The practice of book-length journalism: Reframing the debate

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Abstract

The term book-length journalism is not commonly used in academic and professional literature but it is used in this paper to draw attention to the medium and scope of an area of journalism that is practised by a significant minority of practitioners. Using this term rather than others in more common use, such as literary journalism or literary non-fiction or narrative journalism, opens the way to exploring three important issues: the extent to which this area of journalism is practised at book-length rather than in newspapers; whether there are particular ethical issues that arise in this area of practice; and, third, the affect of conflating of a narrative approach with notions of literary merit.

There is a significant minority of journalists who practice their craft at book-length, or, to look at it another way, a significant minority of non-fiction books published each year in Australia and the United States are written by practitioners of journalism, or are avowedly journalistic in aim and scope (Ricketson, 2009, pp. 33-34). It is difficult to establish with any precision just how much journalistic work is being produced at book-length, but the existence of well-known practitioners such as Bob Woodward and Barbara Ehrenreich in the United States, and David Marr and Margaret Simons in Australia points to the existence of a body of practitioners who extend their journalistic practice to book-length works. That is, where practitioners use journalistic methods to research and write independently about contemporary actual people, events, and issues at book-length in a timely manner for a broad audience, they are engaged in book-length journalism. By journalistic methods, I mean the finding of documents, whether in print or online, interviewing people and first-hand observation (Conley & Lamble, 2006, pp. 163-207, 327-31; Ricketson, 2004, pp. 95-134).

The term book-length journalism may well be unfamiliar to scholars of journalism. Instead, this area of practice is usually incorporated in other terms, such as: the New Journalism, a term coined in 1965 by journalist Pete Hamill and popularised by one of its best-known exponents and advocates, Tom Wolfe (Murphy, 1974, pp. 4-5); the "Nonfiction Novel", which Truman Capote used on the dust-jacket of *In cold blood* in 1966; literary non-fiction, which is what Ronald Weber, an American studies scholar, calls it in his 1980 study *The literature of fact* and which has become the preferred term among literary studies scholars; literary journalism, which Norman Sims, a journalism scholar, redirected from its common usage denoting a journalist who writes about literature, used in an anthology he edited in 1984, *The literary journalists*; creative non-fiction, which is championed by Lee Gutkind, founding editor in 1993 of an eponymous journal and author of a textbook *The art of creative nonfiction*; narrative journalism, which has become popular since the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University devoted an issue of its quarterly *Nieman reports* to it in 2000 (pp. 4-44); and, finally, reportage, which was in use in the 1930s (Hartsock, 2000, p.169) but gained fresh traction after

1987 through an anthology *The Faber book of reportage*, edited and eloquently introduced by John Carey, a Professor of English at Oxford University.

This profusion of terms has several implications. The first, obvious one is that none of them has won even wide acceptance among either scholars or practitioners, despite considerable debate within journalism studies and literary studies. The reasons for this include: the prickliness of journalists toward notions of literariness; the historic hostility of literary critics towards journalism; a frequent conflating of narrative with literary merit; resistance to defining a field in the negative (non-fiction); and vigorously contested philosophical debates about the nature of truth that bear directly on a field in which practices to verify facts and a narrative approach are central (Boynton, 2005, pp. xi-xxxii; Hartsock, 2000, pp. 1-20; Lehman, 1997, pp. 1-39; Ricketson, 2001, p. 150). In the first full-length history of this area of writing in the United States, John Hartsock found the antecedents of what he termed narrative literary journalism in the Roman acta, or gazettes (pp. 83-94). In the 19th century, however, journalism practice split into two streams: the first he calls discursive; the second narrative. These terms echo what Michael Schudson, in his pioneering study published in 1978, *Discovering the news*, offers as models of two ideal approaches to journalism—one founded in "information", the other in "story" (p. 89). The former model finds expression in what is known in the news media industry as the hard news report. It has been the form most closely associated with journalism since near the end of the 19th century (Mindich, 1998, pp. 64-94; Schudson, 1995, pp. 59-60). The story model has an even longer history, as Hartsock argues, and even today in newsrooms journalists routinely refer to what they are writing as a "story"—or, in Australia, a "yarn"—regardless of whether they are writing a hard news report or a feature article (Nell, 1988, p. 51). Newsroom vernacular does signal journalists' implicit understanding of their role as storytellers rather than simple conduits for dispassionately gathered facts (Ricketson, 2004, pp. xi-xii).

Terms like literary journalism, narrative journalism and creative non-fiction all seek to describe an area of writing where practitioners take a narrative approach to presenting their accounts of people, events and issues. Use of the word narrative in this way is well understood in newsrooms but, within narrative studies, the word carries multiple carefully delineated meanings (Abbott, 2008, pp. 13-27, 237-38; Herman, 2007, pp. 22-35, 279-80). Similarly, Hartsock's word for hard news, "discursive", has become tied to the concept of discourse in modern cultural theory (Baldick, 1990, p. 59). In this paper, then, the term expository will be used to refer to the hard news reporting style and the phrase "writing in a narrative mode" will be preferred to narrative, though such a phrase would probably attract the red pen of any self-respecting newspaper sub-editor. The effect of the cleaving of journalism into two primary forms, Hartsock argues, has been that what he calls narrative literary journalism has no natural home or champion within the academy. There have been signs of change in the past two decades, if not in the breaking down of the Balkan walls of academic disciplines, then in the steadily growing academic and professional literature (pp. 10-11), to which his study adds and testifies.

The second implication of the profusion of terms is that all are groping toward naming a writing practice that is not only about actual people, events and issues but is literary or artistic. The criteria scholars choose for defining a field have ramifications for what is included and what is excluded. Raymond Williams has shown how, since the mid-18th

century the term "literature" has come to mean "well written" books that are "creative" or "imaginative" writing (1976, p. 152). But as Andrew Milner asks, who defines what is well written, and why is creative or imaginative literature regarded as superior to other forms of writing? "The implicit premise that philosophy, science and history are somehow neither imaginative nor creative is very obviously indefensible" (2005, p. 2). The notion that literature is inherently fictive is also questionable because there may be factual material in imaginative literature, argues Milner, citing John Milton's sonnet on his blindness that, according to the available biographical information, contains accurate information about the poet's condition and his response to it (pp. 2-3). From late in the 19th century, however, influential literary figures began exulting "imaginative literature" in prose—by which was meant fiction—as the most important form of writing and ignored or devalued other forms of prose, according to Hartsock (pp. 204-45). These were lumped together under a term that defined them in the negative—non-fiction (p. 12). Following Hartsock, and preferring to say what something is rather than what it is not, I use the term book-length journalism in this paper, rather than any term that includes the word non-fiction. The term book-length journalism may be inelegant, but it has the virtue of describing the medium and the scope of the activity. Saying what this area of writing practice is rather than what it is not provides a foundation for re-orienting the critical debate. It is not my purpose to argue for the setting up of a new genre called book-length journalism. In this field, the practitioner may be a newspaper or magazine journalist working at book-length or they may come to it from another background, such as novel-writing. What the practitioner does rather than their background is the key determinant; for that reason, the terms practitioner and journalist are used interchangeably in this paper even when those discussed are better known as novelists. The word non-fiction is spelt with the hyphen in this paper because that is the *Oxford English Dictionary* spelling and also because it makes explicit the separation from the word fiction. Exceptions will be made for titles and quotations from sources, usually American, that exclude the hyphen.

Whether this area of writing practice is or can be art or literature, however that may be defined, is an important question but not one that is central to this paper. When literary or artistic criteria are used to define an area of writing practice, however, scholars are pushed into certain choices about what to study. I resist such a push, and not simply because I might want to argue with various critics' assessment of the literary or artistic qualities of various pieces of journalistic writing, but more importantly because such arguments have the effect of occluding three key issues: first, the extent to which it is practised at book-length today; second, the ethical issues that arise in this area of practice; and, third, the conflating of a narrative approach with notions of literary merit. Taking these issues one by one, scholars have understated the extent to which such journalism is practised at book-length. Journalism written in a narrative mode can certainly be found in newspapers, in the United States and Australia, but it is more likely to be found in magazines and, it appears, most likely to be found in books. I say appears because, without universal agreement as to what constitutes this field, and because what I am calling book-length journalism is subsumed into the broad publishing category of non-fiction, it cannot be enumerated exactly. An early academic study of the New Journalism noted that much of it was published in book form (Murphy, 1974, pp. 17, 26). Edd Applegate drew on seventeen anthologies and scholarly works to compile in 1996 *Literary journalism: A biographical dictionary of writers and editors*, which included journalists and editors working in newspapers, magazines and in books. Even so, of the 172 people listed, 112 (or about two-thirds) had written at least one work of

book-length journalism, as it is defined in this paper. In 2007, the Nieman Foundation collated contributions from journalists and editors reflecting on their practice at its annual Narrative Journalism conferences. Of the 53 contributors, 36 had written at least one work of book-length journalism; many had written several (Kramer & Call, 2007, pp. 299-308). These figures suggest the practice of book-length journalism is more widespread than has been recognised.

Second, questions of ethics are inherent in the practice of journalism, regardless of the medium in which it is presented (Christians et al, 2009, pp. 2-3; Richards, 2005, Preface; Sanders, 2003, p. 12). The documentary bears a similar relationship to television journalism that book-length journalism has to newspaper and magazine journalism, and the ethical issues faced by documentarians have been explored by scholars of the form (e.g. see Bernstein (n.d.); Nichols, 2001; Williams, 1999;). I choose to focus on book-length journalism in this paper because, while study of ethics in journalism is well developed according to an overview published in early 2009 by Lee Wilkins and Clifford Christians in *The handbook of mass media ethics*, relatively little attention has been paid to whether book-length journalism raises ethical issues particular to practice in that medium. For instance, how do practitioners balance their need to maintain editorial independence with the closeness to key sources that comes from gaining a deep level of trust? Are there any limits to the kinds of narrative approach practitioners can take when representing actual people and events? And, how do readers read journalism in books as distinct from in newspapers and magazines? If journalists present their book in a narrative mode, is their work read as non-fiction or, because it reads *like* a novel, is it read *as* a novel?

Scholars in the literary non-fiction, literary journalism and creative non-fiction fields certainly have not ignored ethical issues, but they examine them within the context of work that they argue is literary or artistic (Weber, 1980, pp. 43-55; Sims & Kramer, 1995, pp. 3-34; Cheney, 1991, pp. 217-32; Gutkind, 2005, pp. xix-xxxiii). This leads to the third key issue, which is that, by choosing to study journalism that is in their eyes literary or artistic, scholars blur the question of whether the ethical issues inherent in representing people and events in a narrative mode of writing are magnified or diminished by the practitioner’s literary or artistic skills, or whether it is in the initial taking of a narrative approach that the ethical issues are triggered. This issue is evident in the differing critical receptions to the work of Bob Woodward, a newspaper reporter who has become a prolific practitioner of book-length journalism, and Truman Capote, a novelist who wrote a “nonfiction novel”. Applegate includes both in his dictionary but, where Capote is mentioned in 12 of the 17 sources Applegate cites, Woodward is mentioned by none of them (Applegate, 1996, pp. xvii-xix). Rather, Applegate’s choice appears to be founded in equating the use of a narrative approach with literary or artistic merit. He writes that, in *The final days*, Woodward and his co-author Carl Bernstein “used dialogue, interior monologue, and candid description to depict characters, scenes, and emotions. The book was an example of literary journalism” (p. 300).

Most scholars in the literary journalism, literary non-fiction, and creative non-fiction fields have shown less interest in book-length journalism that is not, in their eyes, literary. Woodward, who has made numerous important journalistic disclosures and sold more copies of his works of book-length journalism than perhaps any other journalist in the world (Shepard, 2007), has not been included in any of the 7 major anthologies of what is termed either literary journalism (Sims, 1984; Sims & Kramer,

1995; Kerrane & Yagoda 1997; Chance & McKeen, 2001) or creative non-fiction (Talese & Lounsberry, 1996; Gutkind, 2005; Williford & Martone, 2007). Woodward's newspaper reports, co-written with Bernstein, on the implications of the break-in at the Watergate hotel in 1972, have, however, won a place in 2 anthologies of investigative or muckraking journalism (Serrin & Serrin, 2002, pp. 132-35; Shapiro, 2003, pp. 368-76). The notion that ethical issues would be present in a work of book-length journalism acclaimed by many literary critics, namely Capote's *In cold blood*, but not in the work of Woodward, whose books are excluded from literary journalism anthologies, is, plainly, nonsense.

What is less plain to all is how some scholars conflate taking a narrative approach with notions of literary or artistic merit, and how failing to examine the assumptions underlying their choices leads to critical confusion. Questions about accuracy, invention and accountability to readers arise in the work of both Woodward and Capote, but where most reviewers debate Woodward's work on these grounds, fewer literary scholars take up the same issues in Capote's work, and a good number of them read *In cold blood* as if it is a novel (Heyne, 1989, p. 481). The 16 works of book-length journalism that Woodward has written or co-authored have been assessed primarily on their merits as journalism. The pattern of reviews of Woodward's books has been to outline, and usually praise, the disclosures they contain and to raise questions about his reliance on anonymous sources and his use of an omniscient narrative voice. There have been major controversies about how he could know certain intimate details about Richard Nixon when the president never agreed to be interviewed by him or by his then-colleague Bernstein for their book *The final days* (Havill, 1993, pp. 108-17; Shepard, 2007, pp. 144-49), about whether he made a serious error in *The brethren* about a Supreme Court judge voting against one of his own judgements (Havill, 1993, pp. 128-35; Shepard, 2007, pp. 189-92) and about whether he invented a scene in which he managed to get past hospital security guards to interview Central Intelligence Agency director William Casey, who was barely able to speak because of surgery to remove a cancerous growth (Havill, 1993, pp. 182-95; Shepard, 2007, pp. 232-35).

Capote certainly opens the door to misreadings by describing his book as a "nonfiction novel" but the sub-title "A true Account of a multiple murder and its consequences" and the numerous media interviews he gave attesting to the book's factual accuracy (Inge, 1987) show he was not echoing the approach of early 18th century writers such as Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding, who described their novels *Robinson Crusoe* and *Joseph Andrews* as a "just history of fact" and "copied from the book of nature" respectively (Ricketson, 2001, p. 152); nor was his sub-title playful, as is novelist Peter Carey's title of his re-imagining of the story of Australian bushranger Ned Kelly, *True history of the Kelly gang*, published in 2000. Phillip K. Tompkins challenged the factual accuracy of *In cold blood* in an article written for *Esquire* magazine after he visited Kansas to re-interview several of Capote's sources and examine the court record of the case central to the book. Tompkins' most serious charge is that Capote altered facts and quotations to substantially skew his portrait of one of the killers, Perry Smith, making him look less like a cold-blooded murderer than a victim whose considerable potential had been crippled by a miserable childhood (1966, p. 171).

A number of literary critics have cited Tompkins' article and, to my knowledge, none has seriously contested its factual grounding, but that does not necessarily diminish Capote's book in their eyes. Melvin Friedman writes that he believes Capote "cheated" but the consequences are unimportant. "Despite the convincing claims of unreliability

. . . we must still believe in the essential authenticity and integrity of Capote's account" but Friedman does not say why he or we should (cited in Heyne, 1989, p. 482). Discussing arguments that Capote had made factual errors about the basketball skills of one person portrayed in the book and the buyer of the beloved horse of one of the four murder victims, Chris Anderson writes: "Even fact is finally beyond certainty when the author is not inventing the story. Experience is too various and complex, too fine, to be represented completely in words" (Anderson, 1987, p. 66). That may be right in the abstract, but does it mean the author of a work of book-length journalism needs make no effort to verify the accuracy of their account? The scale of error is also important; the basketball skills of a peripheral person in the book is not a crucial fact but the sale of the horse is significant because Capote (1966, pp. 77, 169-70, 223) spends considerable space showing Nancy Clutter's fondness for her horse and how poignant it is that "Babe" was sold to a farmer from outside the county who "said he might use her for ploughing" (p. 223). The horse was sold to a local man who treasured her, however, according to Tompkins (1966, p. 127).

The confusion, or what looks like tentativeness, about looking beyond the text to the actual people and events it concerns extends even to those like Weber, author of 3 books about literary non-fiction, for whom the core "critical problem with literary nonfiction cast in the form of fiction is always credibility" and "the writer's commitment to fact" (1980, p. 53). Weber walks up to the abyss but then turns back:

> Such inaccuracy, if it exists, is of course devastating. If Capote has distorted Perry's character, the book is fatally weakened as a "true account." But most readers know nothing of the Clutter murders beyond what Capote relates and so are in no position to measure the book as Tompkins does. Even if they could, such detective work might seem of small importance for the book patently reaches beyond its factual grounding to grasp the reader in the manner of the novel. It seeks to be, finally, a work of the literary imagination, and it is on this level that the reader can best measure it. (pp. 74-75)

It is not at all clear why Weber prefers Capote's account over Tompkins's, which quotes extensively from official documents and from his interviews. Despite Weber's earlier assertions of the importance of credibility and a writer's commitment to fact, he lets Capote off the hook by invoking his artistry, even though it is his artistry that appears to have caused the problem in the first place. Nor does Weber's invoking the work's artistry absolve Capote of his ethical responsibility to the actual people he writes about.

Even more puzzling is the approach of a prominent literary scholar, Wayne Booth, in his book entitled *The company we keep: An ethics of fiction*; his primary aim is to "talk about stories in ethical terms, treating the characters in them and their makers as more like people than labyrinths, enigmas, or textual puzzles to be 'deciphered'" (1988, p. x). Most of his study concerns fiction. Booth does briefly consider the boundary between fiction and non-fiction (1988, pp. 16-17), and he discusses Norman Mailer's *The executioner's song*, a book about the execution of a convicted murderer, Gary Gilmore, that was published in 1979 and meets the definition in this paper of book-length journalism. Mailer's work has been the subject of controversy; he called it a "factual account" and a "true life story" (1979, p. 1053) but it won a Pulitzer prize for fiction in 1980 (http://www.pulitzer.org/bycat/Fiction). Mailer has been criticised for muddying the line between documentation and the fiction-writer's invention (Hersey, 1989, pp. 257-64), and for engaging in a confidence game that "dulls the reader's powers of discrimination and dims his sensitivity to deception" (Fishkin, 1985, p. 216). These would seem to be ethical issues of interest to Booth. Indeed, as someone originally from

that part of Utah where much of what is described in *The executioner's song* takes place, Booth writes that he knows first-hand know

> how misleading some of his [Mailer's] portraits of the area and the people will be to readers who live elsewhere. And I fear the harm that his book will do to many of those who are caricatured in it, including [Gary] Gilmore's wife, children, and relatives. (1988, p. 210 footnote)

Being misled in this way makes Booth think less of Mailer as a person but it is "in large part irrelevant to my appraisal of the book as a narrative that I might recommend to one of my own friends" (p. 210). This does not make much sense to me; if you think it is important to treat characters in works of fiction not as labyrinths or enigmas but more like people, why would you not extend similar, even stronger, care to actual people who are represented in works of non-fiction? If you can think less of a fiction-writer for misleading his readers, is that not an ethical evaluation?

Some critics are hostile to weighing the relationship between fact and fiction, even in works of book-length journalism that make crystal clear they are to be read as journalism rather than as a novel. Phyllis Frus, discussing Janet Malcolm's *The journalist and the murderer*, writes that Daniel Kornstein, the lawyer defending journalist Joe McGinniss in the civil suit brought by the convicted murderer Jeffrey MacDonald, contests the validity of Malcolm's book on its facts and interpretation of legal issues:

> This tradition of tedious recital of error has a long and dreary history . . . There are numerous articles detailing what both Capote and Mailer invented surrounding their subjects [in In Cold Blood and The Executioner's Song]; indeed at least one reviewer of true-crime nonfiction novels invariably feels obligated to set the record straight by pointing out false facts rather than reading carefully to note how the writer has made the material speak. As Malcolm says, "The material does not 'speak for itself'". (1994, pp. 257-58 endnote)

If Frus is referring to an unblinking belief in objective truth, then treating facts as so many sliding balls on an abacus is simplistic and probably tedious, but there are many shades of meaning between that and Frus's argument that "unless the reader has firsthand knowledge of the subjects she has no way of knowing what is actual, unless it is verified by other narratives" (p. 7). The material may not speak for itself, as she approvingly quotes Malcolm, but even careful readers can be flummoxed by omissions and errors in a work of literary non-fiction. Frus inadvertently impales her argument by drawing a conclusion about the murderer, MacDonald, from information in Malcolm's book that Kornstein has contested, with evidence, in his "tedious recital of error" (Frus, p. 194; Kornstein, 1989, pp. 132-33; Ricketson, 2006, pp. 219-28).

Assessing which of Kornstein's or Malcolm's evidence and argument is more persuasive requires further checking and verification. Frus may well be right to argue that the average reader has neither the time nor the direct experience to verify most of what is printed in works of book-length journalism but that prompts an important ethical issue—what obligations do practitioners owe their readers? What is puzzling about scholars such as Frus, Friedman, Anderson, Weber, Booth and others (see, for example, Lounsberry, 1990, p. 192) is the disparity between the rigor and precision they apply to even the smallest details of their scholarship (and that of others) while appearing to have little interest or understanding of the importance of parallel practices of verification in book-length journalism, or, to use their term, literary non-fiction. It is a disparity that is rarely reflected upon in the literature about this field (Lehman, 1997, pp. 25-26, 90). In no way am I suggesting precision in scholarship is unimportant, but I

am asking: if scholars believe it is important in scholarship, why would they take a different attitude toward representing people and events in journalism? Scholars in disciplines such as anthropology and sociology understand well the ethical issues inherent in their study of people, not least through the exhaustive procedures required by university ethics committees for researching “human subjects”. Scholars in literary studies usually deal with texts rather than people, which may go some way toward explaining this peculiar blind spot.

This blind spot among at least some literary scholars, combined with the relative scarcity in the scholarly and professional journalism studies literature on whether there are *particular* ethical issues arising in book-length journalism, points to the need to develop a specific framework to outline and explore the most pressing ethical issues in this field. Such a framework is beyond the scope of this paper but a good deal of the work in producing a work of book-length journalism sits in the research phase. I would argue that central to assessing the success of a work of book-length journalism is appreciating how the journalist did their research. If the journalist has made significant factual errors or omitted relevant information or seriously misrepresented their subjects, then their book’s claims to veracity are undermined. In other words, the standards commonly applied to newspaper and magazine journalism extend to book-length projects. This does not mean 2 journalists working on the same topic will write identical books; as in daily journalism and in historical writing, there is plenty of scope for conscientious and ethical practitioners to take differing approaches to research, to dig into the primary sources at different levels and to differ in their interpretations of documents, people and issues.

But when a work of book-length journalism is about actual people and places and events and is presented as such, then ethically, not to mention legally, it needs to be assessed in that domain. The means by which novelists gather material or draw on their imagination also shapes their writing. Researching the novelist’s working methods and the interplay between the novelist’s imagination and events or people in their life can tell us something about the creative process, but novels can be enjoyed by readers without knowing anything of that. This is not so in book-length journalism, which makes claims to veracity. Or, it may be possible to enjoy a work of book-length journalism without knowing about the research process that shaped the book, but to do that readers would either need to accept on trust the book’s claims to veracity, or read the book as fiction or be unconcerned about the relationship between the two. A practitioner of book-length journalism cannot control exactly how people will react to their work but practitioners can be held responsible for what they present readers and the terms in which they present it. The important question of how readers can assess works of book-length journalism when they know little or less about the events being described is also beyond the scope of this paper but investigating the research phase of book-length journalism has potential to illuminate ethical issues usually not considered by literary studies scholars who tend to be more interested in the text than in how what is in the text came to be in it.

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