

**SOB SISTERS:
THE IMAGE OF THE FEMALE JOURNALIST
IN POPULAR CULTURE©**

**By Joe Saltzman
Director, Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture (IJPC)**

© Joe Saltzman 2003

The Image of the Female Journalist in Popular Culture revolves around a dichotomy never quite resolved. The female journalist faces an ongoing dilemma: How to incorporate the masculine traits of journalism essential for success – being aggressive, self-reliant, curious, tough, ambitious, cynical, cocky, unsympathetic – while still being the woman society would like her to be – compassionate, caring, loving, maternal, sympathetic. Female reporters and editors in fiction have fought to overcome this central contradiction throughout the 20th century and are still fighting the battle today.

Not much early fiction featured newswomen. Before 1880, there were few newspaperwomen and only about five novels written about them.¹ Some real-life newswomen were well known – Margaret Fuller, Nelly Bly (Elizabeth Cochrane), Annie Laurie (Winifred Sweet or Winifred Black), Jennie June (Jane Cunningham Croly) – but most female journalists were not permitted to write on important topics. Front-page assignments, politics, finance and sports were not usually given to women. Top newsroom positions were for men only. Novels and short stories of Victorian America offered the prejudices of the day: Newspaper work, like most work outside the home, was for men only. Women were supposed to marry, have children and stay home. To become a journalist, women had to have a good excuse – perhaps a dead husband and starving children. Those who did write articles from home kept it to themselves. Few admitted they wrote for a living. Women who tried to have both marriage and a career flirted with disaster.²

The professional woman of the period was usually educated, single, and middle or upper class. One historian writes of the successful female journalist of the 1890s: “In the world of modern wild-cat journalism the woman reporter lasts about four years. She brings her education, her personal attractions, her youth, her illusions, her energy, her ambition, and her enthusiasm to the encounter, and the first year she rises rapidly. The second and third years she enjoys the zenith of her popularity; with the fourth year she begins the descent, lingers about the horizon for a time, and then she disappears from view. There is no vocation into which women have entered where disillusion materialize so rapidly as they do in journalism.”³ Most women quit their jobs when they married, and found fulfillment as a woman by being a wife and mother.⁴

Historian Frank Mott writes that “women flocked into newspaper work in the eighties.” By 1886, 500 females worked regularly on American newspapers. Two years later, there were 200 women working on New York newspapers alone.⁵ But during the last 20 years of the 19th century, there were no more than 10 novels written about women journalists⁶ and few chronicled women working as printers, freelance contributors, book reviewers, columnists, travel and fashion writers, crime reporters and editors. The 1900 census recorded 2,193 women in journalism, 7.3 percent of the profession.⁷ Few women worked as reporters in a newsroom. Many worked at home writing

columns or articles thought to be primarily of interest to women. Some were true “sob sisters” writing sentimental stories. Others were more adventurous, undertaking muckraking exposes. Historian Donna Born writes that the woman journalist in fiction at the turn of the century is “single and young, attractive, independent, reliable, courageous, competent, curious, determined, economically self-supporting, professional and compassionate.”⁸ Most female journalists in fiction ended up in marriages or disillusioned, or both. Critics of the time conceded that most of the novels written about journalism were written by men and women “who have worked in newspaper offices at one time or another.” Because of this, they could not understand why few revealed the “journalistic sphere in its true light.” Most deplored the “fiction type of women particularly,” since women “hardly can be said to flock into newspaper offices.”⁹

Even before the movies could talk, it became clear that female reporters were perfect for film.¹⁰ Motion pictures offered the meatiest roles for female actors and created the perfect battleground of the sexes: the underrated girl reporter could prove she was as capable as the male, and the boy reporter could gloat that no girl could possibly keep pace with him. The sob sister became a popular newspaper heroine.¹¹

Hollywood’s female reporters, as one newspaperman put it, “did more glamorous work than most of those who toiled on real papers. Too often, young female reporters, even on big city papers have been confined to covering ‘social’ news, ‘women’s page’ features, and the like. There have been notable exceptions...but for every widely known female reporter who gets to cover top stories there have undoubtedly been thousands who spent most of their working lives at weddings, social events, interviewing outstanding mothers, listening to luncheon-club lecturers or otherwise helping to fill those pages that editors know their female readers turn to habitually.”¹²

Editors used female reporters to cover the human angle or color sidebar of a story. “If somebody accused of a crime happened to be a woman, a female reporter might be assigned to play up the emotional aspects of the story. Or, if the accused was a man, he might have a wife, girl friend or mother” whom the female reporter could interview and play up any heart-tugging angles, any emotional aspect of the story. “What they wrote came to be referred to as *sob stories*” and female reporters came to be known, at least in the movies, as sob sisters. Few newspaper people remember female reporters being called sob sisters in the city room.¹³

Pioneer female journalist Ishbel Ross tells a story about the origin of the term *sob sister* that has been picked up by many commentators. She claims the derogatory name dates from the 1907 trial of millionaire Harry K. Thaw who was accused of killing architect Stanford White for being his wife’s lover. Four female journalists covered the trial – Ada Patterson, Dorothy Dix, Winifred Black and Nixola Greeley-Smith. Male reporters believed that the only reason the four women reporters were there was to give the woman’s point of view, accusing them of sympathizing with the adulterous wife, Evelyn Nesbit Thaw. One male seeing the four at the press table, nicknamed them “sob sisters” and the name stuck.¹⁴ Journalism historian Howard Good sums up how female journalists felt about the name: “Most women reporters resented this label because it reinforced the stereotype of women as big-hearted but soft-minded, emotionally generous but intellectually sloppy.”¹⁵ Slang dictionaries date the term to about 1925, defining a *sob sister* as “a woman news reporter who appeals to readers’ sympathies with her accounts of pathetic happenings.”¹⁶

The early decades of the 20th century “brought an increasingly self-confident newswoman to comic strips, movies, short stories, and novels.”¹⁷ Especially in the movies, women reporters were independent, hard-boiled dames ready and willing to do anything their male counterparts would do to get a story. This creates the dichotomy faced by most women in fiction at the turn of the century – maintaining their compassionate, feminine nature as defined by the times while still exhibiting the so-called masculine traits of journalism considered essential for a successful reporter or editor.¹⁸

The sob sister always has to prove herself. She has to persuade the males around her that she is worthy of their respect.¹⁹ She often screws up before winning her stripes, but, by and large, she is an independent, hardworking reporter who never lets her newspaper down. As historian Deac Rossell points out, “By the 1920s, newspapering was firmly established as a genre where women could take the leading roles, the active and successful parts, as well as men... Where women had been typically the love object, or the dramatic and emotional catalyst between male leads in most films, here she could have a job, move independently through society, be a leader. All without necessarily endangering her femininity or being typed as man-less.”²⁰

Occasionally, the sob sister shows signs of feminine frailty. Most female reporters eventually need rescuing by the most available male. But more often than not, she outwits, outfoxes, and outreports every male reporter in sight. Only then does she become one of the guys. The highest compliment you can pay a female journalist is to call her “a newspaperman.” Film critic Pauline Kael maintains that talkies about girl reporters were almost all based on the most highly publicized female reporter of the time, Hearst's Adela Rogers St. Johns. In *His Girl Friday* (1940), a superior remake of *The Front Page* (1931), the male reporter, Hildy Johnson, becomes a female. Rosalind Russell as Hildy was so obviously playing St. Johns, writes Kael, “that she was dressed in an imitation of the St. Johns' girl-reporter striped suit.”²¹

The most dominant female film reporter of the 1930s, Torchy Blane,²² was played by everyone's notion of what a female reporter looked and sounded like – the fast-talking Glenda Farrell. No one else in films better epitomized the aggressive, self-assured, independent female reporter.²³ One reason for this may have been that the Torchy Blane character was originally a male reporter named Kennedy, the hero of a series of pulp magazine stories by Frederick Nebel.²⁴ In the movies, Blane went after fast-breaking, sensational stories as aggressively as any newsman. Her scoops were usually in print before her male counterparts figured out what was going on. She was no sob sister, no gushy old maid, no masculine-looking lady, “no society dame after the woman's angle,” as one critic put it. “She was an honest to goodness pencil pusher who scrambled for her story along with the so-called stronger sex – and got it.”²⁵

The popularity of this series was mostly due to Farrell's performance as the brassy female reporter. Farrell told one interviewer that the cinematic sob sisters “were caricatures of newspaperwomen as I knew them. So before I undertook to do the first Torchy, I determined to create a real human being – and not an exaggerated comedy type.” She said that when she visited New York City, she watched female journalists work and she met with them whenever they visited Hollywood. “They were generally young, intelligent, refined, and attractive. By making Torchy true to life, I tried to create a character practically unique in movies.”²⁶

Male screenwriters, perhaps worried that these sob sisters were too independent and too feisty for the times, would make sure that by the final reel, these self-sufficient females would succumb to love, longing for what 1930s audiences were sure every woman really wanted – a man, marriage, and children. No matter how strong the female reporter was throughout the film, she, like Torchy Blane, would hope for matrimony with the most available man. The question wasn't how could Torchy Blane care about a numskull policeman like Steve McLane. The situation was that in the 1930s, she really had no choice.²⁷

In real life, the phrase *sob sister* wasn't popularized until the movies used it. It summed up the dichotomy of the movie female reporter. She was considered an equal by doing a man's work, a career woman drinking and arguing toe-to-toe with any male in the shop, and holding her own against everyone. Yet this tough reporter often showed her soft side and cried long and hard when the man she loved treated her like a sister instead of a lover. By the end of the film, most sob sisters, no matter how tough or independent during the film, would give up anything for marriage, children, and a life at home. Female moviegoers understood this massive contradiction. They loved the way the woman gave it to the man throughout the film, but they didn't trust any woman who didn't put family and children above a career. So it didn't seem unusual to them if the woman made a 180-degree turnabout at the end of the film. That was the natural order of things, and she didn't have any choice. In fact, she shouldn't have wanted any choice.

In the 1930s, sob sisters also underwent a form of masculinization, adopting male-associated names and ways of dressing designed to downplay their femininity that made them look more like one of the boys. Women rarely became editors or publishers, but as reporters and columnists they more than held their own against their male counterparts.

For female actors, reporter roles gave them a chance to be top dog in a man's world and they jumped at it. Practically every major actress of the period showed up in tailored coat and pants to fight the males in the newsroom, to assert her individualism and independence – at least until the final reel – and to become one of the few positive role models working outside the home.²⁸ Brenda Starr and Lois Lane, beautiful, intelligent, successful professionals, starred in their own comics. When they moved from newspaper comic strips to movies, they maintained their independent newshawk credentials while pining away for powerful men beyond their control.

During the 1940s, female journalists were complimented for filling the jobs left by men who went to war. Historian Donna Born writes, “The need for women workers to replace men at war caused an overnight change in the cultural attitudes against working women, and the cultural stereotype of women as weak and incompetent changed to that of strong women filling ‘man-sized’ jobs.”²⁹

Female journalists in fiction during the 1940s are either portrayed as isolated super-professional journalists able to do any job perfectly or they are relegated to following orders from men because they are still female and thus unreliable – “irrational, temperamental, prone to trouble, and dependent on a man either for protection and support or for self-fulfillment.”³⁰

After the war, it was business as usual. Women belonged in the home as matriarchs of the nuclear family. Images of the female journalist in popular culture showed women, usually single, as reporters, feature writers, and society page editors, still trying to reconcile their journalism with their womanhood. They still tried to find a satisfactory compromise between two stereotypes – their feminine qualities of compassion, passiveness, sensitivity, and caring and the masculine qualities of ambition and ruthlessness (“I’ll do anything to get that story.”). Beauty and sex turned out to be weapons females used to gain an advantage in the media marketplace, “the competent but bad woman for whom sex is a means to further her ambition.”³¹

Most female journalists portrayed in popular culture are seldom shown as fully developed human beings.³² As historian-journalist Loren Ghiglione puts it, “The contemporary newswoman, while regularly cast as a tough, talented pro, often bears the burden of being depicted as an emotionally empty Super Bitch or Super Whore.”³³

The 21st-century images aren’t all that different from the images of the sob sisters of the past – if a woman is successful, it means she has assumed many of the characteristics of the newsman, losing her femininity in the process. Or, in most cases, she stays tantalizingly female and uses her womanliness to get to the top. It’s still mostly a no-win situation. For every positive image of a successful female journalist in film, TV, novels and short stories, there are a dozen stereotypical clichés – the male reporter saving the inept female reporter, the ravishing female doing whatever it takes to get the story, the tough editor or publisher who is miserable because she has given up what she wants most – the love of a good man and children.

In fiction of the late 20th century and the early 21st century, the most popular female journalist is usually more of a detective solving a crime than a reporter. The savvy reporter or columnist who captures the murderer before anyone else often stars in her own series of mystery novels.³⁴ And it’s a varied group composed of newspaper publishers and owners; investigative and crime reporters from Toronto, London, Georgia, Oregon, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, New York; television and radio reporters; gossip and food columnists; sports writers and even a writer for *Dog’s Life*; documentarians and journalism teachers. Some of the female journalists are so strong and independent that they are reluctant to admit that they are lesbians. Often their sexual preference figures strongly in both plot and character.³⁵

TV anchors and reporters prove irresistible to many writers in fiction,³⁶ movies and TV³⁷ – the females are either depicted as gorgeous blond airheads who sometimes sleep their way to the top or tough-minded women working in an all-male environment trying to prove their worth as reporters and not to be seen as sex objects. Often the veteran female news anchor is threatened by a younger woman who is after her job.³⁸ The greatest stereotype of the image of the female journalist in popular culture, and the most ridiculed, is the TV reporter-anchorwoman.

Ironically enough, the two most positive images of the journalist in popular culture turn out to be women – Mary Richards (Mary Tyler Moore) in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) and Murphy Brown (Candice Bergen) in *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998). Richards starts out as the insecure cub reporter-type working as an associate producer in the Minneapolis WJM-TV newsroom and by the end of the series becomes a self-assured professional ready to move on to bigger things affirmed by *Mary and Rhoda*, the 2000 TV movie updating her fictional history.³⁹

Murphy Brown is the old-fashioned reporter who doesn't let anything get in the way of her story or her work as a journalist. She works hard, loves hard, drinks hard, and smokes one cigarette after another. While this is acceptable behavior for 1930s and 1940s reporters, this kind of obsessive behavior is not acceptable in the 1980s. In the first episode, Murphy Brown repents – she stops drinking and smoking. But she won't let go of the passion that makes her one of the most successful TV reporters in the business and a role model for thousands of women.

Brown is the sharp-tongued network reporter for the live TV newsmagazine *FYI*, based in Washington, D.C. According to her resume, Murphy got her job at *FYI* in 1977, the year Mary Richards was fired from WJM and the same year her boss, Lou Grant took over as city editor for the Los Angeles Tribune in the *Lou Grant* TV series. A fast-talking professional in 1988, Brown doesn't give an inch in her fight to control the TV newsmagazine environment in which she works. In 10 years, she becomes sober, gives birth to an illegitimate child,⁴⁰ survives breast cancer and remains at the top of her profession. Few female journalists in popular culture could match Brown's professionalism and authority. She never compromised herself or her principles and mixed it up with real and imaginary journalists on an equal basis.

Murphy Brown obliterates the fine line between reality and fiction. In one *Murphy Brown* episode, Miles Silverberg (Grant Shaud), *FYI*'s executive producer, gets angry at Brown and yells at her: "Let me remind you about something, Murphy. This is a job, not make-believe. We're not doing *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* here. There's no audience laughing at every cute little thing you say. This is the real world. So when I tell you you're doing a story, you just don't say, 'Oh, Mr. Grant, I don't want to. You do it!'" The point is clear: Murphy Brown lives in the real world, not the world of TV sitcoms. Real journalists are frequent guests and they talk to Murphy as if she is their equal. Away from the television program, Murphy Brown is treated in the media as if she really exists outside of Candice Bergen's persona. And when Vice President Dan Quayle got into a national debate over single mothers with Murphy Brown, reality and fiction became inseparable. Practically every major broadcast journalist appeared on the program during its decade-long run – all of the *60 Minutes* correspondents, every major female news reporter and anchor in the business including Linda Ellerbee, Katie Couric, Joan Lunden, Faith Baldwin, Mary Alice Walker, Paula Zahn, Leslie Stahl and Connie Chung,⁴¹ broadcast veterans Charles Kuralt and Walter Cronkite. And when Murphy greets them on camera, it is as if they are old and valued friends. Not only do real-life journalists treat Murphy as an equal, but politicians from both parties also show up to talk with her and about her. If they all accept Murphy as a real-life counterpart, then who is the audience to deny her existence?

Murphy Brown is the image of the sob-sister-now-celebrity-journalist that dominates the final decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. Yet, for many sob sisters there is a bittersweet aftertaste of giving up a bit too much to achieve this equality with males. After all, the image of the male journalist in popular culture was never that appealing to most people, never much of a complete life with domestic comforts and achievements. Most journalists in fiction lead a rather unappealing, self-centered existence filled with deadlines, alcohol, danger, loneliness, lies and distortions, bitter frustrations and either an exciting death on assignment or a sad end to a long career filled with broken dreams and endless what-might-have-beens.

Successful female journalists end up with nothing less than the male journalist's present successes and failures, and future nightmares.

Female and male journalists, reaching a kind of equality and truce in the battle of the sexes, find themselves in fiction wondering if a lifetime filled with the daily stress and pressure of getting the story and getting it fast and right was worth it. Does any journalist currently knocking out newspaper, magazine and TV news stories really want to do that for the rest of his or her life? Or wouldn't most journalists rather be writing novels or movie and TV scripts or non-fiction books?

The age-old dilemma of a career in journalism vs. a private life with family seems to still be unresolved since most successful journalists find that the only way to be a success is to work at it 24 hours a day, leaving little or no time for personal relationships, marriage, parenting, or anything else that takes time from the seemingly unending professional work.

Many sob sisters have won equality in both image and achievement, but at what cost? At the end of a long day or even worse, a long career, does anyone really want to be Hildy Johnson chasing after one more story or Lois Lane crying her eyes out because the person she loves is out saving the world and doesn't have time for domestic tranquility or Mary Richards, widowed and penniless, trying at the age of 60 to make one more comeback in television news, or Murphy Brown raising a child and battling breast cancer while still holding on to her number one position in TV news, a position any young sob sister or brother would be eager to take away from her?

The images of female sob sisters and male newshounds may differ in particulars, but in the end, they are among the most exciting as well as depressing characters in fiction today.

¹ Harrison, James G., "American Newspaper Journalism as Described in American Novels of the Nineteenth Century," a thesis (Ph.D.) submitted to the Faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1945, p. 283.

² Ghiglione, Loren, *The American Journalist: Paradox of the Press* (Library of Congress, Washington, 1990), "Chapter 12, Newswoman: Tough and Tormented," p. 122.

³ Cahoon, Haryot Holt, "Women in Gutter Journalism," *The Arena*, Boston, Vol. XVII, Dec. 1896-June 1897, p. 568. Holt paints a realistic picture of the young woman entering the editor's office with "a brave attempt to overcome shyness, for her heart beats very loudly." He is looking for new women who have courage, enthusiasm and talent. He will break her in gently with some trifling assignments to see what she can do with her pen, but that is of secondary consideration. The editor writes out a list of questions and sends her to interview a prizefighter and writes a charming interview that appears over "her signature. This speedy flight to the pinnacle of fame is far beyond her wildest and most ambitious imaginings. The result intoxicates her; the whole office is talking about her; and the men ask for an introduction. They shake hands with her and congratulate her; already she is a co-worker." The next year she covers the brutal police court and the filthy slums ("Hers is professional curiosity. She must know about everything, or she can never expect to be a successful journalist"). She dresses up as a member of the Salvation Army, writes about it with pictures and a byline and "Fame now seems quite within her grasp." She teaches in a Chinese Sunday school, "a Chinaman makes love to her," and "All New York was talking about the great expose; she had never dreamed of fame like that." "She is a regular heroine now, - a

thoroughbred. Through her the newspaper poses as a great moral reformer.” She commits herself to a charity hospital and pretends to have an incurable disease. She “has a magnificent story this time, with her name signed to it, and fame actually staring her in the face. She was paid \$10 a day for her work, and the newspaper had a big ‘beat.’ She sold what is rarely offered at \$10 per day: her word, her honor, and her self-respect. She sold them pretty cheap....Ambition lashes her heels, and she labors under the misapprehension that she is working at legitimate journalism....Whatever work her editor lays out for her, that she stands ready to do, whether it is figuring in a balloon ascension or a fire-escape descent, posing as an artist’s model, camping all night on a millionaire’s grave, trotting round the globe in eighty days, or, in short, doing any of the things that are beneath the notice of any man on the staff, or, to put it more mildly, ‘outside of a man’s province.’” She now enjoys the “zenith of her newspaper glory. Her name is featured about town on posters and bill-boards, and she creates an enormous sale for the newspaper.” But “her usefulness as a tool of gutter journalism is waning....Disregard for the truth has by this time crowded out the results of her early training...Where now is the hopeful, credulous, enthusiastic, ambitious girl who came to the city about four years before, or less?” She now suffers from “ill health from exposure, self-neglect, late hours.” Her “ambition begins to wane,” she has no more ideas, and the newspaper has no further use for her. “Her place is soon filled by others who offer themselves a willing sacrifice upon the altar of sensational journalism....She has lost all the capital she had when she began – youth, health, credulity, her ideals, her self-respect, her enthusiasm, and her ambition.” She realizes that her fame was “only vulgar notoriety, and that it was unworthy of her.” She learned to adapt to the society of men, “almost sees through their eyes, and, if such a thing were possible, her ideas would become as perverted as theirs.” Cahoon laments the woman “who sacrifices herself upon the altar of gutter journalism, who makes herself valuable to a newspaper by relinquishing her individuality and her womanhood, who sells her honor for a column of newspaper matter, because it is expected of her,” pp. 568-574.

⁴ Born, Donna, “The Image of the Woman Journalist in American Popular Fiction, 1890 to the Present,” A Paper presented to the Committee on the Status of Women of the Association of Education in Journalism Annual Convention, Michigan State University, East Lansing, August, 1981, p. 6. Born references Lois W. Banner’s *Women in Modern America – A Brief History* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1974, p. 20). Banner also points out that “Among all professions, that of journalism offers perhaps the most impressive example of women’s intrepid persistence in the face of professional hostility. Since mid-century, women have been employed on newspapers as gossip columnists, as editors of women’s pages, and sometimes as roving correspondents. But only rarely had a woman been hired as a regular reporter on general news stories. It took a succession of determined women to overcome this barrier.” p. 36.

⁵ Mott, Frank Luther, *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States through 250 years: 1690 to 1940*, New York, The MacMillan Company, 1949, pp. 489-490.

⁶ Harrison, James G., p. 283.

⁷ Donna Born, p. 6.

⁸ Donna Born, p. 7.

⁹ McClure, H.H., “The Newspaper Novel,” from “Inside Views of Fiction,” *The Bookman*, Vol. XXXI, March-August, 1910, pp. 60. McClure adds that “the novelist very often gets himself into a fearful tangle when he tries to unite an on-the-scene love interest with his newspaper novel machinery. The woman literally is dragged into such narratives and her presence rarely succeeds, in fact, possibly cannot succeed, in convincing the reader that it is natural and conjoint with the evolution of the story in question.” McClure says many recent novels and short stories, however, prove to him that “the writer of the

newspaper novel, if he sticks to things that he *knows* happen in the newspaper world, will have nothing to fear from the man whose more or less trained eye allows him to peep back of the scenes.”

¹⁰ Even in silent films, women found a curious independence in newspaper movies. In *A Female Reporter* (1909), the society editor of the *Daily Knocker* robs a house to show how inefficient the police force is. *The Reform Candidate* (1911) features a feisty female reporter who exposes corruption in government and is praised by a contemporary critic as the kind of “up-to-date heroine that American audiences admire more than the clinging vine variety.” *Her Big Story* (1913) has a female journalist uncovering the real power behind the mayor – the owner of the newspaper she works for. *The Sob Sister* (1914) is a reporter, the daughter of the managing editor of the *Times*, who helps a runaway girl. *How Molly Malone Made Good* (aka *How Molly Made Good*, 1915) tells the story of a young Irish girl who is given an assignment to see if she can make it as a reporter. She pursues the story by car, bus, and airplane, is involved in a train wreck, subdues a pickpocket, eludes a vicious dog, and gets drenched in a rain shower. She finally gets the story and her reward is fifty dollars, a job, and the love of a handsome young associate editor. In *Perils of Our Girl Reporters* (1916), female journalists expose crooks and capture counterfeiters.

¹¹ For the last 70 years, the best-known female reporter sob sister has been Lois Lane of the *Daily Planet* who, with Clark Kent, fights for truth and justice in the best newspaper tradition (*Superman* cartoons, 1941-43; Noel Neill in *Superman Movie Serials*, 1948-50; Phillis Coates and Noel Neill in *The Adventures of Superman: The Television Program*, 1952-57; Margot Kidder in the *Superman* movies, 1978-1987; Teri Hatcher in *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*, 1993-1997, a television series; and Dana Delaney in *The Adventures of Superman* cartoons, 1996-2000).

¹² Barris, Alex, *Stop the Presses! The Newspaperman in American Films* (A.S. Barnes and Co., Inc., Cranbury, NJ, 1976), p. 139.

¹³ Summary comes from Alex Barris, p. 139.

¹⁴ Ross, Ishbel, *Ladies of the Press: The Story of Women in Journalism By an Insider* (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1936), p. 65.

¹⁵ Good, Howard, *Girl Reporter: Gender, Journalism, and the Movies* (Scarecrow Press, Lanham, MD, 1998), p. 50.

¹⁶ Wentworth, Harold and Stuart Berg Flexner, *Dictionary of American Slang* (Thomas Y. Crowell Co., New York, 1960), p. 499.
p. 60-61.

¹⁷ Ghiglione, Loren, pp. 123.

¹⁸ “Most women cannot reconcile these seemingly contradictory forces, and in most cases in these early stories, they leave the profession,” writes Born. Donna Born, p. 10.

¹⁹ No less than one of the most prominent journalists of his time, William Allen White, had his reservations about women in the newsroom. In “Society Editor,” from *In Our Town* (The Macmillan Co., New York, 1904, pp. 36-39), he demeans their dress, their laziness, and cattiness. The issue is, as Donna Born summarizes, “How does the woman reconcile the demands of her profession with the demands of the cultural stereotype? In other words, for a woman to succeed professionally, she must possess certain character traits, traits that are assigned to the cultural stereotype of the male, but possession of these traits (or at times possession of them to a greater degree than is acceptable – a subtle and arbitrary degree not

always easily understood by the woman) can deny to the woman the happiness that she is supposed to find only in marriage.” (Donna Born, p. 8). This creates the dichotomy most women in fiction at the turn of the century had problems dealing with – maintaining their compassionate, feminine nature as defined by the times while still obtaining the so-called masculine traits of journalism – aggressiveness, curiosity, toughness, ambition, cynicism, cockiness – essential for a successful reporter or editor.

²⁰ Rossell, Deac, “Hollywood and the Newsroom,” *American Films*, October, 1975, p. 17.

²¹ Kael, Pauline, “Raising Kane,” *The Citizen Kane Book* (An Atlantic Monthly Press Book, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1971), p. 48.

²² From 1936 to 1939, there were nine Torchy Blane films, seven of them with Glenda Farrell as the reporter for a variety of newspapers, including *The Morning Herald: Smart Blonde* (1936); *Fly-Away Baby* (1937); *The Adventurous Blonde* (1937); *Blondes at Work*, (1938); *Torchy Gets Her Man* (1938); *Torchy Blane in Chinatown* (1939), and *Torchy Runs for Mayor* (1939). Lola Lane briefly took over the role in 1938 (*Torchy Blane in Panama*), and Jane Wyman was the final Torchy Blane in *Torchy Blane...Playing With Dynamite* or *Torchy Plays With Dynamite* (1939).

²³ It was not surprising that Nancy Drew, the youngest sob sister of them all in *Nancy Drew...Reporter* (1939), would emulate all the female reporters she saw in the movies when she decided to try her hand at journalism. It was the most independent and intelligent role model for young women the movies had to offer in the 1930s. Bonita Granville plays Nancy Drew, who switches assignment slips so she can get a scoop. When the city editor finds out, he is angry, but Nancy tells him: “I thought reporters always did things like that – at least they do in the movies – and besides, it says right in my textbook on journalism that a newspaperman or woman must stop at nothing to get the news, and if she ever intends to impress the editor, she must be willing to do much more than just what the assignment calls for.”

²⁴ Good reports, in *Girl Reporter: Gender, Journalism, and the Movies*, the most thorough study of the Torchy Blane films, that reporter Kennedy of the *Richmond City Free Press* appeared in 37 stories published in *Black Mask* and other pulp magazines, pp. 7-8. “The Torchy Blane series is the only series of feature films ever produced by Hollywood about a journalist,” he writes (not counting Clark Kent in the guise of Superman), p. 1.

²⁵ Zinman, David, *Saturday Afternoon at the Bijou* (Arlington House, New Rochelle, NY, 1973), p. 439. Zinman concludes: “Until Torchy Blane appeared on the screen, most movies portrayed women reporters as gushy, homely old maids or sour, masculine-looking feminists.”

²⁶ David Zinman, p. 440.

²⁷ Torchy Blane manages to keep McLane hanging for nine films. At the end of the series, there is no indication that she’s ready to settle down and give up the newspaper business, but audiences of the time seemed convinced that if given the chance, she would give up everything for marriage and family.

²⁸ Some prominent examples include Joan Crawford (Bonnie Jordan, cub reporter in *Dance, Fools, Dance*, 1931); Fay Wray (Marcia Collins, reporter for *The Press* in *The Finger Points*, 1931); Loretta Young (Gallagher, reporter in *Platinum Blonde*, 1931); Glenda Farrell (Florence Dempsy, reporter in *Mystery of the Wax Museum*, 1933); Bette Davis (Ellen Garfield, reporter in *Front Page Woman*, 1935); Jean Arthur (Louise “Babe” Bennett, reporter in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, 1936); Joan Blondell (Timmy Blake, reporter for *The Morning Express* in *Back in Circulation*, 1937); Barbara Stanwyck (Ann Mitchell, columnist, *The Bulletin* in *Meet John Doe*, 1940); Elizabeth Lane, columnist, *Smart Housekeeping*

Magazine in *Christmas in Connecticut*, 1945; Regina Forbes, syndicated columnist in *To Please a Lady*, 1950); Rosalind Russell (Hildy Johnson, reporter in *His Girl Friday*, 1940); Angela Lansbury (Kay Thorndyke, publisher, Thorndyke Publications in *State of the Union*, 1948); Patricia Neal is Alice Kingsly, reporter in *Washington Story*, 1952); Claudette Colbert (Prudence Webb, editor-publisher, *The Fort Ralston Clarion*, Fort Ralston, Texas, in *Texas Lady*, 1955); Shirley Jones (Jenny Dolan, reporter in *The Lives of Jenny Dolan*, 1975); Jane Fonda (Kimberly Wells, TV reporter-anchor, KXLA, Channel 3 in *The China Syndrome*, 1979); Sally Field (Megan Carter, reporter, *The Miami Standard* in *Absence of Malice*, 1981); Holly Hunter (Jane Craig, producer, TV network news in *Broadcast News*, 1987); Geena Davis (Gale Gayley, Channel 4 news reporter in *Hero*, 1992); Julia Roberts (Sabrina Peterson, cub reporter in *I Love Trouble*, 1994); Nicole Kidman (Suzanne Stone, weathercaster in *To Die For*, 1995); Michelle Pfeiffer (Tally Atwater, TV news reporter and anchor in *Up Close & Personal*, 1996); Courteney Cox (Gale Weathers, field reporter for *Top Story* in *Scream*, 1996; *Scream II*, 1997, *Scream III*, 2000); Sarah Jessica Parker (Carrie Bradshaw, New York columnist in *Sex and the City*, 1999-2003; Drew Barrymore (Josie “Josie Grossie” Geller in *Never Been Kissed*, 1999); Nora Dunn (Adriana Cruz, TV correspondent in *Three Kings*, 1999).

²⁹ Donna Born, p. 15. In 1943, Born writes, “60 percent of all Americans approved of married women working...Five years earlier, 80 percent had disapproved.”

³⁰ Donna Born, p. 16.

³¹ Donna Born, p. 22.

³² Donna Born sums up the image of the woman journalist as one that “moves from that of a relatively strong, capable woman in the earliest period (1890-1920) to a less competent, more emotional, feminine woman in the middle period (1920-1940) who again becomes highly competent but somewhat unreal and irrational during the World War II period, and finally, evolves into a more individualistic, competent, less stereotypical woman striving for professional identity in the face of stereotype in the most recent period (primarily after 1963).” Donna Born, p. 25. The same could be said of the images of the female journalist in movies during these eras.

³³ Loren Ghiglione, p. 126.

³⁴ There are more than 45 such heroine journalists in continuing series, including Angelina Amalfi (Joanne Pence); Beverly Gray (Clair Blank); Britt Montero (Edna Buchanan); Carmen Ramirez (Lisa Haddock); Cat Austen (Jane Rubino); Cat Marsala (Barbara D’Amato); Charlotte Sams (Alison Glen); Claire Malloy (Joan Hess); Conner Westphal (Penny Warner); Daisy Dalrymple (Carola Dunn); Emma Lord (Mary Daheim); Francesca Vierling (Elaine Viets); Georgia Lee Maxwell (Kinky Friedman); Henrietta O’Dwyer Collins (Carolyn Hart); Holly Winter (Susan Conant); Irene Kelly (Jan Burke); Jane Day (Ron Nessen and Johanna Neuman); Jane Winfield (Audrey Peterson); Jemima Shore (Antonia Fraser); Jessica James (Meg O’Brien); Jolie Wyatt (Barbara Burnett Smith); Judith Hayes (Anna Porter); Kay Engles (Triss Stein); Kate Henry (Alison Gordon); Kate Mulcay (Celestine Sibley); Laura Ackroyd (Patricia Hall); Lindsay Gordon (Val McDermid); Lucy Stone (Leslie Meier); Lydia Miller (Eleanor Hyde); Maggie MacGowen (Wendy Hornsby); Margot Fortier (Tony Fennelly); Margaret Barlow (David Osborn); Maxey Burnell (Carol Cail); Merry Kramer (Gayle Roper); Mollie Cates (Mary Willis Walker); Natalie Gold (Jody Jaffe); Nell Matthews (Eve K. Sandstrom); Nyla Wade (Vicki P. McConnell); Penny Parker (Mildred Wirt Benson); Primrose Holland (Jo Bannister); Rain Morgan (Lesley Grant-Adamson); Rebecca Schwartz (Julie Smith); Robin Hudson (Sparkle Hayter); Sally Baxter (Sylvia Edwards); Samantha Adams (Sarah Shankman); Tess Monaghan (Laura Lippman).

³⁵ A sampling of lesbian journalists in novels includes Lindsay Gordon, the self-proclaimed “cynical socialist lesbian feminist journalist” from London (Val McDermid’s *Report for Murder*, 1987; *Common Murder*, 1989; *Final Edition*, 1991; *Union Jack*, 1993; *Deadline for Murder* and *Booked for Murder*, 1996; *Conferences Are Murder*, 1999; crime reporter Lexy Hyatt (Carlene Miller’s *Killing at the Cat*, 1998; *Mayhem at the Marina*, 1999; *Reporter on the Run*, 2001); Nyla Wade, a journalist from Oregon (Vicki P. McConnell’s *Mrs. Porter’s Letter*, 1982; *The Burnton Windows*, 1983; *Double Daughter*, 1988); Lynn Evans working in Nepal (Claudia McKay’s *The Kali Connection*, 1994); New York City journalist Joyce Ecco (Diane Salvatore’s *Love, Zena Beth*, 1992); Jane Scott, who writes about horse championships (Franci McMahon’s *Night Mare*, 2001).

³⁶ Examples of women in television news appearing in novels include Robin Hudson, a television news reporter in a series of mysteries written by Sparkle Hayter, including *What’s a Girl Gotta Do?* (1994), *Nice Girls Finish Last* (1996), *Revenge of the Cootie Girls* (1997), *The Last Manly Man* (1998), *The Chelsea Girl Murders* (2000). Joan Carpenter is co-anchor of St. Louis’ evening news show, “Nightbeat” and deals with arrogant news directors, cutthroat TV critics and jealous co-anchors, but isn’t ready for the twisted psychopath who comes after her (*Fan Mail*, 1993). A young woman TV reporter and an anchorman investigate two deaths (Molly McKitterick’s *Murder in a Mayonnaise Jar*, 1993); Katlyn Rome receives the anchor slot on L.A.’s “Six O’Clock News” (Hal Friedman’s *A Hunting We Will Go*, 1997); Laura Barrett, who seemingly had it all – success as a co-anchor of the national evening news, a charming husband, a beautiful daughter – but she also has a secret past (Emily Listfield’s *The Last Good Night*, 1997); Cynthia Diamond, a TV news anchorwoman (Jean Heller’s *Handyman*, 1995); Delia Jamison, a gorgeous woman at the pinnacle of her career, anchor of a network news show in Los Angeles, is being blackmailed (Winston Groom’s *Such a Pretty, Pretty Girl*, 1999); TV anchor Lacie Wagner is also an investigative TV journalist (Jeannine Kadow’s *Burnout*, 1999; *Dead Tide*, 2002); Reporter/anchor Holly Johnston, “a drop-dead-gorgeous new kid on the block striving to prove she’s up to the task and more than just eye candy” (Yolanda Joe’s *This Just In...*, 2000); Madeleine Hunter (“Maddy”) is an award-winning TV anchorwoman (Danielle Steel’s *Journey*, 2000); Dana Evans is a beautiful young anchorwoman for a Washington, D.C., television network searching for a killer (Sidney Sheldon’s *The Sky Is Falling*, 2000); Serpentine Williamson needs to lose weight to get the coveted anchor spot in Chicago (Venise T. Berry’s *All of Me: A Voluptuous Tale*, 2001); news anchorwoman Eliza Blake is the famous face in front of the camera (Mary Jane Clark’s *Close to You*, 2001).

³⁷ Examples of other TV female anchors and reporters in films include Terry Marsh (Lynda Day George), a television anchorwoman trapped by crazed animals on a hunting expedition (*Day of the Animals*, 1977); Betty Rollin, a real-life NBC News correspondent (Mary Tyler Moore) faces breast cancer (*First You Cry*, 1978); Kimberly Wells (Jane Fonda), a TV reporter-anchor for KXLA, Channel 3 (*The China Syndrome*, 1979); Hallie Martin (Jane Fonda), a TV newswoman (*The Electric Horseman*, 1979); Catherine McSweeney (Elizabeth Montgomery), a TV news production assistant, who is terrorized by an assailant (*Act of Violence*, 1979); Tony Sokolow (Sigourney Weaver) is a TV reporter (*Eyewitness*, 1981); Jane Harris (Lauren Tewes) is a TV reporter-anchor for “Newspoint” who discovers that her neighbor is a rapist-murderer but can’t prove it (*Eyes of a Stranger*, 1981); Jamie Douglas (Morgan Fairchild), TV reporter-anchor, who is pursued by a psychotic photographer (*The Seduction*, 1982); Sharon Martin (Kate Mulgrew) is a TV newscaster who is kidnapped (*A Stranger Is Watching*, 1982); Deborah Ballin (Lee Grant) is a TV news interviewer-commentator chased by a maniac (*Visiting Hours*, 1982); Margaret Bourke-White (Farrah Fawcett and Candice Bergen) is the real-life photojournalist (*Margaret Bourke-White*, 1989, and *Gandhi*, 1982, respectively); Maggie Foley (Ellen Barkin) is a TV reporter who tries to figure out whatever happened to a missing rock star presumed dead (*Eddie and the Cruisers*, 1983); Tracy Tzu (Ariane) is a TV reporter who is gang-raped for exposing the Chinese mafia (*Year of the Dragon*, 1985); Lauren Gartner (Kate Lynch) is a segment producer for a newsmagazine, who is the conscience of

the program (*Reckless Disregard*, 1985); Christine Arnold (Sheree J. Wilson) is a naïve young anchor who will do anything for fame and fortune (*News at Eleven*, 1986); Augusta “Gussie” Sawyer (Sissy Spacek) is a world-famous photojournalist (*Violets Are Blue*, 1986); Jane Craig (Holly Hunter) is a TV network news producer in *Broadcast News* (1987); Patricia Traymore (Lynda Carter) is a TV reporter for Potomac Cable Network (PCN) News searching her past for a killer (*Stillwatch*, 1987); Gale Gayley (Geena Davis) is a Channel 4 news reporter in *Hero* (1992); Sabrina Peterson (Julia Roberts) is a cub reporter in *I Love Trouble* (1994); Suzanne Stone (Nicole Kidman) is a weathercaster in *To Die For* (1995); Tally Atwater (Michelle Pfeiffer) is a TV news reporter and anchor in *Up Close & Personal* (1996); Gale Weathers (Courteney Cox) is a field reporter for “Top Story” in *Scream*, 1996; *Scream II* (1997), *Scream III* (2000); Josie “Josie Grossie” Geller (Drew Barrymore) is a cub reporter in *Never Been Kissed* (1999); Adriana Cruz (Nora Dunn) is a TV correspondent in *Three Kings* (1999); Diana Downs (Mel Harris) is a TV anchor who, at 45, is washed up and thinks cosmetic surgery will give her a new career (*Another Pretty Face*, 2002). In television, Amy Amanda Allen (Melinda Culea) is a reporter for the Los Angeles *Courier Express* who joins “The A Team” (1983-1984); Christine Copperfield (Mimi Kennedy) is a fortyish TV anchor worried about her aging looks who drinks a rejuvenating water in “The Twilight Zone: Aqua Vita,” (1986); Theora Jones (Amanda Pays) is the controller (live producer) for Network 23 in “Max Headroom” (1987); Kelby Robinson (Helen Shaver) is a TV anchor-reporter on “WIOU” (1990-1991); Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) is a New York columnist in *Sex and the City* (1999-2003); Janet LeClaire (Myndy Crist) is a reporter who wins the job of co-anchor; Jamie Templeton (Rowena King) is an ace investigative reporter, and Rachel Glass (Lisa Ann Walter) is the fast-talking news producer on the 24-hour news channel, I-24, in “Breaking News” (2002). In addition, there are more than 3,000 anonymous female journalists who show up in films and TV movies since the birth of these media.

³⁸ The theme was used repeatedly. On television, for example, an episode of “Anything but Love” (1990), featured magazine writer Hannah Miller (Jamie Lee Curtis) giving an aspiring young journalist (Courtney Thorne-Smith) a shot at working at the magazine, but the woman ends up stabbing her in the back. In *Lethal Charm* (aka *Dangerous Woman*, 1991), the veteran reporter-anchor (Barbara Eden) fights off a former homecoming queen (Heather Locklear) trying to take her place. On a “Saturday Night Live” in 1989, shakeups at NBC News were likened to “All About Eve” in a skit called “All About Deborah Norville” with Jane Pauley as the veteran being threatened.

³⁹ Twenty-three years later, Mary Richards (Mary Tyler Moore) returned to television. She has grown up to be an in-studio producer at ABC News, but quit her job in 1992 so she could spend more time with her daughter. Now Mary Richards Cronin – she had married an aspiring politician – is widowed and left penniless because her husband had overextended the family finances on his risky loans for his campaigns. Even Mary’s original theme has been updated. She has gone off to Paris to recover from the sudden death of her husband and returns to find her only daughter has moved out, quit college and wants to be a stand-up comedian. Luckily her best friend, Rhoda, divorced from a French husband and now a photographer trying to get together a show, comes to New York just in time to help her get through these crises. She, too, has one daughter who doesn’t understand her mother. When Mary finds out she is broke, she says she’ll just get a job. The daughter says, “You’ve been out of the news business for a really long time, and just between you and me you’re not getting any younger.” A job interviewer tells her that her resume is very impressive, but then asks her how old she is. When Mary says 60, the interview is over. In the interviews that follow, Mary goes from 60 to 58 to her mid-fifties, to “how old do I look?” Ageism is alive and well in New York City. She and Rhoda imagine her in a variety of odd-ball and silly jobs from a dog walker to a woman trying to park cars in a downtown garage, to trying to get customers to enroll in a new long-distance telephone carrier to dressing as a giant pickle at a market promotion. No jobs. No money. And Mary Richards is getting a little scared when she walks into the WNYT newsroom and talks

to the man in charge, Jonath Semeir (Elon Gold). Mary is hired and proves that she hasn't forgotten the news values she learned in Minneapolis as she applies them to a harsh, new world of TV news.

⁴⁰ Corky Sherwood (Faith Ford) is a former Miss America, the inexperienced cub reporter trying to earn her stripes. She admires Brown and eventually wins her respect and the respect of her colleagues. But when Brown, in an early episode, says to her, "Corky, if it will make you feel any better, I tasted success at a pretty young age and I had some of the same fears you do. But then look at all I've experienced since then." Sherwood tearfully responds: "You became an alcoholic, you had to dry out at Betty Ford, you had an illegitimate child, I'm looking at my future...go way...go way..." and she starts crying.

⁴¹ In a memorable episode in 1989, the thin line between reality and fiction disappears completely. The storyline has Brown appearing in a situation comedy set in a newsroom about an anchorwoman (Morgan Fairchild as Julia St. Martin, an actress hired to play Kelly Green) on a live weekly magazine show. Back at the office, she sees Connie Chung coming out of the elevator. The two journalists greet each other. Brown asks her, "What brings you to town?" Chung: "I was just here for some bureau meetings. Hey, I saw you on TV last night." Brown: "Really, what did you think?" Chung: "Murphy, can I be honest with you? I think it's wrong for a journalist of your stature to appear in a sitcom. Once you cross that line, you undermine your credibility. I feel so strongly about that." Brown: "Well, Connie, that sounds awful noble and righteous but I bet if you'd been in my place and those network people came to you begging you to help their show and, yes, offering you the chance to do something a little different, a little intriguing, something tells me you'd be singing a different tune. I bet I know what you would have told them." Chung: "Exactly what I did tell them, no thanks," and Chung walks out.