they could to as many people as possible. That happened as the technology evolved, and the steam-powered printing press allowed daily production of newspapers. Soon the news became an industrialized commodity. The idea that you could have a neutral form of news was created by people who wanted to sell as many newspapers as possible. They didn’t want to sell papers to people of only one party.

This also happened when science and technology were becoming ascendant. Journalists thought it sounded scientific to say the news should be objective, and that grew to be the standard model for journalism.
The industrialized papers developed a methodology for what they were willing to call “facts.” Facts were things that other people said or did or what the journalist experienced first-hand or dug out of documents. Anything outside of that was considered outside the domain of objective journalism. This was done for reasons of self-interest: protection against libel and to align journalism with the legal system, which doesn’t allow into evidence speculation about what other people are feeling or thinking.

Particularly in the twentieth century, but also in the nineteenth century, we developed this difference where, if you wanted to write about what people were feeling and thinking—and where thoughts and feelings might not mesh with words and actions—you did it in the world of fiction. You created imaginative characters where you could present your perspective from inside the interior of another person.

As the novel developed in popularity during the nineteenth century, writers discovered that people really wanted to know what was going on inside people, not just what they say and do, but how they think and what they feel. People like Charles Dickens and William Thackeray who came out of journalism and went into novel writing were motivated to go beyond the formulas of journalism that limited them to describing only what others said and did.

By the time the new journalists came along in the 1960s, you had this strong division. You had fiction writers writing about the thoughts and feelings of imaginative characters and journalists writing about real people, but only what they said and did. The new journalists asked if there was a way to blend these two methods in order to make realistic writing reflect real people more deeply than conventional journalism allowed. And that’s the discussion: how do you do that? And that’s where the controversy comes from.

Robin Lindley: Hunter S. Thompson called his rather exaggerated writing “gonzo journalism.” What did he mean?

Prof. Doug Underwood: There are many variations of New Journalism. Mailer and Capote were novelists first, and they wanted to apply what they’d learned in fiction writing to journalism. Capote is considered to have launched the New Journalism with In Cold Blood, although Wolfe claims he was the first to use the term in this way. Wolfe worked at the old
New York Herald-Tribune where they were trying in their last days to find new writing formulas and give their journalists the freedom to expand beyond the conventional modes of journalistic expression.

There’s a spectrum of this kind of writing. Thompson had a very iconoclastic, subjective personal vision of life, and his writing is a lot of fun to read. The young people that I teach today often identify with his irreverence. His style was more like Twain’s. He was a crazy comic figure who was funny and irreverent. He became famous for his drug use and writing when he was high on drugs, and he captured the countercultural mood of that period.

Joan Didion came out of magazine journalism, and she writes in elegant, careful prose that minimizes her subjective voice but utilizes the stylistic richness of fiction. In the middle you have Wolfe, who is not that interested in telling you what he thinks about the world, like Thompson, but uses highly stylized embellishments and a hip prose style that reflect the craziness of those days, such as he did by going out on the bus with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters and writing about their antics in The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test.

So there’s a range of these writers. And part of what I write about is how a second generation of writers have come along and squeezed the anti-establishment flavor out of the New Journalism and turned it back into a more conventional enterprise, with very little of the Thompson style irreverence or Wolfe’s and Mailer’s spirit of experimentation. Maybe that’s because the world has changed and the sixties style world view is not as widely shared today.

Robin Lindley: James Agee said “Journalism is a form of lying.” And Twain said something similar. What do you think they were addressing?

Prof. Doug Underwood: Lots of writers refer to that, and that’s often what motivated them to leave conventional journalism. Twain, for example, referred to what we’d now call “lying by omission.” He wanted to write about the stoning of a Chinese man by a gang of Irish men for the San Francisco Morning Call. He was told the newspaper didn’t print those stories because it didn’t want to upset its Irish readers.

Or Erskine Caldwell, who started out at the Atlanta Journal, wanted to write about the time he arrived at the lynching of a black man as the body was being cut down. In language
that today would be considered very racist, he was told by an editor that the story was not news.

Other writers had experiences like that, as I describe in the book. They felt that, despite newspapers’ claims to be factual and objective, there were things that they couldn’t write about. These writers felt that [the newspapers] were not conveying the truth about the world.

They also were frustrated by the formulas that the industrialized newspapers developed for the proper way to cover stories. I experienced that myself as a journalist for daily newspapers for 13 years. There were fixed conventions for the coverage of the standard story. You couldn’t cover stories that went outside standard quotations from standard sources, and you kept the stories dry and abstract. That makes it very hard to write stories about the way things really affect people and in ways that touch readers in deep and meaningful ways.

The new journalists wanted to do something about this. For example, if you were going to write about the real stories behind the war in Afghanistan, you don’t want to go to the embassy and quote the usual suspects. You want to go and find out what it might be like to live in an Afghan village where drone missiles hit and really vividly describe the impact on real people. You would follow the model of Michael Herr who wrote about the Vietnam War and said that conventional journalism could no more explain this war than conventional weaponry could win it.

Robin Lindley: And Tim O’Brien wrote to the effect that “story truth is stronger than happening truth.” His book on Vietnam, The Things We Carried, isn’t clear about what is fact.

Prof. Doug Underwood: That’s a controversial book, and it takes you outside the New Journalism movement, but it connects to it in many ways. The book feels like a memoir but, about three quarters of the way through, O’Brien says, “By the way, this is fiction.” On the title page, he calls the book a novel. And yet, the point seems to be that his experiences in the war were so surrealistic that he lost touch with what was real and what was unreal. For many people involved in recent wars, they talk about their experiences like this, and that’s often a sign they’re dealing with trauma, with the way that our thoughts and feelings can influence how we experience reality.
When you’re dealing with that mindset, you go back to Ambrose Bierce in the Civil War. He said his stories may seem surrealistic to the reader, but to him they were real because that’s how he experienced things in battle. To a lot of people, that’s much more how the human mind and emotions work instead of the way it reads when experiences are abstracted and sanitized into the sort of formula—who, what, when, where and how—that you read in the conventional newspaper.

Lincoln Steffens, one of the great muckraker journalists, while he was the editor of the *New York Advertiser*, wanted his reporters to write from the perspective of how stories affected real people. For him, it was a philosophical, almost religious belief, that narrative stories touch people by going from the subject’s heart to the reader’s heart and reveal people so that they connect with each other as human beings. Many journalists who write long narratives, as well as many writers of realistic fiction, have operated in that spirit.

Literary journalists today are reform-oriented and challenge the way our institutional structures can work. Unfortunately, in my view, there’s been this trend to go back to more conventional definitions of fact and fiction. In the book, I complain that scholars and conventional journalists get too hung up on policing the fact-fiction divide. I argue that lots of great works, such as Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* or Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, are written on the borders of fact and fiction. Both those books were based upon real crimes with lots of reporting at their core, but Dreiser and Wright fictionalized the material slightly in order to make the stories more compelling. This, I would add, helped to elevate the books to the stature of real literature.

Some powerful New Journalism stories are written today about social and public issues in ways that Lincoln Steffens described. But I’m not sure a lot of them are as accomplished as literature as have been pieces by semi-fictional writers like Dreiser and Wright or in the older New Journalism of people like Capote and Mailer and Didion and Wolfe. They gave themselves a lot of latitude in their writing strategies and they had a lot of writing talent.

Many of today’s literary journalists aren’t as skilled writers from a literary point of view as that early generation. There are some exceptions. We have writers in the Northwest, for example, who write with an accomplished literary style. Tim Egan, a *New York Times* and
former Seattle P-I reporter, is one. I’d recommend his book of literary journalism, The Good Rain, to anyone. We also have Jim Lynch, a former Seattle Times reporter who now writes fiction. His The Highest Tide is a fine read. So there are new people with a journalistic background, including ones around here, who are producing really good work in both the non-fictional and semi-fictional arenas.

You have to remember a lot of regular journalists jumped on this bandwagon because they could write extended narratives. I take issue with some of my scholarly colleagues who have labeled all of that work literary journalism. I’d like to apply the word literary to people who have reached a higher standard.

Robin Lindley: **Many readers may not know that Dreiser worked as a journalist and was very frustrated in that role. You discuss his journalism career and include his extensive list of the restrictions and indignities that journalists faced.**

Prof. Doug Underwood: Yes. And you have to put that world in context. A lot of the great American writers—Twain, Dreiser, Cather, Stephen Crane—as well as great British writers like Dickens, Thackeray and Rudyard Kipling, all worked in conventional journalism in the nineteenth century for the most part. Journalism could be a wide-open, swashbuckling enterprise in those days and was highly commercialized and often sensationalized. But even in the more professionalized world of the twentieth and twenty first centuries, many journalists would still recognize the rules that Dreiser refers to in terms of the indignities they can suffer and the limitations governing what they can and can’t write about. More than people want to acknowledge, those rules hold sway even in today’s newspapers.

I looked for biographical experiences of these great writers when they worked in journalism as examples of the dramatic ways they felt they weren’t allowed to write what they really wanted to write about and to tell the stories they wanted to tell. Dreiser wrote a memoir—first entitled A Book about Myself, typical Dreiser. (It’s a marvelous book and goes along with his friend, H. L. Mencken’s Newspaper Days about what it was like to work in Baltimore journalism around the turn of the twentieth century. ) Dreiser worked as a journalist for only three or four years at several papers—in Chicago, a couple in St. Louis, then Toledo and
Pittsburgh. He ended up on Pulitzer’s *New York World* where he quit before he was fired. He wasn’t enough of a story hustler. He wanted to write deeper, sociological stuff about urban life that the *World* wasn’t interested in.

I don’t think the rules Dreiser writes about have changed as much as we’d like to think. The irony is that those who moved to fiction writing felt it was a freer place to tell the truth of their experiences than in so-called factual journalism.

Robin Lindley: **Dreiser talks about concerns like the unwillingness of newspapers to offend or question power or commercial interests. And recently, you’ve had reporters like Judith Miller of the *New York Times* who reported only what the Bush Administration wanted told about the Iraq War.**

**Prof. Doug Underwood:** Judith Miller was the stenographer to power. Most newspapers then, and today, are large, traditional, commercial establishments. They are as entrenched in the economic system as any of the institutions their journalists cover. So the journalists quickly come to understand that they are covering the way other institutions do things, but there are these restrictions within their own institutional organization.

Hunter Thompson once said that absolute truth was a very dangerous commodity in terms of professional journalism. But he also said, to hell with it. I am going to write about things as close to the bone as possible. He described himself as operating with aggressive ignorance combined with an instinct to mock the conventional wisdom when he dropped into the middle of the national presidential press corps in the 1970s. He became one of the subjects of Timothy Crouse’s *The Boys on the Bus*. He was delighted to write about what he saw and experienced, and he was as likely to make fun of the other journalists who were working within the limitations of objective journalism.

The funny part was that many of these journalists envied Thompson and his freedom, according to Crouse. They would tell their spouses to read Thompson’s *Rolling Stone* articles because they captured what the campaign was really like. Crouse quotes one of the other reporters as saying that after the revolution, we’ll all write like Hunter.
Robin Lindley: You discuss in your book whether journalism can be great literature. Can you talk about that?

Prof. Doug Underwood: These are always going to be subjective judgments in deciding what is great, and this can be very controversial territory.

I go into the question not only of what stories we consider non-fiction or fiction, and how people like Mailer felt caught in the middle of that, but also how the new journalists—particularly in the early days with Mailer, Capote, Didion and even Thompson—were writing for the ages. They wanted to write what they considered memorable literature.

When you look back in history and you look at what has been considered great literature by professional literary critics, it’s tended to be novels. They have focused more on fiction than non-fiction. Why is that? One of the most obvious reasons is that non-fiction tends to rely on real events that happened at a certain time and place. As time goes by, for people who haven’t shared those experiences and that time period, the stories begin to feel stale.

In fiction, people write stories about admittedly imaginative characters, but the stories have staying power, they contain what Aristotle called the “timeless” and “universal.” This happens because the stories connect with readers no matter what historical era they are living in. In the book, I use the example of Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and his more journalistic piece, *Life on the Mississippi*. Many of us have read *Huckleberry Finn* but not so many [have read] *Life on the Mississippi*. What is it about the story of this ragtag young boy and a runaway slave going down a raft on the Mississippi that is so mesmerizing, versus a journalistic account of Twain remembering his years growing up as a cub riverboat pilot or fulminating about the Gilded Age or complaining about the industrial revolution coming to his hometown, Hannibal, Missouri? Some specialists read [the *Life*] but it doesn’t have the iconic stature of *Huckleberry Finn*. It’s the story about a young boy and his friend running away on a raft – which people throughout the ages probably have wanted to do – that has the allure.

I look at why fiction has an advantage over traditional non-fiction. Part of my argument is that people – both journalists and scholars – tend to define non-fiction too narrowly. That takes out of the discussion a lot of very interesting works that technically wouldn’t meet the factuality standards of *The New York Times*’ copy desk, but are only marginally different from
non-fiction. If you also include the great, realistic, semi-factual novels written by journalists and ex-journalists, you get a better perspective about how much journalism has influenced the literary canon and how significantly journalists have helped to shape our literary history.

Robin Lindley: **What non-fiction books would you classify as great literature? Would you include books like *In Cold Blood* by Capote, *Executioner’s Song* by Mailer, or *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* by Thompson?**

Prof. Doug Underwood: I would argue that all three of those books deserve to be in the literary canon. But I am critical of scholars for too casually applying the term “literary” to all sorts of non-fiction narratives that don’t reach the level of literature. Capote and Mailer and Thompson in those works, along with Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* and Herr’s *Dispatches* and Wolfe’s *The Right Stuff*, and perhaps a few others, including older narrative non-fictional works by Agee, George Orwell, A. J. Liebling, John Hersey, have achieved the level of literature, I believe. Still, I think that’s rarer to achieve in non-fiction because its writing methodology is so much more restrictive.

Robin Lindley: **In some of those so-called non-fictional books, there are fictionalized elements. Don’t readers ask whether they can trust the writer or wonder what is real?**

Prof. Doug Underwood: Conventional journalists argue that is the weakness of the New Journalism or literary journalism. What I argue in the book is that the new journalists solve some of those problems by being transparent in their writing strategies and acknowledging what they’re doing. Thompson sends pretty strong signals that what he’s doing is different from the front page of *The New York Times*. He will tell readers, don’t look for objective journalism here.

Capote created more controversy because he made it his avowed intention to create what he called [*In Cold Blood*] a non-fiction novel. That challenged scholars to point out the places where he took more liberties than conventional journalists would.
I don’t think one can escape this tension. In the book, I say you need to trust readers to make their own judgments. New Journalism doesn’t work as well if you are fixated only on the methodology that The New York Times would call non-fiction.

I sympathize with Mailer’s idea that the tension between fiction and non-fiction can serve an artistic purpose. I am very sympathetic to those writers who have used hybrid methods. I argue that you should look at the works of these writers as existing on a spectrum between fact and fiction. Lots of journalists and scholars and even members of the public don’t nuance the situation in this way. It’s either fact or it’s fiction, or otherwise they reject it.

Robin Lindley: You also discuss how Hemingway kept separate his journalistic and fiction work, as he did with the novel The Sun Also Rises and his non-fiction stories about Spain and bullfighting.

Prof. Doug Underwood: That’s right. Hemingway came on the scene at the apex of the view among intellectuals and literary critics that fiction was the pathway to fame and a lasting reputation and journalism was a mundane activity in service to writing formulas and institutional goals.

Hemingway went to work in journalism at the age of 18 at the Kansas City Star and later at the Toronto Star when journalism had refined many of these standard practices for covering the world. Hemingway always saw his work in journalism as an apprenticeship. He wanted to write fiction from the very start. He bought very much into what in the 1920s was a hierarchy of values where fiction writing was seen as the more memorable activity.

But beyond that, Hemingway had other, personal reasons for preferring fiction writing to daily journalism. He grew up in a very dysfunctional family. His father committed suicide – as Hemingway would -- and his mother was very unstable. He was schooled in the family not to say anything that might upset the fragile emotions of his parents. He shared this kind of background with Twain and a lot of other writers. For them, truth telling and saying what you were feeling and thinking, as opposed to what the world taught you to say, was a catharsis.
So for Hemingway, fiction writing felt to him like writing that was honest and real compared to the restrictions he encountered in his journalism work. He demonstrated this in *The Sun Also Rises*, which I think is his greatest novel. He wrote it in his mid-twenties and it’s about his drinking and social companions when he was working as a journalist in Paris and the vacations they took in Spain. All the characters were based on real people, but he fictionalized the story slightly.

He developed a philosophy that he was able to probe more deeply into the themes of life by having the freedom to let his imagination tweak the story. He later wrote the non-fiction book, *Death in the Afternoon*, a primer on bullfighting. I compare these books to give people a sense of what Hemingway thought he could do in fiction that he couldn’t do in non-fiction, and why I believe the novel achieves a more authentic account of life compared to the flatness of his journalism.

Robin Lindley: *A section of your book deals with how former journalists portray journalists in their fiction—and usually these portrayals are unflattering with journalists often viewed as lowlifes, con artists, drunks—or other sorts of failures. In this fiction, there aren't many admirable reporter figures that have much depth of character, explore complex issues, and tirelessly investigate social ills and prompt reform.*

Prof. Doug Underwood: There’s a tension in journalism between writing about the world as it is and stereotyping the world. One of the criticisms of conventional journalism is that it tends to operate in stereotypes. Maybe it’s not a surprise that when these journalists go into fiction writing, they use stereotypes. I argue that there’s a lot of reason for that. Journalists tend to be falsely self-deprecating people who like to think of themselves as characters who write about the world and aren’t very interesting themselves. And a lot of these writers would find it difficult to present journalists in a serious, deep fashion, particularly for a literary world that they know doesn’t think highly of journalists anyway.

Also, some of these writers, like Dickens and Twain and Thackeray, engaged in pantomime and sometimes crude stereotyping anyway, and they would hardly have wanted to let journalist characters escape their satire.
I do say that it’s disappointing that there are so few novels written by journalists that take seriously the journalistic mission and the challenges facing the journalist. That’s a limitation. There’s a little bit more by the twentieth century with Graham Greene’s conflicted main character, Thomas Fowler, in *The Quiet American*. I really like Pete Dexter’s *The Paperboy*, an interesting evaluation of two young reporters who reinvestigate a crime story in a small town. They win a Pulitzer Prize, and it so happens the father of one of the reporters is the editor of the town paper. Lots of interesting angles. There’s a few around like that.

But yes, it’s an irony that these writers who left journalism to express a deeper truth, in developing journalist characters, went back to the simplistic stereotypes that people accuse journalists of doing. It’s an irony, but it also shows how many of them resented their experience as journalists so much that they couldn’t resist making journalists into questionable characters.

Robin Lindley: *It’s interesting how many of these writers left journalism under adverse circumstances or because of frustration.*

Prof. Doug Underwood: That was particularly true in the nineteenth century. As journalism professionalized after World War II, and salaries had gone up and you had journalism education at universities, the situation got more nuanced and complex.

But in the later twentieth century, when you still had the Hunter Thompsons and the Michael Herrs protesting the lack of candid coverage coming out of even the highly professionalized newsrooms of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, those papers represented the stifling and restraining atmosphere that free spirits like Thompson and Herr would want to get away from.

Robin Lindley: *And you teach a course on narrative journalism as well as conventional journalism.*

Prof. Doug Underwood: In our program, we train students on how to be professional journalists. Because of my experience in journalism, that wasn’t always my favorite duty at the university.
I got the opportunity to teach literary journalism after an accomplished literary journalist we hired, Deb Kaplan, established a program here, and then died tragically of a heart attack. I took over the program and I’ve been teaching it for seven years. It’s been a breath of fresh air. The students love it. We talk a lot about methodologies and the difference between fact and fiction. Then I say you’re going to practice this and I encourage them to write outside the box of journalism training and see if they can stretch their writing methods in a way the new journalists talked about.

I get the best writing, I swear. The students write about real things in their lives and what they care about. They write in stylistic ways that they don’t feel they can in conventional journalism.

It tells me a lot about why conventional journalism has problems these days. When people have other choices, they don’t want this more sterilized picture of the world that you often get from conventional newspapers. They want the real stories about human experiences filled with feelings that people can relate to.

The irony of newspapers is that they traffic in tragedy and controversy and these large, dramatic events in life, but the stories still are sanitized. How many times have you read in The New York Times about what it’s really like to live in an Afghan village where drone missiles are coming in? Or what it was like to be an Iraqi soldier in a bunker when it was carpet-bombed by a B-52?

It is true that narrative journalism has produced more writers who use the larger [methods] of the New Journalism to get closer to how human beings experience these larger issues. There are vestiges of New Journalism in today’s conventional feature writing, but it has been tamed.

When Herr wrote Dispatches, many conventional journalists were grateful because his countercultural writing conveyed a much more palpable reality of what the Vietnam War was really like. He lived with the soldiers and wrote about it through the mindset of a guy who had to take drugs to handle it all. Other journalists recognized that as what the war was really like, even if they couldn’t get that kind of stuff into their own newspapers.
Robin Lindley: **In your narrative journalism classes, it seems you encourage the students to follow the spirit of Lincoln Steffens by focusing on how news events affect real people. What are your students writing about?**

Prof. Doug Underwood: One of the features of New or literary journalism is “immersion journalism.” The idea is that the best way to write a powerful story is to experience it yourself firsthand. Capote went out to this small town in Kansas and immersed himself in the community that had just experienced a cold-blooded murder.

In the class, there are three things I want the students to do in a short, ten-week course. I want them to immerse themselves in something: to meet a character or go to a place or a setting where they feel they can, through their pores, write a story about what it is like to be there or what another person is experiencing.

The second thing I want them to do is to write a memoir, and I encourage them to write about meaningful events in their lives. Many of them write about painful things: divorce, death, substance abuse, anorexia, traumatic experiences. I’ve had students who have come out of the military. I want their accounts to be real and about what matters to them.

And third, I want them to write a story by taking what they learned in the first two stories and applying it to something that deals with a social problem or controversy, and to bring it alive for the reader. That’s what Deb Kaplan did in her career, and I want the class to retain her spirit.

I care less about whether they stick to the specifics of the genre. I care most about them probing truth as they experience it in the deepest way possible. That’s more interesting to me than where you draw the line between fiction and non-fiction.

I want it to be non-fiction. I want them to write as a non-fictional writer does. But I tell them, if you deviate from that, tell the reader you are. Be open but also be creative in trying to tell truth in the most meaningful way possible.

In their stories, the students deal with things they don’t get much opportunity to discuss in a big university where everyone is striving to be successful. One fellow wrote about getting back in touch with his father after his parents’ divorce, and he said writing that story helped him gain closure over the experience. I point out how retelling a story in a more truthful way,
getting at the core of it, can help human beings heal from hard experiences. Freud understood this. One student liked the class because “It’s the closest thing I have to therapy.” I admit you can take that too far in a university setting, but it is a way to deepen students’ humanity and their understanding of themselves.

I’m having a better time getting students to think outside the box than teaching them about the strategies for success in conventional journalism. Which, by the way, doesn’t mean they won’t be successful. Narrative journalism is thriving. The public loves it. Books of narrative journalism sell very well. So students may have more interesting possibilities by cultivating that side of their writing than what conventional training teaches them.

Robin Lindley: Do you have any concluding remarks on your book or what you hope readers take from it?

Prof. Doug Underwood: There’s a lot of themes in this book. Many scholars have studied New Journalism and a lot has been written about it. Scholarship isn’t always a dynamic or helpful thing when applied to rich, human activities. There are those in the scholarly community just as there are those in the journalist community who try very hard to categorize these writings and stick to genre boundaries. There’s a strong impulse in the conventional journalism community to be skeptical of New Journalism as Mailer and Thompson practiced it and see it as risky to the credibility of journalism.

Many scholars of New Journalism come out of conventional journalism. They reflect the view that truth should be conveyed in the way a traditional, objective journalist would see it, and they feel that way in their bones.

It’s been a bit of a struggle getting my ideas accepted in that world. There’s been a strong movement over the past 20 years to bring New Journalism back into the fold and to define it in more conventional terms. I think that’s too bad. I would encourage scholars and journalists – and readers – to stay open to the variety of ways that realistic writers have captured the truth of their experiences, including when they have abandoned the constricting formulas that frustrated them as conventional journalists.
Robin Lindley is a Seattle writer and features editor of the History News Network. His articles have appeared in HNN, Crosscut, Documentary, Writer’s Chronicle, Real Change, NW Lawyer, Re-Markings, and other publications. He can be reached at robinlindley@gmail.com.