

## LITERARY JOURNALISM: THE INTERSECTION OF LITERATURE AND JOURNALISM

*Sonja Merljak Zdovc*

### Abstract

Literary journalism is a style of newspaper and magazine writing that developed as a reaction against factographic and objective journalism. Rather than answering the informational who, what, when, or where, it depicts moments in time. It has also managed to eschew the formula of newspaper feature writing, with its predictability and clichés. Instead, it appointed the techniques of realistic fiction to portray daily life. The author of this paper attempts to present the genre that belongs at the same time to literature and journalism; it combines the best of both practices in order to give the reader the most vivid and accurate picture of society. The author of this paper also attempts to present literary journalism as it exists in Slovenia.

In 1965, the American novelist Truman Capote published a work entitled *In Cold Blood*. Soon followed Norman Mailer with *Armies of the Night* (1968). Both works raised many eyebrows. Were they literature? Or journalism? Even today people are confused when deciding whether to classify them as fiction or non-fiction. The confusion stems already from the subtitles that both authors used. Truman Capote named his work a non-fiction novel; Norman Mailer wrote that *Armies of the Night* was History as a Novel, the Novel as History.

Because *In Cold Blood*, a story about a murder of a prominent farmer's family in Kansas, had been written by a novelist, many critics placed it in fiction. On the other hand, in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., it can be found among non-fiction. American critic John Hollowell, for example, who claimed that in the sixties it became almost impossible to draw a division line between pure literature and pure journalism, said that *In Cold Blood* belongs to literature. Why? Because it is a result of the author's imagination. The author of this paper agrees with him only in the sense that non-fiction belongs to literature, too. But *In Cold Blood* is a work that is based on years of research and as such it is clearly a work that belongs to literary journalism, a genre that lies between literature and journalism and combines the best of both fields: the writing style of literature and the veracity of journalism.

Why is it important to combine both of the two? Because real life is even more interesting and fascinating than fiction; besides, readers like to read about reality. A good piece of writing can also more easily explain even the most complicated things,

topics and events to the readers. Literary journalism articles and books explain science, technology, politics and business. But most important of all, they also speak about contemporary everyday life which would otherwise not be recorded for future generations.

Hollowell compared Capote's *In Cold Blood* with *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser, and here he clearly made a mistake. Whereas on one side Dreiser based his novel on a newspaper article, Capote on the other side talked to people he described in his work and wrote it as he would have written a journalistic piece. Clearly, he obeyed the main rule of literary journalism which is to write literature which is true. Even though some critics argue that Capote could not capture the dialogue he wrote in such a detail, therefore concluding that he made it up, most of literary journalism theorists agree that *In Cold Blood* is an excellent example of what literary journalism is: a true story that reads like a novel. Nothing is made up, nothing is a result of the writer's imagination.

What exactly happened in the sixties? Why did such a prominent young novelist turned to something that was at the time regarded as the lowest form in the writing hierarchy – journalism? Why, soon after Capote, did other follow in his footsteps? And why did they both claim that they discovered a new genre?

In the sixties, American authors realized that in a traditional way they could not adequately react to the contemporary social phenomena. Philip Roth expressed the frustration of many novelists of his generation in a 1961 article: »The American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, then describe, and then make credible much of the American reality ...« (Hollowell 1977: 5).

It is because of that feeling that many novelists decided to write in a genre that Tom Wolfe later in his anthology called New Journalism. After Capote and Mailer, there followed another writer: Joan Didion wrote *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* in 1968. At about the same time Hunter S. Thompson published *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gang* (1967), and Tom Wolfe, the pioneer of New Journalism, as literary journalism was known in the sixties and seventies, was already famous because of his collection of articles *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965). Literary journalism was one of the two creative responses to the feeling that many writers of the time shared. Namely, that American society, with its hippy culture, Vietnam war divisiveness, race riots, sexual revolution and drugs, was changing so fast, it was hard to keep up with it.

The rise of literary journalism does not mean that at the time important novelists did not write about contemporary reality. In fact, many of them, including Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, and William Styron, wrote novels that were revealing the dilemmas the contemporary man faced; but they were mainly focused on the middle class. At the same time, especially younger novelists did not want to continue with the old patterns of writing. For them social realism was an outdated literary form in which they could not express the social reality. For them the era of the novel as a literary genre had ended. They began experimenting with different forms. Some of them started writing surrealist novels, and others became fabulists, as the American critic John Hellmann named them.

But many, as I mentioned, turned into literary journalism as the best way to portray the contemporary society. They started describing the world around them as they saw it. Literary journalism thus took over the role the Novel had in the nineteenth century. Its authors were bringing the news from the contemporary world to their readers. At the same time some journalists also realized that the rules, formulas and constraints of the inverted pyramid made it impossible for them to deal with contemporary subjects. The events that might have been overlooked by the so-called objective or traditional journalists became the focal points of their writing. Literary journalism allowed them to give their readers an insight into the reality, life, or human behaviour of Americans in the sixties and seventies. And, because the works of literary journalists were esthetically, culturally and politically important, they changed both – American literature and American journalism.

Literary journalism, however, was not in fact born in the sixties. Truman Capote was wrong when he claimed that he discovered a new genre. Roots of literary journalism lie in the works of such distinguished writers as Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane and Ernest Hemingway. Still, the author of this paper agrees with those scholars of literary journalism who think that *In Cold Blood* might be the first accomplished piece of writing in the genre. Tom Wolfe, for example, explained in his anthology that he did not consider any of the aforementioned writers as literary journalists. They used some of the techniques of literary journalism, but they remained »not half-bad candidates« (1973: 45).

How did literary journalism evolve? According to critic Thomas B. Connery the first wave of literary journalistic writing appeared in the late nineteenth century when such articles were published in large amounts in American newspapers and magazines for the first time. Literary journalists were writing about themes that could not be presented in traditional articles. They wrote about life in city slums (Jacob Riis, *How The Other Half Lives*, 1890) and through these articles they were able to explain why there were increasingly more people moving into the cities and how they ended up living there. If they had chosen traditional journalism, they would have been able to give the readers just the facts. Literary journalists of the first wave tried to answer readers' questions, but they also raised new ones.

The second wave followed in the thirties when the literary journalism mainly appeared in magazines and books. One of the most important works that appeared then was *Let Us Now Praise the Famous Men* by James Agee. In the forties and fifties literary journalism was kept alive by Joseph Mitchell, A. J. Liebling and other writers for the *New Yorker* magazine. Only in the sixties and seventies has it spread to other magazines, such as *Esquire*, *Village Voice* and *Harper's*. New Journalism, as it was called then, was in fact the most important and significant part of literary journalism. Then, for the first time, a large number of [literary journalism] articles appeared, and was critically accepted.

Literary journalists wrote about true events. They were not making anything up; they were only describing life as they saw it. In this way they managed to fulfill the role of the nineteenth century novelist who was bringing news to his readers. At the same time they were able to portray society more thoroughly to all the readers of the

newspapers and magazines who were not satisfied with objective reporting which remained on the surface of the contemporary events.

The difference between them and traditional journalists was that they were not only interested in newsworthy events. They started to write also about things that would never have made it to the newspaper, things that were not considered newsworthy: things such as people and their every day life. With the literary elements they gave people and events a lasting meaning. John Hellmann said that literary journalists had in common the subject that was based on facts and an aesthetic form and function. According to him, the aesthetics was not a result of the techniques they used but of an artistic approach to the subject (1981: 25).

Let us take Truman Capote for an example; he did not only present a criminal act of two people, he also revealed the state of mind of Midwest America in the sixties. And Norman Mailer was not only writing about the march to the Pentagon, but also about the anti-war movement that was getting prominence at the time. In *Dispatches* (1978), Michael Herr described not only single events from Vietnam war, but also its effects on people. In *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Joan Didion was trying to portray California in the sixties, with its hippies and searchers for the American dream who got lost on the way. And Tom Wolfe was interested in lower class people trying to build themselves monuments with their own status symbols.

Truman Capote is perhaps the most world-renowned writer of literary journalism; one only needs to mention *In Cold Blood* to tell what he has in mind when one speaks about literary journalism. But Tom Wolfe is probably the single most important theorist and author of New Journalism. He wrote articles, non-fiction novels and even essays on New Journalism. His most important works are: *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965), *The Pump House Gang* (1968), *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1969), *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* (1970), *The New Journalism: With An Anthology* (1973), *Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine* (1976), *The Right Stuff* (1979).

He mentioned in his anthology *New Journalism* that for many of the journalists of the sixties becoming a novelist was the main objective. They were writing articles only to pay the rent, get to know the world and master the writing style (1973: 9). Tom Wolfe became a novelist in the late 1980s when he published his first novel *Bonfire of Vanities* (1987). Later followed his second novel, *A Man in Full* (1998). Nevertheless, his most important contributions to American literature and journalism are his »New Journalism« pieces.

Tom Wolfe defined literary journalism as reporting that read like fiction. He described it as »intense« and »detailed« reporting presented with »techniques usually associated with novels and short stories« (Wolfe 1973: 15). According to him, four techniques were commonly used by the new journalists: i. scene-by-scene construction, or depicting people in dramatic scenes as in traditional storytelling; ii. complete dialogue as recorded and remembered rather than journalism's selective quotations; iii. varying the point of view, and even using third person point of view; and iv. status details or the habits, mannerisms, gestures, and so on that distinguish people, societies, and subcultures (31-33).

Tom Wolfe was a master of words. He was the first journalist to use techniques that were previously reserved only for literature. Although American journalist Gay Talese might be considered as the first author to start regularly writing literary journalism early in the sixties, Tom Wolfe was the one who brought genre to its most extreme. If Gay Talese is on the journalistic side of literary journalism, Tom Wolfe is certainly on the literary, given his use of onomatopoeia, italics, stream-of-consciousness and other literary techniques.

Why was it so useful for Tom Wolfe to use literary techniques? Because the subjective kind of writing which was the result of that could bridge the gap between the event and the reader. The reader would not have connected so much with something he knew it was not true and he would also not feel empathy for something that was presented to him in a very factographic way. Tom Wolfe managed to catch the interest of his readers because he wrote so well. The reader would otherwise probably not have been interested in many of his topics (i.e. custom-made cars in California or the life of female prisoners in a New York prison).

Though literary journalism is not the prevalent form of literary or journalistic writing today, by the end of the twentieth century it had been accepted in the mainstream media. It is very expensive to write in this style, but regardless it can be found in many newspapers and magazines, particularly *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The St. Petersburg Times*, and *The Oregonian*, as well as *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *The Village Voice*, and *Rolling Stone*.

In America, publishers are increasingly aware that in the 1990s literary journalism was the only true journalistic »antidote« among the many remedies (e. g., more celebrity and sports reportage, colour printing, fuller TV schedules) to be applied to such widespread current business problems as declining or stagnant circulation and aging readership. As Mark Kramer wrote in his article, it alone moved newspapers toward deeper coverage, toward fulfillment of the civic mission that distinguishes the worthy profession (Kramer 2000). Some scholars even argue that literary journalism could also narrow the gap between journalists and those readers who see them only as vultures. Why? Because this kind of journalism connects writers not only with the mind of their readers but also with their heart. Today, many American writers turn to literary journalism when they write book-length work about contemporary society because they know that readers will be more likely to read it if it reads like a novel and not like a dry documentary.

What can be said about literary journalism in Slovenia? A kind of journalistic writing that could be associated with literary journalism appeared approximately at the same time as New Journalism in the United States. Nevertheless, the occurrence of the new style is not related to the American New Journalism. Slovene journalists were not very familiar with what was going on overseas; one of the reasons was that they were not so fluent in English. The new style of writing appeared mainly for political reasons: Since journalists could not openly state their opinion of the political system, they wrapped it up in a feature story that had elements of short stories from the era of social realism. When painting the picture of poverty, they actually criticized the socialist authorities. Many of the literary elements were used only to add colour to the articles.

The author of this paper found only two pieces of journalistic writing that could be compared with Tom Wolfe's rules for New Journalism: one, »Adria Foxtrot Charlie«, has been published in the weekly *Tovariš*, the other, *Macesen*, is a non-fiction novel. Because my research was focused on the year 1965, I cannot discount the possibility that more writing in the style was published later.

In the contemporary Slovene media only a few literary journalism articles can be found. The story-like or narrative kind of writing is not appreciated; even newspaper feature writing is less and less frequently published. One of the possible reasons could be that literary journalism requires time and money, and the Slovene writers lack both. Perhaps in the future, editorial interest in literary journalism will stimulate journalists to use it more. But first, the editors will have to realize that readers like stories about people and that literary journalism is very useful in conveying more complex information on personalities and society in general. Slovene writers, on the other hand, will also need to understand that readers like stories about real people, and start to write them. Then, perhaps, they will be able to attract even more interest.

Ljubljana, Slovenia

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Note: the article is based on the author's Ph.D. thesis which was supervised by Professor Jerneja Petrič.