



From Fact to Fiction: Journalism & Imaginative Writing in America (Literature/American Studies)

By Shelley Fisher Fishkin

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Walt Whitman spent twenty-five years as a journalist before he published his first book of poems. Mark Twain pursued a twenty-year career as a journalist before the publication of his first novel. The list of great imaginative writers whose careers began in journalism includes not only Whitman and Twain, but also Theodore Dreiser, Ernest Hemingway, and John Dos Passos, among others. Fishkin's book--the first full-length study to examine this tradition in American letters--focuses on the lives and careers of Whitman, Twain, Dreiser, Hemingway, and Dos Passos, in order to discover the roots of their greatest imaginative works and the factors that led each writer to turn to fiction. Fishkin determines that they all turned to fiction because they wished to engage their readers in ways not possible through conventional journalism, and yet not one of them found his artistic stride until he returned, in new and creative ways, to the subjects and strategies first explored as a journalist.

Fishkin weaves together threads of biography, literary criticism, literary theory, and social history to reveal the neglected role journalism has played in shaping American literary tradition since the 1830s. Her final chapter examines the attitudes toward journalism and fiction, and the division between the two in the works of such contemporary fiction writers as Norman Mailer, John Hersey, and E.L. Doctorow.

Fishkin's probing examination of the poetry and fiction that followed the newspaper and magazine work of Whitman, Twain, Dreiser, Hemingway, and Dos Passos both reveals how each writer transformed fact into art and how journalism has helped to give a distinctively American cast to American literature.

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Editorial Review

Review

"I anticipate great value from this text--its scholarship, lucid prose, and particularly the vast gap of ignorance it seeks to fill, will make it a most useful and versatile choice for my course."--Raymond I. Rundus, *Pembroke State University*

"From Whitman and Twain to Dreiser and Dos Passos, [Fishkin] tracks American literature back to unexpected beginnings in journalism. Her sophisticated search turns a new illumination on these writers' lives."--Eugene Patterson, *St. Petersburg Times*

"A valuable and readable study, well worth the attention of any student of American writing."--*San Francisco Chronicle*

"An original, illuminating, and timely work. It reaches back to explore in vivid detail the journalistic origins of some of the greatest American writers, from Whitman to Dos Passos, then reaches forward to reflect with subtlety and sophistication on the current journalistic tendency towards fiction-making."--R.W.B. Lewis, *Yale University*

"No critic before Fishkin has explored at length the phenomenon of the reporter turned artist. *From Fact to Fiction* is a welcome initial exploration, an incisive and well-written discussion...[a] groundbreaking book."--*American Quarterly*

About the Author

Shelley Fisher Fishkin teaches American Studies at the University of Texas in Austin and was Director of the Poynter Fellowship in Journalism at Yale University where she also taught American Literature.

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