Type casting: Journalists in pop culture

In *Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Pop Culture*, authors Matthew C. Ehrlich and Joe Saltzman have done a painstakingly thorough job of marshaling, assembling, organizing, and setting down in print the vast amount of material that makes up our popular culture’s representation of journalism and the men and women who commit it. And there’s no question about it, the press has been a favorite subject of movies, television, and literature for about as long as the first two of those have been around.

The authors approach their...
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middle-aged British reporter in Vietnam in the early 1950s. He harbors no illusions," the authors write. "Fowler steadfastly refuses to take sides of any kind." And when, finally, he does take a stand, it "does not seem to be rooted in any particular idealism." When The Quiet American was Hollywoodized in 1958 by Joseph Mankiewicz, under a heavy studio hand of Cold War pressure, it "completely altered the novel's ending," and Greene angrily disavowed it as a betrayal of his anti-war message, saying "one could almost believe that the film was made deliberately to attack the book and the author." A 2002 remake was faithful to Greene’s vision.

A section on futurism and sci-fi and the perspective they give to our view of the role of journalism today offers a fascinating example of the past predicting the future defining the present. In Isaac Asimov’s 1941 short story “Nightfall,” a journalist named Theremon 762 from the planet Lagash "strikingly resembles the cynical columnists on the planet Earth." Asimov's story deals with science deniers, and a Lagash scientist lashes out at Theremon: “You have led a vast newspaper campaign against the efforts of myself and my colleagues to organize the world against the menace which it is now too late to avert.” It’s a chilling forecast of a modern journalism that gives equal time to climate change deniers.

There’s a great deal to glean from this slim volume (it logs in at 256 pages, but everything after page 154 is appendix and notes). Its academic style hampers the going at first, but once you get deep enough into the riches of the subject matter, it ceases to be as much of a distraction. Still, it’s a little like a scholarly dissertation on sex: descriptive and even valuable, but it can’t touch the real thing.

As the authors say, a little wistfully, near the end, “We began this book by asking why scholars should study the image of the journalist in popular culture. We neglected to provide one important answer: it’s fun.”

“Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture,” by Matthew C. Ehrlich and Joe Saltzman, was published in April by University of Illinois Press.