

**Literary journalism:
looking beyond the
Anglo-American tradition**

Literary journalism: looking beyond the Anglo-American tradition

Guest editors Matthew Ricketson and Sue Joseph

In May 2015, the International Association of Literary Journalism Studies (IALJS) held its 10th annual conference, at St Paul's University in Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States. The host of the conference, Professor Thomas Connery, convened the Host's Panel, charged with the solemn mission once again of discussing a definition of literary journalism. This debate has been trundling along for years and, frankly, is getting nowhere. The two main groups of scholars with a stake in this field, from journalism studies and literary studies, have promulgated a profusion of terms. Those in journalism studies tend to prefer terms that include the word journalism, hence narrative journalism, long-form journalism and book-length journalism. Those in literary studies seem allergic to the word journalism and so prefer terms that include some notion of literariness, such as creative non-fiction, literary non-fiction and narrative non-fiction. The term literary journalism simultaneously fuses and irritates the two groups – many journalism scholars still sniff pretension when they see the word literary, while many literary scholars bridle at what Tom Wolfe called this “accursed Low Rent rabble” clamouring at literature's door with their “damnable new form” (Wolfe & Johnson, 1973, p. 24). As he himself admitted in 1973, there was nothing new about the New Journalism – indeed, it has been around in different manifestations, throughout the world, for centuries. Tom Wolfe never claimed that New Journalism was actually new. What he did write was that calling something new is “just begging for trouble” (Wolfe 1973, p. 23). Throughout the articles in this themed issue the term New Journalism has been expanded – since Tom Wolfe and also retrospectively – in different places and in different times. Authors of individual articles have made clear the context in which they are using the term. But indeed, trouble we have had since the 1970s in this continuing debate around nomenclature.

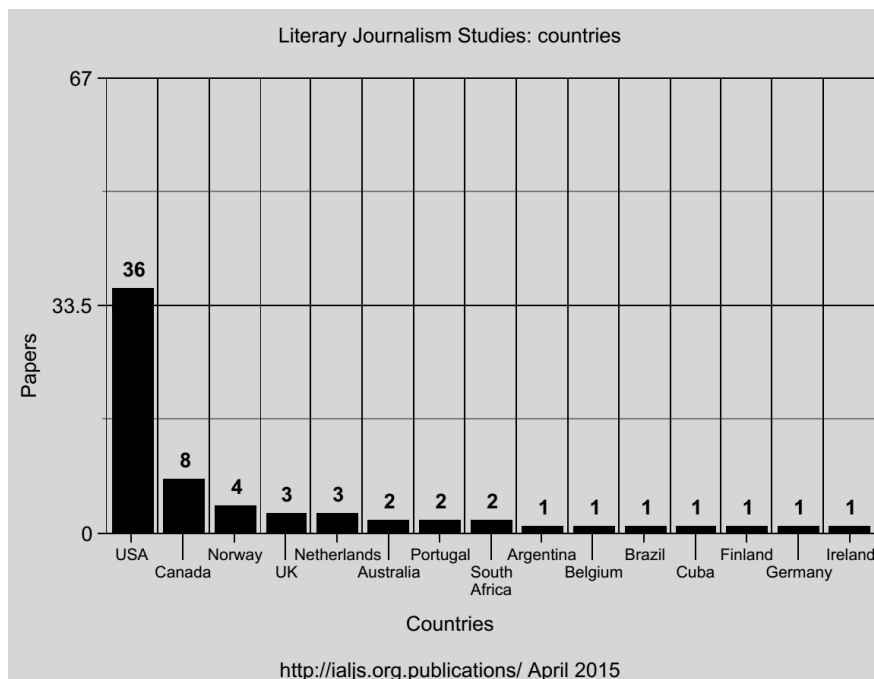
This internecine, obscure turf war actually matters less than the simple fact that whatever scholars might say, writers in countries around the world write this stuff and readers devour it. When it is done well, literary journalism offers us both journalism's revelatory bite and literature's artful exploring of human complexity. Maybe, in the end, there is no right or wrong way of naming it. As John Bak, one of the founding academics of the association incisively writes:

... we should stop fretting over the publishing industry's or the academy's legitimation of literary journalism or literary journalism studies. Continued research into the history and the practice of literary journalism across the globe will serve to create that legitimation, as well as the market that literary journalism and literary journalism studies sorely need. The steady production of strong criticism, theory and pedagogy will eventually coalesce the literary journalism that is out there now and create the discipline's niche ... in sum, we have to stop writing definitional manifestos that show by default that literary journalism lacks cohesion, take charge of the discipline ourselves, conduct the research that needs to be conducted, and wait for the rest to catch up with us. They will, eventually. (Bak, 2011, p. 19)

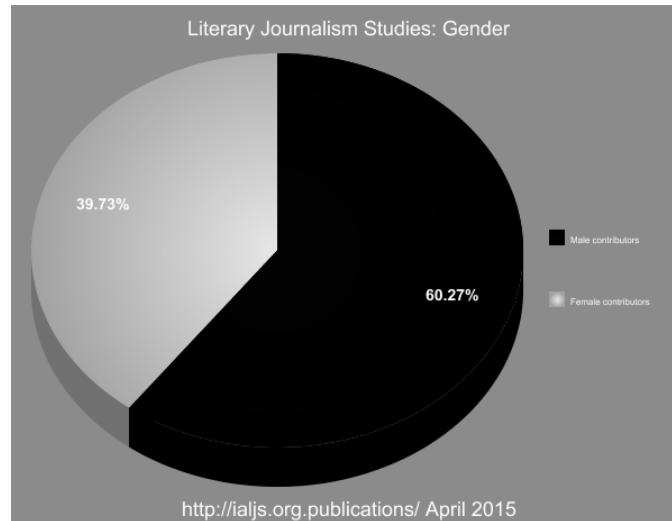
So the scholarly community, we hope, is beginning to understand that we may just have to agree to disagree, and stick to our own nomenclature within our own borders, respectfully sharing our offerings with each other globally at every opportunity.

Data presented¹ on the panel at the IALJS conference was provocative, however. It was presented as a way of opening discussion about a sentiment felt by many scholars who do not hail from the Northern Hemisphere or come from a country where English is the first language. Assembled delegates were shown results from a textual analysis of the association’s journal *Literary Journalism Studies*; it was not about the content of articles but about authors’ country of origin. The same data was also examined through a gender lens. The results revealed² that 73 authors contributed to the 67 papers published; of those 73 authors, 44, or 60.28 per cent, were men and 29, or 39.72 per cent, were women. These authors and their papers represent 15 countries:

- ▶ US 36 (53.73%)
- ▶ Canada 8 (11.94%)
- ▶ Norway 4 (special edition + 1 x 2 author paper) (5.97%)
- ▶ UK 3 (4.47%)
- ▶ Netherlands 3 (4.47%)
- ▶ Australia 2 (2.98%)
- ▶ Portugal 2 (2.98%)
- ▶ South Africa 2 (2.98%)
- ▶ Argentina 1 (1.49%)
- ▶ Belgium 1 (1.49%)
- ▶ Brazil 1 (joint paper) (1.49%)
- ▶ Cuba 1 (1.49%)
- ▶ Finland 1 (1.49%)
- ▶ Germany 1 (1.49%)
- ▶ Ireland 1 (1.49%)



The data shows that even in the most well-meaning and hopeful of enterprises, as the IALJS certainly is, an international association and its journal are still heavily weighted towards the country of publication, in this case, the US. In addition, the data is heavily weighted towards English-speaking countries, especially those in the Northern Hemisphere. The gender split, below, is disappointing, though not surprising.³ Since the data was presented, a special issue of *Literary Journalism Studies* about women literary journalists around the world has been published.⁴



The impetus, then, for this particular themed issue of *Australian Journalism Review*, “Literary journalism: looking beyond the Anglo-American tradition”, is the data above. To explain the title, we feel that even though English is the predominant language spoken in Australia, our country, like many others, finds itself sitting “beyond the Anglo-American tradition”. A glance at the data and graphs above will confirm this. It is a pressing issue and one that Australian scholars in this field should note – we are a vibrant community and our voices should be heard further afield than our own shores. The articles in this themed issue aim to contribute to scholarly debate about the field. We have kick-started the discussion by inviting a prominent literary journalism scholar from within the Anglo-American world, Professor Richard Lance Keeble, to contribute the Afterword, about the range of the contents of the eight articles chosen for inclusion.

We will not add anything to Keeble’s commentary other than to welcome his self-reflexive engagement with the theme of this issue and his acknowledgement of its relevance and value. What we think does need to be added in our guest editorial is a brief placing of the themed issue in the context of Australian scholarship and a call for collaboration between editors of similar journals to encourage greater literacy about the nature and range of literary journalism and its scholarship around the world.

It is true that the scholarship in Australia about this area of journalism and writing practice is not yet well developed and that much of it has used as its reference point work from within the Anglo-American tradition. That owes something to the nature of scholarship, in which it is necessary to cite prominent existing works, and something to the historically strong ties between Australia and the United Kingdom and US. From the vantage point of 2015, though, it can be seen that valuable work has been done locally in both journalism studies and literary studies, but we will focus on the former.

It probably begins with two early feature-writing textbooks, by Maurice Dunlevy and Len Granato and written in 1988 and 1990 respectively, that included discussion, albeit brief, of New Journalism and literary approaches to feature writing. A more recent feature-writing textbook, edited by Stephen Tanner, Nick Richardson and Molly Kasinger and published in 2009, included a chapter about creative non-fiction that drew on Kasinger’s PhD thesis. David Conley, author of

another journalism textbook, wrote two articles for the now-defunct *Australian Studies in Journalism*, in 1998 and 2000, about the relationship between journalism and fiction, especially in the work of 19th century Australian writer Marcus Clarke. Study of the field was pushed along after it began being taught in universities, from as early as 1999 when Contemporary Writing Practice: Creative Non-Fiction was introduced at the University of Technology Sydney in the Writing program; and then at RMIT the following year, when Literary Journalism was introduced into the Honours year of the Journalism program.

In 2007 Susie Eisenhuth and Willa McDonald, (the latter a contributor to this themed issue) published *The writer's reader: understanding journalism and non-fiction* that included interviews with leading practitioners, both Australian and international, and introduced selections of their work. In the same year, Marcus O'Donnell, another contributor to this themed issue, edited a special issue of *Asia Pacific Media Educator* entitled "Narrative and literary journalism" that contained articles about local as well as overseas works. In 2014, *Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics* published a special issue about Australian works that included contributions by Bunty Avieson, Fiona Giles, Mark Pearson and Carolyn Rickett (another contributor to this special issue). A sign of emerging maturity of local scholarship is the number of articles about literary journalism that have begun appearing in international journals, such as Megan Le Masurier's "What is slow journalism?", published in *Journalism Practice* in 2014, and Lindsay Morton's "Not my people: the epistemological complexities of knowing and representing other cultures in literary journalism", published in *Journalism Studies* in the same year.

Without wishing to lapse into the kind of talking-about-yourself-in-the-third-person mode beloved of former prime minister Bob Hawke, it is necessary to mention our own contributions to the field. Matthew Ricketson's first academic publication about literary journalism is an analysis of Helen Garner's *The first stone* in Jenna Mead's 1997 book about the Ormond College sexual harassment case, *Bodyjamming*, and his 2004 textbook *Writing feature stories* included a chapter about literary journalism. Sue Joseph's first academic article was published three years later, in *Asia Pacific Media Educator* – "Retelling untellable stories: ethics and the literary journalist". Since then, both have completed doctoral theses about the field and published book chapters and journal articles, both locally and internationally, as well as books about it. In 2009, Joseph's *The literary journalist and degrees of detachment: an ethical investigation* was published, followed five years later by Ricketson's *Telling true stories: navigating the challenges of writing narrative non-fiction*. Joseph guest edited the Australian themed edition of *Ethical Space* last year, mentioned above, to which Ricketson also contributed. The focus of their work has been on both literary and the journalistic elements of the field, but especially on the ethical issues.

If this brief survey does not have space to include all local scholars of literary journalism, it is also true that as Professor Bridget Griffen-Foley found in editing her ground-breaking *A companion to the Australian media* (2014), there remains a great deal of work to do to chart the field, let alone plumb it. There has been, for instance, very little work done about the historical development of literary journalism in Australia, which is what Griffen-Foley's Macquarie University colleague, Willa McDonald, has begun doing, evident in her contribution in this issue.

It has also been important for us as guest editors to make a seemingly obvious but still overlooked point that there are so many non-English-speaking countries with wondrous literary journalism or creative non-fiction traditions that we are missing out on, as scholars and as readers. That is why we invited two international scholars – Pablo Calvi and Isabel Soares – to write about their own national traditions and innovators. We certainly wanted to gather exemplars of Australian scholarship around our own literary journalism, and we believe we have, but we wanted also to begin a dialogue to find and set in place a method of encouraging contributions from scholars with non-English-speaking backgrounds, to broaden and enrich our own scholarship. The mis-

sion is clearly aspirational and entails a commitment to translation costs and close editing of work by scholars for whom English is not their first language, but we believe it will be worthwhile if it means we are all exposed to a fuller range of literary journalism and empowered to make comparative analyses across the globe. There is a coda to this project: analysing and interpreting other language texts is important, but at this stage of development it is equally important for scholars to build literacy about the writers they analyse because we know so much less about them than we do about the canonical figures in the Anglo-American tradition – Wolfe, John Hersey, Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion et al. We have little doubt that writers of comparable stature have been and are writing literary journalism in many countries around the world. That we in Australia, not to mention the US or the UK, know little about their work is as exciting as it is regrettable. Let the excavating begin!

Notes

1. By Sue Joseph
2. 12 journal issues from spring 2009 (Vol. 1, No. 1) to fall 2014 (Vol. 6, No. 2). Of these issues, three were special issues: spring 2012 (Vol. 4, No. 1) on Hunter S. Thompson; spring 2013 (Vol. 5, No. 1) a special Norwegian issue; and fall 2013 (Vol. 5, No. 2) a special issue on African-American literary journalism. Data sourced from <http://ialjs.org/publications/>
3. For the record, the author gender split of this special issue is 55.5 per cent men; 44.5 per cent women; guest editors are 50:50; compared with an all-male editorship of *Literary Journalism Studies*.
4. Vol 7, No.1, spring 2015; edited by Leonora Flis; six female authors; two male authors

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