

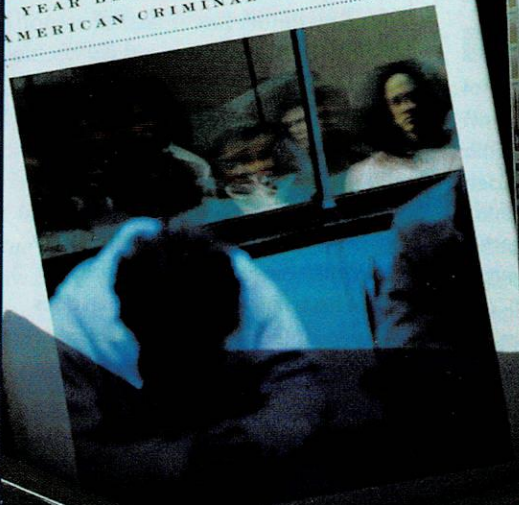
LITERARY NONFICTION

GIRLS,
HOPE IS
A MUSCLE
DELEINE BLAIS

THE WAY TO THE
WHITE HOUSE
RICHARD BEN
CRAMER

POKE

302
YEAR BEHIND THE SCENES IN AN
AMERICAN CRIMINAL COURTHOUSE



The NEW
KINGS

of NONFICTION

Featuring
MALCOLM
BLADWELL
JACK HITT
CHUCK
KLOSTERMAN
BILL
BUFORD
&
MORE
SUSAN
ORLEAN
MICHAEL
LEWIS
JAMES
MCMAHUS

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY
IRA GLASS

1982 PULITZER PRIZE-WINNER
THE PHENOMENAL BESTSELLER!
THE
SOUL
OFA NEW
MACHINE
TRACY KIDDER
"SEEMS TO LIFE NOT ONLY HOW COMPUTERS WORK AND THE
TECHNOLOGY REQUIRED TO DEWIS ONE... BUT ALSO THE HUMAN DRAMA"
THE NEW YORK TIMES

THERE
ARE NO
CHILDREN
HERE

LOVE, DRUGS,
TROUBLE,
AND COMING
OF AGE IN
THE BRONX

BY STEVE WEINBERG

When Susan Orlean's editor at *Esquire* asked her to write a profile of actor Macaulay Culkin and proposed a title, "The American Man at Age Ten," the topic didn't inspire her, but the title did. She asked if she could write about a "typical" 10-year-old boy instead. Unsure of how to conduct her research, Orlean (who some years later became known for *The Orchid Thief* and its self-referential movie version, *Adaptation*) asked friends for names of appropriate boys who would allow an adult reporter to follow them around for weeks. Orlean finally settled on a youngster in Glen Ridge, New Jersey. Here is how she opened the magazine story:

If Colin Duffy and I were to get married, we would have matching superhero notebooks. We would wear shorts, big sneakers and long, baggy T-shirts depicting famous athletes every single day, even in the winter. ... We would eat pizza and candy for all of our meals. We wouldn't have sex, but we would have crushes on each other and, magically, babies would appear in our home. ... For fun, we would load a slingshot with dog food and shoot it at my butt. We would have a very good life.

When the story about this ordinary 10-year-old came out in *Esquire* in December 1992, writers and editors praised the story as an exemplar of a genre. Today, "The American Man at Age Ten" is widely anthologized in volumes that bring together the best practitioners of a craft called literary journalism—or literary nonfiction.

Defining *literary nonfiction* is a tricky proposition. Not everyone agrees on exactly what it is, and there is little consensus about the best (and most representative) books of the genre. However, a few elements unite practitioners of the craft. First, literary nonfiction adopts the techniques of fiction (character development, plot, setting, dialogue, verbal pyrotechnics, and so forth) and applies them to nonfiction. The form often allows the "I" of the writer to shape and personalize the telling of the event. Literary journalists tend to accept that they often affect what they observe and write about—and, in the process, bring the subject and the reader closer together. Truman Capote and Tom Wolfe, two early pioneers of the craft, tried to penetrate their subjects' minds; those of the newer generation of literary journalists immerse themselves in their subjects' daily lives, as did Orlean with Colin Duffy. Walt Harrington, a *Washington Post* literary journalist who came on the book scene in 1992 with *Crossings: A White Man's Journey Into Black America*, calls the genre "intimate journalism" for this very reason. Finally, literary journalists seek out the extraordinary in quite ordinary stories—including the daily life of a typical 10-year-old boy.

In his introduction to his anthology, *New Kings of Nonfiction* (2007), Ira Glass, best known for his public radio program *This American Life*, explores the craft further. A self-styled radio journalist who tells stories by filtering his

interviews and impressions "through a distinctive literary imagination, an eccentric intelligence and a sympathetic heart," Glass relates what his favorite nonfiction writers do. They "find a new angle on something we all know about already or, more often, they take on subjects that nobody else has figured out are worthy of reporting." More specifically, they use big-picture thinking to entertain while educating; even when they approach serious topics, their words and ideas sparkle. "They try to get inside their protagonists' heads with an empathy that's unusual," Glass comments. "Theirs is a ministry of love, in a way we don't usually discuss reporters' feelings toward their subjects."

Many of these writers in Glass's anthology took inspiration from pioneers of the field. Capote influenced future generations of literary nonfiction authors with *In Cold Blood*, his 1966 account of a murder in rural Kansas. Capote liked to call the book a "nonfiction novel," which blew many people's minds at that time. Although the book reached iconic status, some of it may have been made up, which places it in dangerous territory intellectually and possibly disqualifies it as literary nonfiction. Despite Capote's questionable methods, *In Cold Blood* nonetheless inspired other masters of the craft. Madeline Blais, author of *In These Girls, Hope is a Muscle* (included on our list below), explained how Capote's book innovated with "his use of cinematic devices, the way he enters a scene as late as possible and gets out of it as early as possible, the cross-cutting, and especially the agonizing slow motion when he finally gets around to describing the crime itself" (*Chicago Tribune*, 12/25/05).

Capote's work also influenced Tom Wolfe, probably the longest-practicing, most visible living progenitor of literary nonfiction today. Decades ago Wolfe, a former newspaper feature writer, started to use fictional techniques to write true magazine stories and books about race, class, architecture, stock car racing, astronauts, and other topics that captured his interest. In his *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), the "subjective reality" of the Merry Pranksters' cross-country road trip made it a classic of the genre.

Wolfe and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, in turn, influenced another generation of literary nonfiction writers. Mark Bowden, author of *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (1999), recalled that the book "was so thrilling that for weeks I wanted to read it out loud to everyone I met. ... I knew after the first 10 pages what I wanted to do with my life" (*The New York Observer*, 1/2/06). Also a former newspaper reporter, Bowden switched to magazines and then started writing books. As a high school and college student during the late 1960s and early 1970s he discovered what Wolfe labeled "New Journalism." Bowden relates how in a small Maryland suburb he visited the local drugstore, "waiting to pounce on each new issue of *Esquire*, *Harper's* and *Rolling Stone*. No one I knew shared my addiction."

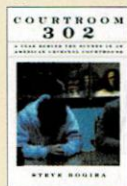
Not at that time, anyway. Literary nonfiction may not have reached the masses when Bowden was scouring the shelves, but it certainly attracts a much wider audience now. Below, I provide a personal list, though certainly not arbi-

trary, of literary nonfiction books, separated into thematic categories. Some of the authors mentioned have multiple books of literary nonfiction; in those cases, I have chosen the book that I think is the highest quality or most representative of the genre. In some instances, I have included more than one book by the same author because I am nearly certain readers will find that oeuvre addictive.

CRIMES AND COURTS

Courtroom 302

A Year Behind the Scenes in an American Criminal Courthouse
By Steve Bogira (2005)

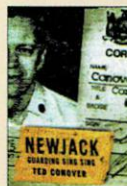


Bogira, a staff writer for the weekly *Chicago Reader*, won special access from the judge of a courtroom in Cook County, Illinois, and immersed himself in observing the proceedings for about year. The result is an unsurpassed understanding of judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, defendants, jurors, and the entire messy system of criminal justice that sometimes passes as the world's finest. (★★★★ July/Aug 2005)

Newjack

Guarding Sing Sing
By Ted Conover (2000)

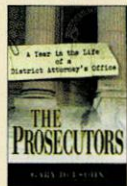
♦ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD; PULITZER PRIZE FINALIST



Before writing *Newjack*, Conover was already legendary for placing himself in danger to research his narratives. The titles tell all: *Coyotes: A Journey Through the Secret World of America's Illegal Aliens* and *Rolling Nowhere: Riding the Rails With America's Hoboes*. In *Newjack*, Conover topped himself by entering New York State prison guard training. He successfully completed the certification and then spent about a year as a corrections officer with no protection from any journalism organization.

The Prosecutors

A Year in the Life of a District Attorney's Office
By Gary Delsohn (2003)



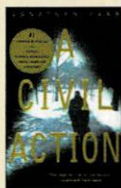
As a reporter for the *Sacramento Bee*, Delsohn negotiated unprecedented access to the normally secret operations of a local district attorney's operation. For a year, he listened in on plea bargains and trial strategy sessions, and saw firsthand how discussion about freedom versus incarceration—and sometimes even life versus death—played out for defendants and victims. (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2003)

STEVE WEINBERG WRITES WHAT HE HOPES IS LITERARY NONFICTION FOR MAGAZINES AND BOOK PUBLISHERS. HE LIVES IN COLUMBIA, MISSOURI, WHERE HE TEACHES PART-TIME AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI JOURNALISM SCHOOL.

A Civil Action

By Jonathan Harr (1995)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD; NATIONAL BOOK AWARD NOMINEE



Harr, a former staff writer at *New England Monthly*, began researching a 1981 court case in which families from Woburn, Massachusetts, sought damages against gigantic corporations for allegedly releasing carcinogens into the groundwater. The contaminants led to high incidences of leukemia and the deaths of six children. After spending years trying to figure out how to construct a compelling narrative, Harr built the story around an idealistic, unconventional plaintiff's attorney.

Killings

By Calvin Trillin (1984)



Many readers probably know Trillin primarily for his writing about food, his rhymed political satire, or his comic novels. But as a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, Trillin traveled around the nation writing narratives about "ordinary" murders and trials—from the story of a Knoxville girl who predicted her own death to the account of a Laotian family's attempted suicide in Iowa. The 16 stories in *Killings* "are meant to be more about how Americans live than about how some of them die," Trillin writes.

SPORTS

In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle

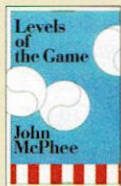
By Madeleine Blais (1995)



Blais, a former *Miami Herald* feature writer who teaches journalism at the University of Massachusetts, immersed herself in the season of an Amherst high school girls' basketball team. The book is about winning and losing games on the basketball court, to be sure, but, more important, it offers a rare window into the locker room, the classrooms, the living rooms, and the normally private sectors of the brains of teenagers.

Levels of the Game

By John McPhee (1969)

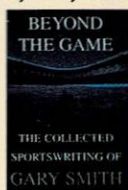


McPhee's more than two dozen books examine women and men going about their daily jobs, and every one is worth reading. McPhee builds *Levels of the Game*, one of his strongest narratives, around a 1968 tennis match between top-ranked white player Clark Graebner and Arthur Ashe, his black counterpart. McPhee, one of most influential writers in literary journalism, offers compelling profiles about each player off the courts, and then moves beyond those profiles to draw conclusions about contemporary society.

Beyond the Game

The Collected Sportswriting of Gary Smith

By Gary Smith (2000)



Smith writes full-time for *Sports Illustrated*, and his stories are exceptionally in-depth, content rich, and structurally and stylistically daring. One of these stories, originally titled “Someone to Lean On,” inspired the full-length feature movie *Radio*; other pieces portray unknown sides of Muhammad Ali, Mark McGwire, and Mike Tyson. Perhaps the most memorable story is “Crime and Punishment,” about a New York City high school basketball star who sees his professional career possibilities fade after being convicted for a sex offense.

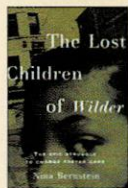
RACE, CLASS, AND ECONOMIC INJUSTICE

The Lost Children of Wilder

The Epic Struggle to Change Foster Care

By Nina Bernstein (2001)

♦ THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY HELEN BERNSTEIN BOOK AWARD; NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD NOMINEE

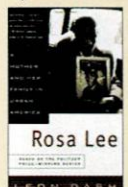


While a newspaper reporter for the *New York Times*, Bernstein covered a long-running, class-action lawsuit filed in the name of Shirley Wilder, an abused African American runaway who, as a 14-year-old in the foster care system, gave birth to a son who ended up in foster care himself. Bernstein’s narrative skillfully weaves together the fates of the Wilder family members and the litigation. She accomplishes far more in this book than what she could have done in a single newspaper or magazine feature.

Rosa Lee

A Mother and Her Family in Urban America

By Leon Dash (1996)

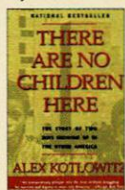


Dash’s book began as an eight-part, Pulitzer Prize-winning series in the *Washington Post* under the general headline “Rosa Lee: Poverty and Survival in Washington.” Rosa Lee Cunningham, mother of eight children and a heroin addict, died from AIDS in 1995, a year after the newspaper series ran. One of her grandsons preceded her in death, shot at age 15 in a drug-related incident. Dash hung out with Rosa Lee and her relatives over a four-year span, doing his best to understand the seemingly permanent underclass in the nation’s capitol. Dash’s previous book, *When Children Want Children: The Urban Crisis of Teenage Childbearing* (1989), is another excellent example of immersion reporting and literary journalism. Dash currently teaches journalism at the University of Illinois.

There Are No Children Here

The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America

By Alex Kotlowitz (1991)



It is difficult to imagine a more powerful book about the racial divide in American society than this one, set mostly in a Chicago housing project for low-income residents (mostly African American) that lies within walking distance of an immensely wealthy (mostly Caucasian) neighborhood. A Chicago-based reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, Kotlowitz built the book around two black youths, who were ten and seven when he immersed himself in their lives. Kotlowitz wrote a second unforgettable book about race in America, *The Other Side of the River: A Story of Two Towns, a Death and America’s Dilemma* (1998), which takes place in Michigan.

Random Family

Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx

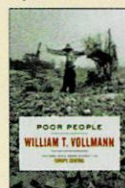
By Adrian Nicole LeBlanc (2003)



This remarkable book of narrative journalism started with a brief newspaper story about the trial of a wildly successful 18-year-old heroin dealer in New York City. As LeBlanc reported the criminal proceedings for the *Village Voice*, she became acquainted with the male drug dealer’s girlfriends. Two women eventually became the primary focus of LeBlanc’s decade-long reporting, which entailed hanging out in the South Bronx and standing out because she was not Hispanic American or African American. (★★★★ May/June 2003)

Poor People

By William T. Vollmann (2007)



Traveling throughout the United States and other nations, Vollmann sought out poor individuals at sites normally ignored by journalists and asked them why they thought they were poor. The simple premise, based on a straightforward question, yields a surprising narrative. Like Calvin Trillin, Vollmann is such a talented writer in so many genres, including fiction, that categorizing him becomes difficult. Unfortunately, he is often forgotten during discussions of literary journalism. (★★★ May/June 2007)

Also ...

PRAYING FOR SHEETROCK | MELISSA FAY GREENE (1991)

THE EVERLASTING STREAM: A TRUE STORY OF RABBITS, GUNS, FRIENDSHIP, AND FAMILY | WALT HARRINGTON (2002)

THE PROMISED LAND: THE GREAT BLACK MIGRATION AND HOW IT CHANGED AMERICA | NICHOLAS LEMANN (1991)

A HOPE IN THE UNSEEN: AN AMERICAN ODYSSEY FROM THE INNER CITY TO THE IVY LEAGUE | RON SUSKIND (1998)

ENRIQUE’S JOURNEY: THE STORY OF A BOY’S DANGEROUS ODYSSEY TO REUNITE WITH HIS MOTHER | SONIA NAZARIO (2006)

BUSINESS AND THE CORPORATE WORLD

The Soul of a New Machine

By Tracy Kidder (1981)

♦ PULITZER PRIZE; AMERICAN BOOK AWARD



Kidder, who started writing for the *Atlantic* after his tour of duty in Vietnam and a stint at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, delved into the world of microcomputers in this book. Starting at the beginning of the development of Data General's Eclipse/MV minicomputer, Kidder not only interviewed the relevant engineers but observed them at work as they raced to finish the next generation computer against a deadline and a competitor.

Three Farms

Making Milk, Meat, and Money from the American Soil

By Mark Kramer (1980)

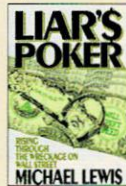
Kramer, who founded the Nieman Program on Narrative Journalism at Harvard, also writes for newspapers and magazines—and lived on a farm in western Massachusetts while writing this book. *Three Farms* discusses three different farms—the old, relatively small New England farm; a modern-day Iowa corn-hog farm, and a gargantuan Califor-

nia corporate farm. He explores how agribusiness succeeds at the expense of the smaller, independent farmer.

Liar's Poker

Rising Through the Wreckage on Wall Street

By Michael Lewis (1989)



After earning his master's degree in economics from the London School of Economics, Lewis became a bond salesman at Salomon Brothers in London (while also working nights as a journalist). *Liar's Poker* is a semiautobiographical account of his experience on Wall Street in the 1980s. In no small detail, he portrays his own serendipitous hiring (which he ascribes to the business practices of his colleagues), the market niche carved by Salomon Brothers, and the firm's great fall.

Fast Food Nation

The Dark Side of the All-American Meal

By Eric Schlosser (2001)



Schlosser began his journalistic career at the *Atlantic Monthly*, and he has also published in *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, and the *New Yorker*, to name a few. *Fast Food Nation* evolved from a two-part article published in *Rolling Stone* in 1991, and it exposes all aspects of America's fast-food industry—from its labor to its place in American culture. ■

But wait, there's more ...

INTERNATIONAL COVERAGE

DATELINE SOWETO Travels with Black South African Reporters | WILLIAM P. FINNEGAN (1988)

THE ATOMIC BAZAAR The Rise of the Nuclear Poor | WILLIAM LANGEWIESCHE (2007) (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2007)

ELECTORAL POLITICS

WHAT IT TAKES The Way to the White House | RICHARD BEN CRAMER (1992)

THE FINAL DAYS | BOB WOODWARD AND CARL BERNSTEIN (1976)

DISEASE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

THE HOT ZONE | RICHARD PRESTON (1994)

DEADLY FEASTS Tracing the Secrets of a Terrifying New Plague | RICHARD RHODES (1997)

AND THE BAND PLAYED ON Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic | RANDY SHILTS (1987)

WAR

THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST | DAVID HALBERSTAM (1972)

A BRIGHT SHINING LIE John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam | NEIL SHEEHAN (1988)

WRITER'S COLLECTED STORIES: ANTHOLOGIES

THE SECRET PARTS OF FORTUNE Three Decades of Intense Investigations and Edgy Enthusiasms | RON ROSENBAUM (2000)

THE HEART IS AN INSTRUMENT Portraits in Journalism | MADELINE BLAIS (1992)

ROAD WORK Among Tyrants, Heroes, Rogues, and Beasts | MARK BOWDEN (2004)

SLOUCHING TOWARDS BETHLEHEM | JOAN DIDION (1968)

POISON PENMANSHIP The Gentle Art of Muckraking | JESSICA MITFORD (1979)

THE BULLFIGHTER CHECKS HER MAKE-UP

My Encounters with Extraordinary People by Susan Orlean (2001)

A Writer's Life | GAY TALESE (★★★ July/Aug 2006)

ANTHOLOGIES ABOUT THE CRAFT ITSELF

INTIMATE JOURNALISM The Art and Craft of Reporting Everyday Life | EDITED BY WALT HARRINGTON (1997)

THE NEW NEW JOURNALISM Conversations on Craft with America's Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft | EDITED BY ROBERT BOYNTON (2005)

THE ART OF FACT A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism | EDITED BY KEVIN KERRANE AND BEN YAGODA (1997)

THE GANG THAT WOULDN'T WRITE STRAIGHT Wolfe, Thompson, Didion, and the New Journalism Revolution | MARC WEINGARTEN (2006) ■