This book unabashedly celebrates the great American journalistic tradition of undercover reporting and offers an argument, built on the volume of evidence, for the restoration of its once-honored place in the array of effective journalistic techniques. Even the most cursory analysis of a century and a half of significant undercover investigations by journalists makes clear how effective the practice can be. Repeatedly, they have proved their worth as producers of high-impact public awareness or as hasteners of change. Like almost no other journalistic approach, undercover reporting has a built-in ability to expose wrongs and wrongdoers or perform other meaningful public service. It can illuminate the unknown, it can capture and sustain attention, it can shock or amaze. The criticism that has bedeviled the practice in more recent years comes from the ethical compromises it inevitably requires, its reliance on some of journalism’s most questionable means, and the unacceptable excesses of the few. Deception not only happens in the course of reporting undercover, it is intrinsic to the form. For would-be truth tellers, this is a shaky ground.

Yet at its best, undercover reporting achieves most of the things great journalism means to achieve. At its worst, but no worse than bad journalism in any form, it is not only an embarrassment but can be downright destructive. This book suggests that the capacity of undercover reporting to bring important social issues to public attention and thus to motivate reformers to act far outweighs the objections against it, legitimate though they may be. Its benefits,
when used selectively, far outweigh the lapses, which, it turns out, are more of a preoccupation in only some quarters of the profession than they are with the public.

The stories I have chosen to highlight in the following pages have been culled from an idiosyncratic collection of sources: prize and award lists; oblique and direct references found with key word searches in various databases, often incomplete, and in books that cite or allude to recent and archival newspaper, magazine, and journal articles and essays; citations in lawsuits and in law reviews and academic journals; and some old-style reeling of the microfilm. Others emerged from cursory mentions in works of media criticism, commentary, history, ethics, or other, often out-of-print journalism texts. To the numerous authors and journalists who informed my thinking and to those on whom I relied the most, I offer special thanks. You’ll find their names in the text, sometimes repeatedly, and in the endnotes and bibliography. Special thanks to those who took the time to speak and message with me at length, including Soma Golden Behr, Barney Calame, Ted Conover, John Davidson, Tim Findley, Tom Goldstein, Chester Goolrick, William Hart, Tony Horwitz, Woody Klein, Paul Lieberman, Lee May, Dick Reavis, William Recktenwald, Ray Ring, Emily Sachar, John Seigenthaler, Paul Shapiro, Jeff Sharlet, Ken Silverstein, Patsy Sims, Paul Steiger, Vivian Toy, Craig Unger, Bill Wasik, Edward Wasserman, Steve Weinberg, Michael Winerip, and Merle Linda Wolin. Warm gratitude also to academic colleagues at New York University and beyond. Some pointed me to or allowed me to use little-known material; others read and critiqued sections of the manuscript in draft. Those include Rob Boynton, Ted Conover (also my colleague), Pete Hamill, Richard R. John, Richard G. Jones, Perri Klass, Joe Lockard, Jean Marie Lutes, Mike McIntyre, Robert Miraldi, Doug Munro, Patricia O’Toole, Jay Rosen, William Serrin, Clay
Smith, Stephen Solomon, and Steve Wasserman. Alex Goren and Gail Gregg were even willing to listen when I needed to read aloud. Superb research assistants helped greatly at various points: Joanna Bednarz, Nicholas DeRenzo, Hilary Howes, Ryann Liebenthal, William Marshall, Michael Mindel, and Miranda Stanton. Indispensable to the retrieval process were those at the other end of interlibrary loan and in the archives of Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc., since so much of this ephemeral record has not been well or fully indexed, let alone digitized. Throughout the project, the support and encouragement of the book’s editor, David Abrahamson, has been exceptional. Thank you, also, to the team at Northwestern University Press, including Rudy Faust, Marianne Jankowski, and Gianna Mosser.

Here, too, is a salute to the long memory of veteran journalists and news librarians, which figured prominently in the unearthing and amassing of the material, as did the published recollections of the individual editors and reporters mentioned above. Many examples found their way into the book because they are among the best remembered or most controversial undercover projects. Others made the cut because of the investigation’s inventiveness, enterprise, or uniqueness, or the peer or public impact it had in its day. Still others became important because I stumbled on them by chance and could not resist the impulse to share them. Others helped to illustrate larger points.

Yet despite nearly four years devoted to the pursuit of the most worthy examples in American history, comprehensive retrieval remains an elusive goal. The long list of undercover projects I have compiled is surely still incomplete. New investigations hit the news as I type. I hope the database created as an extension of this project, found on the web at http://undercoverreporting.org or through the website of the Elmer Holmes Bobst Library
at New York University, will continue to grow with the help of more sources from the crowd, both across the United States and from abroad. For this unique digital repository, special thanks go to the Bobst team—Brian Hoffman, Monica McCormick, and Alexa Pearce, and, in the early stages, Jessica Alverson—and to Jane Tylus and her committee at the Humanities Initiative of the Faculty of Arts and Science at NYU, and to my deans during the past six years, Richard Foley and Jess Benhabib, George Downs, and Dalton Conley. All lent vital support to this undertaking, and to me personally. Brian Hoffman designed the site and William Marshall helped give it shape as he loaded the initial material. Both thought carefully about its functionality. In the latter stage of production, Abby Ohlheiser made it even smarter.

Literally hundreds of pieces dating from the 1820s have been considered for inclusion, with more surfacing all the time. For research purposes, organization of the material has been sorted by year, by reporter, by method, by subject, by medium, by outlet, by honors, and by whatever documentable impact the work can claim. Chapters are organized roughly by reporting theme. They focus on those few examples that most clearly illustrate the nature of undercover reporting about the subject at hand, or that help support the central argument about the genre and why it matters. Most of the pieces or series noted had important impact or received outsized attention in their day. (Chapter 13 is more of a kitchen sink of noteworthy themes that did not warrant a chapter all their own.) Impact and outsized attention mean everything from prizes and awards to best seller lists to heavy coverage in the press to a place in the cultural conversation to legal or ethical challenges to direct spurs to legislation, reform moves, or other forms of response or action. Please note that in the interest of length, much of the long-lost material exhumed for this project
has been reburied in the endnotes, where it is still worth a visit. Browsing the headlines and succession of dates for, say, a Chicago Tribune or Sun-Times series from the 1970s, from initial disclosures through to stunning public impact—arrests, trials, firings, institutional shutdowns—provides a parallel narrative along with loud testimony to the method’s reformative power. Turn to the database for the opportunity to find and read the full texts of the stories themselves.

The criterion for inclusion in the book and the database is a very wide tent, intermingling all types of media in a twenty-first-century way. The main focus is journalism for significant purpose that required (mostly) physical acts of deception by reporters or their surrogates—anything from shadowing, artful dodges, and blending in with the crowd to radically altered identities. Excluded for the most part are works designated as fiction or works that are at least partly fictionalized, although it is impossible to leave out Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle, which, the author assures us, is a full-fledged work of unvarnished reportage. George Orwell’s Down and Out in Paris and London receives attention, even though he is not American and his book includes otherwise forbidden composite characters. Why include them? Because both Sinclair and Orwell invariably figure in even the spottiest recounting of high points in undercover reporting’s history. They inspire too many imitators to ignore. Speaking of Orwell, a few seminal works by journalists from other countries also were deemed too important or too illustrative to exclude, even though this book primarily focuses on undercover’s American exponents.

This project started with no hypothesis but with a keen interest in undercover reporting going back two decades ago to the start of my work on Nellie Bly. Its central argument emerged from assembling and analyzing the patterns of these hundreds of projects
and their back stories and then plotting them on a virtual timeline against relevant contemporaneous currents in the field.

Also, in the interest of restricting length, in addition to the numerous newspaper series fully cited in the endnotes, I have included references to a good deal of rich ancillary material both in the endnotes and in the database. The pieces I could not locate in time for the book’s publication I am hopeful will eventually appear in the database.

The following pages crisscross three American centuries to re-live some familiar favorites from the annals of undercover reporting and to revive some remarkably executed projects that were new at least to me. All of these efforts have attracted significant attention of one kind or another—locally, nationally, publicly, or professionally—and all of them provide the opportunity for a wonder-filled ride along the highways and byways of significant, carefully planned, high-risk, high-reward journalism that has sought and often managed to make a difference.

Brooke Kroeger