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Book Review of Doug Underwood's *The Undeclared
War between Journalism and Fiction: Journalists as
Genre Benders in Literary History*

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Book Review: Doug Underwood ***The undeclared war between*** ***journalism and fiction:*** ***Journalists as genre benders in*** ***literary history***

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Abstract: Doug Underwood

The undeclared war between journalism and fiction: Journalists as genre benders in literary history

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Almost 200 pages into his bumpy and aggravating account of the relationship between journalism and fiction writing, Doug Underwood arrives at this succinct statement: 'the influence of journalism upon the fiction writing tradition may be of more significance than anything journalists have produced as journalism through much of literary history' (p. 194). Would that The Undeclared War Between Journalism and Fiction had begun with this simple and testable claim. We could then have asked, more directly, the right sorts of questions. What forms of journalism are we talking about? Newspaper work? Magazine writing? Book-length investigations? Which tastemakers and critics set the contours of the fiction writing

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'tradition'? Or is Underwood asking, more simply, how journalism has influenced the work of writers who produced both nonfiction and fiction over the course of their careers? What measures do we propose to compare the significance of a writer's journalism and fiction? Stylistic sophistication? Popularity? Social or political impact? A place within society's canon of esteemed literary works?

Underwood's answers to these questions are not very satisfying. He believes that great writing should illuminate 'timeless and universal themes about the human condition' (p. 199). He argues that industrial forms of objective journalism can never achieve that level of insight. But he also thinks that literary critics and the literary journalism crowd have gotten it wrong. Literary critics do not give sufficient weight to nonfiction's fact-grounded efforts to inspire social change. And literary journalism scholars remain in thrall to the profession's fact-fiction distinction, insisting that long-form reporting meet the norms of factual accuracy set by the newspaper business. Underwood argues that the very best writers have recognized that the deeper truths of human experience demand the methods of fiction and that few if any works of literary journalism have measured up to that standard. Surely some of the premises of *Undeclared Warfare* unexceptionable.

Yes, scholars probably have paid relatively less attention to the influence of journalism upon novelists. Yes, scholars have tended to divide their labor into studies of journalism (whether conventional or long-form) and studies of the novel and short story. And yes, it would be interesting to know more about the life experiences and professional practices of writers who have inhabited both those literary worlds. But so much else in this book is utterly murky. Underwood has no sociological sense. He bounces between 18th, 19th, and 20th century examples and across English and American literary traditions with no feel for the challenges of doing so. He never fully acknowledges that what writers have meant by 'journalism' has varied greatly over time. He makes much of Norman Mailer's preference for fiction over reporting without describing the historical context that helped shape Mailer's choices and his conception of himself as a writer.

Mailer did prefer to speak of himself as a novelist, as Underwood observes, but he also thought of himself as a man of moral substance and as a public intellectual. Nonfiction gave him that standing with readers in a way that his fiction did not. Thus, Mailer's letters, books,

and public appearances can reasonably be interpreted as a social performance as much as an expression of his aesthetic preferences. He was managing his public identity with his readers, critics, and fellow writers in a way that he hoped would enhance both his reputation and his market value (and Mailer was keenly aware of both). Underwood's topic, in short, begs for the sensibilities and insights of a Pierre Bourdieu, a discussion of how cultural capital, social fields, and aesthetic dispositions figure in the fact–fiction debate. But Underwood prefers to fight it out on what he describes as humanistic grounds, as judgments about the relative aesthetic worth and moral weight of journalism versus fiction.

The organization of *Undeclared War* is puzzling. Just four chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue fill its 200 pages of text, but nearly half the book is devoted to a rambling first chapter called 'Challenging the boundaries of journalism and fiction', which lays out Underwood's objections to postmodern literary criticism and to the recent scholarship on literary journalism. The other chapters seem arbitrarily chosen: a discussion of censorship in the news business, of Hemingway's career, and of journalists' portrayals of journalists in their fiction. Whole sections of the book are given over to lists rather than developed as a systematic argument. Underwood annoyingly puts the 'new' in 'new journalism' in quotes across dozens of mentions in the book, as if to remind everyone that he, for one, does not believe that the 'new' journalism was really all that new. Again, a failure of sociological imagination. The question is not whether Underwood thinks the New Journalism was new, but why so many commentators of that era thought it something different.

In the end, *Undeclared War* reads like a book constructed from the fragments left from his earlier book *Journalism and the Novel* (Underwood, 2008). Both books point to sources that readers interested in the fact–fiction debate should read. But *Undeclared War* will not be much help in interpreting that debate.

Reference:

Underwood D (2008) *Journalism and the Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press