

CHAPTER 8

Features writing

Lord Northcliffe, founder of the *Daily Mail*, believed: 'It is hard news that catches readers. Features hold them.' It's a positive view although not one echoed by all journalists. The view that real journalism is 'hard news' and its opposite is 'soft features' still prevails on some newspapers. Yet Northcliffe's point has probably been true for as long as there has been mass-market journalism, and in particular since the broadcast media, later joined by the internet – took over the job for most people of bringing in the hard news. Northcliffe's observation is that hard news is much the same wherever you read it, but that features create a unique tone and character. If that is partly true of newspapers, it is much more true of magazines, many of which contain almost entirely features material.

Let's take the exceptions first. News magazines such as *The Economist* have news pages, but as they are not published daily it is not usual for readers to get their first information about big events from them unless they turn to the associated daily or more frequent news briefings on the internet that many publications (including *The Economist*) now supply. This means that even in news magazines, stories are written as background to the news or as a development of it. Accordingly, a more accurate name for some periodical news writing would be news backgrounder, a term that is familiar on newspapers too. It's one kind of features writing, as we shall see. It's also a kind of features writing that can't be dismissed as 'soft'. A news backgrounder differs from straight hard news in that it offers more information and greater length and space than is available for the writer to explain the issues or cite examples. So it follows that to write news features is at least as demanding, if not more demanding, than to write news.

For the reader, features may be more interesting to read because they offer a deeper and wider coverage of their subjects. Peter Preston, former editor of *The Guardian*, went so far as to say that the public's appetite for topical features is 'ravenous', and this may help to explain why the publishers of periodicals currently seem less pessimistic than their newspaper rivals.¹ While some futurologists argue that the printed word is on the way out, and there's no doubt that the periodicals industry is facing serious challenges, magazines and their associated brand extensions continue to be launched, sold and licensed throughout the world: one of the sources of their appeal is the quality and range of their features.

WHAT ARE FEATURES?

We have noted that news is written about in terms of people as far as possible, and that it tells stories about human beings, that a strong narrative thread is important and that news writing should contain references to time. A great deal of news writing is constructed around quotations, ideally from people as living sources, but also from written sources, and increasingly press releases. Much of this is also true of features writing, but there are differences between features and news and therefore between what writers specialising in these types of writing are expected to do.

One thing obvious to anyone who reads a lot of journalism is that the distinction between the content of periodicals and newspapers is increasingly blurred. I stress content because there is still plenty to separate the two kinds of publications in terms of design, paper quality and so on. But where content is concerned newspapers nowadays provide readers with a wealth of feature material, whether in the main news sections or in the burgeoning number of supplements and specialised sections they produce. This is of interest to magazine journalists because in many ways these supplements are simply magazines – the weekend newspaper colour supplements, for example – or if not they may be using exactly the same kinds of stories and styles of writing as publications which are more usually thought of as magazines. Even on the traditional news pages it is true to say that much of what appears could actually be called features writing rather than news.

It's also true that the word journalism in its broadest sense has always covered a variety of writing, including reporting, essays, descriptions of people and places, gossip, reviews, advice about how to do any number of things, comment on current events or indeed on events which are not all that current. Among all this we would recognise news by the fact that it is new information and, almost always, that it is being reported as soon as possible after the event. Features writing is usually topical, but it is much less anchored to the moment than news. Editors like to have the security of writing about the same topics as everyone else (unless they have an exclusive), and so if there is an event such as the break-up of a popstar's marriage or the murder of one teenager by another, these stories are likely to prompt hundreds of stories on related topics.

However trivial some features topics are, there is a significance to the best features writing which should not be ignored. John Pilger refers to what he calls 'slow news' and his book *Hidden Agendas* is devoted to it. The phrase was once used by journalists to mean a day when the 'authorised sources of information' such as governments and corporations are out of action and there has not been any act of God or calamity to interest the hard-news hacks. Pilger's positive use of the term describes the stories that take longer to uncover, which are less immediately tied to the daily or even weekly agenda, and which may be ignored altogether by most news media. In his book there are examples such as his account of the sacking of dock-workers in Liverpool in 1996. Pilger's journalism is passionate and committed – passionate about humanity, particularly the underdogs, and committed to telling the truth, or at least versions of the truth different from those found in most of the mass media. Even those who don't share his political convictions can learn from his methods: he asks questions about events and received wisdom that lead him to uncover new ideas and information. An excellent example of 'slow news', in the sense that it took well over a year to produce the story, caused shockwaves throughout the world in March 2018 when Carole Cadwalladr's groundbreaking story about access to and use of personal data by Facebook and Cambridge Analytica was published by *The Observer*. Relevant here is that an early version of it was published first in the paper's features-oriented Review section.²

The term slow news is also used positively by the quarterly independent magazine *Delayed Gratification*. Founded by experienced news reporters it writes about significant news events but with a time lag of around three months. This gives journalists time to do detailed research into a story and to look into the background leading up to an event or into its wider ramifications. A typical example is issue 27 with its coverage of the tragic Grenfell Tower fire in London.

I've mentioned that features are less tied to time than news and are likely to be longer than news stories, but these are not absolute rules. A news story in *The Economist* is likely to be longer than almost any feature in *That's Life!* or *The Big Issue*. What usually holds true, though, is that a feature story is likely to be longer than a news story in any given publication.

Another distinction between the two kinds of stories is that in features there is often more scope for the writer to use an individual style of writing, as well as to allow for more of the writer's personality to show through. Indeed, one American textbook's definition of features writing takes this point further than most British features journalists would when it says 'A good feature story is a creative work of art.' The same book suggests that in features writing 'to make a point the writer controls the facts – by selection, structure and interpretation – rather than the facts controlling the writer' (Metzler 1986: 190). This is a useful way to begin thinking about features, where more emphasis is put on writing style and tone, even if it is sounds rather naive about the extent to which facts stand by themselves on the page, unimpeded by anything the writer might do to them.

So far I have perhaps implied that magazines are filled with either news or features, and indeed that would be one way to summarise even if it is too simple. News or trade magazines are easier to divide up in this way than consumer magazines, which contain a wide range of material, some of it written by journalists, some not. Typical things to find in consumer magazines are interviews, gossip pages, competitions, advice columns written by agony aunts or uncles, reviews, listings, listicles, surveys, crosswords, fashion and style pages, cookery, home interest, horoscopes, personal opinion columns or columns recounting some aspect of life, whether it's daily home life or some other kind. Many magazines carry letters pages and these can be indicators of the tone of a magazine as can the comments and threads of interaction that develop on social media.

CONSUMER MAGAZINES

It is not my intention here to explain how writers or editors produce all this material, as in many cases it is individual to a publication or, as in the case of horoscopes or fiction, is really beyond the scope of what journalists are expected to do other than sub them. There are, however, a few points worth making about consumer magazine journalism.

FICTION

The first is that whereas fiction used to be prominent in many magazines, particularly those for women and girls, it no longer is. *The People's Friend* still publishes stories and serial fiction, but most other publications have phased them out unless they are specialist titles for creative writers. What seems to have replaced romantic fiction is realistic, explicit sex: agony aunts (or uncles) who discuss personal relationships have been a staple of consumer magazines for centuries, even if the material they now discuss is more openly about sex and less about romance or strategic marriages than once it would have been. And fiction has also been eased out of the women's weekly market by the soap opera treatment given to the lives of television stars and other celebrities or members of the royal family.

LISTINGS

An increasingly common part of the contents of many consumer magazines are listings connected with entertainment. Some magazines, such as the *Radio Times* and *TV Times*, are based around listings for broadcast programmes. Yet other magazines such as *Hello!* list television programmes too. Newspapers and the internet all do this as well, and there are entire magazines such as Newcastle upon Tyne's *The Crack* and *Narc* devoted to arts and entertainment listings. Perhaps the

continued popularity of paper lists is evidence that electronic journalism has not yet replaced paper journalism in the daily habits of readers. Scotland's *The List*, which started as a paper listings magazine, has now moved to quarterly publication in print but with a comprehensive listings service covering the whole of the UK online.

LISTICLES

A listicle is the name for a type of feature based on a list. Listicles are particularly popular on the internet but as a format this has a history stretching back at least as far as *The Bible* in the Ten Commandments. Listicles are popular because they remove the need for the writer to link points into a coherent argument or narrative. Examples can be found everywhere - at random '564 New Looks' (*Glamour* September 2017); 'Top nine things you need to know about "listicles",' (Steven Poole, *The Guardian*, 12 Nov 2013).

REVIEWS

Reviews and event reports are a staple of many magazines, whether they cover the arts, sport or politics. Writing reviews can provide a useful way into print, but the more established a publication is, the more likely it is to want to engage big names to write reviews. Reviewing or match reporting rarely pays well, if at all, although it can bring other rewards such as free books or tickets to events you would otherwise have to pay to see. A regular reviewer for a good publication or website must build up her own relationship with record or publishing companies so that even if the reviewing work dries up on one magazine, enough of the raw material continues to be sent to provide ideas and subjects on which to base pitches to other publications. Reviewing is hard to break into in one way, as arts or literary editors tend to use their own coteries of writers. However, it isn't time-consuming or expensive for someone who wants to review to write a couple of sample pieces to offer to an editor. It's most unlikely in the current industry climate that someone could survive professionally just by writing reviews.

PERSONAL COLUMNS

What is true of all these aspects of magazine content that are not strictly to do with journalistic writing is that they help to create a context for the journalism. They also help to create the tone or atmosphere of the publication, and this in turn, editors believe, helps to inspire the loyalty of readers. This tone is further established by the personal opinion columns, whether they are openly labelled as such or whether they appear as a 'letter from the editor' or some other guise. Whereas in news there

is a tradition of journalists attempting to write impartially, in consumer magazine journalism this is not the case: there may be pockets of reportage that aspire to impartiality, but much of what surrounds these will be opinion in one form or another and the truth is that it is likely to be opinion that supports or at least does not challenge views that are acceptable to advertisers.

At its most journalistic it may be the sort of column that tells the story of the writer's week or some domestic incident, or it may be an essay on a topic likely to interest readers. It would be hard to train a writer to produce this sort of thing. If you think you can do it, try it out, several times, and then test it out first on non-journalists and then, if you're going to try to sell it, on editors. The mistress of the domestic life column was Alice Thomas Ellis who wrote the weekly 'Home Life' in *The Spectator* for several years and published collections of these columns in book form. She was, however, one of our leading novelists, as well as someone who had an unusually rich home life (seven children, famous or eccentric friends) and so the fact that her column about daily life was so readable is not surprising. Sandi Toksvig is another daily-life columnist whose writing is readable and funny, although we shouldn't forget that she too has another professional life, in her case as a writer, broadcaster and political activist. In theory there's no limit to the kind of topic that might be appropriate for this kind of writing so long as it is appropriate for the magazine that publishes it. Ros Coward wrote a regular column for *The Guardian's* Family section about the later years of her mother's life. For any of the many people coping with the difficulties (medical, psychological, social) of caring for an elderly family member the writing was informative and engaging. There are countless other examples from many publications and about all kinds of life stages. In her book *Speaking Personally: The Rise of Subjective and Confessional Journalism* Coward offers an insight into the scope and history of this kind of writing as well as trying to account for its popularity as a journalistic form.

The problem with this kind of column is that while many journalists are capable of producing half a dozen of them, fewer can sustain the effort over a long period, so the material begins to wear thin. To write one should not be seen as an easy option. The best are informative as well as entertaining. Another problem is how far the writer feels free to expose friends and family to the scrutiny of the outside world, something each writer must negotiate for herself.

THE JOURNALISTIC FEATURE

If we turn now to what journalists would consider to be features proper, rather than all those items other than news with which magazines are filled, there is no set of formulae to learn as there is for news. More flexibility is allowed in structure, style and tone and, as I have noted, there is more scope for the writer's voice to emerge. Indeed, some editors would say that a voice has to emerge or the writing will remain too flat and too bland to sustain the reader over the greater length at which features

are published. There are, nevertheless, certain types of feature which are common and which can be used in many ways and to cover many different topics. (For a detailed analysis of the range of feature styles the account by Holmes et al. in *The 21st Century Journalism Handbook* is a useful account.)

LORNA GRAY

Lorna Gray is Digital Managing Editor of Features for Bauer Media in Australia. As an established feature writer for *Cosmopolitan* UK she applied for a maternity-cover job on Australia's *Cosmopolitan* where the title is published by Bauer. (In the UK it's a Hearst title.) 'I badly wanted a change of scenery but found the culture and the media industry over here to be similar to London, (albeit sunnier!),' she says. 'What was supposed to be a six-month stay has turned into three years and permanent residency.'

Lorna quickly made the decision to get into digital. 'I wanted to upskill and add new strings to my bow but I soon realised that digital journalism is evolving at an almighty rate,' she says. 'There are practices from six months ago we've already scrapped or adapted - there's no such thing as simply "getting into digital" as I had (somewhat naively!) believed.'

At first this meant she was online editor for two other Bauer titles, *Cleo* and *DOLLY* before returning to *Cosmopolitan* as its senior online editor in 2015. Since then she has worked on a digital launch called *Now to Love* that pulls together eight of the Australian Bauer magazine brands.

Her current job is, she says: 'the most mag-like job I've had since I've started working in digital. My earlier roles involved creating very reactive, news-driven content but now I work with a features list like a magazine would have.' Lorna finds herself at the head of a centralised features team providing long-lead and SEO-driven features for *Cosmo*, *ELLE*, *Harper's BAZAAR*, *Gourmet Traveller*, *Now to Love* and *Homes to Love*.

'Writing across all these very different (and wonderful!) brands means tone is key,' she says. 'It differs from my old days as a feature writer mostly in the speed in which I do things. Deadlines were much longer in magazines. Nowadays my team are interviewing experts or talent, writing, uploading, optimising and illustrating a feature, sometimes all within half a working day. It's great being able to track how people engage with your content - how many people have clicked onto a feature, how long they stayed on the page and whether or not they clicked onto further links on your site. And to keep checking in on the team's work - being able to see the numbers grow over time. Digital life is certainly hectic.'

Lorna got into magazines straight after graduating from Stirling University with a journalism degree. She recalls that as a child she had 'always wanted to be a journalist'. There are no journalists in the family but her aunt remembers Lorna used to make her own magazines when she was little and that she produced and edited a newspaper during her last year at school.

Within two years she was a staff features writer at *Cosmopolitan*, a job she loved. 'It was my dream job,' she says. 'I am a *Cosmo* girl. I am the typical reader.' To get there she had completed a nine-month (paid) internship with the title and then developed her skills and networks by joining the London-based news features agency Famous Features. It sold her pieces to the weekly women's magazines and the tabloid newspapers giving her practice at interviewing, pitching ideas and writing up stories in a variety of styles. It also enabled her to develop her contacts. Soon she was offered a full-time job writing for two women's weekly titles *Chat* and *Pick Me Up!* where she began taking responsibility for the work of others by having to commission and edit stories as well as write them. She feels sure that her agency experience helped her to take the next step.

A staff features-writing post on *Cosmopolitan* was advertised and Lorna successfully negotiated the intensive selection exercises and interviews. Soon she was writing interviews with all kinds of people. There were celebrities to meet, but as *Cosmo* has specialist entertainment writers Lorna was able to do the more investigative, issue-based pieces which meant interviewing ordinary people. 'I love writing real-life features,' she says. 'I find it really gripping to hear people's stories. And then it's lovely if you get a letter saying they liked the piece.' And there were some benefits attached to working for one of the most famous magazine brands in the world. She was in charge of the books coverage and so got lots of books. 'Then there were the beauty and fashion freebies, not to mention all the parties and events I got invited to.' Parties are part of her busy schedule in Australia too: 'There are definitely perks unique to Sydney. Outdoor launches and parties on the iconic Sydney harbour or a quick swim at the beach before work are among them,' says Lorna.

In her new job she has a team to manage and every Monday starts with a features conference where they all pitch ideas for the week. 'There will be a mixture of ideas across all the brands – some reactive, some long-lead, some research focused. Then it's full-steam ahead,' she says.

PROFILE

Now that her commissioning and writing is all for digital content, what does she think is the future for print? 'I'm hopeful that despite some great brands folding, there's still a place for magazines,' she says. 'Perhaps there will be more cross-platform opportunities where the print and digital teams will work together and it'll be more about the powerhouse brands delivering amazing content, whether it be in print or online. Either way there's always going to be a place for quality features.'

Lorna observes that 'the magazine industry has changed irrevocably in the past decade. In fact publishing as a whole has evolved into something completely different from what it was when I started in mags in 2009.' But she remains very optimistic. 'There's nothing quite like reading a magazine. I don't believe print will die out in my lifetime. Readers will always be looking for great content.'

NEWS BACKGROUNDER

The news backgrounder is probably the most common kind of feature. It is what its name suggests – a look in detail at some aspect of a story beyond the hard-news element. Take the example of the week that three bombs exploded in areas of London with large ethnic minority communities – Brixton and Brick Lane. That's the hard news. A news backgrounder might look at the groups who are suspected of planting the bomb – what motivates them? How big and influential are they? Another might examine the recent record of racially motivated crime in those areas. Another might interview residents to find out what their daily experience of racism is. There are no restrictions to the kind of question that can be asked in a news backgrounder, giving the reporter scope to think through the implications of an event and use the usual reporter's techniques to find the answers, opinion and descriptive colour. This approach can be extended into book length. One fine recent example is Åsne Seierstad's *One of Us: The Story of a Massacre and its Aftermath*, an exhaustive account of the background to the mass murder by Anders Breivik of Norwegian teenagers in 2011.

THE INTERVIEW OR PROFILE

Interviews and profiles are common types of magazine features, whether hung on a topical peg or not. Interviews may be with celebrities or with ordinary members of the public who are in the news in their own right, or whose job or interests are in the news. There are many ways of conducting and writing interviews or profiles. For a fuller discussion of the history and techniques see Chapters 9 and 10.

THE COMPOSITE INTERVIEW

Closely allied to the interview with one person is the composite interview feature, where a number of people are asked about a topic and their views or their stories are told in separate pieces of copy, each of roughly the same length, often with a picture at the top. The series of interviews is introduced with a few paragraphs to explain the purpose of the piece and why it is topical. There is no limit to what this kind of feature might be about. Three examples: young men who earn their living as rent boys; women who became Labour MPs in the 2017 general election; six former foreign secretaries interviewed about the UK leaving the European Union and the current foreign secretary, Boris Johnson.

The point of composite features is to tell a story about people, what journalists call a human-interest story. Many of the most readable human-interest stories are those about people who are not in the public eye. Pete Hamill, in his lament about the state of journalism, was scathing about how overshadowed ordinary lives are by the predominance of the famous. 'The print media are runny with the virus of celebrity' is how he puts it, noting that among the celebrities who are most often written about 'true accomplishment is marginal to the recognition factor' (Hamill 1998: 79, 80). Others feel differently, as the contents lists of most magazines show. And Lynn Barber says she writes about famous people precisely because she finds fame to be a subject of fascination in itself (Barber 1998: xi).

HUMAN-INTEREST STORIES

The term 'human interest' covers a huge range of material, and at its simplest means the telling a story through the eyes of the people who are involved or affected by it, although often it is the people who are the point of the story rather than any independent event. An example of a typical weekly women's magazine human-interest story would be an account of a woman whose teenage son caught her as she fell out of a burning building, saving her life. The narrative would be broken up by quotes from her to give a vivid account of the fear and then the gratitude she felt. What the reader gets out of an account such as this is not altogether clear. For journalists it seems obvious that as human beings we are all interested in what befalls other human beings. From a literary perspective it could be said that the stories journalists write are the close relations of any other stories that people like to tell and have always told each other, whether fictional or factual or somewhere in between; whether spoken, sung, filmed or written down.

In his anthology of reportage, John Carey suggests that one pleasure of reading accounts of the tribulations of others is that it places the reader 'continually in the position of a survivor' (Carey 1987: xxxv). His view is coloured by his arguable (not to say blinkered) suggestion that good reportage is largely about death and war.

Good reportage can, in fact, be written about almost anything. The preponderance of death and war in the press and in his anthology has, I would argue, more to do with the interests and, possibly the gender, of those doing the commissioning and selecting of articles than with any absolute notion of what it might be worthwhile to read. Nevertheless, Carey is making a brave attempt to understand why it is that we should want to read lengthy accounts, which go well beyond the bare facts, of what has happened to people we have never met and never will.

Within the broad category of human interest you could include all celebrity coverage and many interviews with those who are not famous, if they are talking about their lives in general. One subdivision of the interview category, for example, is the interview series based around one aspect of the lives of a range of people. 'A life in the day' in *The Sunday Times Magazine* is a well-known example of this, and a tribute to its success is the number of copycat regular features it has prompted both in the same magazine ('Relative values') and in others: for many years *The Observer* ran a series called 'A room of one's own', and the *Radio Times* a regular piece called 'My kind of day'. These are short and are not designed to probe the depths of the subject's psyche. As often as not they are written in the first person, although usually as filtered through a journalist to make it readable. The point of these is, simply, to give an insight into one or two aspects of the lives of others partly through an examination of their 'daily rituals' as Hunter Davies, whose idea it was in the first place, puts it in the introduction to the anthology of some of the best examples from the first 25 years (Stafford-Clark 2003).

THE TRIUMPH-OVER-TRAGEDY PIECE

Another staple of human-interest journalism is what is known as a triumph-over-tragedy (TOT) piece. The nickname is self-explanatory: a true story is recounted about some brush with horror or death or embarrassment or disability. The gravity of the circumstances varies and the style in which it is written up varies too, according to the magazine. There are those who assume that TOTs are found mainly in the downmarket press, in particular the weekly women's magazines. In reality there is no such restriction. Upmarket magazines and broadsheet newspapers all have their own ways of presenting what is in essence the same kind of story.

If TOT stories are one step away from fictional narratives, there is another staple of features journalism that is perhaps two steps away. This is the personal column through which the writer tells the story of his life week by week, weaving into the broader narrative momentous life events which can't be recounted in a jokey tone just for their entertainment value. Reading these columns is like reading a novel in real time, so at each sitting there is only a limited amount that can have happened to the writer as the illness progresses, or the divorce proceeds. For many readers these narratives are more gripping than the best fiction because they are true and

in the most extreme cases because, far from being triumphs over tragedy, they provide a detailed account of the tragedy as it unfolds. Ruth Picardie wrote about and then died of breast cancer; John Diamond was treated for and died of throat cancer; Kathryn Flett told readers about getting divorced and then being ditched by a new lover. The most up-to-date version of this kind of writing appears not in print but in personal blogs that allow anyone to 'publish' the story of their lives on a regular basis. The quality of the writing is variable but at its best it can give an invaluable insight into the lives of those who wouldn't otherwise necessarily have a voice. It can also be available almost immediately instead of having to negotiate a print publication schedule. (See Chapter 12 for a fuller discussion of blogging.)

Some readers complain that this kind of writing is self-indulgent and too personal. Its supporters argue that it's the personal nature of it that makes it worthwhile to read. John Diamond, who was already writing a regular column before he became ill, merely mentioned the diagnosis one week and found himself inundated with letters from readers who wanted to sympathise or advise, or who took strength from the writing, but who most definitely wanted to read more, which perhaps bears out Carey's point about the pleasure readers get from being in the position of survivors. This isn't the kind of writing a journalist can set out to base a career on, but it should be noted as a trend because of what it says about readers.

In many cases the TOT narrative does involve the account of an event, whether it's a train crash or being stuck on a snowy mountain for three days with no food. Part of the piece will therefore be a simple narrative account of the event leading up to the tragedy and then the overcoming of it. Many features, though, are based just on the account of an event or a set of circumstances. An event such as a political demonstration might be written up as part description, part narrative and part quotation from participants or observers, with some explanation of the political purpose.

ESSAYS

Another feature type, although one more often found in serious magazines such as the *London Review of Books* or *Prospect*, is the essay. Here the writer takes a topic such as racism, the death penalty, secondary school education, begging, one-night stands and writes a considered piece based on research and reflection. The research separates this from a straight opinion piece, though the distinction is not absolute. In a more essay-like article, the journalist might start the research phase with a question rather than a point of view, whereas most opinion pieces start from a premise that the writer researches only to find supporting evidence. By opinion pieces I don't just mean the kind of polemic that takes a stand on matters of political or ethical importance. In some of the more light-hearted magazines an opinion piece might argue the case for staying single or for avoiding football matches on television.

ADVICE

It would be impossible to discuss features writing without mentioning the 'how to' feature. In one form or another these fill the majority of pages in magazines aimed at women and girls, and that's without including the agony columns giving advice about specific problems. There are, of course, feminist accounts of why it is that females are thought to be so incompetent that they need a limitless supply of advice about how to lead their daily lives. 'Look great naked. The lazy girl's workout for a sexy body'; 'How to find your mate a boy', are some examples. Sociologist Marjorie Ferguson argues that much of what is going on in the pages of the magazines for women and girls is comparable to what happens in religious cults: just as newcomers are initiated into the rites of a religious sect, so women and girls learn the rituals associated with the 'cult of femininity', such as how to cleanse, tone and moisturise their skin, among many other things (Ferguson 1983: 5). Harmless enough advice is offered in some cases, but as feminists of the more traditional sort argue, the range of topics on which advice is offered is narrowly limited to beauty, fashion, home-making and sex (Greer 1999: 312; McKay 1999; White 1977: 46–47). The reason the range is so limited is that these are the topics on the strength of which advertising can be sold (see Chapter 15).

The overnight success of men's lifestyle magazines in the 1980s suggested that boys and men needed help with learning the basics of daily life, just as women have always been thought to. Or, at least, it showed that publishers have decided there's money to be made out of telling them they need such help.

The 'how to' feature appears in almost every kind of periodical. Financial magazines tell readers how to purchase pensions or choose a stockbroker; parenting magazines explain the intricacies of nappy-changing; mountain-bike magazines give guides to bike maintenance. The writer's imagination is the only limit to what could be turned into a serviceable 'how to' piece. The same could be said about features in general. There is not really a restriction on subject matter other than the preferences of the editor and the bounds of good taste – not even that in some magazines, *Viz* being one successful example.

REPORTAGE

Another type of feature, reportage, is in fact the most vague, because the word 'reportage' covers so many possibilities and forms part of so many kinds of journalism. At one level the word simply means journalistic reporting and in that sense it should cover straight news writing too. However, most British news reporters would not think of applying the word to what they do. If they used the word reportage at all they might use it to mean something more like a news background feature, something that contains elements of descriptive writing and the other various reporting techniques. That's too simple, though, as reportage does not have to

be tied to subjects that are currently in the news. Ian Jack, former editor of *The Independent on Sunday*, discusses the way the French word 'reportage' carries a weight that the English equivalent, 'reporting', does not, and suggests that this has something to do with the limited status of journalism in the UK: 'Reporting never did have much in the way of social status in Britain, where deference and privacy were valued more than "people poking their noses in".' This only gets worse, he argues, the more journalism becomes a branch of showbusiness. For him, 'good reporting/reportage means to describe a situation with honesty, exactness and clarity, to delve into the questions *who*, *what*, *when*, *why* and *how* without losing sight of the narrative' (Jack 1998: v, vi).

Some of the best reportage starts not from an event that has taken place by chance, but from an interest of the journalist, a question she wants to explore. Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death*, an exploration of how the funeral industry works, is one example. So is the exploration of poverty in the UK by Nick Davies, published as *Dark Heart*. Andrew O'Hagan wrote an article for *The Guardian's* 'Weekend' magazine which traced the journey of a lily from the field in Israel where it was grown, through the flight to London, the wholesaler, the packaging, the florist, to the purchaser. In a long article such as this, a variety of subjects were touched on, giving the reader an insight into many aspects of life: commerce, mourning ritual, the logistics of the florist's trade (O'Hagan 1998).

One of the best writers of this kind is the American John McPhee. A staff writer at *The New Yorker* magazine he has published 32 books. The most recent, *Draft No. 4: On the Writing Process*, is a fascinating series of essays about the writer's craft and is worth reading by anyone seriously interested in features writing (McPhee 2017). For a topic he takes a subject such as oranges (in *Oranges*) or the mercantile marine (in *Looking for a Ship*) or man's struggle against nature, as exemplified by attempts to reroute rivers or calm volcanoes (in *The Control of Nature*). He then sets out to find out everything he can about his chosen topics, using all possible methods of research, and weaves the information into rich narratives incorporating history, biography, economics, geography, sociology, geology and psychology (McPhee 1989). Ryszard Kapuściński is another well-known writer of non-fiction: his piece 'The soccer war', about the war over a football match which broke out between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969, has found its way into anthologies. The idea for reportage may grow out of the hard-news coverage of a story that a journalist decides to revisit. One example is 'Inside Iraq' by James Buchan, published in 1999: an account of a visit to the country several years after the war that followed its invasion of Kuwait to see what life was like in the aftermath. Åsne Seierstad's books *The Bookseller of Kabul* and *101 Days: A Baghdad Journal* are examples of book-length reportage produced by a journalist who was otherwise working to daily news deadlines.

What Mitford, McPhee, O'Hagan, Kapuściński (and, indeed, all the best journalists since Daniel Defoe) demonstrate is a strong curiosity. They want to know how

things work, why things are done as they are, how people and places and systems fit together. For some writers the obsession with wanting to know more leads them to do their research undercover, by joining an organisation or pretending to be someone they are not. The most famous English example of this is George Orwell's account of living at the margins of society in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, but there are many notable ones: one is Gloria Steinem's account of life as a Playboy bunny (Steinem 1995: 29); more recently, Madison Marriage was one of the reporters from the *Financial Times* who went undercover to work as a hostess at a London City all-male charity dinner; Günter Wallraff's description of living as a Turkish migrant worker in Germany (Wallraff 1985); and at the turn of the twentieth century, the American journalist Nellie Bly ('the most famous journalist of her time') feigned insanity as a teenager so that she could find out what life was like in a hospital for the insane (Kroeger 1994). The ethical questions raised by this kind of work are similar to those faced by sociologists who seek to gain access to institutions or groups in order to study them (McKay 2012). There are many occasions when journalists do this kind of undercover reporting sometimes in a minor way – the reporter who spends a day on the streets of London begging (Gerard Seenan for Glasgow's *The Herald*), or following a rather longer investigation time as James Bloodworth did for *Hired: Six Months in Low-Wage Britain*. It will be obvious why undercover reporting is so often done at the lower end of the social and income scales: it's much easier to bluff your way through a day as a homeless beggar than as a stockbroker.

For the reader, features like this have the same appeal as any other journalism – entertainment or information as well as the literary pleasure, if the piece is written well, in both the way language is used and the narrative structure. Or, as Martha Gellhorn, put it:

A writer publishes to be read; then hopes the readers are affected by the words, hopes that their opinions are changed or strengthened or enlarged, or that readers are pushed to notice something they had not stopped to notice before.

(Quoted in Jack 1998: xi)

Unfortunately, the kind of reportage in which she specialised is not as common as it once was or as it might be, given how many millions of words of journalism are written each month. One reason is that it is expensive to produce because of the amount of time it takes to research. Few magazines can afford the luxury of time for their reporters – a week nowadays would count as very generous, at least in Britain, but a feature writer who wants to spend time investigating a subject or a group of people fully will not acquire much material in such a limited time if he also has to produce a lengthy article. This is one explanation for the increasing prevalence of the personal life or personal opinion columns: little time needs to be 'wasted' in research (Jack 1998: vii, viii).

THE NEW JOURNALISM

This point was anticipated by Tom Wolfe in his introduction, 'The new journalism', to the anthology of the same name he edited with E.W. Johnson. Published first in 1973, and reissued regularly ever since, the writing it contained and the writers for whom it was a showcase became the inspiration for many journalists, especially those who wanted to write features. One characteristic of their writing was the use of techniques more usually associated with fiction to produce articles that read like novels or short stories, even though they were tightly tied to factual reporting. Another characteristic was the depth of the research they were able to undertake. They stayed with their subjects for longer than most reporters can now expect to do.

There was never really a movement called 'new journalism', but what Wolfe and Johnson did was to identify a kind of journalism, aspects of which had, in fact, existed quietly for almost as long as journalism and which was becoming fashionable in the US in the 1960s and 1970s. Some of the writers included in the anthology were or became famous: Joan Didion, Hunter S. Thompson, Gay Talese, George Plimpton, John McPhee, Truman Capote and Tom Wolfe himself.

The only British writer to be included was Nicholas Tomalin, a hard-news man who was killed in the Yom Kippur war. His piece, 'The General goes zapping Charlie Cong', became a model for other writers who wanted to write about media events as they really were, rather than just writing about what the media managers wanted to convey to the readers. Tomalin seems to have written down exactly the words the General used to describe why and how he was killing Vietnamese peasants. The more typical journalistic approach would have been to protect readers from the man's bluntness, perhaps in the General's interest, perhaps to spare the readers the unpalatable truth about what was really happening in South East Asia. 'There's no better way to fight than goin' out to shoot VCs. An' there's nothing I love better than killin' 'Cong. No, sir' is the quote with which Tomalin finishes the piece (Wolfe and Johnson 1990: 227).

In this article there is virtually no comment by Tomalin apart from the briefest of asides about his 'squeamish civilian worries', and certainly none of the generous use of the first-person viewpoint which has provoked not only criticism of the new journalism style, but also some self-indulgent emulation from less talented writers. The article's strength is in the way it conveys the emotional reality of war. It was also important, in Wolfe and Johnson's eyes, because it proved that the techniques they had identified as characteristic of the new journalism could be used not just by grand feature writers who had plenty of time at their disposal for research and writing. Tomalin was working to a weekly deadline.

For much of the rest of what came to be called the new journalism, time was an important factor. Writers had to argue for enough time to research their subjects, to

stay with the people they were profiling over a period of days or weeks rather than just meet them briefly to ask a few questions. They also needed time to write, as what they were doing aspired to the condition of the best literary writing, even if the writers might not have expressed it in quite that way.

IN SEARCH OF EMOTIONAL REALITY

The two most common criticisms of this kind of writing are, as I have noted, that it can be self-indulgent and that it makes false claims to be true. The self-indulgence criticism can be answered simply by saying that when good writers allow themselves into the story then it is for the benefit of the narrative: it is a choice the writer makes for good literary reasons. Journalism, however, like any other craft or art, is not always successful. As Paul Scanlon put it in his introduction to an anthology of writing from the American magazine *Rolling Stone*: 'Until you have mastered the basics of good writing and reporting, there is simply no point in trying to get inside a movie star's stream-of-consciousness, take an advocacy position on dog racing, or invent some new punctuation' (Scanlon 1977: 9). Even among seasoned reporters a generally good writer may misjudge her work on some occasions, or less skilful writers may attempt to use techniques they are not capable of using well. In journalism a tradition has grown up that the story should be told in an impersonal third-person voice, so when the first-person viewpoint was used for telling stories rather than in clearly labelled opinion pieces there was bound to be resistance from editors. There was also bound to be a flock of journalists who seized on the technique, thinking it was an easier way to write than striving for objectivity. So yes, it can be lazy and self-indulgent for a reporter to write more about her own feelings than to report those of others, but that's emphatically not what the new journalism, at its best, is about. It is, instead, about trying to use every means possible to get at different aspects of reality, both the circumstances of an event and the emotional or social reality that goes with it. Sometimes, because journalism is about human beings and the things that happen to them, allowing the reporter into the story can make it that much more vivid.

Getting at the truth

The other criticism, that exact accuracy can't be guaranteed, is one which can only be countered if the reader is able to trust the writer, and this is one reason why it matters if journalists are viewed as dishonest, as they increasingly are. Sebastian Junger, in his book *The Perfect Storm*, addresses the problem directly in the foreword when he discusses the various sources of information he has used 'to write a completely factual book that would stand on its own as a piece of journalism' but which would not 'asphyxiate under a mass of technical detail and conjecture' (Junger 1997: xi). In writing about the deaths of six fishermen at sea he had the

additional setback of not being able to interview the fishermen who were his main characters to find out about their personalities or ask how it feels to be dying in a storm. One of his several approaches was to interview those who had nearly died in storms at sea. He resists the temptation to fictionalise any parts of the story, or dialogue, in his attempt to write 'as complete an account as possible of something that can never be fully known'.

The difficulty for sceptics arises when a reporter reproduces lengthy dialogue he has overheard, as Wolfe does in the extract from 'Radical Chic' in his anthology. How can he remember everything? The answer, given by Wolfe, is that he achieved this by using 'the oldest and most orthodox manner possible: . . . arrived with a notebook and ballpoint pen in plain view and took notes in the center of the living room through the action described' (Wolfe and Johnson 1990: 412). Another of the sceptics' questions relates to passages of interior monologue that some 'new journalists' write. Gay Talese's comments on this are illuminating. He says that as a writer he used the same techniques that his mother used in conversation with the customers in her dress-shop, which was a 'kind of talk-show that flowed around the engaging manner and well-timed questions of my mother'. She would simply ask 'what were you thinking when you did such-and-such' and she was a good and patient listener (Talese and Lounsberry 1996: 2–5). In other words he would ask, he would listen and he would make detailed notes.

This is where trust or faith comes in. You either believe that to be possible or you don't, but there is no real qualitative difference between trusting a reporter who writes in the new journalism style or one who writes in the more conventional way. Both kinds of writers include those whose work brings the business of reporting into disrepute, as well as those who bring it respect. What isn't in doubt, though, is that in as far as journalism is about 'getting at the truth' there exist several truths – social, psychological, emotional, economic – in addition to the events which are the narrative framework holding them together. To get at these various truths there is no reason why journalists, like fiction writers, should not experiment with a variety of techniques. Readers will make up their own minds if editors give them the choice.

In the UK, however, readers do not often have the opportunity to choose to read the kind of features writing which in the US is often called creative non-fiction or literary journalism (McKay 2011: 47–60). These labels reflect the development of this kind of writing since the 1970s. Gone, more or less, are the pyrotechnics of punctuation for which Wolfe and Thompson (and indeed new journalism) became known. Accepted, though, is the more measured, often book-length reportage of Joan Didion, John McPhee, Gay Talese, John Berendt, Tracy Kidder, Calvin Trillin, Jonathan Raban and Gabriel García Márquez, among others.

It's not every aspiring journalist who wants to do this kind of writing. In the UK at least there is still a prevalent suspicion of what can be achieved, and many features editors would not publish features written in this way – just as they would not be

able to pay for the time the research and writing processes such immersive reporting would take. Although, as Carl Bernstein points out, Jessica Mitford achieved impressive journalistic results without a journalistic empire 'to back her up with clout and clips and cables and credit cards. Armed with a sturdy pair of legs, a winsome manner, an unfailing ear and an instinct for the jugular she sets on her merry way' (Mitford 1980: 262). It is, however, important for new feature writers to be aware of both the constraints and the possibilities of the genre. They may never have the freedom, as Gloria Steinem did for the piece entitled 'I was a Playboy bunny', to research a piece about the Playboy organisation by training and working undercover for several weeks (Steinem 1995: 29). Or, as Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Tracy Kidder did, to follow a computer-design team to research *The Soul of a New Machine*, which in turn took over two years to write. Or, as John McPhee did, to spend several months living on Colonsay off the west coast of Scotland to write *The Crofter and the Laird*. But there is every sign that non-fiction has an increasing appeal for the public imagination, as the popularity of books such as John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* shows, along with the popularity of confessional journalism and biography of various kinds. There is no evidence that the public's appetite for the drama of real life is waning, so it is perhaps surprising that magazine features editors have not chosen to offer their readers the literary equivalent. Much of what is commissioned is either the fantasy fodder of the lifestyle magazines (fashion, food, furniture, football and sex), straightforward news background, gossip about celebrities, practical advice about how to manage some aspect of life, or personal opinion.

Further endorsement of the long-form journalism model came in 2015 when Belarusian journalist Svetlana Alexievich was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. Several of her books are translated from Russian into other languages including English, notably *Chernobyl Prayer* and *The Unwomanly Face of War*.

PUTTING A FEATURE TOGETHER

Features, as we have noted, are likely to be longer than news stories. This usually, if not always, means that more material has to be researched and more sources found. The writer will need to knit together the facts and analysis, relevant anecdotes, case studies and plenty of colour (the journalist's word for description and eyewitness evidence). This raises the question of structure. News is almost always written to a formulaic structure, but features writers don't have similar formulae to provide the framework of their writing, and if they do make habitual use of one approach then their work will lose its edge. The truth is that what works at a length of 250 words will not be successful at 1,500.

There is no ideal way to structure a feature, so the best advice is for writers to analyse ones that seem to work well in the kind of magazine for which they want

to write. It is common in many publications to see case studies based on interviews used even for stories about abstract subjects. For a piece looking at government pension policy, for example, it would be normal in many magazines (and newspapers) to start with a real-life case study or two as a way of attracting the reader's attention. Then the more abstract discussion or the quotes from financial experts can be woven into the whole piece. The problem is that although this is done for good reasons, it has become a cliché of features writing. In general a features story needs a strong, intriguing introductory paragraph, although what that comprises varies according to the feature and the publication. In the introduction or the following paragraph or two, the writer should make clear what the story is about in a 'nub' paragraph which gives a brief explanation of the point of the piece. It's important not to be overambitious as most features work best if they are tightly focused on the particular rather than attempting to cover too much in a general way. (John McPhee's book *Draft No.4* gives sound advice on structure.)

There are, then, no fixed rules about features, although individual publications may have their own. Even where there are rules, fashions in features seem to change more quickly than those in news, depending on the publication, on its readers, and on the purpose for which the features are being written. It's easy to see, then, why journalists who like in-depth exploration of a topic choose to work on features, as do those for whom the literary aspects of writing are part of the attraction of journalism as a career. The broader scope and wider choices of subject matter and approaches to writing up the material can seem liberating to someone used to the constraints of hard news, just as they can also seem more bewildering to a beginner.

NOTES

- 1 Peter Preston, the Hetherington Lecture, Stirling Media Research Institute, Stirling University, 29 September 1999.
- 2 www.pressgazette.co.uk/observers-carole-cadwalladr-i-became-a-news-slave-in-pursuing-cambridge-analytica-data-harvesting-scoop

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