

[Sumpter on Roggenkamp, 'Sympathy, Madness, and Crime: How Four Nineteenth-Century Journalists Made the Newspaper Women's Business'](#)

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The following book review from JHistory may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

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Karen Roggenkamp. *Sympathy, Madness, and Crime: How Four Nineteenth-Century Journalists Made the Newspaper Women's Business*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2016. 184 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-60635-287-8.

Reviewed by Randall Sumpter (Texas A&M University) **Published on** Jhistory (July, 2019) **Commissioned by** Robert A. Rabe

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Experiments in the mechanics of journalism flooded periodicals during the nineteenth century. Ideas ranged from Amos Jay Cummings's refinement of human interest stories at the *New York Sun* to the invention of so-called yellow journalism by the denizens of the *New York World* and *New York Journal* city rooms. In *Sympathy, Madness, and Crime: How Four Nineteenth-Century Journalists Made the Newspaper Women's Business*, Karen Roggenkamp introduces us to another news work permutation, this one designed by women competing with men for legitimate story assignments.

According to Roggenkamp, a professor of English at Texas A&M University-Commerce, women had established a foothold in American journalism by the mid-nineteenth century, but the number of full-time female journalists remained small. One journalist of the era estimated their true numbers at 250 by the close of the century.[1] The types of stories these women were permitted to do also remained limited. They covered women's club news, society page assignments, stories for children, and book reviews. These topics attracted women readers, thus satisfying advertisers.

However, these types of assignments did not satisfy all women journalists. Some reacted by developing strategies to forge a path to more meaningful assignments, like writing editorials, serving as special correspondents, and covering politics. Some of these strategies exploited gender stereotypes, including those about feminine physical and psychological fragility, held by male editors. "Stunt girls," for instance, had to overcome physical challenges to produce stories about sensational topics, often by participating or pretending to participate in unsavory activities, like being admitted to an insane asylum, and then reporting about the experience.

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Other deceptions used by ambitious women included making anonymous contributions to the editorial pages of a newspaper that could be easily mistaken for the work of a male writer. Other strategies were designed to prevent stories from being published. Elizabeth Banks, for instance, would lie about the availability of sources she had previously developed. This would give her an indirect method to shape the news and prevent poaching by male reporters. She used this strategy to protect her exclusive access to diplomats, actresses, and inventors.

In this book, Roggenkamp introduces us to yet another strategy, the use of the rhetoric of sympathy, by examining the work of four female journalists active during the last half of the nineteenth century. Roggenkamp's subjects are Margaret Fuller, Fanny Fern, Nellie Bly, and Elizabeth Garver Jordan. Roggenkamp believes these four were the most conspicuous female "public authors" from the last half of the nineteenth century (p. 11). In the 1840s, Fuller worked for Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*. Some historians consider her to be the first full-time woman journalist in America. Fern was employed between 1851 and 1869 by Robert Bonner's *New York Ledger*. During that period, the *Ledger's* circulation climbed from 2,500 to 400,000, much on the strength of Fern's writing. She reputedly became the highest paid newspaper writer in America. Bly and Jordan were active in the 1880s and 1890s: Bly became known for her work as a stunt girl, Jordan for her preoccupation with precision journalism.

Their forays into the rhetoric of sympathy often shared common targets: Bloomingdale Insane Asylum, the Tombs prison, and Blackwell's Island. In some cases, male reporters like Julius Chambers of the *New York Tribune* already had written exposés about these institutions. Roggenkamp, however, argues that women were the first to frame their accounts with a rhetoric that buttressed their journalistic authority through highly gendered and sympathetic language.

Fuller's stories were not only sympathetic toward the inmates but empathetic as well. She "repackages a mode of writing primarily associated with female sentimental fiction and sells it in a medium primarily associated with men—the newspaper—and reinforces her own journalistic voice in the process" (p. 49). Both Fern and Fuller invited readers to compare the well-kept grounds of prisons and asylums with the suffering that occurred within the walls. Fuller urged her readers to weep alongside the incarcerated prisoners and inmates. Fern's work, like Fuller's, exploited the plot trajectory found in female fiction.

Bly and Jordan deployed the rhetoric of sympathy differently than Fuller, Fern, or each other. Bly worked undercover, Jordan, in the open. Bly's narratives were sympathetic toward the reporter; the asylum inmates and criminals that she described were, according to Roggenkamp, supporting cast members.

Fern and Fuller targeted well-to-do or voyeuristic readers that they suspected were too comfortable to truly care about the less fortunate. Bly, on the other hand, applied the language of sympathy to her own efforts as a stunt girl. Jordan's painstaking use of detail in what nineteenth-century editors called "pen picture" stories left it to the reader to decide how the language of sympathy should be applied. In her coverage of the Lizzie Borden axe murders, for instance, Jordan "counts the dental fillings in Lizzie Borden's mouth. She catalogues each glimmer of emotion that passes over Borden's face. She notices the soles of her shoes" (p. 116).

Bly's work was meant to valorize reporters, particularly herself. Bly sometimes justified the narratives that she wrote as the work of a "special writer" or "correspondent," not as a lowly reporter. Roggenkamp finds that Bly was not "necessarily a sympathetic observer of pathetic scenes but an active participant, through a narrative framework that emphasized the newspaper woman's presence not as a tool for directing reader sympathy toward distressed subjects but for celebrating the reporter herself, who often posed as a distressed figure" (p. 76). In other words, we are to have sympathy for the "special writer" or "correspondent" who must master many hurdles to acquire a story and excuse their excesses. Meanwhile, the poignancy found in Jordan's stories center on the source not the reporter as illustrated in Jordan's "True Stories of the News" column published in the *New York World*.

To claim a work space in a profession dominated by men, women wrote stories about the insane, criminals, and the institutions that housed them. In short, they wrote stories men would not be routinely assigned and used tools that men would not routinely employ. No matter the year or city room, these women were confronted by the same problem: how to gain admittance to legitimate news work. Developing and mastering the language of sympathy was only one strategy nineteenth-century women journalists invented and employed to earn that legitimacy.

Roggenkamp's work with *Sympathy, Madness, and Crime* represents a growing interdisciplinary approach to the study of media history. Her method is novel and marks her membership in a small group that is attempting to apply new tools, like the rhetoric of sympathy, to historical research topics. In this case, Roggenkamp's work makes it possible to consider the rhetoric of sympathy as a news value used frequently by nineteenth-century journalists to frame stories.

If there is a weakness in Roggenkamp's analysis, it is a failure to explore the seismic changes in news work that occurred between 1840 and 1900 and the additional effects they could have had on women journalists. This context is important. What counted as reporting also changed radically in the mid-years of that century. For instance, Fuller was not so much a reporter but what we would recognize today as a columnist and literary critic. Before her untimely death, she had become a part-time revolutionary and an infrequent correspondent for the *Tribune*. Fifty years later, Jordan's work more nearly matches today's standards.

Note

[1]. Elizabeth G. Jordan, "The Newspaper Woman's Story," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* (March 1893), 340.

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