

Reporting Back: Notes on Journalism

Lillian Ross

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By R. Thomas Berner

The problem with any book by Lillian Ross is that it does not stay in print very long. What is probably her most useful book for journalists and journalism professors alike, *Reporting*, was first published in 1964 and last published in 1981, yet it contains two of her best-known pieces, "Picture" and "Portrait of Hemingway." The Hemingway piece resurfaced as a book in 1999, the centenary of his birth, and *Picture*, about the making of the movie "Red Badge of Courage" by John Huston, is back in print this June with a foreword by his daughter, actress Angelica Huston.

Reporting Back is a collection of excerpts from nearly 80 articles Ross has written for *The New Yorker*. What makes this book "better" than *Reporting* is that it includes Ross's analysis of her work, so we learn how the assignment came about (usually from an editor) and then how she tackled the assignment, which is useful information for rookies and professionals alike. And while Ross says the book is not about newspaper reporting, some of the pieces were done in relatively short order and hold up quite well.

"Journalism to me," Ross writes, "is factual writing, and the highest kind of it comes in the form of good writing, and often writing that, at its best, is witty." She notes that one special beacon for her was her older sister, Helen, who said she wanted to be a "traveling correspondent" and travel the world over and then write about it. From Helen, Ross says she learned humor and irony and, of course, wit.

Ross reveals nothing new about writing—in fact, she uses the unoriginal phrase "beginning, middle and end" to describe how she sees a story. She scorns the phrase "fly on the wall" to describe her reporting technique and writes almost contemptuously about journalism professors who advocate that their students use the technique. She says that the editor William Shawn, with whom she had a long personal relationship, said it was "a silly and meaningless phrase," which does make one wonder if either wordmeister understood metaphor and how people learn. Perhaps I'm getting defensive because I am one of those fly-on-the-wall advocates.

Ross has much to share and I came away reinforced in my regard for her work. Overall, this is a good book for journalists to read—and keep,

which is what I intend to do in the months ahead as I downsize my library.

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