

Washington Women Journalists: Fact vs. Fiction

Maurine H. Beasley
Professor Emerita
Philip Merrill College
University of Maryland, College Park
College Park, MD
mbeasley@jmail.umd.edu

Truth is stranger than fiction, the old saying goes, but in this case I think fiction can lead us to some relatively uncomfortable truths. For my presentation I examined six novels written since 1990 that feature Washington, D.C. women journalists. My intent was to find out what they say about the culture of Washington journalism and women's role in it. I think they say a lot. Five were written by women who describe themselves as either present-day Washington journalists or former Washington journalists. The sixth author appeared to have a Washington-area newspaper background in Northern Virginia.

To a considerable degree, the books show Washington women journalists as ambitious, intelligent, well-educated, competitive, supervised by male editors, likely to encounter sexual harassment, experiencing conflicts between their careers and personal lives, and caught up in office politics, including rivalries with other women.

Do they provide a true picture of Washington women journalists? I interviewed the authors of the two most recent books, and the answer was "yes." Also, it was quite obvious two of the others wrote from extensive experience and the remaining two exhibited familiarity with journalistic settings and routines in the nation's capital.

Authenticity rang particularly true in the case of *The List*, a debut novel published in 2013 by Karin Tanabe.¹ Describing it as a fast-paced political thriller, another novelist praised it as capturing "the frenetic, all-consuming pace of political reporting, with a healthy dose of scandal, glamour and intrigue thrown in."²

The main character, Adrienne Brown, a 28-year-old graduate of Wellesley College, works for the social/celebrity section of a political news organization called the *Capitalist*, which is known to Washington insiders only as *The List* and is primarily web-based. *Capitalist* political reporters and editors look down on her section, staffed by underpaid young women like herself. Her pressure-filled day starts at 5 a.m. and continues until the evening with coverage of politically-oriented parties. She is compelled to write 10 stories a day and is expected to answer emails within three minutes.

According to Tanabe, herself a graduate of Vassar College and a former magazine writer like her heroine Adrienne, the “newsroom stuff is all based on my experience at *Politico*,” a Washington political news operation that provides content for the Internet, television, radio, and its own print publication.³ Tanabe stayed there two years and wrote *The List* “while I was working 14 hours a day.”⁴

“Nobody who has not worked in new media understands what it means to the people who work in it,” she said. “The pace is insane.”⁵ Tanabe found *Politico*, run by experienced male journalists, “very sexist; women leave at a 70 percent higher rate than men. ... They burn out very quickly.”⁶

In the novel, Adrienne, determined to become a “top dog D.C. reporter,” is jealous of the star woman reporter who scorns her as a mere social writer. By chance Adrienne discovers her disagreeable colleague involved in an affair with a U.S. Senator and rises in the male-dominated *Capitalist* hierarchy by disgracing the other woman. Adrienne does, however, suffer some ethical pangs. She also is concerned about her relationships with men, especially the colleague’s husband, whom Adrienne would like to father her own children.

“I wanted to show what the new media is like, especially for young women,” Tanabe said. “One of the things that struck me was that the men would share stories, but among the women there was no camaraderie. I had a friend who had an affair with a Senator, so I saw

how easy it is [to get access to powerful males]. Power is the obsession of Washington, money the obsession of New York, and looks the obsession of Los Angeles.”⁷

Sexual power relationships also figure in *Girls No More*, a 2012 eBook written by Caryl Rivers, a professor of journalism at Boston University and the author of multiple works of fiction and nonfiction.⁸ *Girls No More*, a sequel to Rivers’ best-selling book, *Virgins*, is set in Washington during the Vietnam era and tells the story of three women.

Two of the women were best friends in a Catholic high school and now are involved in journalism. One is a Pulitzer Prize-winning foreign correspondent, Peggy Morrison, who carries on a steamy affair with her old boyfriend even though he has become a Catholic priest. The other, Constance Masters, is an unhappy wife covering parties for a thinly-disguised version of *The Washington Post*, in spite of opposition from an abusive husband, whose Navy career is not going well. The third, Kitty, is a rich widowed Jewish hostess whose lover, a Midwest member of Congress, does not even tell her when he marries a beauty-contest winner from his home state solely to advance his political career.

After various convolutions of the plot, it appears there may be a happy ending. The priest seems ready to leave the priesthood and assume responsibility for the twins he has fathered while their journalist mother goes to jail for refusing to name a source. The abusive husband decides to get psychiatric help and his wife agrees to resume their marriage but expects his support for her career. The widow stumbles on compromising letters from her lover, refuses to continue their relationship, and in effect blackmails him to support aid to Israel.

According to Rivers, “The two women journalists are loosely based on the experience of myself and ... Clare Crawford-Mason. Clare started her D.C. reporting career covering the party beat, just as the character Con [does].”⁹ The novel pictures Con resorting to feminine wiles as she seeks Capitol Hill gossip, while Peggy, because of her Pulitzer Prize, is given

the cold shoulder at her newspaper by the other reporters who envy her, although she too struggles with the sexist atmosphere of the political scene.

Rivers continued, “The party scenes were pretty true to life in those days, women journalists were pretty much on their own in trying to dodge drunken, amorous males, some of them their sources.”¹⁰ In the case of the character Peg, Rivers said, “And the reactions that Peg gets when she starts to cover Vietnam protests and gets angry reactions from editors, who regard the protestors as unpatriotic punks, come from my own experience.

“The portrait of the women journalists was quite realistic; women in those days were struggling to cope in a power town where all the power belonged to men. Not so very different from today,” Rivers concluded.¹¹ This observation seems borne out by the Tanabe book, with its emphasis on the dreary experiences of women covering contemporary social events in Washington.

Specialized fields of Washington reporting contain particular forms of gender bias as depicted in two other novels. Women entering the locker rooms of male athletes to report sports provide a zesty backdrop for *Squeeze Play*, a novel by Jane Leavy.¹² Pairing sex and baseball, Leavy offers a raunchy look at the world of a female sportswriter, A.B. Berkowitz, who is assigned to cover the Washington Senators—the worst major league baseball team. Berkowitz encounters enormous animosity, although as pictured in the novel, most of it comes from members of the team and its management, not from her editors and male colleagues at the mythical *Washington Tribune*. By no means are the athletes willing to cover themselves to allow her to interview them; in fact, it becomes team policy not to speak to her at all.

Obviously inspired by her career as a sportswriter for *The Washington Post*, Leavy, who also has published biographies of major sports figures, writes with humor, telling detail, and personal knowledge—as well as some vulgarity—in *Squeeze Play*. *Entertainment*

Weekly called it “the best novel ever written about baseball,” while *People* magazine said it portrayed locker room life, displaying Berkowitz’s ability to view “not just the players’ ...um... [physical] assets but also their all-too-human frailties.”¹³ We also see Berkowitz falling prey to some frailties of her own and having trouble with her own boyfriend because of the demands of following the team.

No one could read the book without concluding that a woman sportswriter needs extraordinary courage to cope with the masculine culture and vocabulary of the major leagues. The book explains what price the woman has to pay.

Moving to another specialized field of Washington reporting, those used to a less frenetic type of reporting may find it easier to empathize with Chas Wheatley, a divorced, middle-aged, and somewhat overweight restaurant critic who is the heroine of *Murder on the Gravy Train*.¹⁴ Unlike the women in the other Washington novels discussed here, Wheatley is not young and beautiful. Written by Phyllis Richman, the award-winning restaurant critic of *The Washington Post* for 23 years, *Murder on the Gravy Train* is the second of two mysteries by her with a Washington newspaper background.

Conveying aspects of newsroom culture, this story introduces a tough male editor, appropriately named Bull, and the interoffice machinations of a younger, thinner, and more aggressive reporter named Dawn that lead to the breakup of Chas’s relationship with an investigative reporter. In the end Chas writes a story exposing an evil restaurant owner with political ties who committed murder and allied himself with the byline-grabbing Dawn. Chas’s story lands on the front page and her journalistic star rises.

At this point Chas realizes that her previous efforts to cover the restaurant beat by looking into a credit card and pricing scam had meant little to her editor who had little interest in a food beat staffed by a woman. “I might have been considering that investigation as hot news, but he saw it as filling column space. He’d ordered a specified number of inches

of scandal to be delivered on a particular date. I was the catalogue and he was the shopper,” Chas decided.¹⁵

The remaining books are part of two series of mysteries aimed at women readers. *Grave Apparel*, the fifth in Ellen Byerrum’s Crime of Fashion series, features Lacey Smithsonian, a fashion columnist for a fictional newspaper called the *Eye Street Observer* [Eye Street is a main street in downtown Washington].¹⁶ Lacey and her associates figure in all the Crime of Fashion books, which depict her solving crimes that mysteriously come her way while she writes about fashion faux pas.

As a journalist, however, the stylish Lacey longs to be taken seriously as a “hard news” reporter, recognizing that the fashion beat does not have the prestige of political reporting. Byerrum, who describes herself as a novelist, playwright, and Washington journalist, devotes considerable space to interoffice feuds in *Grave Apparel*, which highlights enmity between a woman editorial writer and a woman food editor as the springboard for a plot involving the wearing of garish holiday sweaters. A clever and facile writer, Byerrum includes fashion columns by Lacey in the text and references to newspaper office politics.

In her official biography, Byerrum, a journalism school graduate, describes her first job on a small town newspaper in Colorado before she came to Washington “where I got much better reporting jobs.”¹⁷ She also graduated from a private investigators’ school in Virginia. Describing her fictional character as “beautiful, smart, sassy, and very well-dressed,” Byerrum wrote, “Lacey was a character in my imagination long before she appeared in the Crime of Fashion series.”¹⁸

Also in the “chick lit” genre, the sixth novel, *Corruption of Faith*, was the first in a series starring journalist Sutton McPhee.¹⁹ I was not able to find out anything about the author, Brenda English, and think that name may be a pseudonym. In an acknowledgement, the author thanks individuals connected with the police department in Fairfax County,

Virginia, a large Washington suburb, for their help and the book itself contains numerous details about police operations.

Unlike characters in the other books, Sutton, a reporter who covers Fairfax County schools for a prominent Washington newspaper, has little difficulty with her newspaper colleagues. Still, she is growing tired of education reporting, even though she cannot imagine herself as anything other than a reporter. Her marriage had broken up when her husband complained that she “spent too much time at the paper and that he thought the other reporters were a bunch of immature, over-sexed, budding alcoholics.”²⁰

Sutton’s world changes when her sister is murdered and she investigates the crime, discovering that it was not due to random street violence, but tied to a major extortion scheme by a corrupt minister. Her journalistic reward for getting this page one story is promotion to the police beat even though she doubts her qualifications for the job. The book ends with Sutton, having cast aside a cold-hearted boyfriend who declined to go to her sister’s funeral, looking out her apartment window and wondering if she will ever find “a real someone to take the loneliness away.”²¹

In summary, it seems that fiction about Washington women journalists provides considerable insight into the facts surrounding their occupation.

Endnotes

¹ See Karin Tanabe, *The List* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2013).

² Endorsement by Sarah Pekkanen, also an author of women’s commercial fiction, on the first page of *The List*.

³ Interview by Maurine Beasley with Karin Tanabe, Bethesda, MD, July 3, 2013.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See Caryl Rivers, *Girls No More*. A Novel eBook: Kindle (www.Amazon.com, 2012).

⁹ Caryl Rivers interview by Maurine Beasley, June 17, 2013, email. Rivers, Crawford-Mason, and Beasley all belong to a group of feminist journalists called JAWS.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See Jane Leavy, *Squeeze Play* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

¹³ <http://www.janeleavy.com/squeeze-play>.

¹⁴ See Phyllis Richman, *Murder on the Gravy Train* (New York: Avon Books, 1999).

¹⁵ Ibid., 186.

¹⁶ See Ellen Byerrum, *Grave Apparel* (New York: Signet, 2007). There now are nine books in the Crime of Fashion series.

¹⁷ http://www.ellenbyerrum.com/eb_website_february_2, 2011.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See Brenda English, *Corruption of Faith* (New York: Berkley Prime Crime, 1997). Two other books followed.

²⁰ Ibid., 12.

²¹ Ibid., 260.