

guardian.co.uk

Fleet Street's finest

From Evelyn Waugh to Michael Frayn, novelists have portrayed journalists as bibulous, cynical and slothful. But for Christopher Hitchens, the tales of 'unredeemed squalor' and fiddled expenses evoke nostalgia for a vanished age

Christopher Hitchens

The Guardian, Saturday 3 December 2005

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)

James Bond does not make an appearance until Part Two of what is perhaps his most polished adventure, *From Russia with Love*. And when he has been briefed by M and outfitted by Q, and told what is expected of him, he suffers a mild mid-life crisis. What, he asks as the plane takes him towards the Golden Horn, would his younger self think of the man now so "tarnished with years of treachery and ruthlessness and fear", sent off "to pimp for England"? Eventually dismissing this as an idle or feeble mood, he reflects further:

"What-might-have-been was a waste of time. Follow your fate and be satisfied with it, and be glad not to be a second-hand motor salesman, or a yellow-press journalist, pickled in gin and nicotine, or a cripple - or dead."

Yes, well, that seems to put the profession nicely in its place, and indeed in its context. I read those words when I was a schoolboy in Cambridge in the early 1960s and had already decided that only journalism would do.

Not long afterwards, I was strolling along Tenison Road and saw, I swear, a wheezing second- or even third-hand motor belching towards me. Behind its wheel sat a man of impossibly fly-blown and lugubrious appearance; his skin sallow and wrinkled, an unfiltered cigarette in his mouth; his eyes like piss-holes in the snow. Only one detail was required to complete the scene, and at first my disordered senses almost refused to register it. Stuck in the corner of his windscreen was a faint and tattered card that read "PRESS". It was yellow all right. It might as well have been stuck in the band of his hat. Christ knows where he had been - perhaps to a bad day at the Newmarket races - but it took little imagination to see where he was bound. And this was not a Giles cartoon but a glimpse of the future I thought I wanted. I cheered up immensely. Clichés and caricatures are there to be overcome, after all. And I had my Orwell books to go back to.

Not much later, I came across Orwell's essay "Confessions of a Book Reviewer". It opens thus, in case you may have forgotten:

"In a cold but stuffy bed-sitting room littered with cigarette ends and half-empty cups of tea, a man in a moth-eaten dressing-gown sits at a rickety table, trying to find room for his typewriter among the piles of dusty papers that surround it. He cannot throw the papers away because the wastepaper basket is already overflowing, and besides, somewhere among the unanswered letters and unpaid bills it is possible that there is a cheque for two guineas which he is nearly certain he forgot to pay into the bank ... He is a man of thirty-five, but looks fifty. He is bald, has varicose veins and wears spectacles, or would wear them if his only pair were not chronically lost. If things are normal with him he will be suffering from malnutrition, but if he has recently had a lucky streak he will be suffering from a hangover."

Orwell of course could be discouragingly pessimistic at times. But for light relief there was always Evelyn Waugh, who in his *Decline and Fall* had taught me that even original sin could have its lighter side. What could be funnier than the school sports-day at Dr Fagan's awful Molesworth-like establishment at Llanabba? The arrangements are being made:

"Admirable! And then there is the Press. We must ring up the Flint and Denbigh Herald and get them to send a photographer. That means whisky. Will you see to that, Philbrick? I remember at one of our sports I omitted to offer whisky to the Press, and the result was a most unfortunate photograph.

"Boys do get into such indelicate positions during the obstacle race, don't they?"

A picture appeared to be emerging here. In the opening pages of *Scoop*, as William Boot is still in the train from Somerset to London and as yet has no idea what awaits him at the offices of the *Daily Beast*, he recalls that:

"He had once seen in Taunton a barely intelligible film about newspaper life in New York where neurotic men in shirt-sleeves and eye-shades had rushed from telephone to tape-machines, insulting and betraying one another in circumstances of unredeemed squalor."

Could this squalor ever be redeemed? Perhaps not by one of my other favourite standbys, Graham Greene, who sent Hale of the *Daily Messenger* down to Brighton for the day, there to pass his time in hucksterism and fatuity, "drinking gins and tonics wherever his programme allowed":

"For he had to stick closely to a programme: from ten till eleven Queen's Road and Castle Square, from eleven till twelve the Aquarium and Palace Pier, twelve till one the front between the Old Ship and West Pier, back for lunch between one and two in any restaurant he chose round the Castle square, and after that he had to make his way all down the parade to the West pier and then to the station by the Hove streets. These were the limits of his absurd and well-advertised sentry-go."

(And so much of journalism is the "sentry go": the stake-out, the hand-out, the lobby correspondents attending on their "source" who knows as well as they do when the deadline is coming. Hale and the *Daily Messenger* are doomed to miss the only real story of the day, which is Hale murdered in broad daylight by having a stick of hard rock jammed down his throat: an apposite revenge upon the idle and the spoon-fed.)

Enough, perhaps, of the Catholic school of fiction. I graduated to the cool and elegant universe of Anthony Powell, in whose world the influence of the newspapers is relatively minimal. In fact, as it now seems to me, the absence of this influence is a limitation on his claim to have been describing English social reality. Surely Sir Magnus Donners, that tycoon of 1930s tycoons, should have been the ambitious and manipulative proprietor of at least one Fleet Street title? When Powell gets round to it, though, as he does in the 10th of his 12-novel cycle, he does not stint. Here is the port-soaked "Books" Bagshaw, in *Books Do Furnish a Room*:

"He possessed that opportune facility for turning out several thousand words on any subject whatever at the shortest possible notice: politics: sport: books: finance: science: art: fashion - as he himself said, "War, Famine, Pestilence or Death on a Pale Horse". All were equal when it came to Bagshaw's typewriter. He would take on anything, and - to be fair - what he produced, even off the cuff, was no worse than what was to be read most of the time. You never wondered how on earth the stuff had ever managed to be printed."

Bagshaw's gift for non-specialisation is further emphasised a little later on, when he hears a saloon-bar criticism of the *Woman's Page* from an irate X Trapnel:

"Don't breathe a word against the Woman's Page, Trappy. Many a time I've proffered advice on it myself under a female pseudonym."

And this only sent me back to Evelyn Waugh and *The Loved One*, in which the repulsive Jake Slump, wreathed in the fumes of a bar-fly and chain-smoker, is a veteran of the agony advice column "Aunt Lydia's Post Bag".

A few themes seem to be emerging from the way in which our novelists have treated our journalists: copious gin (or whisky, or port, or what you will), mediocrity, cynicism, sloth, and meanness of spirit. This is to say nothing of the greatest of all les déformations professionnelles: shameless and indeed boastful fabrication. And I entirely forgot to mention the fiddling of expenses. All professions are deformed by this, of course, but only journalism has made a code out of it:

"Mr Salter saw he was not making his point clear. "Take a single example," he said. "Supposing you want to have dinner. Well, you go to a restaurant and do yourself proud, best of everything. Bill perhaps may be two pounds. Well, you put down five pounds for entertainment on your expenses. You've had a slap-up dinner, you're three pounds to the good, and everyone is satisfied."

(Evelyn Waugh: *Scoop*).

"Various members of the staff emerged from Hand and Ball Passage during the last dark hour of the morning, walked with an air of sober responsibility towards the main entrance, greeted the commissionaire and vanished upstairs in the lift to telephone their friends and draw their expenses before going out again to have lunch."

(Michael Frayn: *Towards the End of the Morning*).

An absolutely brilliant dead-pan account of the expenses racket is also given in Philip Norman's marvellous novel of the *Sunday Times* in the late 60s: *Everyone's Gone to the Moon*. This is the only rival to Frayn since Waugh.

Frayn's *Towards the End of the Morning*, first published in 1967, used to have the status of a cult book among the hacks (as we all agree to call ourselves). It does have more or less everything: the white-haired and burned-out old soak who can only reminisce about forgotten, bibulous trips with forgotten, bibulous stars of old Fleet Street: the bullying, self-loathing pictures editor who insists on how self-made he is; the dreamy assistant scribe who only wants to write book reviews for the *New Statesman* on the side (that dates it a bit: in those days the NS had a literary editor and was literate); the neurotic deputy editor who can't keep up the supply of pre-digested columns entitled "In Years Gone By", or hold his rural clergymen contributors to their deadlines. (In the latter respect, there is something of a lift from William Boot's "Lush Places" countryman column in *Scoop*.)

There was always, also, an interest in guessing whether Frayn had "set" it all at either the *Observer* or the *Guardian*, which in those days were separate institutions. (Malcolm Muggeridge's journalism novel *Picture Palace* had been too transparent in this regard, enraging his employers, the then-Manchester *Guardian* management, who obtained an injunction preventing its publication.) In the introduction to the new edition, Frayn says that it was a touch of both. The paper is never given a name, but it's in any case obviously not the *Observer* because it comes out every day. A possible clue, for addicts and cognoscenti, is contained on the very cover of the new edition which drops an entire word out of the title of the novel, and rather metaphysically offers it as *Towards the End of Morning*. The *Guardian* is no longer so celebrated for its misprints but there will always be those of us who are nostalgic for the days when it was, and when the opera critic Phillip Hope Wallace, for example, could wake up to find that he had reviewed last night's Covent Garden performance of Doris Godunov.

Admirers of Frayn's second novel are sneered at by those of us who are in the know, and who appreciate that it is his first novel about journalism that really demonstrates his genius. In *The Tin Men*, published in 1965, there are some boozers and louts and misfits, to be sure. But the brilliance of the thing lay in its attempt to reduce the business of hackery to an exact formula. At a demented research institute named for William Morris, eager eyes gaze at a computer that can handle UHL, or "Unit Headline Language". A survey is conducted, in which people are shown the random headlines:

ROW HOPE MOVE FLOP

LEAK DASH SHOCK

HATE BAN BID PROBE

A total of 86.4 % of those responding say that they understand the headlines, though of this total a depressing number cannot quite say why. Thus the search must go on. Would people like to read about air-crashes with children's toys in the wreckage, or without children's toys in the wreckage? In the case of a murder of a woman, should the victim be naked or partially clad? Frayn re-summons the tones of old Fleet Street into this laboratory of shame, when the questing researcher Goldwasser is brusquely accosted by his vile assistant Nobbs: "Do you prefer a female corpse to be naked, or to be clad in underclothes?" he repeated to Goldwasser. "That's what I call a good question, mate. That's what I call a good question."

How shall we know the cultural mayhem wrought by thinking in headlines? Philip Roth's *Portnoy* does it all the time, as he guiltily imagines how his foulness would be rendered on the front page. When a Wasp girl will not administer him a blow-job for fear of suffocation, for example: JEW SMOTHERS DEB WITH COCK: Vassar Grad Georgetown Strangulation Victim; Mocky Lawyer Held.

The habit breaks out fairly mildly in *Scoop*, where all the genius goes into the reporter's cables that are now a thing of the past ("LOVELY SPRING WEATHER BUBONIC PLAGUE RAGING"). In *Decline and Fall*, a lazy journalist comes to interview the mad architect Dr Silenus at Margot Beste-Chetwynde's country home, and "happily" visualises as he talks: "Peer's Sister-in-Law Mansion Builder On Future of Architecture." In *Brideshead Revisited*, for that matter, debutantes shriek at the headline "Marquis's Son Unused to Wine."

In one movie version of Hecht and MacArthur's *The Front Page*, Walther Matthau sees the condemned man's distraught girlfriend launch herself from a window and barely breaks off to mutter: "Shady Lady Leaps for Love," thus anticipating the New York Post's "Headless Body in Topless Bar" by some two decades. But in Frayn's *Tin Men* the examples are barely even satirical, or self-satirising. "Child Told Dress Unsuitable By Teacher"; "Paralysed Girl Determined to Dance Again". And since the demure days in which he was originally writing, further defences against satire have been erected at the lower end of the business. (Just try adding "bonk" to the list of four-letter headline words listed earlier, and begin your computer simulation.)

Martin Amis's *Yellow Dog* does its level best at parody (as can be proven by the mild name of his fictional rag, the *Morning Lark*, which is far less grotesque than the *Daily Beast* or *Daily Brute* and could very easily be imagined on a newsstand right now). And yellow is the light in the newsroom, and in the eyes of the hacks, and in so many of the bodily-fluids that they tirelessly seek to make their readers emit. The new modern skill is that of wildly overdone photocaption-writing, where no groan-making multiple-entendre is off-limits, and again I wasn't absolutely sure that part of the yellowing Clint Smoker's effort, about royalty in a Chinese restaurant, couldn't have been at least partly stolen:

"But sweet turned to sour when photographers had the sauce to storm their private room. Wan tun a bit of privacy, the couple fled with the lads in hot pursuit - we'll cashew!"

("That bit was good," said a hard-bitten old Fleet-Streeter of my acquaintance, "but the bit about how we discuss the readers at editorial meetings was bloody uncanny.") In Kingsley Amis's *Girl, 20*, which is the second funniest of his novels and the only one I can call to mind that features journalism - though I suppose Jim Dixon in a low moment does briefly impersonate a newspaper reporter on the telephone - the description of the editor Harold Meers is so thoroughly and worryingly accurate that I have met people who are certain that they must know who the bastard was. (" 'It's the way he keeps thinking up new ways of being a shit that you can't help taking your hat off to him for,' said Coates." Albert Coates, incidentally, exactly resembles Jake Slump in the tartarean depths of his smoker's cough - "Coates drew at his cigarette and coughed terribly. He seemed unaware of any link between these two actions" - while the hero of *Girl, 20* joins Slump, Boot, and the awful Reg Mounce of *Towards the End of the Morning*, in the notorious newspaper-industry bind of the hack who has been fired without knowing it.)

The Amises are the only ones of the authors I have mentioned who didn't serve time on a national newspaper. Fleming was a foreign editor for Kemsley when that family owned the *Sunday Times*, Waugh was a correspondent and Greene had been a subeditor as well. Powell toiled at the *Daily Telegraph*, and Frayn we all know about. They mostly did quite well out of it. Orwell never had a steady job, but he haunted Fleet Street in search of work and knew the argot. Yet they all unite in employing the figure of the journalist, or the setting of a newspaper, as the very pattern and mould of every type of squalor and venality.

The sole exception I can call to mind is PG Wodehouse, who started out as a penny-a-liner on the *Globe* and seems to have found journalism to be innocent fun. Bertie Wooster never misses a chance to mention his article on "What The Well-Dressed Man Is Wearing", which appeared in his Aunt Dahlia's own magazine *Milady's Boudoir*, and to which he deprecatingly refers as "my 'piece', as we journalists call it". Psmith, in *Psmith Journalist*, takes over a small magazine of domesticity in New York, named *Cosy Moments*, and transforms it briefly into a campaigning, reforming and crime-fighting organ. His slogan when confronted by those who would intimidate him is: "Cosy Moments cannot be muzzled." This motto has been inscribed on the wall above my keyboard for many years.

Probably nothing is as boring as the reminiscences of an old Fleet Street hand, but I shall have to say that I pity those now in the trade who won't remember the atmosphere of that little enclave between Ludgate Circus and the Strand, with its byways and courts and alleys. Yes, the smell of printer's ink, the thunder of the presses like the engine-room of the *Titanic*. Yes, the lights blazing in the black-glass palace of the old *Daily Express*, and the vans swinging out on their way to catch the overnight trains with the first edition. Yes, the fog around Blackfriars Station. Yes, the exorbitant padding of the night-shift by printers with names like M Mouse.

Yes, the suicidal imbibing in the *King and Keys*, or the *Punch*, or *El Vino*. Yes, the demented whims of the latest proprietor. Yes, the overflowing ashtrays and the pounding of ancient upright typewriters. Yes, the callousness and gallows humour. ("Shumble, Whelper and Pigge knew Corker," as Waugh describes a hacks' reunion in *Scoop*. "They had loitered of old on many a doorstep and forced an entry into many a stricken home.") And yes, it's true that the most celebrated opening line of any Fleet Street war correspondent was that of the hack in the Congo who yelled: "Anyone here been raped and speaks English?"

The palm goes to Frayn, in the end, because well before it happened he could see that closing time was coming, to those pubs and those hot-metal presses both. Hackery and Grub Street had of course been lampooned before, from Pope to Gissing, but the real "age" of newspapers begins roughly with the Northcliffe press - "written by office-boys for office-boys", as someone loftily said - and the era of mass literacy. In other words, it opened with the 20th century and may have closed with it.

In Frayn's two novels in the sixth decade of that century, the lure of television is already beginning to exert its anti-magic. The mindlessness of the opinion poll and the reader-survey is coming to replace news and analysis. The reporters and editors are beginning to think about mortgages and pensions. The editor is a cipher. I do not think that there will again be a major novel, flattering or unflattering, in which a reporter is the protagonist. Or if there is, he or she will be a blogger or some other species of cyber-artist, working from home and conjuring the big story from the vastness of electronic space.

In any case, the literature of old Fleet Street was to a very considerable extent written by journalists and for journalists. Most reporters I know regard *Scoop* as a work of pitiless realism rather than antic fantasy. The cap fitted, and they wore it, and with a lop-sided grin of pride, at that. Perhaps this assists us in answering the age-old question: why does the profession of journalism have such a low reputation? The answer: because it has such a bad press.

• Christopher Hitchens is a columnist for *Vanity Fair* and wrote the introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *Scoop*

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2010