

The Return of the “Humble I”: *The Bookseller of Kabul* and Contemporary Norwegian Literary Journalism

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Åsne Seierstad's The Bookseller of Kabul prompted controversy in Norway, a controversy that influences the practice of literary journalism in that country to this day.

In September 2002 a few copies of a new nonfiction book nobody seemed to have any hope for was modestly placed on the shelves of Norwegian bookstores. The book, which portrayed the life of a relatively ordinary Afghan family, had a limited print run of approximately 2,000 copies, and the publisher did not bother to market it properly. The author, the then relatively unknown—even to a Norwegian audience—journalist Åsne Seierstad, did not seem to hope for much either. “Why would anyone want to read about an Afghan family?” she much later was quoted as asking herself.¹ The first review seemed to agree and called the book “dreary.”² But then something happened. Within a few months, the book—*The Bookseller of Kabul*³—became a national best seller, selling 250,000 copies, which is a record for nonfiction literature in Norway. Within a few years, it was translated into forty-one languages and had topped the *New York Times* best-seller list for forty-one consecutive weeks.

Something, however, was lost in translation. While both reviewers and readers around the world praised *The Bookseller of Kabul*, the bookseller himself, Shah Mohammad Rais (who is given the pseudonym Sultan Khan in the book) raised his voice in the Norwegian public sphere. Rais claimed that

Seierstad had betrayed his trust in her exposure of him and his family. Commentators started debating: Did the book *really* tell a true story? Was it not fiction? Had the author behaved unacceptably and unethically in the way she portrayed, in intimate detail, the everyday life of the bookseller and his family? The criticism was a familiar one. It was the kind of epistemological critique concerning levels of truth and ideals of objectivity commonly raised toward what Eason labels “realist” literary journalism.⁴ And it was an ethical critique concerning the consequences of immersion in cultures unfamiliar with public exposure of everyday life.

In this essay I will argue that both the success and the criticism of *The Bookseller of Kabul* had a profound effect on Norwegian literary journalism in the years to come. Since 2002, book-length literary journalism has grown in popularity with Norwegian readers, publishers, reviewers, and journalists alike. This wave of literary journalism seems to be inspired by the success of *The Bookseller of Kabul*, while at the same time incorporating, at least partially, some of the criticism made of Seierstad’s book. The essay first presents the domestic debate about the book and analyzes it within a framework of the different epistemological and ethical traditions in literary journalism and literary reportage. In the last sections, I will discuss three contemporary award-winning Norwegian literary journalism books—Kjetil Østli’s *Politi og røver* [*Cop and Criminal*], Simen Sætre’s *Hugo* and Bjørn Westlie’s *Fars krig* [*My Fathers War*]⁵—to see what possible consequences the debate following *The Bookseller of Kabul* have had on this kind of journalism in Norway. Based on this discussion, I will argue that an ideal of compassionate subjectivity in line with Eason’s (1990) notion of “modernist” literary journalism and European literary reportage dominates these works and that, as a consequence, the “humble I” has returned to become the ideal narrator in contemporary Norwegian literary journalism. The “humble I” narrator is characterized by open subjectivity, self-reflection, a sensitivity towards how the presence of the narrator affects characters and milieus, and a constant questioning of the narrator’s ability to provide a truthful account of described events, people, and milieus.

II

The form, or discipline, of literary journalism inevitably evokes discussions on the distinctions between fact and fiction, journalism and literature, and different notions of truth. David Eason argues that the New Journalism, one of the origins of contemporary literary journalism, falls into two camps—the “realist” and the “modernist”—which differ in their epistemological approach.⁵ In spite of their new approaches to journalism, the

realists, like Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, and Truman Capote, were, according to Eason, conventional journalists in the sense that their journalism did not effectively challenge the hegemonic ideal of objectivity. Eason argues that these realist New Journalists “organize the topic of the report as an object of display, and the reporter and reader, whose values are assumed and not explored, are joined in an act of observing that assures conventional ways of understanding still apply.”⁶ Their approach thus implies that an undisputed reality can be discovered by the journalists and expressed in their texts; that observation as a journalistic method involves almost no ethical problems; and that traditional, cultural models of storytelling are perfectly capable of unmasking the real.

It is, by contrast, with the “modernist” New Journalists that we find those who challenge the conventional notions of journalistic epistemology. According to Eason, the modernist New Journalists, such as Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, and Hunter S. Thompson, deny the ideal of objectivity and instead “describe what it feels like to live in a world where there is no consensus about a frame of reference to explain ‘what it all means.’”⁷ They insist on subjectivity and do not put their trust in the ability of narrative structure to portray an objective account of real life. They are part of their own narratives and make transparent their awareness of the limits to their observations. The modernists’ approach to literary journalism therefore to some extent corresponds to the epistemological position taken by many structuralist and post-structuralist literature theorists, like Roland Barthes, who argues that literature is based on the “plurality of meanings.”⁸ But there is a vital difference. The premise of Barthes’ argument is that there is no referential reality beyond language, and that, as a consequence, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is difficult, if not impossible, to draw. Even the modernist literary journalists insist on the difference between fiction and nonfiction. Even though they deny the idea of objectivity, they aim at portraying an intersubjective truth that relates to a world outside the text.

The modernist approach to literary journalism has by no means overthrown objectivity’s hegemonic position in the ideology of journalism. Journalism in general and literary journalism in particular are still dominated by a realist approach. The works of popular, contemporary U.S. literary journalists—for instance the ones labeled by Robert S. Boynton as the “New New Journalists”⁹—seem to take for granted an uncomplicated relationship between text and reality, fact and fiction, subject and object. Many of these contemporary U.S. literary journalists—such as Adrian Nicole LeBlanc and Tom French—differ from the earlier realist approach to literary journalism only in what their objects of inquiry are. They are to a much greater extent than Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, John McPhee, and similar writers preoccupied

with portraying the lives of ordinary people. They immerse themselves in the everyday privacy of subjects unaccustomed to the attention of journalists, but they treat them more like objects of study than subjects with whom the journalist engages in compassionate, intersubjective relationships.

As we shall see shortly, the approach taken by Seierstad in *The Bookseller of Kabul* fits well with this contemporary realist literary journalism. But this approach does not conduce equally well to the Norwegian and European tradition of (literary) reportage. Most definitions of reportage emphasize the reporter's eyewitness accounts of the events described as a prerequisite of the genre.¹⁰ By such a definition, it follows that the reportage is often considered as personal account, and much European reportage has therefore not only been marked by the reporter's subjectivity, but also by a combination of opinion and observation. A German definition of reportage emphasizes, according to John Hartsock, "eyewitness account, running commentary."¹¹ In many European countries, especially in Eastern Europe, reportage journalism has had a political, often polemic, side to it, such as in the works of the Czech journalist Egon Erwin Kisch and Swedish journalist Ivar Lo-Johansson in the 1920s. As pointed out by Hartsock, this polemic type of reportage is not the only kind of reportage journalism found in Europe. Hartsock distinguishes among three types of literary reportage: 1) polemic literary reportage; 2) narra-descriptive literary reportage providing a close-ended response to the topic reported on; and 3) narra-descriptive literary reportage that "embraces the inconclusive present of a fluid phenomenal world that grants free interpretive possibilities to the author and reader."¹² I interpret Hartsock's two forms of narra-descriptive literary reportage as equivalent to Eason's distinction between realist and modernist literary journalism.

In Norway, all three of these forms of (literary) reportage have co-existed. But when the New Journalism arose in the 1960s in the U.S., a polemical and politically radical form of book-length reportage thrived in Scandinavia.¹³ This tradition of polemical reportage, coupled with the ideal of subjectivity and first person narration found in twentieth-century reportage in Scandinavia,¹⁴ has greatly influenced the way reportage is perceived in contemporary Norwegian nonfiction literature. Torunn Borge, for instance, emphasizes the importance of the journalist's "open subjectivity" when writing reportage,¹⁵ and Jo Bech-Karlsen defines reportage as "a personal narrative" that derives from the reporter's own experiences in the real world.¹⁶ Bech-Karlsen further emphasizes that the journalist's presence as eyewitness must be apparent in order for a journalistic text to be classified as reportage.

Such definitions alienate the detached omniscient narrator as a journalistic ideal of narration and instead promote compassionate subjectivity and

what might be interpreted as a “humble I” as a preferred narrator. Such a narrator is personal and thereby vulnerable, because the “I” is part of the events described, and thereby affected by these events. The “humble I” narrator does not think any higher of himself than of the characters he encounters; he acknowledges that he has much to learn from the people and milieus he seeks out; and he thereby modestly accepts that his view of the world might not be right. As a consequence, realist literary journalism might be perceived as an unfamiliar form of journalism within a Norwegian reportage tradition. However, it must be noted that in the Scandinavian newspaper’s feature sections, the detached omniscient narrator has grown to be quite common during the last twenty years or so.

III

When Seierstad traveled to Afghanistan in 2001 to cover the recently started war, it was as a freelance war reporter. She had previously worked as a foreign correspondent in China and Russia for Norwegian newspapers before she became a freelance reporter for the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK in 1998. At the time, she was essentially an unknown journalist, but within the community of Norwegian journalists she was considered to be a fearless, hardworking, and independent member of the profession. These sides of her professional self became apparent when she, after being embedded with the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan for six weeks, traveled to the city of Kabul, recently surrendered by the Taliban, in order to investigate the lives of ordinary people in the Afghan capital. Upon her arrival to Kabul in November 2001, she made an acquaintance with a bookseller, who invited her to stay at his house with his family. She ended up immersing herself in the life of this family—the bookseller, his two wives, their five children, and several other relatives—from January to May 2002. They knew she was a journalist, and they knew she wanted to write a book about their lives. And so she did.

The Bookseller of Kabul was published in Norway in September 2002 with the subtitle *Et familiedrama [A Family Drama]*.¹⁷ This was not Seierstad’s first book. Two years earlier, in 2000, she published a series of profile interviews from Serbia following her coverage of the Balkan war.¹⁸ The differences between the Serbia book and *The Bookseller of Kabul* are interesting. First, the Serbia book is written as a first-person narrative from Seierstad’s point of view, in tune with the dominant Norwegian reportage tradition, while *The Bookseller of Kabul* is written as a third-person narrative from the character’s point of view, including inner monologue—in other words more like realist literary journalism. Second, in contrast to the Serbia book, the characters of

Bookseller are not portrayed with their real names. Third, the level of immersion is much more developed in *Bookseller* since Seierstad lived in the same house as those she wrote about, which she did not in the Serbia book. Consequently, *Bookseller* offers far more access to, in Ervin Goffman's phrase, the "backstage" of the characters' lives.¹⁹

Fourth, *The Bookseller of Kabul* was published with a more ambiguous genre affiliation than the Serbia book. The subtitle of the Serbia book—*Portretter fra Serbia [Portraits from Serbia]*—to some extent relates the book to genres of nonfiction,²⁰ while the subtitle of *The Bookseller of Kabul—A Family Drama*—alludes to Henrik Ibsen's dramas, at least in a Norwegian context, and thereby to genres of fiction. Bookstores and libraries in Norway therefore could not quite figure out whether to classify the book as fiction or nonfiction, reflective of Poul Behrendt's "double contract."²¹ Bech-Karlsen argues that such double contracts are common in narrative journalism—a realist kind of literary journalism based on a reconstruction of events more than eyewitness reporting—but that they are uncommon in the Nordic reportage tradition.²²

The Bookseller of Kabul starts off with a description of how the bookseller, who is given the name Sultan Khan, goes about to get himself a second, younger wife, after being married to the same woman for sixteen years. This story and the triangle relationship between the bookseller and his old and new wives are the primary narrative focus of the book. The bookseller is portrayed as a rather tyrannical man, who controls his family and especially the women with a harsh hand. Seierstad sides with the women and with what she interprets as their struggle for independence, freedom from oppression, and other basic human rights. More than just a visitor, Seierstad becomes part of the family; she travels and eats every meal with them, goes to the bazaar with the female members, and shares a bedroom with the bookseller's nineteen-year-old sister, who is ordered to take care of her. But unlike the other women in the family, Seierstad is free to move out of gender-specific circles, which gives her the opportunity to see both male and female perspectives.

The Bookseller of Kabul has been called "the most intimate description of an Afghan household ever produced by a Western journalist"²³ and "a beefed up, bedroom version" of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations."²⁴ Unlike the first reviewer in *Dagbladet*, most critics were positive towards the book. By November 2002, the book was on top of the nonfiction bestseller list in Norway. Seierstad won the National Booksellers Award, was nominated for the prestigious Brage award, and the National Freelancer's Association appointed her as freelancer of the year.

But then, with the help of a Norwegian magazine journalist, the book reached Kabul. In June 2003, Tuva Raanes, a journalist with the women's magazine *Kvinner og Klær* [*Women and Clothing*], travelled to Kabul to interview the bookseller, Shah Mohammad Rais, about his take on the then internationally acclaimed book. During the spring of 2003 the *The Bookseller of Kabul* had been translated into French, German, Italian, and Swedish, and deals had been made to publish the book in thirteen additional countries. It had been praised by international reviewers, and Seierstad was traveling across Europe to promote the book. But no one had heard from the bookseller himself, even though his name had been made public by the Norwegian newspaper *Dagbladet*, which interviewed him when the book was published in September 2002.²⁵ When Raanes met with Rais she was amazed to find out that he had not read the book. She managed to provide him with an English translation and was present when he read it. According to Raanes, he became furious.

The magazine story did not run until September 2003, but the story about the magazine journalist's efforts to make the bookseller read the book broke a month earlier, on 28 August, in the newspaper *VG*, which simultaneously published its own interview with Rais. Consequently, this interview was the first public account of Rais's reactions to the book, and he did not mince words. "I hate Åsne very much right now," he proclaimed, according to *VG*.²⁶ He was deeply humiliated and shocked by some of the stories in the book, especially those where his female relatives revealed intimate details about their sex lives. If these stories became publicly known in Kabul, they would cast long shadows of shame and dishonor over the family, according to the interview with Rais. "The consequences of all this . . . will be divorce or death!" he said to *VG*, before proclaiming that he was going to sue Seierstad. Seierstad, who was confronted with the bookseller's reactions, regretted that she did not have the manuscript translated for Rais to read before it was published.²⁷

This interview sparked what was to become an intense debate on the truthfulness of the book and the ethics of Seierstad as a journalist. The day after the interview with Rais was published, the well-known Swedish journalist and author Jan Guillou was quoted by *VG*, claiming that the book was a "fabrication from cover to cover," "a novel disguised as journalism," and that "now the family has to take responsibility for a western woman's novelistic imagination, and that's a gross ethical misconduct."²⁸ Seierstad, in the same newspaper story, simply replied that "everything in the book is true." In another newspaper the same day the Norwegian-Iranian author Walid al-Kubaisi was quoted to have said that Seierstad should withdraw the book. Al-

Kubaisi had written an essay in a small Norwegian newspaper in April 2003, where he argued that *The Bookseller of Kabul* was a deeply problematic book in moral and ethical terms. This essay had, however, passed unnoticed, but it was now brought back to the public's attention. "Åsne has created a disaster for the family," al-Kubaisi said to *Dagbladet*,²⁹ before asking a rhetorical question: What would have happened if an Afghan journalist with no knowledge of the Norwegian language were allowed to stay with a well-known family from the posh parts of Oslo in order to write a book, in which he disclosed the husband's affairs with prostitutes; the wife taking a lover; the son's drug abuse; and the daughter trying to commit suicide? If such a book was published in Afghanistan, it would have found its way back to Oslo, and it would not have been considered a truthful or ethically sound account of events, argued al-Kubaisi, according to *Dagbladet*.

The criticism was in other words twofold. First, there was the epistemological consideration related to the book's truthfulness—how can we know what is true and what is fabricated in a book with such close resemblance to genres of fiction? Second, there was the ethical consideration related to the revealing of intimate, private, and potentially compromising details from the lives of this Afghan family. Both these dimensions continued to dominate the public debate during the fall of 2003 in a range of newspaper interviews, essays, and commentaries from authors, journalists, editors, publishers, intellectuals, and academics. Some, like al-Kubaisi, sided with the bookseller and argued that the book should be pulled off the market, while others sided with Seierstad, arguing that the book, in spite of its ethical and epistemological problems, served a greater good, namely to give voice to the voiceless—the women of Afghanistan. Wrote *Aftenposten* commentator Kathrine Aspaas: "It is our duty to report on encroachments in the name of culture. This fact justifies Seierstad's betrayal."³⁰

The *Bookseller* controversy reached a high point when Rais himself turned up in Oslo September 16, 2003, with his youngest wife and their newborn son. They stayed a week; Rais gave an impressive amount of interviews for newspapers, radio programs, and television talk shows. He made it clear that he wanted the book to be withdrawn in the seventeen countries where it had been published, or was about to be published. Rais and the Norwegian lawyer he had hired met with Seierstad, her Norwegian publisher, and their lawyer to discuss the matter. But nobody agreed on what actually happened at this meeting. The lawyers quarreled, Seierstad was angry with the press, her publisher was angry with everyone who suddenly criticized the book after praising it a year earlier, and it became clear that there would never be any agreement. Rais declared he would write an autobiography containing a

“whole chapter devoted to Seierstad.”³¹ It was truly a media circus.

The bookseller’s wife, Suraya Rais, who did not speak English, was also interviewed by several newspapers (without the presence of her husband), amongst them *Dagbladet*, which had the translator read out loud to her the opening pages of the book (which she claimed she did not know the content of). In these opening pages the process by which Suraya Rais became the bookseller’s new wife is described. According to Seierstad’s descriptions, Suraya was sold to Shah Mohammad Rais against her will. When learning about this, Suraya reacted, according to the *Dagbladet* interview, with disbelief and anger. “I did not at all mind marrying him. I trusted my parents to make the right decision . . . I was neither sold nor bought,” said Suraya, according to the interview, before adding: “I thought she was a nice person, a journalist who would help people understand Afghanistan. Now I don’t like her. She has taken advantage of our hospitality and spread lies about our family.”³²

When Rais left Norway, two things happened: First, sales of the book increased, not only in Norway, but also internationally. The conflict between Rais and Seierstad had been picked up by international press, including in the U.S., where the book was about to be published. The conflict therefore drew attention to the book in the States, and sales there increased dramatically. Second, high profile Norwegian academics became interested in the debate. In hindsight, one of the most cited essays related to the debate was written by a professor of social anthropology, Unni Wikan. Wikan, a specialist in Arabic culture, criticized Seierstad’s methods. Her main concern was that the “genre” Seierstad had chosen made it difficult to assess her methods. “She exposes her informants, but disguises herself,” wrote Wikan.³³ She found it difficult to assess how Seierstad had solved the language problem; if any of her informants spoke English, or if she had used a translator, and if so, what kind of relationship the translator had with the informants, and how she could have quoted her informants as excessively as she did without using a recorder.

The Bookseller of Kabul does not provide any answers to these questions, as Wikan pointed out. Some notes on method were added in the English version, namely who Seierstad used as translators: the bookseller himself, his sister, and one of his sons. To translate from Dari via English into Norwegian (and then into other languages) is extremely difficult, Wikan argued. She found it problematic that excessive quotes, dialogue and inner monologue were represented in the book when all of it was filtered through the minds of these three translators—especially since the role of these translators and of Seierstad as a participant observer is omitted from the book.

Wikan’s evaluation was both epistemological and ethical. She found that

the ethical problems of exposing private details were directly linked to Seierstad narrative style and her position as narrator and to the way she represented “reality.” In an essay in the magazine *Samtiden* a year later, a professor of global history, political science, and development studies, Terje Tvedt, made similar arguments, but he went even further in arguing the impossibility of claiming that *The Bookseller of Kabul* represented truth. Tvedt argued that the book was “intellectually immature,” and he questioned whether it should have been published.³⁴ He pointed out the postcolonial theory of “othering” of non-Westerners in Western media representations and he argued that *Bookseller* was marked by such a discourse. Furthermore, he claimed that the arrival of bookseller Rais in the Norwegian public sphere was a historic, first account of a “native striking back” to oppose the way he was represented.

Another social anthropologist, Knut Christian Myhre, extended Tvedt’s postcolonial interpretation by arguing that “Seierstad’s inability to talk directly and freely to the people she writes about serves to establish the primacy of ‘vision’ over ‘narrative’, which Said (1978) describes as characteristic of Orientalizing discourses.”³⁵ Myhre found it surprising that so much attention had been paid to the ethical concerns of *The Bookseller of Kabul* instead of closely investigating the “metaphors and literary images employed by Seierstad.”³⁶

The above account of the debate that *The Bookseller of Kabul* caused in Norway—a debate caused mostly by Rais’s public declarations—makes it clear that what most critics found troubling about the book was related to the author’s narrative insistence that *Bookseller* represents an objective truth. The Norwegian (and European) tradition of (literary) reportage clearly favors reportages in which the journalist’s position as narrator is detectable and where the journalist imprints her reportages with a personal perspective, and thus a subjective truth. Consequently, the realist type of book-length literary journalism represents a form and an epistemological position that becomes problematic as a journalistic genre in a Norwegian context. That being said, this explanation does not account for the many adverse responses to the book, and it fails to explain Rais’s role in increasing such responses.

I will therefore argue that there is something deeply problematic with realist literary journalism when it is applied as a narrative form to describe events and people that belong to cultures other than those the journalist and her domestic audience are familiar with. There are so many cultural, socio-political, and personal obstacles and differences between Seierstad and her readers on the one side, and Shah Mohammad Rais, his family, and the people of Afghanistan on the other, that it is impossible for her to completely understand beyond doubt the Afghan way of living, thinking, and reasoning.

These vast differences are greatly amplified by the language issue.

The realist form Seierstad writes within takes its energy, in Eason's sense, "from an image-world that obscures the subjective realities of diverse sub-cultures."³⁷ This image-world is constructed by Seierstad's—and her Western world readers'—predefined ideas not only about the Oriental world, but about ethics and morality, and what is considered good and bad. It is a normative and thereby subjective position, within which a traditional, Western way of thinking prevails over the subjective realities of the Rais family in particular and Afghans in general. Realist literary journalism provides a predefined frame within which events, places, and people are interpreted. The problem is that this frame, and the normative and subjective position it promotes, is disguised as objective, unbiased truth, thus making it difficult, if not impossible, to apply a journalistic "reflexivity," which, according to Elisabeth Eide, is necessary when trying to represent "the other."³⁸

The ethical problems raised by Rais and the critics return us to the dilemma of realist literary journalism: Had Seierstad written *The Bookseller of Kabul* in line with the ideals of modernist literary journalism and personal reportage, the ethical problems would have been much easier to solve. Seierstad's methods would then have been made transparent, as would her influence as a participating observer. She would have been forced to question openly her perspective, values and norms, and what she believed to be true. And she would have avoided the "absoluteness" of positivist realism and could instead have opened her participatory observations up for multiple interpretations. Such "open subjectivity" has, according to Borge, "the clear advantage that it can be located, both as the reporter's distinct voice and as the interplay between her and the people, places, and events she describes and analyzes."³⁹

IV

In May 2004 it became clear that Rais would not follow through with his legal threats because of the costs involved in a potential lawsuit. But four years later, in 2008, the bookseller's youngest wife, who traveled with him to Norway in 2003, and again in 2006, summoned Seierstad and her publisher for violation of her privacy. She won her case in the Norwegian District Court, and Seierstad was sentenced to pay Suraya Rais a compensation of 125,000 NOK (U.S. \$15,000). However, the case was brought to the Court of Appeals, which reversed the verdict. And finally, in March 2012—ten years after the book was published—the Norwegian Supreme Court voted it would not hear a second appeal. There were, in other words, no legal reasons why literary journalism in Norway should not profit from the commercially successful formula of *The Bookseller of Kabul*. Yet, it did not.

However, several things happened to literary journalism in Norway in

the wake of the *Bookseller* controversy. First, book-length literary journalism increased in popularity with journalists, readers, and publishers. The Norwegian book market had for years been dominated by fiction. Journalistic nonfiction with literary inflections was rarely published. *The Bookseller of Kabul* changed that. Literary journalism and literary reportage became popular genres with publishers, who became aware of the commercial potential of these genres. But there were also other incentives for publishing houses to offer nonfiction in general and literary journalism/reportage in particular. In 2005 the Norwegian Arts Council extended the publicly financed purchasing system to include nonfiction titles. This system secures a minimum of sales to public libraries of books published by Norwegian publishers. Publishers also saw that the struggling newspaper industry increasingly had a hard time fulfilling its promise of bringing in-depth analyses of modern society, and book-length journalism hence became a commercial priority. Publishers at Gyldendal, one of the two biggest publishing houses in Norway, argued, “The newspapers have cut back on the difficult, research-demanding part of their practice, and thereby handed over parts of their job to the publishing business.”⁴⁰

Second, book-length literary journalism has increasingly been acknowledged as quality literature in Norway. *The Bookseller of Kabul* was the first piece of literary journalism to be nominated for the prestigious Brage award for best nonfiction book in 2002. In 2006, Simon Sætre’s *Hugo*—a literary journalism book portraying the life of a homeless drug addict—was nominated for the same award, and in 2008, Bjørn Westlie became the first literary journalist to win the award with his book *Fars krig* [*My Father’s War*]. The following year another literary journalist, Kjetil S. Østli, won the award for his book *Politi og røver* [*Cop and Criminal*].

In contrast to *The Bookseller of Kabul*, these award winning literary journalism books adhere to the epistemology of modernist literary journalism, thus indicating that this form of literary journalism has come into prominence in Norway. In the last sections of this essay, I will take a closer look at the implications of this epistemological change and give examples of how it is manifested in the three Brage-nominated books mentioned above—and also, surprisingly, to some extent, in the later works of Seierstad.

V

Modernist literary journalism, and much of the Nordic reportage tradition, is marked by subjectivity, uncertainty, and an awareness of the journalist’s limits in describing the “real” world. It is marked by methodological transparency and sensitivity towards informants and milieus, and its practitioners treat their sources as subjects they engage with, not as objects they

can observe without interference.⁴¹ This epistemological position fits well with Sætre's *Hugo*, and the other award-winning books, Westli's *Fars krig* and Østli's *Politi og røver*.

In *Hugo*,⁴² Simen Sætre, a feature writer with *Morgebladet*, follows a homeless drug addict in Oslo for a year, trying to get to know him, his past, why and how he became what he is, and how someone might end up homeless in Norway, the richest country in the world, where each and every city and municipality is obliged by law to provide shelter for everyone who needs it. The book is deeply humanistic. Sætre treats Hugo with respect, as a fellow human being, even though he at times finds it hard to understand him. In his efforts to do so, he tries, at least to some extent, to live like Hugo. He goes undercover in the underworld where Hugo lives, pretends to be his brother, and tries out begging and sleeping on the streets. Sætre searches for answers and explanations, but discovers how difficult it is to find any. He reflects, asks questions, thinks out loud, and extensively investigates Hugo's past, but the more he finds out about him, the more questions he asks. It's an open-ended and never-ending story. Furthermore, Sætre constantly doubts what he discovers and he shares his uncertainty with the readers. What is real and what is not is constantly under scrutiny in the book. A good example of this constant questioning of what Sætre believes to be true is found in the book's very first chapter, where Sætre discloses how he met Hugo. Sætre had posted flyers around the city of Oslo hoping to get in contact with a guy like Hugo in order to write the book he wanted. Hugo made contact, and they met at a café. But could he really be sure that Hugo was who he said he was? This is how Sætre describes parts of their first meeting:

While we are talking I can feel a pang, a feeling of doubt. I have felt it before. It's the feeling you get of someone hinting at something, like when I once came home to a girl I liked and she played Nick Cave's "Are you the one that I've been waiting for?" Was something going on here? Was it a hint, or just coincidence? It was the same feeling. I started doubting if this man really was homeless.

He was introvert and quite dull, actually.

Afterwards, I noticed that I in my notebook had described him as "ordinary," a characterization, which by no means describes a beggar, a homeless and a drug addict (and which by the way is a ridiculous description of any person). I couldn't picture him on the streets. His hair could fit, and the plastic bag, and the way he talked. But the rest was not right. Afterwards it struck me that I never saw his arms.⁴³

Sætre uses his own point of view and his uncertainty quite consciously,

almost as a dramatic effect. The questioning of truth claims becomes a narrative driving force. He positions himself as a rather naïve and quite blunt narrator, and the book thereby becomes as much about Sætre—who he is, his prejudices, and values—as about Hugo. And since the “I” is the point of identification for the reader, the book implicitly becomes as much about the reader’s prejudice and values as about Sætre’s.

As with *Hugo*, the 2008 Brage award winner for best nonfiction book of the year, Bjørn Westlie’s *Fars krig*,⁴⁴ is a deeply humanistic and personal book. The two journalists embark on similar projects in the sense that both books deal with trying to understand someone who is an outcast, someone with a totally different way of living and thinking about the world, which contravene standard social norms and conventions. But while Sætre tries to figure out a contemporary stranger, Westlie, a feature writer with *Dagens næringsliv*, tries to figure out his own father—why he became a Nazi soldier during the Second World War. Westlie’s father welcomed the German invasion of Norway in 1940, enrolled as a SS soldier, and fought for the Third Reich on the Eastern front. Needless to say, having a father who was a “quisling” is both traumatic and tabooed, especially in Norway, a country that prides itself on its resistance during the war.

Westlie’s father was convicted for treason after the war, and their relationship was thereafter almost nonexistent, the son being filled with anger and embarrassment about his father’s actions. Over the years, Westlie’s father tried to reach out to his son by sending him tapes he had recorded. Westlie stored the tapes in a box in his attic, never listening to them. But one day he changed his mind. He started listening to the tapes and found that they contained his father’s recollection of the events of his life and his attempts to explain himself. These tapes are the starting point of *Fars krig*. Westlie uses the tapes, and letters his father wrote, to reconstruct his experiences during the war and the events that turned his father into a Nazi. But he does not treat the tapes as reliable sources. He constantly doubts his father’s recollection, even when it comes to his father’s feelings and descriptions of the impact different events had on him. An example is when Westlie writes about his father’s first experiences at the Eastern front in Ukraine following his training in Germany:

The reality that he was met with in Ukraine was dramatically different and far more brutal. What he experienced there was, according to him, “ten times worse” than during training. But what did he mean by that, and what was it that made him react in such a way? Was it the way the soldiers were treated, or was it the way they approached the Jews? Or was it something he much later arrived at?⁴⁵

Throughout the book Westlie tries to verify the events his father describes

by doing extensive research, and he tries to figure out what his father had left out in his tape-recorded memoirs and why he had done so. The events at the Eastern Front in Ukraine are of particular importance, because it became crucial for Westlie to find out to what degree his father participated in the pursuit, deportation, and assassination of Jews. The tapes and letters did not provide any answers to that question, and Westlie decided he needed to travel to Ukraine and seek out the places where his father was stationed, the people living there now, and what they had to tell. As best he could, he followed in his father's footsteps. Westlie found the remains of mass graves nearby where he believed his father had been positioned, but—as with Simen Sætre in *Hugo*—the more he found out, the more questions he was left with. The truth kept slipping away; all the different sources provided nothing but bits and pieces that never made a complete picture. In the end, Westlie confronted his father, who was still alive, albeit in poor health. It became a meeting filled with ambiguity, leaving Westlie with no final answers.

Questioning claims of truth is also at the heart of Kjetil S. Østli's *Politi og rover*,⁴⁶ the book that won the Brage nonfiction award in 2009. In *Politi og rover*, Østli, a feature writer with *Aftenposten*, portrays an undercover agent who for twenty years worked to bring down a gang of criminals involved in several armed robberies, including the infamous 2004 robberies of the Munch painting *The Scream* and the Nokas Cash Handling, from where the gang managed to get away with 57.4 million NOK (approximately U.S. \$10 million). Østli also portrays one of the gang members, a man who started his “career” the same year as the agent. Østli followed both of these men for three years and discovered many similarities between them. He was surprised to find that the main line of difference was not drawn between the cop and the criminal, but between the cop and the criminal on the one side, and him, the well-educated family man, on the other. The cop and the criminal represented an ideal of masculinity quite different from the one Østli adhered to. They were both risk takers and adventure seekers; they loved guns and action, body building, and fast cars; they would never take paternity leave; they did not read books; they shared the same favorite movie (*Heat*) and the same views on women's rights; and it seemed to Østli that there were only minor coincidences that had made one of them a cop and the other a criminal. It might as well have been the other way around. If the law did not divide them, they would have been great friends.

After a while, Østli found out not only that they knew each other much better than he originally thought, but that they—the cop and the criminal—were conspiring behind his back in order to change his views on masculinity. They nicknamed him spitefully “the academic” and considered him a wimp

and a sissy. They started, Østli afterwards learned, “Project Man.”

Part of this Project Man involved teaching Østli how to drive like a man, which, according to the cop and the criminal, implied driving fast and recklessly. One cold winter day Østli therefore found himself in a car with the criminal behind the steering wheel in search of a deserted, icy road where some “real” driving could be done. The criminal found the perfect road, and the events that then unfolded were so shocking to the journalist that he totally blacked out. He was so scared he could not remember a thing afterwards. He wrote about the experience based on the recordings he had made on a minidisc recorder he had left on the dashboard:

“We could drive all night, just drive, drive, drive” I hear Petter say on the recorder. And then I just hear the engine, pushed to its limits, and I visualize the narrow road, the turns, the accident, the death, the funeral. And then, out of nowhere, I hear myself laughing. A loud laugh I don’t recognize, high-pitched and strange, and in-between the gasps I can hear myself cursing, swearwords gushing out of me. “HAHAHA FUCKING HELL FUCK FUCKING CUNT HAHAHA.”

I was so surprised I had to listen to the minidisc once again. Now I heard that my fear turned into hysteric euphoria. And I heard more. My laughter was not manly. It wasn’t The Man we had lured out. It was the boy. Who you really are, says Nietzsche, is a big child, who can make life an esthetic game of self-confirmation until eternity. It was the boy inside me I found that night.⁴⁷

The experience made Østli question his own ideas of masculinity, and the book is as much about what it means to be a man in a contemporary Western society as it is about a cop chasing a criminal. Østli is forced to reconsider his preconceived ideas of manhood, of morality, of ethics—and, as with Sætre and Westlie, he is left with more questions than answers.

All three of these books share some striking similarities. Apart from being thoroughly researched and beautifully written pieces of literary journalism, they are all highly subjective and methodologically transparent. None of the three journalists claims to have found the objective truth about the topics they write about; they are more than happy with mapping out different perspectives and different levels of subjective truths. Furthermore, they are deeply involved with the subjects they write about, and this involvement becomes a core part of their narratives. What seems to be a book about a homeless drug addict is as much a book about the journalist’s, and the implied reader’s, prejudice and preconceived ideas.⁴⁸ What seems to be a book about a father who was a SS soldier is as much a book about a son trying to understand the incomprehensible. And what seems to be a book about a cop

and a criminal is as much a book about a modern family man trying to figure out what it really means to be a man.

In contrast to *The Bookseller of Kabul* these three books are rooted in the traditions of modernist literary journalism and Nordic reportage. Sætre, Westlie, and Østli are deeply affected by what they experience, and their emotional reactions constitute much of the books' thematic substance.

VI

To conclude this essay, I will take a look at Seierstad's most recent book, *The Angel of Grozny: Inside Chechnya*,⁴⁹ to see if any changes in her epistemological position can be found. The most striking difference between this book and *The Bookseller of Kabul* is that *The Angel of Grozny* is a first-person narrative, thus allowing much more methodological transparency and a more specified and subjective point of view. However, Seierstad does make use of an omniscient narrator in certain parts of the book, and, for example, resorts to a third person narration and a reconstruction of inner monologue in the first chapter, techniques she used in *The Bookseller of Kabul*. But this is the exception rather than the rule in *The Angel of Grozny*. The first part of the book consists mainly of Seierstad's recollection of her first trips to Chechnya as a correspondent for *Arbeiderbladet* in the mid-1990s. This part is written with an awareness of the tricks memory can play on past events, as when Seierstad writes about her trip from the airport to the city center of Grozny: "Did I walk? Did I drive? Did I meet anyone? Did I catch a ride with anyone? I am no longer able to remember how, but in some way or the other I ended up in the city center of Grozny."⁵⁰ And a few pages later Seierstad mixes dreams with reality in her description of her first night in Grozny in a way that makes the reader wonder were the one ends and the other begins:

The cool breeze had been an illusion, now the dark was warm and heavy. The sheets were clammy. There was no air to breathe in. The salvos came closer; there were fights just around the corner. The gate was broken open and the house stormed by soldiers, who slammed the door open, ripped the blanket off me, pulled me out of bed, threw me on the floor. I screamed. And woke up. Then I dozed off again to a restless sleep accompanied by the gunfire, which came closer and became more distant, before slowly dying down.⁵¹

This kind of humble uncertainty is not to be found in *The Bookseller of Kabul*, and given the first-person narrator that Seierstad employs when she travels back to Chechnya in 2006—a trip that makes up the main part of the book—it becomes clear that Seierstad has changed her narrative style and epistemological approach, making her literary journalism far more openly

subjective, closer to the modernist position and more compatible with the Nordic reportage tradition. She is, to a much greater extent, “an independent moral agent,” which, according to James L. Aucoin, represents a quality judgment of literary journalism. Writing about Ryszard Kapuscinski, Aucoin argues that such a quality judgment implies that: “His techniques and biases are laid bare before the readers, allowing each to judge his credibility.”⁵² Instead of trying to create authenticity in a positivist-realist manner by presenting facts as absolute, Seirstad’s own voice—her “humble I”—becomes her “badge of authenticity,”⁵³ as it did for such a master of European reportage as Ryszard Kapuscinski, and as it did for Simen Sætre, Bjørn Westlie, and Kjetil S. Østli.

It must, however, be noted that the “humble I” by itself does not guarantee such authenticity. As any narrator, the “humble I” is a literary construction. It can never be an actual representation of the author, even though the bond between the author and the narrator in first-person journalism is closer than in fiction. The “humble I” may implicitly position the journalist in the text as a moral agent, but it also positions the journalist as a literary agent. There is a chance that the “humble I” becomes ritualized as a genre convention in literary journalism, as a kind of narrator journalists construct in order to create a sense of authenticity. If that becomes the case, the “humble I” becomes just another container, which, in Eason’s words, “can come to seem as incapable of grasping reality as those [it] displaced.”⁵⁴

NOTES

1. Siss Vik, “Bestselger på tross [Best seller in spite]” *Bokprogrammet*, NRK (Oslo: NRK, 19 October 2010).

2. Espen Søbye, “Taurig fra Kabul [Dreary from Kabul],” *Dagbladet*, 2 September 2002, <http://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/2002/09/02/347621.html>.

3. Åsne Seierstad, *Bokhandleren i Kabul. Et familiedrama [The Bookseller of Kabul. A Family Drama]* (Oslo: Cappelen, 2002).

4. David Eason, “The New Journalism and the Image-world,” in *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Norman Sims (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 191–205.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 192.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, trans. Katrine Pilcher Keuneman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 68.

9. Robert S. Boynton, *The New New Journalism: Conversations on Craft With America's Best Nonfiction Writers* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005).

10. See for instance Jo Bech-Karlsen, *Reportasjen [The Reportage]*, 2nd ed. (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2002); Steen Steensen, *Stedets Sjanger. Om Moderne Reportasjelijournalistikk [The Genre of Place. On Modern Reportage Journalism]* (Kristiansand: IJ-forlaget, 2009); John Carey, *The Faber Book of Reportage* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987); John C. Hartsock, "Literary Reportage: The 'Other' Literary Journalism," in *Literary Journalism Across the Globe*, ed. John S. Bak and Bill Reynolds (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 23–46.

11. Hartsock, "Literary Reportage," 30.

12. *Ibid.*, 41.

13. Jo Bech-Karlsen, "Rapportbøker og dokumentarisk reportasje [Report Books and Documentary Reportage]," in *Norsk Litteraturhistorie. Sakprosa Fra 1750 Til 1995 [Norwegian History of Literature. Nonfiction from 1750 to 1995]*, ed. Egil B. Johnsen and Lars B. Eriksen, vol. 2 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1998), 238–51.

14. See for instance Bech-Karlsen, *Reportasjen*; Thore Roksvold, *Avisjangerer over Tid [Newspaper Genres Across Time]* (Fredrikstad: Institutt for journalistikk, 1997). See also Bech-Karlsen's contribution elsewhere in this issue of *Literary Journalism Studies*.

15. Torunn Borge, ed., *Yrke, Reporter: Fra Isabelle Eberhardt til Wera Sæther [Occupation: Reporter. From Isabelle Eberhardt to Wera Sæther]* (Oslo: Oktober 1999).

16. Bech-Karlsen, *Reportasjen*, 216.

17. Seierstad, *Bokhandleren i Kabul*.

18. Åsne Seierstad, *Med ryggen mot verden. Portretter fra Serbia [With the Back Against the World. Profiles from Serbia]* (Oslo: Cappelen, 2000).

19. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971).

20. "Portrett" (Portrait) is a well-established genre of journalism in both print and broadcast in Norway, equivalent to a long profile interview.

21. Poul Behrendt, *Dobbeltkontrakten. En æstetisk nydannelse [The Double Contract. An Aesthetic New Formation]* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2006).

22. Jo Bech-Karlsen, "Literary Journalism: Contracts and Double Contracts with Readers," *Literary Journalism. The Newsletter of the IALJS* 4, no. 3 (2010): 8.

23. Richard McGill Murphy, "The War at Home," *The New York Times*, 21 December 2003, Online edition, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/21/books/the-war-at-home.html?ref=bookreviews>.

24. Tim Judah, "Family at War – with itself," *The Observer*, 31 August 2003, Online edition, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/aug/31/travel.features>.

25. Jan-Erik Smilden, "Åsne er min venn uansett. Men hun tar feil [Åsne is my friend no matter what. But she is wrong]," *Dagbladet*, 11 September 2002.

26. Lena Storvand, Ida Ellisif Knutsen, and Guro Hoftun Gjestad, "– Hater Åsne veldig mye nå [– Hate Åsne very much right now]," *VG*, 28 August 2003.

27. Lena Storvand, "– Angrer på at bokhandleren ikke fikk lese manuset [– Regrets that the bookseller did not read the manuscript]," *VG*, 28 August 2003.

28. Lena Storvand, “– Boken må være oppspinn [– The book has to be a fabrication],” *VG*, 29 August 2003.

29. “– Mangler moralsk samvittighet [– Lacks moral consciousness],” *Dagbladet*, 29 August 2003.

30. Kathrine Aspaas, “Overlagt svik [Deliberate betrayal],” *Aftenposten*, 29 August 2003, sec. Kultur.

31. “Bokhandleren vil skrive om Seierstad [The bookseller will write about Seierstad],” *Dagsavisen*, 22 September 2003.

32. Tore Gjerstad, “Bokhandlerens kone: Sint på Åsne [The bookseller’s wife: angry with Åsne],” *Dagbladet*, 18 September 2003, 50.

33. Unni Wikan, “En svært forsinket debatt om bokhandleren fra Kabul [A very delayed debate on the bookseller of Kabul],” *Aftenposten*, 30 September 2003, sec. Debatt, 8.

34. Terje Tvedt, “The native strikes back. Om budbringere og verdensbeskrivelser [The native strikes back. On messengers and descriptions of the world],” *Samtiden*, no. 4 (2004): 18.

35. Knut Christian Myhre, “The Bookseller of Kabul and the Anthropologists of Norway,” *Anthropology Today* 20, no. 3 (2004): 22.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Eason, “The New Journalism and the Image-world,” 194.

38. Elisabeth Eide, *Down There and up Here: Orientalism and Othering in Feature Stories* (New York: Hampton Press, 2011), 284.

39. Borge, *Yrke, Reporter*, 12.

40. Sandra Lillebø, “Gjør journalistenes jobb [Does the journalists’ job],” *Klassekampen*, 21 September 2010.

41. Eason, “The New Journalism and the Image-world.”

42. Simen Sætre, *Hugo: En biografi [Hugo. A Biography]* (Oslo: JM Stenersens forlag, 2006); (the name Hugo is a pseudonym).

43. *Ibid.*, 15–16 (my translation).

44. Bjørn Westlie, *Fars krig [My Father’s War]* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2008).

45. *Ibid.*, 98 (my translation).

46. Kjetil S. Østli, *Politi og rover [Cop and Criminal]* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2009).

47. *Ibid.*, 164 (my translation).

48. By “implied reader” I refer to the way in which meaning is prestructured by the text and actualized through the reading process. See Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

49. Åsne Seierstad, *De krenkede: historier fra Tsjetsjenia* (Oslo: Cappelen, 2007); English version: *The Angel of Grozny: Inside Chechnya* (London: Virago, 2008).

50. Seierstad, *De krenkede*, 21 (my translation).

51. *Ibid.*, 23 (my translation).

52. James L Aucoin, “Epistemic Responsibility and Narrative. Theory The Literary Journalism of Ryszard Kapuscinski,” *Journalism* 2, no. 1 (2001): 15.

53. *Ibid.*, 17.

54. Eason, “The New Journalism and the Image-world,” 203.