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Where are the true journalism novels?

Friday, February 22, 2008 | 5:00 p.m. CST



Steve Weinberg |
BY Steve Weinberg

I know something few other journalists know: Day after day, novelists are writing about us. Some of those writers actually work in newspaper, magazine, and broadcast newsrooms, but some of them have never even set foot inside a newsroom. What I call “journalism novels” — those with journalists as protagonists — get snatched up by pleasure readers across the nation. They show up in bookstores, airport shops, libraries and at online book retailers. They can be found in the “mystery fiction” and “romance fiction” sections, and, occasionally, the serious-literature section.

As a result of all those novels — thousands of them — readers from all walks of life form mental pictures of how journalists gather news and what journalists are really like. The trouble is, a high percentage of journalism novels, including many written by real-life journalists, sensationalize and otherwise misrepresent the craft. (The same is often true of movies, television programs, and stage plays.)

So even though it is traditional in newsrooms to pay little, if any, attention to journalism novels, the growth of unreliable portrayals almost surely contributes to image problems for reporters, editors, anchors and publishers.

In the opening months of 2008, numerous journalism novels are scheduled for publication, among them Alex Witchel’s “The Spare Wife.” Others carry such titles as “Stalking Susan,” “Deviant Behavior,” and “A Little Trouble with the Facts.”

I started collecting journalism novels in 1983, just for fun at first, or perhaps because I felt flattered that fiction writers would find my chosen career so alluring. The collection, which includes thousands of such titles, now resides in Ellis Library on the MU campus. Journalism professors at the university have assigned novels from my collection to their students. At least four master's degrees and doctorates are based in part on graduate students mining these books.

In real life journalism can seem a weird craft. It plays a role at the center of democracy but resides in a chaos of perceptions, at once reviled and revered, misrepresented and romanticized. Every time I start reading a new journalism novel, I hope the author will help me make sense of my craft. After all, good fiction helps shed light on the human condition, helps readers understand the personalities of its characters.

Far too often this is what I take away from journalism novels: As a group we have a lot of sexual intercourse on the job, lack scruples when gathering information, and solve murders frequently enough to eliminate the need for homicide detectives in certain metropolitan areas. Good fun, I suppose, but disheartening because journalism should come across as something more noble.

Given so powerful an affinity among authors writing about journalists, I am thrilled to read the relatively few credible, insightful novels in my collection. I confess that I have not read all of them, so a gem might sit on the shelf unacknowledged. Of those I have read, though, my favorite is now 37 years old. The author, almost unknown in the book-publishing world when he wrote "The Fly on the Wall," is now famous for a series of mystery novels set in Indian country. He worked as a real-life journalist before turning to fiction.

His name: Tony Hillerman.

The novel's title comes from the metaphor, attributed to Walter Lippmann, of the journalist who sees all and feels nothing. The protagonist, John Cotton, keeps a picture of the symbolic insect on the pressroom wall in the Capitol of a Midwestern state. Here is one passage from Hillerman's novel that turned me on:

"Cotton hurried past the Game and Fish Department offices, past the doors of the State Veterinary Board, the Funeral Directors and Embalmers Commission, the Contractors' Licensing Office and the Cosmetology Inspection bureau. He reminded himself, as he did almost every day when he used this route, that there might be good hunting among these obscure agencies forgotten in the Capitol catacombs. In fact, he had a tip about the Veterinary Board. An anonymous caller had told him the director was letting his wife use agency gasoline credit cards. When he had time, he would check it out."

Now that is credible.

Hillerman's novel, while excellent, does sensationalize the craft from time to time. I dream of a novel better still. In his 1970 book "The Newspaper in the American Novel," scholar Thomas Elliott Berry wrote that no author had "created a genuinely memorable newspaperman character. ... The great American newspaper novel still remains to be written."

So I circulate among the library shelves holding my collection, thinking about when I will finally come across the "Moby Dick" of journalism novels.

Steve Weinberg is the former executive director of Investigative Reporters and Editors. He teaches at the Missouri School of Journalism, and he has written eight (nonfiction) books. This column was originally written for Editor and Publisher and is reprinted here with the author's permission.

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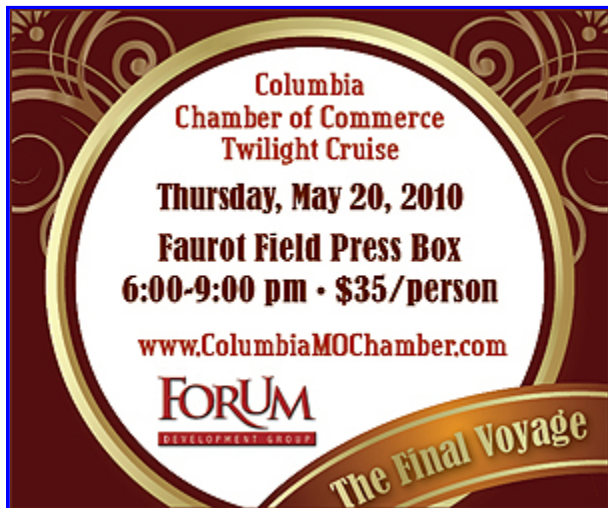
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