

BOOKS

I Spent My Life in Newsrooms—But in My Novels, Reporters Aren't the Heroes

Journalists are in the business of finding facts and telling secrets, and these aren't the acts that move a story of Washington intrigue forward.

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I'm a journalist deep in my bones. Like a lot of people in newsrooms, I came to the profession young (at 15, in my case), and have spent more than 45 years at it now—as a reporter, as an editor, as the press critic at the *Los Angeles Times*, writing books about media, and even running two think tanks that studied the field. One of the books I co-authored with Bill Kovach, *The Elements of Journalism*, is a text on press responsibility that is used worldwide.

Journalists, to me, are heroes. But when I started writing novels a few years ago—and had to imagine how all the players in a story might think—I realized that, in political fiction at least, journalists don't make great protagonists. Their grasp of the story, in the end, is too fragmentary. They are rarely let inside the rooms where the

secret intrigue plays out. And given the particular requirements of political thrillers, they are even less likely than others to save the day.

Journalists make fine heroes in a lot of other fiction, especially crime novels; reporters are truth seekers, after all, and in real life, it is not uncommon for them to help solve crimes, including murders (from the Golden State Killer in Sacramento to the Grim Sleeper serial killer in Los Angeles, it's a long list).

But the basic structure of most crime fiction is retrospective. A terrible deed has been done, and now the hero must find out who is responsible. The plot is driven by solving a puzzle, most of the pieces of which are already in front of you. That is something a variety of types of characters can do: reporters, cops, private investigators, and even—in the case of English drawing rooms—little old ladies. The heroes of crime fiction might share some traits in common. As a group, they are shrewd and driven, with an eye for detail and a gift for inductive reasoning. But many people, not just journalists, have those skills.

Political fiction is a different genre. What compels the action in political stories is not a crime that has already happened, but, usually, a villain's drive for power, which sets in motion a plan or chain of events that must be stopped. The story is canted forward, not backward. And it is less about facts already in evidence than about dynamic desires and relationships.

The classic political thrillers of the 1960s exemplify this structure. In *Seven Days in May*, a messianic right-wing general plans a military coup to overthrow a weak president. In *Fail Safe*, Machiavellian hard-liners push for a preemptive strike on Russia after U.S. computers offer a false signal that the Russians might be attacking first. In *The Manchurian Candidate*, the North Koreans are allied with a power-hungry Washington matron who hopes to seize the presidency for her husband. The heroes in these stories have to do more than figure out the dastardly plan. They also have to stop it—in most cases at the last minute—from reaching its conclusion. “Plot to shoot the president discovered, news at 11” might not cut it. The hero needs to run into the rafters of the auditorium and grab the gun before the shot is fired.

[*Read: Bill Clinton's novel isn't a thriller—it's a fantasy.*]

Often, this action takes place behind closed doors. In conventional crime fiction, the final revelations tend to be public—the crime was probably news in the first place, and so, often, is its resolution. Political thrillers, in contrast, usually hinge on the need to keep explosive information from coming to light. At the end of Frederick Forsyth's *The Day of the Jackal*, for example, the hero (a policeman) has buried the assassin in an unmarked grave. A terrible secret—that the French president came very close to being murdered by his political opponents—has been buried with him. For the reader, the thrill of the ending comes from being let in on a dangerous secret about which the public will never fully know. Journalists are awkward here: They are in the business of telling secrets, not keeping them.

Journalists also might not have access to the right secrets to begin with. Part of the fun of political fiction is in seeing behind the scenes of government and diplomacy and watching the psychology of power at play. In those circumstances, it helps to have a protagonist inside the room—not one waiting outside asking questions.

Advise and Consent, Allen Drury's intricate story of a Senate confirmation, is a good example. Drury was a *New York Times* reporter. But as if to underscore how irrelevant journalists are to the action, the reporters in his novel do not even have names. They're identified only by publication. They ask mostly silly questions. And the poor scribes are given neither physical features nor private thoughts. It is Drury's backhanded way of conveying how power in Washington really works, and how little of it is in the newspapers.

Instead, the key character in Drury's novel is Senate Majority Leader Bob Munson, the man tasked with getting the White House's nominee approved. He is one of the few characters in the drama whom everyone confides in, which makes him a useful storytelling choice. He is also one of the few people who understands and even sympathizes with the motivations of people on all sides, which helps Drury get at the complexity of the story he wants to convey.

Think of the heroes of so much political fiction, and there aren't many reporters among them; rather, they tend to be people close to the seat of power, with relationships that give them special insight into the motives of other key characters, including the antagonists. In *The Manchurian Candidate*, the hero is a military intelligence officer and former prisoner of war who realizes there is something wrong with his former friend. In *Seven Days in May*, it is an army officer who

painfully discovers that his former mentor appears to be losing his mind. In Don Winslow's cartel trilogy about the drug wars, the hero is a DEA agent locked in a blood feud with his old friend, a drug lord. In Gore Vidal's *Lincoln*, readers watch Lincoln himself through the eyes of his young aide, John Hay, and much of what makes the book compelling is seeing the president's skill, intelligence, and subtle grace, which even many in his own Cabinet seem to miss.

[*Read: A perfectly postmodern White House book*]

My own new book, *The Good Lie*—about how Washington reacts to a terrorist incident abroad—includes a lot of the nuts and bolts and challenges of investigative reporting, especially coverage of national-security matters: where and how reporters meet intelligence sources and develop their trust, how they avoid technology that could get them caught, and how the whole process is different from what's in the movies. There is a good deal about the motives of intelligence sources as well. Many of the journalists in my book are heroic. They keep breaking important stories that reveal some of the lies being told in Washington and help propel the plot forward. But in the end the exposés reveal only parts of the true story—not the whole of it.

Journalists in real life lay out the facts they can ascertain. Yet they rarely have *all* the facts of a case. And they eventually learn that the facts, on their own, almost never add up to the whole truth. Those of us who work in news can determine the *who*, *what*, and *where* of an event with a fair degree of certainty. But we are always on softer ground when it comes to motive: *Why* did the president do what he did? Journalists might try to answer, but they will never do so definitively. Yet it's those very questions of motive that animate political novels, which have the same goal as all fiction: to add the *why* and *how* to our understanding of the world.

Stephen King has described good fiction as "the truth inside the lie." In other words, it's a way to try to comprehend the things that you cannot fully know or understand if you stick entirely to what is observable in the factual world. Good thriller writers—whether they are working in crime or political fiction—try to reveal something true while they entertain, often by taking real-life situations and tweaking them, just a little, to explore their wider implications. Then they throw deep and compelling characters into those situations and explore how they will react emotionally and morally.

For a novelist who's trying to tell the truth about politics, journalists can be important players in the drama. They dig, ask uncomfortable questions, and reveal facts that are part of the puzzle. But if a true villain were ever to set a terrible plot in motion, journalists are not likely to stop it by themselves—in real life or in fiction.

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