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**Stranger Than Fiction:  
The Art of Literary Journalism**

**Professor William McKeen**  
The University of Florida

# **Stranger Than Fiction:**

## **The Art of Literary Journalism**

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**Professor William McKeen**

The University of Florida



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Stranger Than Fiction:  
The Art of Literary Journalism  
Professor William McKeen



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## About Your Professor

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### William McKeen

William McKeen is a professor of journalism at the University of Florida. He teaches courses in writing, journalism history, literary journalism, and the history of rock'n'roll.

Professor McKeen received his Ph.D. in higher education administration from the University of Oklahoma in 1986. He also holds a master of arts in mass communication and a bachelor of arts in history, both from Indiana University.

Before beginning his teaching career, he worked for newspapers in Indiana, Florida, Kentucky, and Oklahoma. He has also been an editor for the *American Spectator* and the *Saturday Evening Post* and—in addition to his academic duties—serves as book editor for *Creative Loafing*, a weekly arts-and-lifestyle magazine in Tampa, Florida.

Professor McKeen is the author of several books. *Outlaw Journalist* has been widely hailed as the definitive book on the iconoclastic journalist, Hunter S. Thompson. Writing in the *Times* of London, critic Christopher Hitchens called it “admirable” and “haunting.” He has also published a memoir, *Highway 61*, of a six-thousand-mile road trip with his grown son. *Rock and Roll Is Here to Stay* is a massive history of rock'n'roll and part of the Norton Anthology series. He has written several other books on American popular culture, literary journalism, and music.

He has two books in the works: *Paradise Recalled* and *Mile Marker Zero*.

McKeen is the father of seven children and lives with his wife and whatever children are home at the moment on a small farm near Wacahoota, Florida.

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## Introduction

One of the reasons I didn't major in journalism is because in my first attempt to take a course in the field, the professor began the class by asking, "What is news?" There followed a ninety-minute discussion of possible definitions, as a bunch of squirming eighteen-year-olds tried to come up with something that sounded serious enough to please the professor. At the end of that first class, the professor smiled smugly and said, "Well, of course, it can't be defined." I, for one, was steamed. I thought, "Then why in the hell did you waste ninety minutes of my precious time on this Earth trying to define something that can't be defined?"

And so I majored in history. But after working for newspapers and magazines, I became a journalism professor and I usually toss out that little anecdote at the beginning of every class. It's my way of saying that we're not here to waste time, but that a lot of what we do cannot be nailed down. We can't say we have the definitive answer, because one may not exist.

This course is my take on literary journalism. It's about this kind of storytelling, but it's clearly told through my eyes. Take this elephant over to someone else and he or she might have a different idea. But this is the way I see it, and I hope this is helpful as you develop your own way of seeing.

My mentor was a poet named Starkey Flythe, Jr., and in a book on which we collaborated, he wrote, "Truth is stranger than fiction, which is why fiction is such a comfort." Too true, Starkey. The stories we will discuss here are true stories. They are works of journalism. Another quote comes to mind. It's from journalist I.F. Stone. As he described the joy he took in his work, he said, "I have so much fun I ought to be arrested. I'm like a kid and God has given me a great big fire to cover. I'm a journalistic Nero fiddling while Rome burns. But I have to remind myself: It's really burning."



# Lecture I

## Ancestors

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Tom Wolfe's *The New Journalism*.



At some point, our hairy and unhygienic ancestors made an important discovery. They learned that a sound could mean a thing. A sound did not just have to be a sound.

For example: Let's say you're walking along and you bump into a woolly mammoth. You grunt. Those mammoths are big, after all. But that's just a sound.

But at some point, someone—and we will never know who it was—delivered a variation on the grunt to his cave-dwelling associates, and that grunt meant something. Maybe it was, "Where's the remote?" or "Have you seen my keys?" But whatever it was, at some point someone someplace decided that a *sound* could mean a *thing*.

And then another ancestor—perhaps less hairy and more hygienic—invented writing. He or she decided to try to make pictorial representations of these various grunts and utterances. Sounds were duplicated with images and thus was writing born.

That was a major invention, perhaps more life changing than the invention of the wheel or even the iPhone. Writing freed us. Before, we could communicate only as far as our shout could be heard or our signal fire seen. Now, we could write a note and pass it on to the whole tribe. Thus was mass communication born.

And almost from the beginnings of language and writing, we've wanted something. Ever since human beings first gathered around campfires and uttered these sounds that soon became words, we have wanted stories. As children, when we crawled into our parents' laps, we wanted stories. Today, when a cataclysmic event occurs, we want stories. We want to know what happened and we want all of the details.

And we want true stories.

Let's flash forward a couple of millennia. After all, this is a course in literary journalism, not a history of Earth.



One of the seminal moments in American history came in the 1830s. Newspapers were property of the privileged and most of these publications contained business news, shipping news, legal news, and other things of interest to the ruling class.

Then a journalist with an idea—often, a dangerous and subversive thing—decided that his newspaper would contain information . . . *stories* . . . about the rest of us. And this new kind of newspaper would cost one cent.

The stories about the rest of us, of course, concerned arrests for violence and drunkenness. People who had no reason to read—don't judge them—suddenly had purpose. "For what reason do we exist," a wise woman once said, "but to make sport for our neighbors?"

1830s Dude No. 1: "Hey, did you hear about Dennis Mott?"

1830s Dude No. 2: "No, what happened?"

1830s Dude No. 1: "He was arrested for drunkenness and for beating his woman. Here, it's in the paper."

1830s Dude No. 2: "Yeah? Let me see that." (*Grabs newspaper, but soon crumples it in frustration.*) "Oh, damn. I forgot. I'm illiterate."

And so it went. There was a tremendous growth in literacy rates after that, as finally "the rest of us" had something we wanted to read.

There are a lot of great writers in our history who created what we now call literary journalism: Daniel Defoe, James Boswell, and Charles Dickens all wrote nonfiction with the grace and skill of their fiction. So even though this kind of writing was called "new journalism" for a while in the 1960s, there was really nothing new about it.

Now, when we use the words "literature" and "journalism" in the same sentence, we need to be sure we know what it is we want to say.

Journalism has provided much of the material for historians. It's often been called "the first rough draft of history." We know what we know about the American westward migration of the nineteenth century, for example, from letters sent to newspaper editors back east from anonymous correspondents on wagon trains. Through these letters . . . *these journals* . . . we learn all about the day-to-day life on the prairie. We look back on those times and, with the





vantage of hindsight, feel superior. We pity those people then who didn't know what was ahead for them.

But perhaps they did know. In an 1850 article in the *Saturday Evening Post*, a Chippewa predicted the devastation—if not the genocide—of the Native Americans. This journalism was literature written on the run. And it became our history.

We also want to tip our hat to the great American writers who began their careers in journalism. Most history-of-journalism textbooks skip over Mark Twain if they mention him at all. His has often been called the first truly American voice in world literature—and it was a voice forged in his early newspaper career. The same goes for other great writers, such as Ring Lardner, H.L. Mencken, and Ernest Hemingway.

Flash forward to the twenty-first century. We have new media. We have multi-media storytelling. We have Facebook and Twitter and we have all sorts of gizmos on the way and we become an increasingly fast-paced and volatile culture.

Still, we want stories. When there's a devastating earthquake in Haiti, we want stories. When we ponder the identity of the next president of the United States, we want stories about the candidates and what their lives were like. When we read about a child abducted and murdered, we see the headline, we gasp, and we read on.

Because we want stories.

In this course, we will discuss some of the greatest storytellers in the history of American journalism. Great storytelling has always been with us, but we will focus on nonfiction writing since the end of the Second World War and up through the boom in the late twentieth century.



Chippewa wedding, ca. 1860s, from a stereoscopic photograph.

© Martin Art Gallery/New York Public Library

# FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

## Questions

1. Historians always had letters and journals from which they drew much of the material to do their writing. With e-mails and blogs in cyberspace now, what do you think will be most difficult for historians writing about our period a hundred years from now?
2. Research Mark Twain, H.L. Mencken, and Ernest Hemingway and find out what those writers had to say about their apprenticeships in journalism. What were the good things they learned from working for newspapers? What were the bad habits or the pitfalls of journalism that they learned to avoid?

## Suggested Reading

Wolfe, Tom. *The New Journalism*. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.

## Other Books of Interest

Kerrane, Kevin, and Ben Yagoda, eds. *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism*. Simon & Schuster, 1998.

Snyder, Louis, and Richard Morris, eds. *A Treasury of Great Reporting: Literature Under Pressure from the Sixteenth Century to Our Own Time*. Simon & Schuster, 1962.

## Websites of Interest

1. The *Mark Twain Quotations, Newspaper Collections, and Related Resources* website provides a chronological listing of many of his newspaper articles. — [www.twainquotes.com](http://www.twainquotes.com)
2. *Lardnermania* is a website dedicated to the life and works of Ring Lardner. — [www.tridget.com/lardnermania](http://www.tridget.com/lardnermania)
3. *Timeless Hemingway* is a premier website about Ernest Hemingway and includes video clips, images of the author, and other resources. — [www.timelesshemingway.com](http://www.timelesshemingway.com)

## Lecture 2

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### The Unforgettable Fire

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is John Hersey's *Hiroshima*.



First of all, we probably need to define literary journalism. It's sort of a highfalutin term, but it's really a very simple concept.

It's the idea of writing nonfiction as if it were fiction. No, that doesn't mean making up stuff. But it means that we use the insights and skills of the novelist in telling our true stories.

The writer most closely identified with literary journalism—back when it was still young enough to be called “new journalism”—was Tom Wolfe. He'll always tip his impeccable hat to others as being more important or more influential in the genre.

But Wolfe served as a sort of historian for literary journalism—and an analyst of what made it successful.

He identified four techniques that journalists began using—techniques borrowed from fiction writers.

The first was the use of scene-by-scene construction. Rather than doing the traditional journalism thing of telling a story in the inverted pyramid style, the story is told as a collection of scenes.

The second was the use of dialogue. Traditional journalists were used to quoting only rarely. The literary journalists were more liberal in their use of dialogue.

The third part was the most controversial—the use of the third-person point of view, in which the reporter told the story through the eyes of the subject. This upset a lot of traditionalists, because it seemed to give the writers access into the subject's soul. The defense was simply that great reporting yielded this information.

The fourth element was the use of what Wolfe called “status-life details.” It's almost like background noise—the colors, smells, tastes, etc., that give readers the sense that the writer was *there*, even though the experience might have been re-created.



But well before the brouhaha about “new journalism” in the 1960s, one publication in particular had made the use of literary techniques in nonfiction standard practice.

The *New Yorker* magazine, founded by Harold Ross in 1925, became an exemplary publication for literary journalism, decades before that term was coined.

The Second World War is a great starting point for the discussion of the literary journalism explosion. The coverage of that war, particularly by the *New Yorker*, stands as one of the great achievements of American journalism. Such staff writers as Janet Flanner, A.J. Liebling, and David

Lardner covered the war. But it was a piece written at war’s end by John Hersey that set a high standard for literary journalism. His book *Hiroshima*, which appeared first in the *New Yorker*, was not only his greatest achievement, but it was also named the greatest work of American journalism in the twentieth century. It created a template for literary journalism.

What Hersey did was remarkable. Several months after the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—and after the end of the war—he made the decision to go to Hiroshima to put a face on the tragedy. To the American public, flush with victory, the dropping of the bomb had been a matter of biological economics. Thousands were killed, but so many more would have been killed if the United States had gone ahead with the planned invasion of Japan, the Pacific equivalent of D-Day.

So Hersey wanted to show readers how the dropping of the bomb affected the day-to-day lives of the Japanese people.



Harold Ross (1892–1951), founder and editor of the *New Yorker* magazine, at a public hearing in 1949.

© Library of Congress



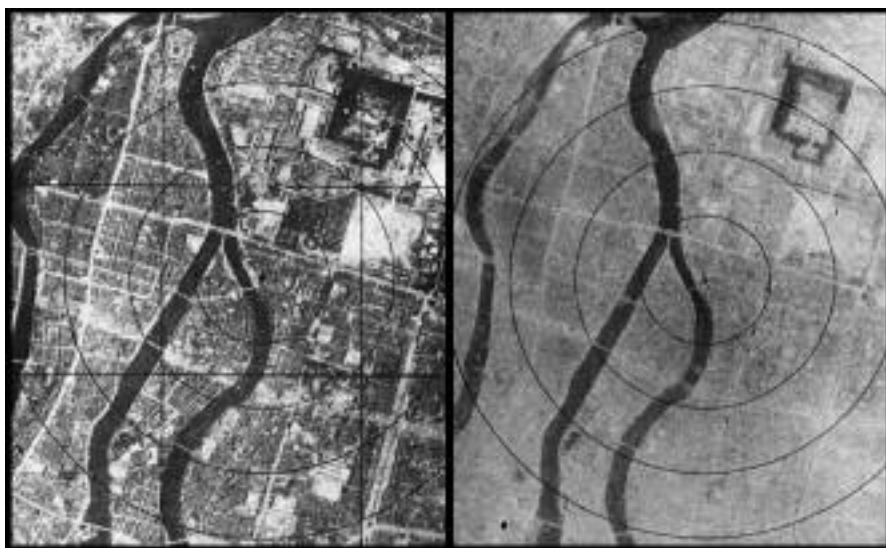
Author and journalist John Hersey driving a U.S. Army jeep in 1944.

© Library of Congress

Through serendipity and a number of fortuitous connections, he found six people whose stories he decided to tell. One was a young woman working a factory. Another was a Jesuit priest. One was a tailor's widow. There was a young physician. Through these lives and intertwined stories, Hersey was able to construct a compelling narrative that began at the moment the bomb flashed above Hiroshima. In the first paragraph, he introduces the six characters and then follows them through the next several days as they deal with horrors unimaginable.

It was written like a novel and, in a masterpiece of tone, told the story of human chaos in a voice that was calm and well-reasoned.

The result was published in the *New Yorker* in 1946—as the complete editorial content of one issue. It was published in book form later that year and in 1986, Hersey revisited the story, updating readers on what had happened to his six survivors in the decades since the atomic explosion.



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Aerial views of Hiroshima as seen through a bombsight before (1945) and after (1946) the atomic bomb was dropped on the city.

# FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

## Questions

1. John Hersey did not go to Hiroshima until the spring of 1946. Yet he gives us the feeling that he was there in August 1945 because he writes of the explosion and aftermath with such clarity and precision. Do some research. How did he do his reporting so thoroughly that he was able to re-create the scene so effectively? What can you learn about his interviewing method with the survivors?
2. Hersey had spent most of his career to that point writing for *Time* magazine and was considered a protégé and heir apparent to *Time* founder Henry R. Luce. Yet this, his most famous work of journalism, appeared not in *Time* but in the *New Yorker*. Why did Hersey bypass his regular publication and risk ruining his relationship with his mentor? (And it was ruined.)

## Suggested Reading

Hersey, John. *Hiroshima*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989 (1946).

## Other Books of Interest

New Yorker Magazine, Inc. *The New Yorker Book of War Pieces: London, 1939 to Hiroshima, 1945*. New York: Schocken Books, 1988 (1947).

Pyle, Ernie. *Here Is Your War: Story of G.I. Joe*. Lincoln, NE: Bison Books/Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska, 2004 (1943).

## Websites of Interest

1. The *Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum* includes a virtual museum tour and stories from before and after the atomic bombing. — [www.pcf.city.hiroshima.jp](http://www.pcf.city.hiroshima.jp)
2. Steve Rothman of Arlington, Massachusetts, maintains the website *About John Hersey's "Hiroshima,"* which includes links to many resources associated with Hersey, his works, and the first page of the original *New Yorker* article from 1946. — [www.herseyhiroshima.com](http://www.herseyhiroshima.com)



## Lecture 3

### The Mother of Literary Journalism

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Lillian Ross's *Reporting*.



Lillian Ross brought a depth to reporting and observation that became a model for others to follow.

Harold Ross—no relation—regarded the Second World War as a plot by Hitler and Mussolini to ruin his magazine, the *New Yorker*. Able-bodied male staff members were being drafted left and right. Though he had dodgy relationships with women in his personal and professional lives, he finally decided he would have to hire more female staffers.

A good thing, that. Lillian Ross was one of the young women he hired and she became one of the most influential and most-imitated writers of her generation. She greatly expanded the voice of the magazine beyond the original style forged by early *New Yorker* writers and editors James Thurber and E.B. White.

Throughout her career with the *New Yorker*, which continues to the present day, she wrote a number of pieces—many anonymous—for the magazine's "Talk of the Town" section. But she was best known for her brilliant, incisive, and meticulous reportage.

Perhaps one of her most controversial pieces was her profile of writer Ernest Hemingway. The great novelist lived in Cuba then, but when he visited New York for a couple of days, Ross asked to shadow him and he agreed. She followed him as he went shopping with friends and enjoyed his wife's company in his hotel suite.

The resulting article, "Portrait of Hemingway," was considered shocking for its time. Rarely had a celebrity's life been shown in such microscopic detail. Readers also got to look inside the Hemingway marriage.



A rare picture of Lillian Ross (1918–?) with *New Yorker* editor William Shawn (ca. 1950s). Ross and Shawn had a long affair, about which Ross wrote in *Here but Not Here: My Life with William Shawn and the New Yorker* (1998). She has granted few interviews in her life and has kept her private life—except for the book—very private.

© The Kobal Collection

Though readers apparently regarded Ross's profile as an invasion of privacy, Hemingway himself thought Ross had written the best thing he'd ever seen about himself.

Her next major work was a novel-length work of journalism—and it read very much like a novel. *Picture* began as a profile of filmmaker John Huston, the writer-director behind *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, and several other films. *Picture* chronicled the making of Huston's film *The Red Badge of Courage*, based on Stephen Crane's great novel of the Civil War.

Ross's book showed the clash of creativity and commerce in the film industry, and it became one of her most influential and imitated works.

Nearly every generation of literary journalists has paid homage to Ross's *Picture*. In the 1960s, John Gregory Dunne wrote about the making of the wretched *Doctor Doolittle*, a musical starring Rex Harrison that allowed him to talk through his songs, as he had done with *My Fair Lady*. At the dawn of the 1990s, Julie Salamon of the *Wall Street Journal* told the valiant tale of a dedicated and gifted filmmaker (Brian DePalma) trying to turn out a two-hour film adaptation of Tom Wolfe's huge novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. It, too, was a massive flop. It seemed that literary journalists were at their best writing about failures. (Dunne's book was called *The Studio* and Salamon's *The Devil's Candy*.)

Good as those books were, though, they haven't had the influence of Ross's *Picture*, which was enshrined by its inclusion in The Modern Library collection.

Ross was an influential and often-imitated writer, but few could match her prose or her perceptions. She nearly always appears in her work, but not in an obtrusive or annoying way. This was a difficult tightrope for less-skilled writers to walk. She also limited her subjects by refusing to write about people she did not like. She liked Hemingway. She liked Huston. She liked the "normal people" who people her shorter pieces, many of which first appeared in "The Talk of the Town" section of the *New Yorker*.



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© Penguin

The cover of *Picture* from the 1962 Penguin edition of the book.

In 1964, she published a huge collection of her work called simply *Reporting*. It included the Hemingway piece and all of *Picture* and several of her key pieces, including “Symbol of All We Possess,” about the Miss America pageant, and “The Yellow Bus,” about the senior trip to New York City



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by a graduating class from the high school in Bean Blossom Township, Indiana. Knowing her proclivities, it should come as no surprise that Ross kept in touch with those high school students years later.

Ross produced books that collected her *New Yorker* reporting (“Moments with Chaplin,” “Talk Stories,” and “Takes”), but perhaps her most startling book was her memoir *Here but Not Here: My Life with William Shawn and the New Yorker*, which appeared after the death of William Shawn, Harold Ross’s successor as editor of the *New Yorker*. Shawn had guided Lillian Ross’s work and had also maintained a long romantic relationship with her, despite the fact that Shawn was married and had children. He and Ross maintained a separate family life and all parties seemed satisfied with the relationship. What was notable about *Here but Not Here* was not only the candor Ross showed after decades of guarding her privacy, but also the skill with which she wrote about her own life. The great reporter had the sort of tremendous insight few journalists find when looking at themselves.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

### Questions

1. How does Lillian Ross use herself as a character in *Picture*? Most journalists are cautioned to keep themselves out of a story, yet Ross used herself in nearly everything she wrote. Does she obtrude or does she manage to stay on the outside of the narrative?
2. Think about Lillian Ross's maxim that she would not write about people she did not like. Then read *Portrait of Hemingway*. If Hemingway and Ross had a mutual admiration society—and they did—then how come so many readers were shocked and infuriated by her portrayal of him in that celebrated *New Yorker* profile?

### Suggested Reading

Ross, Lillian. *Reporting*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964.

### Other Books of Interest

Ross, Lillian. *Picture*. New York: Da Capo Press, 2002 (1951).

———. *Portrait of Hemingway*. New York: Modern Library, 1999.

### Websites of Interest

1. *The New Yorker* magazine website has an archive available to subscribers that includes many of the articles discussed in this course. —  
[www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com)
2. National Public Radio provides three separate items about Lillian Ross, including two interviews and an article about new journalism. —  
<http://www.npr.org/search/index.php?searchinput=Lillian+Ross>

## Lecture 4

### The Egotist

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History* and *The Executioner's Song*.



Norman Mailer embarked on a seemingly conventional literary career. After service in the Second World War, he returned to the states and published his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, appearing to the world as a junior-varsity Hemingway.

He continued on the fiction trajectory, but had obvious interests in journalism. He wrote nonfiction occasionally and was cofounder of the *Village Voice*. Though he didn't take journalism all that seriously, his work around the beginning of the 1960s was extremely influential on younger writers such as Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson. As historian Douglas Brinkley described his influence, "He chopped the wood for others to carve."

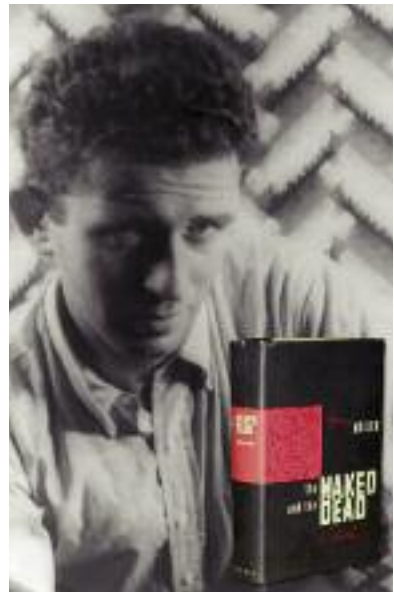
When literary journalism began its rise in the early 1960s, Mailer at first disparaged the form. When Truman Capote made his major foray into nonfiction, publishing *In Cold Blood* in 1966, it was Mailer who termed the venture "a failure of imagination."

But in the next year, it was Mailer who published the next great work of literary journalism.

Mailer took part in an antiwar demonstration at the Pentagon in 1967. Unhappy with his subsequent portrayal in the press, he decided to write about that evening in microscopic detail. The result was published in *Harper's* and then later appeared as the book *The Armies of the Night*.

Mailer brought something new to the party. Instead of simply narrating the story as a first-person piece, he wrote about himself as a historical character—"Mailer" or, on occasion, "The Beast."

Mailer was known for his monstrous ego. A television talk-show host once brought out an empty chair to contain this ego. But despite the apparent ego involved in a writer making himself into a historical



Norman Mailer (1923–2007) in a publicity photo from 1948 with an original edition of *The Naked and the Dead*.

© Reinhardt & Company

character, Mailer made it work with a dose of uncharacteristic self-deprecation.

The book won the Pulitzer Prize and marked the opening of the uneven middle period of Mailer's career. He concentrated on journalism, with wildly mixed results. He wrote about the Apollo 11 landing on the moon—but not about the moon landing itself. He wrote about how Norman Mailer felt about it. He wrote about the battle of the sexes—but mainly how Norman Mailer felt about it. And so on.

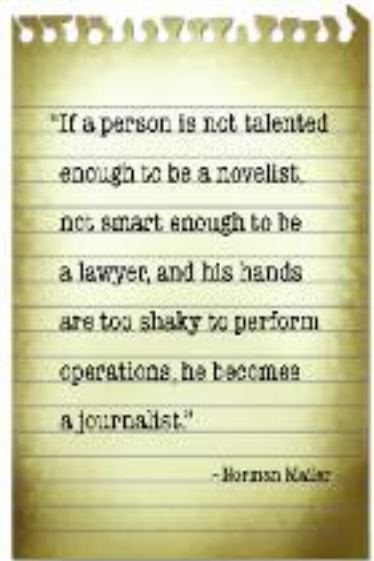
At the end of the 1970s, a great story appeared, ripe for the literary journalism treatment. It was about a career criminal who had been sentenced to die. But no one had been executed in the United States in a dozen years. Suddenly, this convicted killer asked the state to carry out its promise to kill him. Thus did Gary Gilmore become a media celebrity and, as he prepared for his execution, he began marketing his death, trying to get the best movie deal, the best book deal, and the best marketing plan.

As part of the marketing plan, there would be a book written by Norman Mailer. And so, though he had a legitimate place in the story, Norman Mailer left himself out of *The Executioner's Song*, his finest work of literary journalism and the recipient of another Pulitzer Prize. It remains one of the great achievements in this form of writing.

Mailer's long career will continue to be studied by those with an interest in both fiction and nonfiction.

With a writer as prolific as Mailer, there are many misfires in his career. He may have turned to writing nonfiction in the late 1950s because he felt stalled as a novelist. After the success of *The Naked and the Dead*, his best books—*Barbary Shore* and *The Deer Park*—were considered disappointments. The essay "The White Negro" and the journalism in *Advertisements for Myself* and *The Presidential Papers* reinvigorated him. Against the wall again with his fiction in the late 1960s, he produced *The Armies of the Night* and embarked on a decade-plus of nonfiction books, mostly failures until *The Executioner's Song*.

And yet, he continued. In not worrying that he would look ridiculous, he rarely was. For a writer, fearlessness and tenaciousness are vital qualities. Mailer had both. Near the end of his life, he shared some of the lessons he learned about his craft in *The Spooky Art*.



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## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

### Questions

1. Mailer was often criticized for his portraits of women in his work and his treatment of them in his life. Research his relationships (he was married six times) and ask if his categorization as a misogynist is fair. You might want to consult *A Ticket to the Circus* by Norris Church, his widow, to whom he was married for the last twenty-five years of his life.
2. As we ponder the concept of “self” in a journalist and debate the use of the first person, where do we put Mailer on the journalistic continuum of detached observer/involved participant?

### Suggested Reading

Mailer, Norman. *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*. New York: Plume, 1995 (1968).

———. *The Executioner’s Song*. New York: Signet, 2000 (1979).

### Other Books of Interest

Mailer, Norman. *The Spooky Art: Thoughts on Writing*. Reprint. New York: Random House, 2004.

———. *The Time of Our Time*. New York: Modern Library, 1999.

### Websites of Interest

1. “A Brief History of Norman Mailer” from October 1, 2001, by English professor J. Michael Lennon, of Wilkes University, is available on the PBS *American Masters* website. —  
<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/norman-mailer/a-brief-history-of-norman-mailer/653/>
2. Several interviews and broadcasts featuring Norman Mailer are available on the National Public Radio website. —  
<http://www.npr.org/search/index.php?searchinput=Norman+Mailer>

## Lecture 5

### The Quality-Lit Man

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Terry Southern's *Red-Dirt Marijuana and Other Tastes*.



erry Southern was perhaps the most tragic, least understood, and least appreciated of the new journalists who arose in the 1960s.

He came from a small town in Texas and he landed in Paris after the Second World War, as part of a group of American expatriate writers. He was not involved in the launch of *The Paris Review*, but he did contribute to the publication early on.

After all, he was determined to make it big in what he called the quality-lit game. He was in Paris, in part, to chase the ghost of Ernest Hemingway. Like generations of writers before, and since, he wanted to write the Great American Novel.

But then the need to eat intervened.

He began writing for the Olympia Press in Paris. This publisher specialized in erotic and satirical writing and Southern and his friend Mason Hoffenberg collaborated on a book called *Candy* (1958). It brought Southern a modest paycheck, which was his goal. It was originally published under the pseudonym Maxwell Kenton because Southern was serious about pursuing the quality-lit career and had a book manuscript under consideration by a major American publisher at the time.

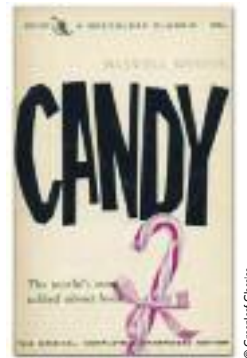
What he did not foresee was the phenomenal success of *Candy*. It became a monstrous best-seller. Since it had not been protected by conventional copyright, bootleg editions sprang up all over the world. Within a few years, Southern and Hoffenberg were outed as the authors, but they never received more than their initial payment for the book.

Southern did publish a couple of novels—*Flash and Filigree* (1958) and *The Magic Christian* (1959), which was subsequently adapted into a movie starring Ringo Starr and Peter Sellers, but when he returned to the United



Terry Southern (1924–1995), ca. 1968.

© Library of Congress



The cover of the first United States printing of *Candy* (1965).

© Greendale Classics

States, he became best known for his journalism in *Esquire* and his screenplays for several key films of the 1960s. He was author or coauthor of *Dr. Strangelove*, *The Loved One*, *Barbarella*, and *Easy Rider*, among others.

However, his journalism for *Esquire* was truly groundbreaking. Southern was writing what we might call “gonzo journalism” when Hunter S. Thompson was still an unknown freelance pitching stories from South America. With his seminal article “Twirling at Ole Miss” (*Esquire*, February 1963) and other pieces for the magazine during the decade, Southern emerged as one of the seminal voices of his time.

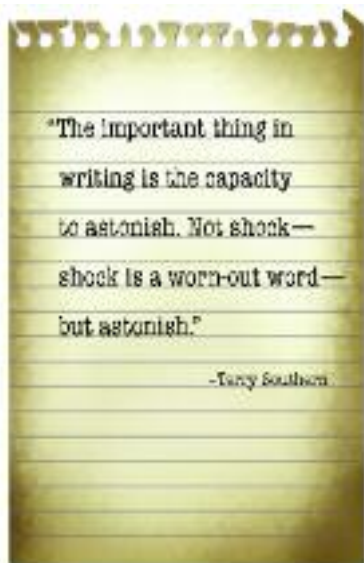
What Southern wrote was what Tom Wolfe called “a curious form of autobiography” in which the process of journalism became the subject of journalism. This is the device on which Hunter S. Thompson would mount his career. A fancy-pants term for it (*ahem . . . mine*) is “metajournalism,” which simply means that it’s journalism about journalism.

The whole time Southern is in Oxford, Mississippi, for “Twirling at Ole Miss,” readers are always aware that the writer is there to do the Story. The Story dominates. How can he frame the Story? Can he use this event in the Story?

It sounds like a recipe for self-indulgence. But metajournalism—or the Thompson strain of that DNA, gonzo journalism—depends on the writer maintaining a self-deprecating or apologetic tone. It does not work in the hands of an egotist (see Norman Mailer), but it does with a writer willing to make himself the butt of the joke.

And Southern knew the genetic structure of humor better than most writers and was always willing to get a laugh at his own expense.

Southern is not always mentioned when the Mount Rushmore of literary journalism is discussed. Throw out his name and you’ll likely get the flicker of recognition at the mention of *Candy* or those magnificent films he wrote. But he played a role in the evolution of literary journalism, and many of the things that happened in those nonfiction chronicles that followed would not have happened in the same way had Southern not been there first.



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## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

### Questions

1. What similarities can you find between Southern's writing in the 1960s and Hunter S. Thompson's writings in the 1970s? What elements are different, giving each writer a distinctive style?
2. What would you say in an article or a lecture if you wanted to make a case for Terry Southern as an American writer deserving greater recognition? How would you rehabilitate his career and image so he would get the acclaim he deserved?

### Suggested Reading

Southern, Terry. *Red-Dirt Marijuana and Other Tastes*. New York: Citadel Underground, 1998 (1967).

### Other Books of Interest

Southern, Nile. *The Candy Men: The Rollicking Life and Times of the Notorious Novel Candy*. New York: Arcade, 2004.

Southern, Terry. *Now Dig This: The Unspeakable Writings of Terry Southern, 1950–1995*. The Terry Southern Literary Trust, 2001.

### Websites of Interest

1. The Terry Southern Literary Trust provides a website about the author and his works. — <http://www.terrysouthern.com>
2. The PBS New Hour “Retrospective” website provides the complete text of Terry Southern’s article “Grooving in Chi,” which originally appeared in *Esquire* magazine in November 1968, about the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. — <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/convention96/retro/southern.html>

## Lecture 6

### The New Art Form

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*.



any of the literary journalists came from a background in newspapers or magazines. People like Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, and Gay Talese sought—and, for a while, had—conventional careers in journalism.

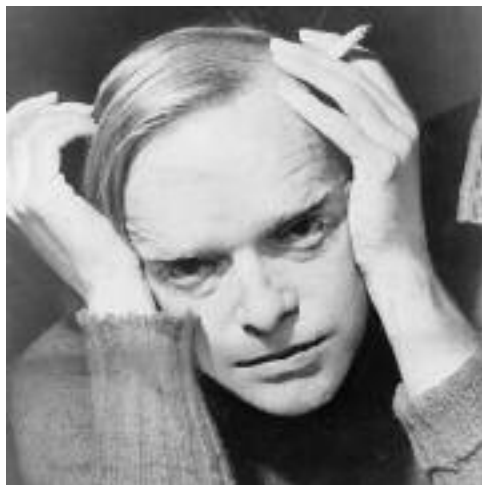
Truman Capote was different. He came from a fiscally and emotionally impoverished background, passed around through relatives with little of the stability children need and crave. The experience turned him inward, and the circumstances made him a natural storyteller.

He rose from the great Southern literary storytelling tradition and was soon on his way to being a pint-sized Faulkner (or at least a Styron). He landed at the *New Yorker*, where he worked as a copy clerk, and began publishing short stories and winning awards when still an extremely young—and striking—man.

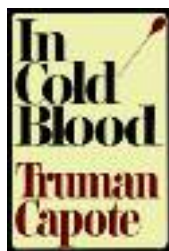
Though well respected for his graceful and gothic short stories and insightful novels, in the mid-1950s, Capote decided to experiment with nonfiction writing. He did so first with *The Muses Are Heard*, the comic novella-like account of an American tour of *Porgy and Bess* behind the Iron Curtain, in which he showed a remarkable ability as a reporter. This, as with “The Duke in His Domain,” his profile of Marlon Brando, appeared in the *New Yorker*.

But since both those pieces were somewhat comic, critics didn't realize the depth of his accomplishments with nonfiction. As always, people don't take humor seriously.

So he began looking around for a serious subject. In November 1959, he found it—the murder of a family by “persons unknown,” out on the high plains of Western Kansas.



Truman Capote (1924–1984) in a 1959 publicity photo.



The cover of *In Cold Blood* (1966).

His account of this multiple murder and its consequences, *In Cold Blood*, became one of the great achievements of literary journalism and the touchstone of the true-crime genre.

Not quite willing to call himself a journalist, Capote went so far as to say his book was the harbinger of a new art form—the nonfiction novel. Whether this was an attempt at innovative marketing or to distance himself from the rest of the ink-stained wretches, the term served mostly to confuse generations of young people in the years since. Now they think they need to refer to a novel as a “fictional novel”—as if there is any other kind.

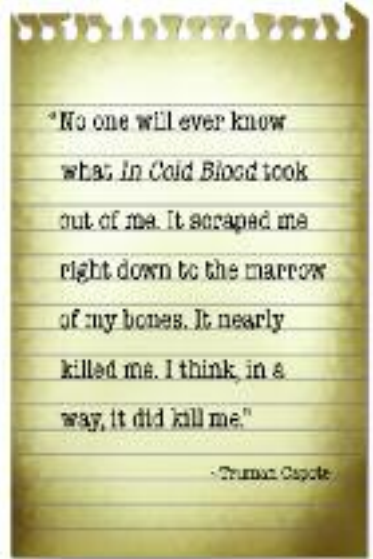
Of course, Capote’s work did much more than confuse generations of college students about the use of the word “novel.”

One of his lesser achievements might be that he nearly single-handedly created a genre—the true-crime book. He might have scoffed at this, since he had high literary pretensions and that genre has produced a significant share of pulp and trash. But he also introduced a generation to the machinations of police work, criminology, and the American justice system. For years, television interviewers used Capote as the go-to guy for discussions of capital punishment and crime.

One would never have classified Capote as shy or retiring, but the success of *In Cold Blood* thrust him into a blinding spotlight of celebrity and he became a regular on talk shows and was a significant character in American popular culture, in part because of his flamboyant personality and his arresting and childlike speaking voice.

Though he spoke of writing a great American novel in the aftermath of *In Cold Blood*, he instead rode this tsunami of publicity for more than a decade, treading water with books that merely collected work written earlier. His occasional forays into journalism were of the middleweight variety, as if he did not want to produce a major work of nonfiction, knowing it would be dwarfed by the magnificence of *In Cold Blood*.

Finally, in the 1970s, he began publishing chapters from his novel-in-progress. It probably had more elements of nonfiction than fiction and it dealt frankly with his time in the world of the very rich. He named names. He told stories out of school. His friends turned away from him.



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After three chapters of *Answered Prayers* had been published in *Esquire* by the end of the 1970s, Capote found himself cut off from many of his high-society friends. Angry, broken-hearted, and lonely, he turned with even more frequency to the drugs and alcohol that were his solace.

In his last years, he produced only one work with much new material or significance, a 1981 collection called *Music for Chameleons*. Again he suggested he had created a new art form. This time, the pieces of recollection were called “documentary fictions,” though it wasn’t clear how they differed in construction from memoir. The centerpiece of the book was a riveting true-crime tale called “Handcarved Coffins.” Though it could have been a worthy successor to *In Cold Blood*, Capote tossed it off as something written in script form between himself and a police investigator. As *In Cold Blood* had brimmed with specifics, “Handcarved Coffins” was so vague with details that it could have been fiction.

He died at 59, at once a tragic and significant figure in American writing. *In Cold Blood*, his greatest achievement, nearly killed him. Though Capote never fully recovered from that book and the success and excess it brought, he remains an important voice in literary journalism.



Left to right: model Jerry Hall, artist Andy Warhol, singer Debbie Harry, Truman Capote, and fashion designer Paloma Picasso at a party in 1979.

© The Kobal Collection

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

### Questions

1. Read *In Cold Blood* carefully and analyze how Capote might have gotten the information he used in the book. What came from interviews? What was the source for the other information, including the re-creation of the family's last day? Capote often claimed that "every word" in the book was true. What words . . . what parts . . . cause you doubt?
2. Like Lillian Ross, Capote disdained tape recorders for interviews. However, he also disdained taking notes. What can you learn about Capote's reporting techniques during the research of *In Cold Blood* and how do his techniques compare with those of more traditional reporters?

### Suggested Reading

Capote, Truman. *In Cold Blood*. Random House, 2002 (1966).

### Other Books of Interest

Capote, Truman. *Too Brief a Treat: The Letters of Truman Capote*. Ed. Gerald Clarke. Vintage Books, 2005.

Clarke, Gerald. *Capote: A Biography*. New York: Da Capo Press, 2005.

### Websites of Interest

1. The *Truman Capote* website provides a biography, information on books and movies, and related sites. — [www.capotebio.com](http://www.capotebio.com)
2. The *New York Times* obituary from August 28, 1984, on Truman Capote, written by Albin Krebs. — <http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/12/28/home/capote-obit.html>

## Lecture 7

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### The King of Hangoutology

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Gay Talese's *Thy Neighbor's Wife*.



If there was a central figure without whom there would have been no literary journalism explosion in the 1960s, it was Gay Talese.

The son of a tailor in Ocean City, New Jersey, Talese had a rather humble upbringing and schooling. Instead of an elite East Coast school, he went off to college at the University of Alabama, where he served as sports writer on the college paper.

After graduation, he was able to work his way to the city room of the *New York Times* and became a respectable *Times* reporter. Considering that time in the history of the newspaper—the late 1950s—that might imply dullness. But he managed to get his voice and his unusual worldview into the gray pages of the respected—and boring—*New York Times* of the early 1960s.

But he also liked to moonlight. It was his writing for *Esquire* and his famous profiles of Joe Louis, Joe DiMaggio, and Frank Sinatra that revolutionized the art of reporting. His famous piece “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold” has been called the greatest magazine article ever published. He gathered his information not from interviews with the sometimes reclusive and combative singer. He just observed Sinatra from a distance, watching him as he talked, fought, and worked with other people.

Gay Talese didn't interview. He just hung out. And nobody in the history of journalism was better at hanging out than Gay Talese.

Talese collected the best of his magazine profiles in *Fame and Obscurity*, which can be considered a how-to book in writing about people. In the course of a few weeks of hanging out, Talese was always able to pull the essence of his subject out of their reticent selves and present them bare to the world. The book serves as a capstone to the first part of Talese's career—as a magazine writer.



Gay Talese (1932–) during an appearance at the Strand Bookstore in New York City, 2006.

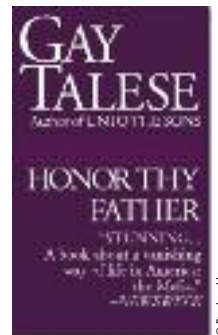
© David Shankbone

The second part of his career was as the author of monumental and meticulously detailed nonfiction books about key institutions in American culture, including the media, organized crime, and the sex industry.

Early in his career—and while still working for the *New York Times*—Talese had done several short books, including the quirky and delightful *New York: A Serendipiter's Journey* and *The Bridge*, an account of building the Verrazano Narrows Bridge that connected Staten Island and Brooklyn.

At the end of the 1960s, he began to write his epics. He first turned his gaze toward his (by then) former employer, the *New York Times*. *The Kingdom and the Power* showed the scope of Talese's gifts. It was a history of the planet's most influential newspaper, but it was also framed by a story of one afternoon in the life of the newspaper's then-editor, Clifton Daniel. Despite its less than glamorous subject, the book was a best-seller.

Talese then turned toward a life of crime—or, at least, reporting such a life. Published nearly simultaneously with Mario Puzo's huge best-seller *The Godfather*, Talese's *Honor Thy Father* was thumbnailed as “the nonfiction *Godfather*.” Indeed, both books dealt with the spectacle of Mafia generations changing hands. But Talese's was all true, written from the vantage of the scion of the Bonanno crime family. That Talese had such access is due to not only his gifts as a journalist, but also his Italian-American heritage. Young Bill Bonanno liked Talese because he saw they had so much in common.



Talese published *The Kingdom and the Power* in 1969, *Fame and Obscurity* in 1970, and *Honor Thy Father* in 1971. His next book would take much longer.

Talese earned a book contract to write about sex in America. Perhaps that sounds frivolous. But once you begin to take it seriously and begin to wonder how to tell this story, you realize that Talese had his work cut out for him.

The reporting of the book became news. For years, magazines and newspapers carried accounts of Talese's research, as he worked in massage parlors and frequented prostitutes and committed other questionable acts, all in the name of understanding the nation's preoccupation with sex. That his marriage to Nan Talese endured is testament to the character of both parties.

But Talese, ever the consummate reporter and writer, truly was trying to develop an understanding of the sexual culture. And then he faced a huge narrative challenge: where would he find the seam of the story? What would be the narrative thread?

He began by telling the story of a boy aroused by a photograph of a nude woman on a sand dune—and, as the boy achieves the satisfaction following masturbation, Talese then takes us into the mind of the woman in the picture, and what she was thinking at the moment the photograph was taken. He then

follows her as she is discovered and becomes America's favorite nude model in the 1950s, and that path eventually leads to *Playboy* magazine and its editor, Hugh Hefner.

What Talese did was to follow the narrative as a round-robin. The story was handed off to different characters and they then reappeared through the book, until, at the end, Talese himself enters the story.

When *Thy Neighbor's Wife* was published in 1980, it was greeted with some derision by the wink-wink-nudge-nudge faction, but it has stood the test of time as a monumental work of literary journalism and sociology.

Talese by this time was something of a stonecutter as a writer, laboring forever over his manuscripts. *Unto the Sons*, a dozen years after *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, was about the Italian-American experience, largely focused on his family. *A Writer's Life*, which sounds like an autobiography, was a stream-of-consciousness jog through Talese's mind, full of the rich, unfolding, and sometimes elliptical sentences that made his writing at once frustrating and fulfilling. He's at work on another book, this time about his marriage.

Though he has not been prolific in this second—much longer—phase of his career, few literary journalists have been as influential as Gay Talese.



Nan and Gay Talese at the 2009 Tribeca Film Festival in New York.

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## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

### Questions

1. Read several of the key profiles in *Fame and Obscurity*. Talese is known for writing about people who disliked being written about. Analyze his pieces (on Sinatra and DiMaggio, for starters). How much of the piece comes from Talese's conversations with the subjects? How does Talese appear—if he does—in these celebrated profiles?
2. Read *Thy Neighbor's Wife* and consider how Talese uses his personal experience in telling the story. Is the book stronger or weaker because of his appearance? There are no fake names in the book. Everyone appears under their real names. Which of the characters might have the greatest regret for opening up to Talese and why?

### Suggested Reading

Talese, Gay. *Thy Neighbor's Wife*. Updated ed. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009 (1980).

### Other Books of Interest

Talese, Gay. *The Gay Talese Reader: Portraits and Encounters*. New York: Walker & Co., 2003.

———. *A Writer's Life*. New York: Random House, 2007.

### Websites of Interest

1. The Random House official Gay Talese website. —  
[www.randomhouse.com/kvpa/talese](http://www.randomhouse.com/kvpa/talese)
2. The *Esquire* magazine website provides the entire text of the April 1966 article by Gay Talese, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold." —  
[http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ1003-OCT\\_SINATRA\\_rev\\_?click=main\\_sr](http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ1003-OCT_SINATRA_rev_?click=main_sr)
3. The *New York* magazine website provides an article from April 26, 2009, by Jonathan Van Meter titled "A Nonfiction Marriage." Van Meter interviewed Gay Talese about his family life in relation to *Thy Neighbor's Wife*. —  
[www.nymag.com/arts/books/profiles/56289/](http://www.nymag.com/arts/books/profiles/56289/)

## Lecture 8

### Pandemonium with a Big Grin: Tom Wolfe, Part I

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.



You don't have to read books to know Tom Wolfe. As the "Man in the White Suit," he has been an observer of popular culture as well as an icon of popular culture.

He didn't start out to do anything particularly radical. He went straight through school—aside from a flirtation with Major League Baseball—and earned a doctorate at Yale University in the late-1950s. After all of that schooling, he wanted a dose of the real world. He'd seen a lot of movies, and working for a newspaper looked like fun. So he applied and was rejected by all of the greatest newspapers in the country. He was also rejected by many of the lesser newspapers.

Finally, he got a job at the *Springfield Union* in Massachusetts. After a couple years there, he went off to the *Washington Post*, and then landed—in 1962—at the *New York Herald-Tribune*. You didn't get more "real world" than the *Herald-Tribune* newsroom.

He wrote for the daily newspaper and helped with the transformation of the Sunday magazine into *New York*, which became one of the showpieces of literary journalism. And he watched what his competitors were doing. He was most interested in Talese's writing and where it appeared—*Esquire* magazine—and so he came up with an idea for *Esquire*. Since he was going to California to write a standard newspaper feature on car customizing for the newspaper, his expenses were paid. While he was there, he told *Esquire*, he could write something weird for the magazine. That "something" became "There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored (Thphhhhhh!) Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (Rahghhh!) Around the Bend (Brummmmmmmmmmmmmmm)," loved—and hated—by many.

The result was a failure—a failure that became a success. Though he was over deadline and unable to write, Wolfe managed to find his unique writing style when he began typing up his notes.

His style was hyperbole, hyperventilation, and hoopla, and perfectly suited to the 1960s, which he called "pandemonium with a big grin."

Tom Wolfe in the offices of the *New York Herald-Tribune* in 1963.



© Library of Congress

He saw a great opportunity to try to follow a moving target and do something really unusual: to record the strange evolving decade. He wanted to write the great American novel of the 1960s, with a lot of his *zip-zam-zowie-and-swoosh* language, but it would, of course, *not* be a novel. But he faced a huge challenge. He wanted to write about a character he saw as a sort of spiritual leader, the avatar of a new culture, almost a Buddha to a young generation of writers, artists, and weirdos. And the subject was . . . a writer.

It was Ken Kesey, the young novelist who had published *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion*. Kesey had all of the right stuff and certainly the literary DNA to carry it off, to become the Hemingway of his generation, to earn a spot in the pantheon of literary greatness.

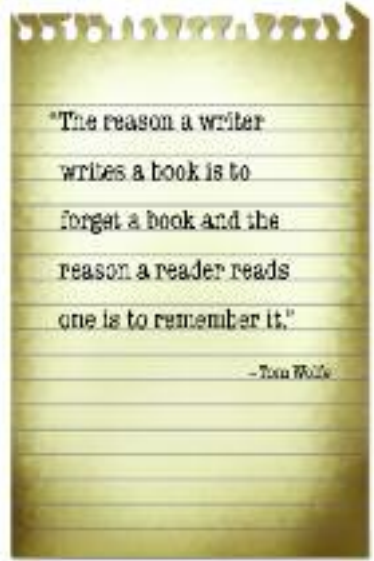
But just having it all wasn't enough—at least that's the way Wolfe saw it. Kesey had eschewed materialism and was game to discover damn near anything. He saw the still-legal drug LSD as key to his explorations, and he wanted to take his charmed and enthusiastic friends along with him.

Those friends were sort of the patient-zero for the species hippie. They were the Merry Pranksters and, in 1964, they set off on a day-glo bus, headed from San Francisco to New York, to celebrate the publication of Kesey's second novel. That bus trip became the central metaphor for Wolfe's eventual book and for the 1960s: "Are you on the bus?" Are you cool? Are you hip?

Of course, Wolfe was not along for the ride. He didn't really discover Kesey and his spiritual quest for two years, until 1966, when he saw him as the central character of this great epic of a generation's spiritual quest.

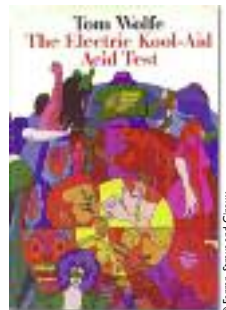
And once he decided to write the book, Wolfe saw himself in a race against time. There was nothing to stop Kesey from writing the "great book of the sixties." And who was hanging out with Kesey, but other writers, including Larry McMurtry (*Lonesome Dove*), Hunter S. Thompson, and Robert Stone (*A Hall of Mirrors*). What was to keep them from writing the "great book of the sixties"?

Nothing, of course. But Wolfe won the race with *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.



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Cover of the first U.S. edition of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, 1968.



© Farrar, Straus and Giroux



## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

### Questions

1. Is *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* too much a product of the times? Wolfe himself wonders if it's a mere historical curiosity. But considering the lingering infatuation with the music and popular culture of the 1960s, does the book still resonate today?
2. Wolfe re-created the bus trip by interviewing and by watching the four hundred-hour film that Kesey made of the journey. He re-created the meeting between the Hell's Angels and the Merry Pranksters by listening to an audiotape made by Hunter S. Thompson. Can you find the stylistic differences between events Wolfe reported firsthand and the accounts Wolfe drew from these secondary sources?

### Suggested Reading

Wolfe, Tom. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. New York: Picador, 2008 (1968).

### Other Books of Interest

McKeen, William. *Tom Wolfe*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995.

Wolfe, Tom. *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*. New York: Picador, 2009 (1965).

### Websites of Interest

1. Picador Publishing's official Tom Wolfe website. — [www.tomwolfe.com](http://www.tomwolfe.com)
2. The Kingwood Library at Lonestar College in Kingwood, TX, provides the *American Cultural History* website with a decade-by-decade overview. This link covers the period 1960–1969. — <http://kclibrary.lonestar.edu/decade60.html>
3. *Wolfgang's Vault* website provides memorabilia from the 1960s, including music, art, photography, and other items from the pop-culture scene. — [www.wolfgangsvault.com](http://www.wolfgangsvault.com)

# Lecture 9

## Pushing the Envelope: Tom Wolfe, Part II

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*.

**F**ew journalists ever became the sort of cultural observer and social critic that Tom Wolfe became. In turning his eye on society, he created or perpetuated a number of catchphrases that became part of popular culture: "good old boy," "radical chic," "the Me Decade," and "the right stuff."

As the times changed, he changed. The over-the-top language he used in chronicling the psychedelic 1960s changed as he entered the 1970s and began work on his most mature piece of journalism.

He had been nabbed by Jann Wenner, editor of *Rolling Stone*. Wenner had discovered a number of great literary journalists in the first years of the magazine, but now was aggressively going after proven talent. He came up with a great idea for Wolfe: attend the last Apollo launch at the Kennedy Space Center. It would be a reunion of all the surviving astronauts.

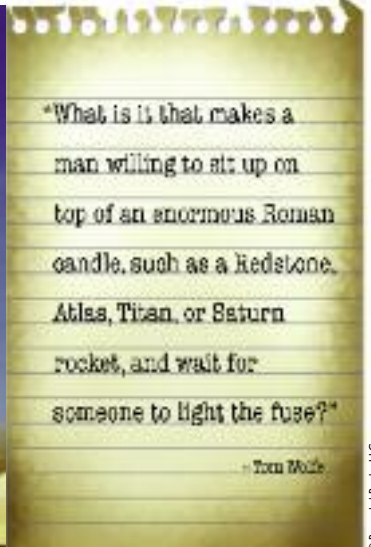
Wolfe leaped at the chance, but soon discovered that the astronauts formed a tight circle. If you hadn't been in space, you couldn't be part of the club. The frustration led to fascination and soon Wolfe was in the thrall of that elite club. What began as a single article soon became a four-part series. (One story was called "Post-Orbital Remorse" and it dealt with the depression felt by astronauts after they returned from walking on the moon, aware that their lives had peaked.)



Tom Wolfe (1931–) posing during a book tour in 1997.



Launch of Apollo 11, July 16, 1969.



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Wolfe had been planning to write a novel—a real novel—but he set that aside as the story of the astronauts absorbed his life. It took him seven years, but finally he published his nonfiction saga as *The Right Stuff*. The critics called it the work of the “new, mature Tom Wolfe,” because the language was much more controlled. He said he merely had the language match the characters. He was writing about oddballs in the 1960s, so the writing had flash and lights. Writing about the military, he was more terse.



© Picador Books

Second edition cover of *The Right Stuff*, 1981.

In post-Watergate America, the themes of *The Right Stuff* were unfashionable. It came out at the end of the period of excess that Wolfe himself had tagged “The Me Decade.” Though not trembling-lipped and reverent, *The Right Stuff* was an unabashedly patriotic work, laughing and winking at the foibles of the time, yet respectful of the ingenuity and spirit that characterized America’s part of the space race.

It also dealt with subjects that few people seemed to be willing to speak about in the post-John Wayne world: heroism . . . bravery . . . doing the right thing.

As unfashionable as the book might have seemed in that cynical time, it hit a chord and also helped rewrite a small portion of history. The silent hero of the story, the fearless test pilot, Chuck Yeager, was unknown outside the subculture of military flying. *The Right Stuff* made him so much a household name



© NASA

Astronaut Groups 1 and 2

The original seven Mercury astronauts selected by NASA in April 1959 are seated (left to right): L. Gordon Cooper Jr., Virgil I. Grissom, M. Scott Carpenter, Water M. Schirra Jr., John H. Glenn Jr., Alan B. Shepard Jr., and Donald K. Slayton. The second group of NASA astronauts, who were named in September 1962, are standing (left to right): Edward H. White II, James A. McDivitt, John W. Young, Elliot M. See Jr., Charles Conrad Jr., Frank Borman, Neil A. Armstrong, Thomas P. Stafford, and James A. Lovell Jr.

that he ended up writing two volumes of autobiography and became a television pitchman.

And the astronauts—those who had tasted spectacular fame and then been cast aside—enjoyed another moment in the sun, thanks to Wolfe’s book. Not all of them approved of him telling stories of the boys’ club life they led away from their families and of the astronaut groupies, but many of them eventually and, no doubt, with some regret, acknowledged the truths in the book.

(The book’s title itself became a catchphrase and, unfortunately, it inspired unimaginative headline writers to title any profile of an author as “The Write Stuff.”)

In his great book, Wolfe has examined the fleeting nature of the astronauts’ great fame in the fickle American culture that needed a new distraction every minute.

After *The Right Stuff*, he returned to that novel he’d been planning—*The Bonfire of the Vanities*—and became primarily a novelist, though he still “reports” his novels as vigorously as he did his journalism.



Chuck Yeager with the Bell X-1 after becoming the first man to break the sound barrier on October 14, 1947.

© United States Department of Defense

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

### Questions

1. Journalists used to keep a lot of secrets in the 1960s—whether about President Kennedy’s philandering or about the astronauts’ carousing. When do you think the culture changed and is it possible for someone of such great celebrity to have privacy? If so, what parts of a public person’s life should be private?
2. Though the book was hailed as the work of the “mature” Tom Wolfe as opposed to the “wild and crazy” Tom Wolfe, the earlier incarnation still lingers. Where does the “zip-zam-zowie-and-swoosh” Wolfe emerge in *The Right Stuff*?

### Suggested Reading

Wolfe, Tom. *The Right Stuff*. New York: Picador, 2008 (1979).

### Other Books of Interest

Wolfe, Tom. *Hooking Up*. New York: Picador, 2001.

———. *The Purple Decades*. New York: Macmillan, 1998 (1981).

### Websites of Interest

1. The *Chuck Yeager* website celebrates the life and work of the famous aviator.  
— [www.chuckyeager.com](http://www.chuckyeager.com)
2. A search for the term “astronaut” on the National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s (NASA) website provides details on astronauts through four categories: “general,” “news,” “podcasts,” and “images.” — [www.nasa.gov](http://www.nasa.gov)

## Lecture 10

### She Who Uses Shyness as a Weapon

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem: Essays* and *The White Album*.



Look over the major players in literary journalism and it looks like a boys' club. It also looks like an East Coast boys' club.

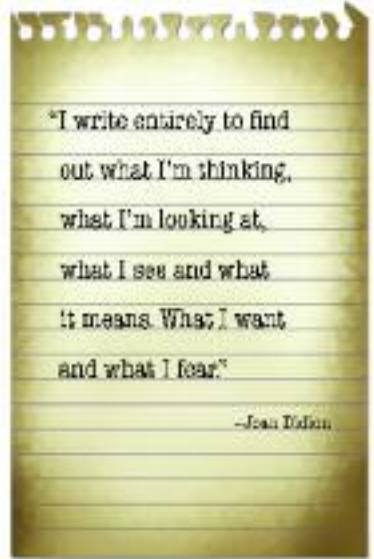
But few writers more successfully chronicled the California culture of the 1960s than Joan Didion. First as a freelance, then as a regular *Saturday Evening Post* columnist, she wrote minimalist essays about the folks and foibles of the times.

She was educated at Berkeley and worked for *Vogue*. But a certain sort of magic happened when she and her husband, John Gregory Dunne (also a journalist), began reporting on the weirdness on the California coast in the 1960s.

Didion wrote for conventional magazines. In that era, you could not be more conventional than the *Saturday Evening Post*. By the end of the 1960s, she and Dunne alternated writing the magazine's "Points West" column.

Their work stands as the great chronicle of that place and time—the exaltation of California culture, rock-star royalty, weird religious cults, movie-star excess, and serial killers.

Didion was known for being nearly pathologically shy. Interviews were torture for her—and perhaps even more so for her subjects. It's said that after asking a question and getting a response, Didion would often sit, not asking another question, and letting the silence grow. The quiet would often unnerve the subject and they would volunteer information—anything—to just reintroduce sound to



Joan Didion (1934–) at the National Book Awards in November 2007.

the situation. For her, shyness became a weapon, another tool in her journalist's arsenal.

Didion's best short journalism is contained in two anthologies—*Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, from 1968, and *The White Album*, which appeared in 1979, but which appeared to have been written with a century's worth of hindsight.

Didion also had an active career as a novelist, with such books as *Run River*, *Play It as It Lays*, and *A Book of Common Prayer*. With Dunne, she coauthored several screenplays, such as *A Panic in Needle Park*, *True Confessions* (based on one of Dunne's novels), *A Star Is Born*, and *Up Close and Personal*.

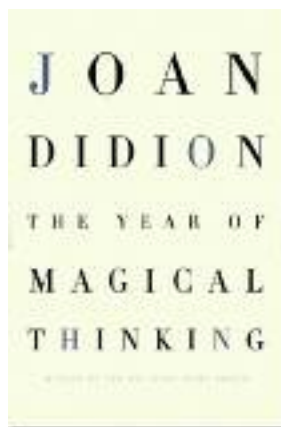
Didion achieved her greatest recognition with her most personal story, *The Year of Magical Thinking*. The tragic tale of losing both her husband and daughter within the space of a year, the memoir was a huge commercial success and much lauded, as well as the inspiration for a Broadway play starring Vanessa Redgrave as Didion.

What's remarkable in *The Year of Magical Thinking* is the way that this great observer and reporter turns her trained eye inward to examine in meticulous and heart-wrenching detail the circumstances around these devastating losses.

Didion had always played a role—many times, a small and inconsequential one—in the stories she wrote about other people. Whether watching Nancy Reagan deal with obsequious members of the press, or watching the other three members of the Doors deal with oddball lead singer Jim Morrison, Didion was often in her stories as a reference point for readers—an everywoman, if you will.

So when she told her own story, she took readers into her mind, to examine the tragedies from the vantage point of her soul, informed by her broken heart. Rarely has a writer of any kind—novelist or journalist—written with such relentless detail of events so close to the bone.

Though she won acclaim for her journalism, Didion's most lasting work of art might be this tragic tale.



Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* was the winner of the prestigious National Book Award in 2005, a year when there were five-hundred and forty-two nominations under consideration.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

### Questions

1. How would you describe Didion's tone in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*—published in 1968 and written about that decade—and the tone in *The White Album*, which came out a decade later, but which covered much of the same ground? Do you see continuity or is there an evolution in terms of her tone?
2. Research interviewing styles. What journalists are considered the best at interviewing? What are the strengths and weaknesses of Didion's style?

### Suggested Reading

Didion, Joan. *Slouching Towards Bethlehem: Essays*. Reissue ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008 (1968).

———. *The White Album*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990 (1979).

### Other Books of Interest

Didion, Joan. *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live: Collected Nonfiction*. New York: Everyman's Library, 2006.

———. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. New York: Vintage Books, 2007.

### Websites of Interest

1. The PBS show "Fresh Air with Terry Gross" website provides a biography of Gross, whose style has been compared to Joan Didion's and other women journalists. — [www.npr.org/freshair](http://www.npr.org/freshair)
2. The *Joan Didion Info* fan website (not affiliated with Joan Didion) provides resources and information on the writer's life and work. — [www.joan-didion.info](http://www.joan-didion.info)



## Lecture II

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### The Man Who Became a Verb

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is George Plimpton's *Paper Lion: Confessions of a Last-String Quarterback*.



When Tom Wolfe published his profile of *New Yorker* editor William Shawn, the literary establishment began kicking back at the ruffians behind literary journalism.

But there was no more literary a character in that generation than George Plimpton, one of the founders of the *Paris Review*. This Harvard-educated writer and editor had a literary pedigree that was above reproach.

Yet he also had a Walter Mitty-esque desire to participate in arenas where he had no business. So, in the eyes of many of those in his literary and social circles, Plimpton went slumming in the world of journalism.

What he did not only had an effect on literary journalism—amping up the “literary” side of the equation—but also had an effect on the literary world.

Because he wrote about sports . . . real sports . . . he expanded the scope for a lot of literary endeavor.

He loved sports. He wrote about sports—and not about Harvard's lacrosse team. He liked boxing, pro football, major league baseball . . . the whole enchilada. And what he wanted to do, in his writing, was to show how the professional athlete matched up against the rest of us.

He became the model of the participatory journalist—a writer who made himself central to the stories he wrote. In his most famous exercise, he attended the training camp of the Detroit Lions in 1963 as the last-string quarterback. He was on the crest of 40, playing games with men twice his size and half his age. His only on-field experience was in the preseason intrasquad game where he, wearing number “0,” led his team through a series of downs, losing yardage on the plays.



George Plimpton sports a bloody nose after a round with light heavyweight world champion boxer Archie Moore in 1956.

© The Lyons Press

The resulting book, *Paper Lion: Confessions of a Last-String Quarterback*, appeared in 1966, at the peak of the new journalism wave—not long after *In Cold Blood* and Tom Wolfe’s first book, a few months before Norman Mailer lived his *Armies of the Night* experience and Hunter S. Thompson published *Hell’s Angels*.

*Time* magazine called him “the professional amateur.” He dabbled with baseball (*Out of My League: The Classic Hilarious Account of an Amateur’s Ordeal in Professional Baseball*), golf (*The Bogey Man: A Month on the PGA Tour*), hockey (*Open Net: A Professional Amateur in the World of Big-Time Hockey*), and boxing (*Shadow Box: An Amateur in the Ring*). For a brief period in the early 1970s, he hosted a series of television specials showing him trying other endeavors—working for the circus and doing stand-up comedy.

Other writers tried and failed to do what he did. They called it “doing a plimpton.” The writer had so defined a form that he suffered the same fate as Kleenex, when its name became a euphemism for all tissues.

It’s hard to find anyone who ever met George Plimpton who did not admire him. He was an elegant writer and a superb, encouraging, gifted editor. As one of the founders of *The Paris Review*, he kept that publication afloat with huge infusions of cash from his pocket. And, as part of a continuing series of penetrating interviews that he often conducted, the *Review* offered enormous insight to the creative process. Plimpton’s interviews have been collected in the several volumes of the series *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*.

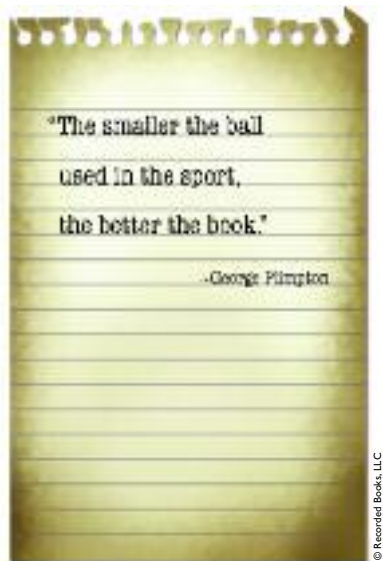
As editor and as confidant to other writers, his talent and largesse benefited dozens of significant artists.

Later in his career, he became known for producing well-crafted oral-history biographies—one of socialite Edie Sedgwick and one of writer Truman Capote. On his death in 2003, his friends conducted a similar literary wake for him in the book *George, Being George: George Plimpton’s Life as Told, Admired, Deplored, and Envied by 200 Friends, Relatives, Lovers, Acquaintances, Rivals—and a Few Unappreciative Observers*.



Last-string quarterback Plimpton on the bench during a 1963 preseason game for the Detroit Lions.

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## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

### Questions

1. Contrast Plimpton's use of the first person with Norman Mailer's use of the first person. To make the playing field level, use *The Fight* by Mailer and *Shadow Box* by Plimpton, since they both deal with boxing. What sorts of similarities do you find? What sorts of differences?
2. Which sports inspire the best journalism and why? What are the dramatic elements of each sport that arouse writers to do their best work?

### Suggested Reading

Plimpton, George. *Paper Lion: Confessions of a Last-String Quarterback*. Anniv. ed. Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2009 (1966).

### Other Books of Interest

Aldrich, Nelson W. *George, Being George: George Plimpton's Life as Told, Admired, Deplored, and Envied by 200 Friends, Relatives, Lovers, Acquaintances, Rivals—and a Few Unappreciative Observers*. New York: Random House, 2008.

Plimpton, George. *The Best of Plimpton*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994.

### Websites of Interest

1. The *Plimpton Project* is a George Plimpton fan website. — [www.plimptonproject.org](http://www.plimptonproject.org)
2. The *Paris Review* (cofounded by George Plimpton) website. — [www.theparisreview.com](http://www.theparisreview.com)
3. The National Public Radio website provides an audio interview between George Plimpton and Mike Pesca from September 22, 2003, on the fortieth anniversary of Plimpton's book *Paper Lion*. — <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1438959&ps=rs>

## Lecture 12

### A Savage Journey to the Heart of a Dream: Hunter S. Thompson, Part I

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*.



unter S. Thompson's early career is both a guidebook and a cautionary tale for would-be journalists.

Genetically unsuited for a traditional career as a reporter, he was a freelance, living a hand-to-mouth existence, eking out a living pitching stories for hundred dollar paychecks. He lived this way until he was nearly thirty, when one of those hundred dollar assignments led to his first book contract.



Hunter S. Thompson at a motel in the 1970s.

Thompson had accepted an assignment from *The Nation* to write about Hell's Angels, the outlaw motorcycle gang. The resulting article was so good, his mailbox was stuffed with book offers. At the time, much of his income came from his blood donations. Suddenly, he was in line to publish his first book.

He rode with the Angels for a year and near the end of his research, he said he was stomped by the gang. The scope of the stomping—and whether it was provoked—is still being debated. But it certainly brought *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* a lot of attention on its publication. Everyone seemed to know about “that crazy dude who rode with the Hell's Angels.”

Following the success of his first book, Thompson contracted to write a weighty-sounding tome to be called *The Death of the American Dream*. For three frustrating years, he labored on the ponderous project, feeling that every new tragic event—the



assassination of Martin Luther King, the assassination of Robert Kennedy, the election of Richard Nixon—symbolized the bottom of the abyss for the nation and what it stood for.

He couldn't write the book, but a few magazine assignments that were on the surface failures ended up leading Thompson to develop a more natural style. He stopped trying to achieve the polish expected from a professional journalist and began writing with the freedom he'd written with for years in his correspondence with friends.

It was correspondence that led to his breakthrough. He'd written a profile of French skier Jean-Claude Killy for *Playboy*. In the aftermath of his 1968 triumph at the Winter Olympics, Killy was beginning a new career as a pitchman for Chevrolets. Thompson was assigned to cover Killy at the Chicago Auto Show and found the athlete standoffish, rude, and boring. He also had no interest in Chevrolets—or any other American car—which he would not have allowed his dog to drive.

It was Killy who gave Thompson an idea when Thompson told the skier that he was a frustrating man to write about. "Then write about how hard it is to write about me," Killy suggested.

It was a liberating moment. Thompson wrote the piece, which *Playboy* immediately refused to publish. Among other things, Thompson had criticized Chevrolet, which the magazine was luring as a potential advertiser.

Furious at the rejection, Thompson wrote friend Warren Hinckle a letter in which he unloaded on *Playboy's* editors and most of the rest of the Western world. Hinckle was starting a new magazine, called *Scanlan's Monthly*, and he asked to publish the piece, with the furious letter as preamble.

It was a hit when it appeared in *Scanlan's Monthly* and soon Thompson had another assignment—to cover the Kentucky Derby, back in his home town of Louisville. Because it was a homecoming and featured a clash of cultures, the events took on a more ominous tone for Thompson than perhaps they would have for another writer.

On deadline, conflicted, full of doubt, Thompson finally broke down and handed sheets from his yellow legal pad to the magazine copy boy and walked out.



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French skier Jean-Claude Killy (1943–) in 1967 just before the 1968 Grenoble Winter Olympics. Post-Olympics, Killy became a spokesman for Schwinn bicycles, Head Skis, and Chevrolet automobiles. The latter role was detailed by Hunter S. Thompson in his 1970 article "The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy" in *Scanlan's Monthly*.

He figured he would never again work in journalism.

Instead, Hinckle published the notes verbatim and the resulting article, "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," was hailed as the next step in the evolution of journalism. A friend wrote Thompson to say the piece was "pure Gonzo." No one was quite sure what that meant, but it sounded good.

It worked, and his stories began to be about trying to write stories. It was journalism about journalism.

It was another couple of failed assignments that provided the fodder for his most famous work. It was written purely for his own pleasure, as a way of cooling down after laboring all day on a major piece about a murdered reporter. And somewhere in between the lines of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, he managed to subtly write his book on the American Dream.



Artist Ralph Steadman illustrated many of Hunter S. Thompson's works, including this sketch for "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved."

© Ralph Steadman

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

### Questions

1. Since Hunter S. Thompson's writing is so subjective, can it really be considered journalism at all? Since he admitted he occasionally indulged in fantasy during his writing, does that also cause it to lose its status as journalism?
2. Hunter S. Thompson couldn't hold jobs for very long. Though we seem to value rule-breakers when they are successful, society pressures most of its members to conform. What lessons can a young writer learn from Thompson's experience?

### Suggested Reading

Thompson, Hunter S. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*. 2nd ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1998 (1972).

### Other Books of Interest

Thompson, Hunter S. *The Great Shark Hunt: Strange Tales from a Strange Time*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003 (1979).

———. *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*. New York: Modern Library, 1999 (1967).

### Websites of Interest

1. *The Selvedge Yard* website provides a pictorial (and a short video) of the Hell's Angels by Hunter S. Thompson during his time with them in 1966. — <http://theselvedgeyard.wordpress.com/2009/12/23/hunter-s-thompson-hells-angels/>
2. *The Great Thompson Hunt* is a fan website featuring resources, articles, and information about Hunter S. Thompson. — [www.gonzo.org](http://www.gonzo.org)

## Lecture 13

### Truth Is Never Told in Daylight: Hunter S. Thompson, Part II

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*.



ann Wenner knew little about publishing when he founded *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1967. He knew only what he liked—and, after serializing *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in *Rolling Stone*, he knew that he liked Hunter Thompson's writing.

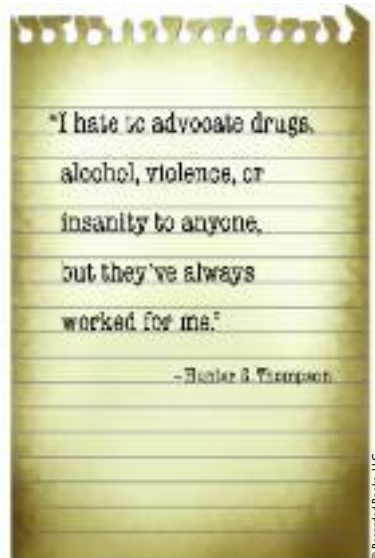
Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was something written for pleasure, not necessarily for publication. When it appeared in *Rolling Stone*, it was hailed as yet another one of Thompson's breakthroughs. It showed what Thompson could do when he labored over his writing and when he rewrote it. He admitted, many years later, that after the success of that piece—and the book version, published in 1972—he never wrote a second draft of anything the rest of his life.

Too bad. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was, to Thompson's generation, what *The Great Gatsby* had been to F. Scott Fitzgerald's generation. Both works not only reflected the dreams and disillusionment of the times, but both were nearly perfect works of literature. Pick up a pencil and try to find a word in either book that you would remove. You'll leave the pages untouched, so well written are they.

Thompson had tried so hard to wrestle his frustrations with the times in between covers in something he hoped to call "The Death of the American Dream." But after years of struggling with that subject, he found that he couldn't articulate his fury. In writing *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, he had



Hunter S. Thompson calling in a story.





finally dealt with the subject—almost subconsciously, without realizing it—and conveyed the same feelings subtly, as opposed to the heavy-handed approach *The Death of the American Dream* would seem to require.

The intoxicating language of *Fear and Loathing* was catnip to Wenner, and *Rolling Stone* garnered a lot of attention by unleashing it upon the world. At that point, Wenner would have allowed Thompson to write about fingernail clippings or navel lint for the magazine. When he asked Thompson what he wanted to write about, he suggested politics.

Wenner had scrupulously avoided politics. He did not want his magazine to be identified with the “underground” press or with one political platform or the other. But Thompson wanted it, so he got it.

And so Wenner gave Thompson a blank check: What would you like to do next? Thompson said he wanted to cover a presidential election campaign from start to finish. Embittered and heartbroken by politics, he felt certain that he would find, deep in the process, the evidence he needed to pronounce dead the American Dream.

In biweekly dispatches for *Rolling Stone* throughout 1972, Thompson explained the political process to a generation of young readers, filling millions with the love-loathe relationship he had for the political system. He showed readers a campaign as it had never been shown before.

The dispatches were collected and smoothed into a book called *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, a classic of political journalism.

Unfortunately, this breakthrough reporting also brought Thompson the worst enemy a journalist could have: fame.

After the political reporting made him a household name, he could no longer practice his craft. He was much more famous than the people he covered. He was so famous that he was a character in a comic strip (“Uncle Duke” in Garry Trudeau’s *Doonisbury*).

The last part of Thompson’s career showed his shift in focus from being a reporter to being a reactor. He could



Senator George McGovern (1922–) of South Dakota was the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate in 1972.

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Cover of the paperback edition of *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*.

no longer report events, so he watched the reporting of others on television, and then reacted to what he saw. He was sort of a Walter Lippmann for the stoned generation.

He was also a prisoner of persona. He had created an image for himself as a drug-gobbling madman. That character was a great literary creation, but also a trap. Thompson was torn between playing this character that his fans wanted or trying to break free to tap into more of his enormous talent.

It was perhaps because of these frustrations—and perhaps because his body began to betray him—that Thompson took his life on February 20, 2005.



In Aspen, Colorado, on August 20, 2005, Thompson's ashes were fired from a cannon atop a 153-foot tower that he had designed (in the shape of a double-thumbed fist clutching a peyote button). The private ceremony included friends and the music of Norman Greenbaum's *Spirit in the Sky* and Bob Dylan's *Mr. Tambourine Man*. Red, white, blue, and green fireworks were launched along with his ashes.



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## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

### Questions

1. It's clear from reading Thompson's reporting from the campaign trail that he thought the only worthy candidate was George McGovern. How would a reader at the time deal with this information? What are the advantages and disadvantages of Thompson's revelation of his bias?
2. Some careers benefit from fame—in fact, that seems to be the goal for actors and musicians. Thompson clearly abdicated his role as a reporter when he became famous. What are the drawbacks for a writer of any sort—but particularly a journalist—when they become too famous?

### Suggested Reading

Thompson, Hunter S. *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2006 (1973).

### Other Books of Interest

McKeen, William. *Outlaw Journalist: The Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009.

Thompson, Hunter S. *Fear and Loathing in America: The Brutal Odyssey of an Outlaw Journalist*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

———. *The Proud Highway: Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman, 1955–1967*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1998.

### Websites of Interest

1. The *Atlantic* magazine website provides an article entitled “Writing on the Wall: An Interview with Hunter S. Thompson” from August 26, 1997. — <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/unbound/graffiti/hunter.htm>
2. *Hunter S. Thompson's Books: A Resource and Bibliography of Hunter S. Thompson's Work*. — [www.hstbooks.org](http://www.hstbooks.org)
3. *Rolling Stone* magazine obituary article about Hunter S. Thompson by James Sullivan from February 21, 2005. — [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/7045227/hunter\\_s\\_thompson\\_dies](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/7045227/hunter_s_thompson_dies)

## Lecture 14

### The Legend on the License

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are David Finkel's *The Good Soldiers*, Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, and Mary Roach's *Stiff: The Curious Life of Human Cadavers*.



This has been nearly as much a class in history as in literary journalism. Most of the writers we've talked about did their most celebrated works forty or fifty years ago. Since it's always good to start at the beginning, sometimes we run out of time.

So here are some other writers you might want to investigate—some of them from those “old days,” and some of them “still in short pants and still writing.”

Since the glory days of “new journalism” in the 1960s, there have been many astonishing feats of nonfiction writing carried out under the aegis of literary journalism.

In our concluding lesson, we'll briefly discuss some of these works and begin to compile a reading list for life.

Jimmy Breslin was present at the creation—as a colleague of Tom Wolfe's at the *New York Herald-Tribune*—and he revolutionized the concept of what a newspaper column ought to be. He also wrote wonderful books, such as *How the Good Guys Finally Won*, about the Watergate scandal.

Nora Ephron wrote a column about women in a magazine for men (*Esquire*) and her collections *Wallflower at the Orgy* and *Crazy Salad* contain brilliant examples of brief, brilliant, and insightful writing.

Michael Herr's hallucinogenic reporting of the Vietnam War in *Esquire*—the pieces collected in the book *Dispatches*—has been described as the best writing about men at war in our time.

Edna Buchanan single-handedly revived the art of police reporting while working for the *Miami Herald* and collected her stories of life on the police beat in *The Corpse Had a Familiar Face*.

Rick Bragg raised the level of the feature-writing game at the *New York Times* in the 1990s and his collection of journalism, *Somebody Told Me*, could be a textbook in any course on writing journalism. He has also written



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three heartfelt memoirs of his family—*All Over But the Shoutin’, Ava’s Man*, and *The Prince of Frogtown*—that show a love of and a skill with the language rarely seen in modern writing.

Mary Roach is a writer who just lets her curiosity run wild. In *Stiff*, she wrote about what happens to cadavers. In *Spook*, she wrote about scientists who study the afterlife. In *Bonk*, she wrote about the science of sex research. Few writers juggle “fascinating” and “funny” as skillfully as Roach.

Ernie Pyle’s reporting of the Second World War has retained its power through the decades, and *Washington Post* reporter David Finkel seems to be Pyle reincarnate in his reporting of the day-to-day life of the American soldier in Iraq. His book *The Good Soldiers* has already been recognized as the best writing about war in the last three decades.

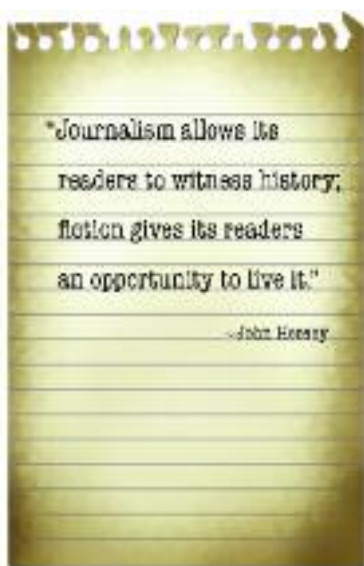
Malcolm Gladwell of the *New Yorker* continues that magazine’s storied traditions of explanatory journalism—and he has built himself into a franchise with such books as *The Tipping Point* and *Blink*.

Jon Krakauer has written magnificent books in the general men-against-nature theme with *Into the Wild* and *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster*.

Sebastian Junger, with *The Perfect Storm: A True Story of Men Against the Sea*, may have crossed the line between journalism and fiction, but his book still is a significant work.

Charlie DeDuff. Marie Brenner. Joel Stein. Chuck Klosterman. Susan Orlean. Richard Rhodes. Dave Barry. Adam Penenberg. And more. There are scores of other writers who have created telling chronicles of human existence.

But we conclude our study where we began—with John Hersey. The young reporter who walked through the wasteland of Hiroshima in 1946 was a seminal figure in the development of literary journalism. Thirty years later, he began to wonder what he and his breed had wrought. In a famous *Yale Review* essay, Hersey concluded that many young writers had taken too many liberties with the practice of journalism. In the end, Hersey reminds us that the tenet of literary journalism is that it is journalism—“none of this was made up.”



# FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

## Questions

1. As more journalism appears online and multimedia presentations replace a lot of text formerly found in newspapers and magazines, what is the future of literary journalism? Is there a multimedia equivalent of the form?
2. Hold several of the books we mention in this lesson up to Hersey's standard in "The Legend on the License." Have our standards for truth slipped in the years since Hersey wrote *Hiroshima*?

## Suggested Reading

- Finkel, David. *The Good Soldiers*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.
- Herr, Michael. *Dispatches*. New York: Everyman's Library, 2009 (1977).
- Roach, Mary. *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001.

## Other Books of Interest

- Junger, Sebastian. *The Perfect Storm: A True Story of Men Against the Sea*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997.
- Krakauer, Jon. *Into the Wild*. London: Pan Books, 1999.
- . *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster*. New York: Anchor Books, 1999.
- Orlean, Susan. *The Orchid Thief: A True Story of Beauty and Obsession*. 17th ed. New York: Ballantine Books, 2000.

## Websites of Interest

1. The Poynter Institute for Media Studies (St. Petersburg, Florida) is a school for journalists, future journalists, and teachers of journalism. — [www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org)
2. The Nieman Foundation for Journalism *Narrative Digest* is a moderated compendium of narrative journalism assembled and refreshed by folks at the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University. — [www.nieman.harvard.edu/narrative](http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/narrative)

## COURSE MATERIALS

### Suggested Readings:

- Capote, Truman. *In Cold Blood*. Random House, 2002 (1966).
- Didion, Joan. *Slouching Towards Bethlehem: Essays*. Reissue ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008 (1968).
- . *The White Album*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990 (1979).
- Finkel, David. *The Good Soldiers*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.
- Herr, Michael. *Dispatches*. New York: Everyman's Library, 2009 (1977).
- Hersey, John. *Hiroshima*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989 (1946).
- Mailer, Norman. *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*. New York: Plume, 1995 (1968).
- . *The Executioner's Song*. New York: Signet, 2000 (1979).
- Plimpton, George. *Paper Lion: Confessions of a Last-String Quarterback*. Anniv. ed. Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2009 (1966).
- Roach, Mary. *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001.
- Ross, Lillian. *Reporting*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964.
- Southern, Terry. *Red-Dirt Marijuana and Other Tastes*. New York: Citadel Underground, 1998 (1967).
- Talese, Gay. *Thy Neighbor's Wife*. Updated ed. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009 (1980).
- Thompson, Hunter S. *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2006 (1973).
- . *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*. 2nd ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1998 (1972).
- Wolfe, Tom. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. New York: Picador, 2008 (1968).
- . *The New Journalism*. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.
- . *The Right Stuff*. New York: Picador, 2008 (1979).

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