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Literary Journalism's Twelve Best

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Book review by **Judith Paterson**

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Despite being dubbed the "new journalism" in the 1960s, literary journalism could be considered as old as the Iliad or the Bible. At its best, it's as accurate as traditional journalism and as readable as good fiction. Here are the best books of the genre:

Homage to Catalonia

By George Orwell (1938)

Orwell went to Spain in 1937 to write about the civil war. Instead, he joined the militia to fight the Fascists. After being almost mortally wounded, he went home to England and wrote a book that taught new journalists how to use detail and dialogue to place themselves in the stories they tell. "Perhaps the best book that exists on the Spanish Civil War," the New Yorker called it.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

By James Agee (1941)

In 1936, Fortune magazine assigned Agee and photographer Walker Evans to document the lives of Depression-era sharecroppers. The men ended up living with an Alabama family and assembling a story far too subjective for Fortune. Five years later, their story appeared as a powerful and peculiar book ? part sociology, part autobiography, part photo album and part meditation on the art of writing about people one knows.

How to Cook a Wolf

By M.F.K. Fisher (1942)

By the time of her death earlier this year, Fisher had long been a cult figure among people who love writing and people who love food. In countless New Yorker stories and 26 books, food became her metaphor for life. "I am really writing about love," she said, "and the hunger for it." This collection of stories, criticism, recipes and philosophy advises readers on how to live and love.

In Cold Blood

By Truman Capote (1965)

Capote's "nonfiction novel" turns the senseless slaughter of a Kansas farm family by a pair of psychopaths into a pitched battle between good and evil. Based on six years of reporting, the book set a standard for fusing the best qualities of fiction and journalism. Never mind that all the quotes sound like the author's doing ? the book is still a spellbinder, and Capote's identification with his insane protagonists is as disturbing as ever.

Slouching Towards Bethlehem

By Joan Didion (1968)

Washington Post critic Jonathan Yardley's recent attack on the "narcissism" of this veteran new journalist notwithstanding, nobody depicts the 1960s better than Didion in this collection of essays. Obsessed with cultural fringes, Didion returns often to her native California. Not the California of Hollywood or San Francisco, but of the Sacramento Valley ? hot, mean and weird.

Fame and Obscurity

By Gay Talese (1970)

This medley of celebrity profiles is a how-to book for aspiring feature writers. Using a fly-on-the-wall approach, Talese watches Frank Sinatra coming undone because he has a cold, marvels at the marital bliss and business acumen of the middle-aged Joe Louis, unravels the "self-psyche" of Broadway producer Joshua Logan ? and much more.

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

By Annie Dillard (1974)

Since journalism is about paying attention, journalists should consider this young writer's account of the Thoreau-like year she spent in a cabin in Virginia's Blue Ridge. "What you see is what you get," she says at the beginning of a book that turns out to be a treatise on looking at nature. There are more snakes and frogs than people, but you'll enjoy the hike.

Winners and Losers

By Gloria Emerson (1976)

Emerson spent 1970 through 1972 in Vietnam as a correspondent for the New York Times and came home with "memories to harm the strongest heart." For four more years she interviewed veterans, wives, widows, politicians and resisters at home. This stunning piece of reportage relies on a series of flashbacks and scene shifts to depict the dual tragedy of Vietnam and America. Thanks to Emerson, no one need forget the bitterness of those years.

The Right Stuff

By Tom Wolfe (1979)

This masterwork sends men into space and heads America to the moon. In star-studded metaphors and sentences that move faster than sound, Wolfe casts the myth of the frontier in epic terms while sending up everything American: cowboys, soldiers, politicians, family life, provincialism, expansionism, competition, patriotism, greed and, not least of all, the wackiness of that quintessential "genteel Beast," the press.

Russian Journal

By Andrea Lee (1981)

In a collage of foreign scenes and characters, Lee chronicles a year (1978-79) spent in Russia with her graduate-student husband. She captures the past through the eyes of the present, the work-worn women, old before their time, and the bitter young people ? the sad ones, the determined ones, the frightened ones and those who have compromised.

House

By Tracy Kidder (1985)

In 1982, a middle-class couple named Judith and Jonathan Souweine set out to build their dream house in Amherst, Massachusetts. Plans get made, walls go up, tempers flare. Architects, builders, carpenters and painters appear. Kidder sits on the sideline and turns the domestic drama into a Melville-sized metaphor for America.

Maus: A Survivor's Tale

By Art Spiegelman (1986, 1991)

Almost 20 years ago, this cartoonist and co-founder of Raw, the acclaimed magazine of avant-garde comics, began interviewing his cantankerous father about the Holocaust in Poland. In two volumes of "funnies," he recasts those visits in a sitcom within a horror story, drawing Jews as mice, Germans as cats and Poles as pigs. Spiegelman's funnies turn out to be as much about American society now as Europe's then.

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