

November/December 1997

THE REPORTER IN THE NOVEL

by *Steve Weinberg*

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Recently, I spent a few days with one of my favorite investigative reporters, John Cotton, in a state capital several hundred miles from my mid-Missouri home. We scrutinized the doings of state legislators, checked the records of a government agency in charge of highway construction, felt the wrath of somebody he is planning to write about, and, I must add with all modesty, solved three murders. We had a great time.

I made similar visits recently, though not always so satisfying, to other journalism acquaintances in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and several places in rural America. On one trip I found myself in hot, humid Miami accompanying Britt Montero on her daily newspaper police beat the day after leaving snowbound Denver, where I visited crime reporter Jack McEvoy as he solved the mysterious death of his twin brother, a cop.

As you have surely figured out by now, my travels were of the armchair variety. The journalists I spent time with are characters in novels. John Cotton is the protagonist in *The Fly on the Wall*, a 1971 novel by New Mexico journalist Tony Hillerman. Britt Montero is the creation of Edna Buchanan, a Pulitzer Prize-winning former Miami Herald reporter, who has written a series of novels starring her heroine. Jack McEvoy sprang from the imagination of Michael Connelly, author of *The Poet*, who used to report for the Los Angeles Times.

Since I started collecting novels with journalists as protagonists, I have acquired some 1,300 of them, of some 2,300 out there. Some I keep at home. The rest I have donated to the library at the University of Missouri, home of the journalism school where I teach. Because the library is just two miles from my house, the separation is bearable.

The library collection is visited by many readers. Some are nonjournalists looking for an entertaining book. Some are journalists fascinated by my collection. I know of at least five graduate students who have used the collection while researching the portrayal of journalists in fiction.

Why do I collect these books? I have spent little time analyzing the reasons; I might dislike what it says about my obsessiveness. But I know that part of my reason is healthy - reading the novels has made me think more deeply about the craft I have practiced for thirty-three years.

Unfortunately, extracting lessons from journalism novels - how to handle ethically ambiguous situations, improve information gathering, write more compellingly - has been difficult. That is because journalism novels, like journalism itself, stress the atypical, the dramatic.

In fact, I worry a lot about the unrealistic picture a nonjournalist must take away from these novels: according to most of them, we lack an ethical center, sleep regularly with sources, and solve so many crimes, especially murders, that it is a wonder the police have anything to do.

In many ways, the most realistic of the hundreds I have read is *The Fly on the Wall*. Even before the Watergate-related explosion in investigative reporting, Hillerman, through his protagonist John Cotton, was advocating following the paper trail. Consider this passage from the novel:

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 capital 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.

Besides learning more about documents-based investigative reporting from Hillerman's novel, I learned about moral ambiguity. Many journalism novels, like many real-life newsrooms, are salted with self-righteous reporters, editors, correspondents, and producers who cloak their dubious practices in the First Amendment.

Given those inappropriate attitudes, I found much of Hillerman's dialogue in *The Fly on the Wall* instructive. Near the novel's climax, for instance, Cotton is talking to a political insider who hopes to dissuade him from printing an exposé almost certain to harm the incumbent governor. If the governor falls, the political machine of Senator Gene Clark will benefit. Here is Cotton's soliloquy:

You fault Gene Clark for having no political philosophy. Well, I've got one. I believe if you give them the facts the majority of the people are going to pull down the right lever on the voting machine. A lot of them are stupid. And a lot of them don't give a damn. And some of them have closed minds and won't believe anything they don't want to believe. But enough of them care so if you tell them what's going on, they make the right decisions.

Thought-provoking stuff. But then so is the political insider's reply:

Sure, but in this case that leaves a question. You just print part of the facts. There's a difference between facts and truth. Here you show them the dirt you've uncovered in the Roark administration. But you're not going to say, "on the other hand . . ." You're not going to say "But this mess is relatively minor." . . . You won't say that because that's another level of truth. It's not the verifiable truth you people talk about in the pressroom.

Hillerman was writing fiction when he wrote those passages. But no journalism textbook has ever said it better.