

Speaking Truth to Power

Contemporary Classics in Investigative Journalism

By Steve Weinberg

IN 1904, JOURNALIST IDA TARBELL wrote a book called the *The History of the Standard Oil Company*. It started as a series of exposés for *McClure's Magazine* and then expanded into an 800-page investigation. Despite its innocuous sounding title, Tarbell's book provided the first example of full-fledged investigative journalism—a careful synthesis of accurate information culled from government documents, private papers, and interviews with a wide variety of sources. Tarbell demonstrated how Standard Oil Company had become the nation's dominant corporation in part by creating an unequal playing field through special alliances with railroads and unfair competition with other oil companies. Tarbell also challenged the common perception of Standard Oil chairman John D. Rockefeller as the upstanding model of an honest, God-fearing philanthropist.

Tarbell, who died in 1944 at age 87, became known as one of the “muckrakers.” President Theodore Roosevelt coined this term in 1906 to describe journalists' abilities to uncover “the dirt” on municipal corruption, urban poverty, corporate monopoly, and labor exploitation during the Gilded Age and Progressive era. Although Roosevelt respected some who exposed wrongdoing, he did not use the term in an entirely complimentary manner. But Tarbell and her compatriots—Lincoln Steffens, Ray Stannard Baker, Upton Sinclair, David Graham Phillips, Will Irwin, Samuel Hopkins Adams, and Charles Edward Russell most prominently—considered the label a badge of honor.

After the passing of the muckraker generation around 1915, investigative reporting in newspapers and magazines, then later on radio and television, ebbed and flowed until the 1970s, when many newsrooms started to institutionalize the practice. Unlike investigative reporting in peri-

odicals, where so many of the early muckrakers exposed society's ills, the publication of investigative books has never ebbed. Year after year they appear, often eliciting important public policy responses. The authors tend to be journalists, although scientists such as Rachel Carson (*Silent Spring*, about the dangers of pesticides), academics such as Alfred W. McCoy (*The Politics of Heroin*, about U.S. government complicity in the global illicit drug trade), and public-interest activists such as Ralph Nader (*Unsafe at Any Speed*, about the deadly design of automobiles) number among the exceptions.

Because no library shelving classification or bookstore section exists for “investigative journalism,” the titles fall into different categories: politics, government, corporations, the environment, the criminal justice system, philanthropy, education, scientific research, foreign policy, and so on. As a result, many observers—even those who count themselves as publishing insiders—are unaware of how vigorous a genre investigative books have become.

I have tracked, reviewed, and written investigative books since the early 1970s. In 1983, when I became Executive Director of a 5,000-member organization called Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE), I started to compile lists of worthy investigative books for journalists. My annual compilation of investigative books by U.S. journalists under contract to U.S. publishers appears in the January/February 2005 edition of *The IRE Journal* (see www.ire.org).

So many well-researched, well-written investigative books on important topics have been published that achieving consensus on a “best-of” list is unlikely. The following books include a small percentage of the “best-of” published since 1965, which marked the start of investigative journalism's modern era.

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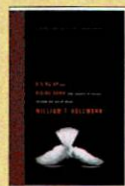
VIOLENCE



BLACK HAWK DOWN

A Story of Modern War
By Mark Bowden (1999)

As a *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter, Bowden covered the U.S. military special forces entry into Somalia to try to ameliorate tribal warfare. The historical war reporting that sufficed during World War II, Korea, and even Vietnam bears little resemblance to Bowden's literary nonfiction narrative about the U.S.'s disastrous 1993 operation in Mogadishu. Bowden also wrote the superb *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw* (2001).



RISING UP AND RISING DOWN

Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means

By William T. Vollmann (7 volumes, McSweeney's, 2003; abridged volume, Ecco/HarperCollins, 2004)

Vollmann has created an amazing amount of quality work as a magazine writer, novelist, and investigative reporter. In an era of constant warring among and within nations, Vollmann's examination of the causes and consequences of government-sponsored violence, from Montezuma to the Khmer Rouge, is of the utmost significance.

POLITICS

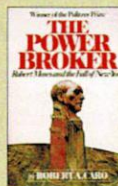


THE PUZZLE PALACE

A Report on NSA, America's Most Secret Agency

By James Bamford (1982)

Bamford, a self-trained investigative journalist, exposed the inner workings of the National Security Agency. Reportedly larger than the CIA and FBI combined, NSA was so secretive it often failed to appear in official U.S. government manuals; commentators joked that the acronym stood for "No Such Agency." Bamford later joined ABC News, while continuing to write books and articles about governmental espionage. His most recent book is *A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq and the Abuse of America's Intelligence Agencies* (2004).



THE POWER BROKER

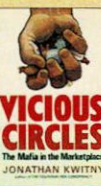
Robert Moses and the Fall of New York

By Robert A. Caro (1974)

♦ PULITZER PRIZE

A landmark investigative biography of the city official whose public works projects between the 1930s and 1950s changed the face of New York, *The Power Broker* remains in print more than 30 years later. A reporter for the Long Island newspaper *Newsday* while researching Moses's life, Caro eventually left the newsroom to write the award-winning, multi-volume biography of President Lyndon Baines Johnson. Three of the projected four volumes are available: *The Path to Power* (1982), *Means of Ascent* (1990) and *Master of the Senate* (2002).

MONEY



VICIOUS CIRCLES

The Mafia in the Marketplace

By Jonathan Kwitny (1979)

A former *Wall Street Journal* reporter, Kwitny brought to light the unprecedented reach of organized crime into American life. He explored the Mafia's influence in diverse sectors of American business and labor organization, from banking and meatpacking to garment factories. He later wrote, among other books, a searing expose of U.S. foreign policy, *Endless Enemies: The Making of an Unfriendly World* (1984).



AMERICA: WHAT WENT WRONG?

By Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele (1992)

This investigative duo at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote an excellent biography of billionaire Howard Hughes and an exposé of the nuclear waste dilemma before this 1992 blockbuster. *America* is an indictment of politicians, Wall Street traders, and corporate chief executives who fattened their bank accounts at the expense of the nation's health, leaving millions of American workers living in poverty or seeking unemployment benefits. Since moving to *Time* magazine, the pair have written important books about income tax scandals and the failures of the American health care system.

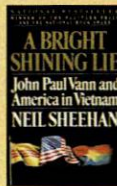
ABUSE OF POWER

MY LAI 4

A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath

By Seymour M. Hersh (1970)

A reporter trained at the City News Bureau of Chicago and the *Associated Press*, Hersh, while freelancing, heard a rumor about a massacre of Vietnamese civilians by U.S. military troops. Tracking down the alleged leader of the massacre, Lt. William L. Calley, Hersh beat the major news media to the punch. The book version of his reports was his second title; in 1968 he had published a lesser-known exposé about chemical and biological warfare. Hersh later conducted investigations as a *New York Times* reporter and, since *My Lai 4*, has written six investigative books, most recently *Chain of Command: The Road From 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (2005).



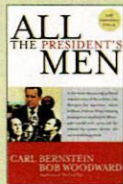
A BRIGHT SHINING LIE

John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam

By Neil Sheehan (1988)

♦ PULITZER PRIZE AND NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

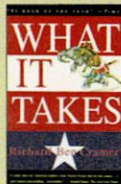
Sheehan reported in Vietnam and elsewhere for United Press International and *The New York Times* before composing one of the best books about the history-altering involvement of the U.S. in a distant civil war. Part biography of John Paul Vann, a whistleblowing Army officer killed in Vietnam in 1972, part war chronicle, and part political exposé, *A Bright Shining Lie* resounds painfully two decades later.



ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN

By Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein (1974)

As two young *Washington Post* reporters, the authors exposed the dirty dealings of U.S. President Richard M. Nixon and his corrupt staff in this highly influential investigative book. The movie version, starring Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman, added to the impact. Bernstein co-authored one more book with Woodward, then wrote a few mediocre books on his own. Woodward completed ten more investigative books (and counting), each one a bestseller. His subject matter includes the military, the courts, and federal bureaucracies.



WHAT IT TAKES

The Way to the White House

By Richard Ben Cramer

(1992)

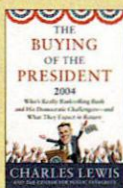
After leaving the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Cramer followed top presidential candidates—Republicans George H. W. Bush and Robert Dole and Democrats Michael Dukakis and Gary Hart—during the 1988 campaign. He hung out with them, interviewed their friends and foes, then wrote an insightful political campaigning book. Cramer is an inventive, daring stylist and a keen observer of humanity. Other investigative books by Cramer include a biography of Joe DiMaggio and an inquiry into Arab-Israeli strife.

LET THEM EAT PROMISES

The Politics of Hunger in America

By Nick Kotz (1969)

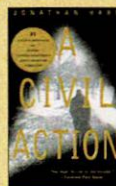
As a Washington, D.C., correspondent for *The Des Moines Register*, Kotz saw elected politicians and government bureaucrats talk with concern about hunger among millions of residents of the world's richest nation, but do little beyond the talk. His book exposed their shameful behavior. Kotz continues to publish magazine features and compelling books.



THE BUYING OF THE PRESIDENT

By Charles Lewis and the Center for Public Integrity staff (various editions, incl. 2004)

Lewis quit his job as a producer at CBS Television's *60 Minutes* in the late 1980s to found a combination investigative reporting enterprise/nonpartisan research organization designed to feed information to more traditional newsrooms. The Center for Public Integrity staff has published books about influence peddling and outright corruption at all levels of government within the U.S. and abroad, and in corporations worldwide. Of all those books, the ones with the greatest impact have been the various editions of *The Buying of the President*. Each edition demonstrates in excruciating detail how different U.S. presidential candidates sell out to special interests.



A CIVIL ACTION

By Jonathan Harr (1995)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD FOR NONFICTION.

A long-time magazine staff member and freelancer, Harr altered the way many readers think of litigation in America. His narrative account centers on a lawsuit filed by families in Woburn, Massachusetts, whose members had suffered illness or death due to corporate pollution of the water supply. Harr focuses on the unconventional and often unsympathetic lawyer who represented the families. A 1998 movie starring John Travolta magnified the book's influence.

everyday
people

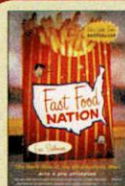
WORK

HEALTH



THE COMING PLAGUE
Newly Emerging Diseases in a World Out of Balance
By Laurie Garrett (1994)

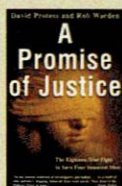
A science correspondent for National Public Radio and a reporter for *Newsday*, Garrett exposed a seldom-acknowledged global danger: deadly infectious diseases spreading rapidly all over the world, from tuberculosis to AIDS. She followed up this tour de force with the equally alarming and impressive *Betrayal of Trust: The Collapse of Global Public Health* (2000).



FAST FOOD NATION
The Dark Side of the All-American Meal
By Eric Schlosser (2001)
We are what we eat, a truism capitalized upon by Schlosser in this expose of the mammoth fast food industry. In this bestselling (and his first) book, he achieves both depth and breadth about a subject to which every reader can relate.



AND THE BAND PLAYED ON
Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic
By Randy Shilts (1987)
As AIDS spread across the U.S. and the rest of the globe, Shilts, a gay reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, covered it like nobody else. Then he wove his daily reporting into an upsetting, compelling book narrative. Shilts died of AIDS in 1994, at age 42.



A PROMISE OF JUSTICE
The Eighteen-Year Fight to Save Four Innocent Men
By David Protess and Rob Warden (1998)
One of the most devastating problems in the U.S. today is the conviction of innocent defendants, often victims of racial profiling, who end up in prison while the real perpetrators remain at large. About a decade ago, advances in DNA testing showed beyond any doubt the numerous innocent imprisoned across the nation. Dozens of journalists and a few academics have published important books about wrongful convictions; the progenitor of many journalistic accounts is *In Spite of Innocence: Erroneous Convictions in Capital Cases* by Michael L. Radelet, Hugo Adam Bedau, and Constance E. Putman (1992). But *Promise of Justice*, along with its predecessor *Gone in the Night: The Dowaliby Family's Encounter With Murder and the Law* (1993), captured readers' attention more than others. Protess is a freelance investigative reporter as well as a journalism professor at Northwestern University. Warden is a former journalist who now directs an Innocence Project at the Northwestern University law school.



THE SOUL OF A NEW MACHINE
By Tracy Kidder (1981)
♦ PULITZER PRIZE
Kidder is a master of immersion journalism, unobtrusively inserting himself into the lives of his subjects. This book, about the invention and construction of a supercomputer, offered one of the first in-depth looks into computer technology. Trained in the fine arts and fiction, Kidder now writes nonfiction for *The Atlantic Monthly*. He continued his immersion approach in his books about the daily lives of schoolteachers, nursing home residents, and homebuilders, among others.

CULT



NEWJACK
Guarding Sing Sing
By Ted Conover (2000)
♦ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE FOR NONFICTION
Conover is one of the best practitioners of participatory investigative journalism, surreptitiously inserting himself behind the scenes to ferret out the truth. For this book, he risked his life to go through prison guard training and then spent a year employed at the notoriously dangerous Sing Sing prison in upstate New York. His previous books also involved risky participatory journalism, most notably *Coyotes: A Journey Through the Secret World of America's Illegal Aliens* (1987).

JUSTICE

TURE



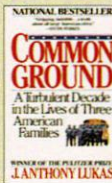
THE LOST CHILDREN OF WILDER

The Epic Struggle to Change Foster Care

By Nina Bernstein (2001)

Politicians and parents call children society's most important asset, but children are frequently treated as anything but. Bernstein started reporting on the abominable state of U.S. foster care as a newspaper reporter at *Newsday*, and continued after joining *The New York Times*. Her book features a multi-generational family saga that extends far beyond the Wilders' tragic experience to expose the nation's dysfunctional social welfare system.

FAMILY



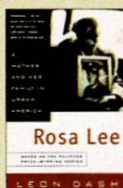
COMMON GROUND

A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families

By J. Anthony Lukas (1985)

◆ PULITZER PRIZE

A former *New York Times* reporter, Lukas crafted his masterpiece about race relations in the U.S. by immersing himself in the lives of three racially and economically-diverse Boston families. "The more time I spent with them, the harder it became to assign easy labels of guilt or virtue," Lukas told his readers. "The realities of urban America, when seen through the lives of actual city dwellers, proved far more complicated than I had imagined." After the publication of more superb books, Lukas took his life in 1997.



ROSA LEE

A Mother and Her Family in Urban America

By Leon Dash (1996)

As a *Washington Post* reporter, Dash immersed himself in lives of urban poverty in Washington, D.C., then wrote unforgettably about a nearly anonymous African-American family maimed by drugs, AIDS, and crime. One of a relatively small number of African-American investigative journalists, Dash often gained deeper acceptance from minority communities than his Caucasian colleagues. His mixture of skepticism and empathy, combined with his smooth writing style, helped his work stand out. He now teaches journalism at the University of Illinois.

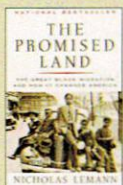


THE CORPSE HAD A FAMILIAR FACE

Covering Miami, America's Hottest Beat

By Edna Buchanan (1987)

Nobody has chronicled the anatomy of contemporary crime and crime fighting—the perpetrators, police, prosecutors, defense lawyers, and judges—better or with more humor and irony than Buchanan did during her career as a *Miami Herald* reporter. This collection offers riveting tales about every urban crime imaginable, from rioting to cold-blooded murder. Buchanan eventually quit the *Herald* to write novels, most of them featuring a newspaper reporter, Britt Montero, somewhat like herself. The first in the series is *Contents Under Pressure*. (1992)



THE PROMISED LAND

The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America

By Nicholas Lemann (1991)

By focusing on hard-to-document families, Lemann demonstrated how a trend missed by many journalists—the migration of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban North between 1940 and 1970—altered an entire culture. A newspaper reporter, magazine writer, and book author, Lemann recently entered academia as dean of the Columbia University journalism school.

RACE

Changing the World One Book at a Time

While investigative books often stand as powerful exposes, can they actually change the world?

America: What Went Wrong by Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele appeared on the shelf during the 1992 election campaign. Some campaign consultants and professional pollsters believe the book persuaded borderline voters who read it to resent Republican Party policies on job retention, thus improving Bill Clinton's ballot totals. Whether the book is responsible for the defeat of George H.W. Bush is impossible to document, but the possibility cannot be ruled out.

Some books helped spur longer-term change. The spate of wrongful conviction books helped fuel a new conventional wisdom that says the U.S. criminal justice system frequently errs. As a result, jurors, judges, and other actors in this system began to examine police and prosecution claims of guilt with more skepticism in many jurisdictions around the country.

The Puzzle Palace by James Bamford offers an example of both short- and long-term change. His book reduced the sacred nature of the National Security Agency and other espionage operations in the short term. In the long term, journalists followed Bamford's path. By raising public consciousness and asking questions, they emboldened members of Congress to challenge the unencumbered, unaccountable spending of federally funded spy bureaucracies. ■

STEVE WEINBERG, FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF INVESTIGATIVE REPORTERS AND EDITORS (IRE), TEACHES JOURNALISM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI. HE IS AUTHOR OF *THE REPORTER'S HANDBOOK: AN INVESTIGATOR'S GUIDE TO DOCUMENTS AND TECHNIQUES* (3RD EDITION, 1995) AND OTHER NONFICTION BOOKS. HIS ANNUAL COMPILATION OF INVESTIGATIVE BOOKS BY U.S. JOURNALISTS APPEARS IN THE JAN/FEB EDITION OF *THE IRE JOURNAL* (WWW.IRE.ORG).

PRACTICING THE ART



POISON PENMANSHIP

The Gentle Art of Muckraking

By Jessica Mitford (1979)

Mitford, an English transplant born in 1917, published books exposing the funeral industry (*The American Way of Death*, 1963) and the prison industry (*Kind and Usual Punishment*, 1973). This collection contains magazine pieces and excerpts from her books. The Introduction is a wonderfully light masterpiece about the investigative craft, and the Afterword by Carl Bernstein, a great investigative journalist from the generation following Mitford's, is also valuable.

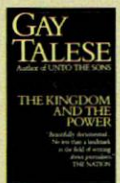


THE SECRET PARTS OF FORTUNE

Three Decades of Intense Investigations and Edgy Enthusiasms

By Ron Rosenbaum (2000)

Like Mitford's anthology, Rosenbaum's volume carries more impact than any of his monographs. Rosenbaum, who takes a sociological approach to his subjects, skillfully deconstructs widely disseminated conspiracy theories. Readers may wish to delve into his column in the *New York Observer*, his two previous collections (*Travels with Dr. Death*, 1991, *Manhattan Passions*, 1987), and his explication of recent history, *Explaining Hitler* (1999).



THE KINGDOM AND THE POWER

By Gay Talese (1969)

Reporting on institutions is difficult to pull off in a compelling way, but Talese succeeded while investigating the culture and coverage of *The New York Times*, where he had been employed before becoming a magazine freelancer. His books since 1969 have included new takes on sex and organized crime.