Shortly before the exposés of Jack London and Upton Sinclair exploded the possibilities of the undercover narrative, women writers remodeled the newspaper stunt girl for the magazine and book readers of the new century. The sisters-in-law Van Vorst, Marie and Bessie (aka Mrs. John), were among the most successful. They made the circuit from the pickle factories of Pittsburgh to the shoe factories of Lynn, Massachusetts, to the cotton mills of North Carolina and published their experiences as a five-part series in Everybody’s in 1902. As a book, their collection of stories became a best seller in the “Miscellaneous” category when published by Doubleday and Page the following year. Titled The Woman Who Toils, the book held its own for a full half a year against such formidable competitors as Helen Keller’s The Story of My Life and Booker T. Washington’s Up from Slavery.

What most distinguished the Van Vorst ladies from their stunt girl predecessors was the more polished narrative and the pronounced angling of their experiences to emphasize their own class-consciousness. The book’s subtitle positioned it as “The Experience of a Literary Woman as a Working Girl.” Repeatedly in the
text, written half by one and half by the other, both women were more pointed in emphasizing their own privileged and cultured upbringing over their status as well-known literary figures. Their starting point was an unapologetic sense of superiority over the wage earners they had spent months impersonating, living, and working among. Reviewers were quick to point to this approach as both a plus and a minus. As for revelations, they reported on the surprising number of young women whose only reason for working in the factories was near folly—to earn pocket money for clothes and leisure—and how that had depressed wages and opportunity for women who needed the jobs to support themselves or their families.

*Everybody’s* followed up the Van Vorst investigation with a four-article series on domestic servitude. Lillian Pettengill’s pose recalled the earlier work of Elizabeth Banks from England and Madge Merton in Canada, but with a Seven Sisters college twist. Pettengill had spent the year after her 1898 graduation from Mount Holyoke as “Eliza,” the household maid. Both she and Banks acknowledged that they initially turned to housekeeping to support themselves when other avenues wouldn’t open. But with that, they both fell on the idea of turning hard luck into stories and income. Pettengill characterized what she had done as setting out to see “this particular dog-life from the dog’s end of the chain.” In the end, she argued in favor of domestic service over factory life. She also railed against the prevailing stigma on working in someone else’s home, a point Banks also had made from across the Atlantic Ocean. Doubleday published Pettengill’s magazine series as a book, which reviewers quickly likened to the Van Vorsts’ far more successful effort.

As the Pettengill book was making its rounds, Bessie Van Vorst rebutted in *Harper’s* the younger writer’s affirmation of the servant’s
life. Van Vorst based her observations on her time as a scullery maid in one of the factories, where the disgusting, daily backbreaking cleanup inevitably fell to the female employees. Experiencing the work herself allowed her to observe that even with the shorter workday of the cleanup crews, the free hot dinner, and the greater freedom of movement these tasks afforded, she still would choose the factory floor over having to be “occupied with humanity’s debris” as one of those who “have abandoned or ignore an ideal, who prefer relative material ease to relative moral freedom.”

Over the next hundred years, and the record is surely incomplete, women writers undertook at least another score of undercover assignments to showcase the problems of the worker and the unemployed. In the aftermath of Sinclair’s immense success with The Jungle, Rheta Childe Dorr spent the better part of a year in 1906 and 1907 under contract to Everybody’s to witness and experience the feminization of the trades. She went undercover to work in the accounts division of a department store and as a commercial laundress and then in a number of factories across the country, including manufacturers of shirts, cakes and biscuits, and spun yarn. But she struggled with writing for publication.

“I had the stuff, reams of it, but I couldn’t write it,” she recalled in her memoir. “I could write paragraphs, pages of description, paint vivid pictures of factory life and character, but separate articles I could not write at all.” The reporting, she determined, had taken her thinking in an altogether different direction. It wasn’t really about “the women’s invasion” at all. “It’s the Man’s Invasion and it’s got to be stopped,” she recalled telling her editors. She explained that men owned all the women’s jobs. Hers is a cautionary tale about reporting that does not produce the story that editors have envisioned.
The magazine assigned her a collaborator, a “brilliant writer,” she called him, named William Hard. Soon, she felt that he began treating her like a secretary, sending her on reporting errands for this or that fact. Eventually, he just cast her aside. Months passed and no pages arrived for her to proof. Then she spotted a newsstand poster for the forthcoming October 1908 issue of Everybody’s, promoting a new series called The woman’s invasion but under the sole byline of—William Hard. Dorr threatened legal action. By the time the magazine appeared a few weeks later, not only was Dorr’s byline on the series alongside Hard’s but she had also managed to stop him from republishing the serial in hardcover under his name alone. What troubled her most, Dorr later wrote, was not how dismissively she had been treated, but that “in the truest sense, the articles were not mine.” She wanted the series to be quickly forgotten and “that other articles I should write would give me a better reputation.”

She in fact got that opportunity. Benjamin Hampton had recently taken over Broadway magazine, naming it Hampton’s Broadway magazine. After hearing about Dorr’s undercover experiences, he wanted them for the magazine and set out to make her a writer. (“Your articles all begin: ‘Once upon a time there was a little dog and his name was Fido,’ and they all end, ‘Come to Jesus.’”) The magazine did not survive but Dorr’s subsequent efforts do, in her 1910 book, What Eight Million Women Want.

How little conditions had improved by 1921. Cornelia Stratton Parker cloned the working girl ruse for a series in Harper’s that the company’s publishing arm turned into a book the following year titled Working with the Working Woman. For Parker’s reports, she followed the standard script—got jobs as a seamstress in a dress factory, as a pantry girl in a New York hotel, as a packer in
a chocolate factory, as a laborer in a brass works operation, as a laundress, and as a pillowcase labeler in a bleachery. In the book’s introduction, she explained the modest goals of her project, “to see the world through their eyes—for the time being to close my own altogether.”

A decade after Parker’s effort came the Great Depression. Interest in the women who worked hard for little gave way to a focus on women with no way to earn at all. Adela Rogers St. Johns, the Hollywood screenwriter and novelist, recalls in her memoir the summons from William Randolph Hearst—the telephone was his scepter, she said—that brought her to his ranch at San Simeon to get the details of a novel assignment.

For Hearst, an exposé could only be regarded a success, St. Johns explained, “if it created news that the other papers were forced to follow.” At the ranch, serving up generous helpings of caviar, Hearst called the situation of unemployed women a national emergency that needed detailed eyewitness reporting more than editorial comment. “We must appeal first to their hearts,” she recalled him saying. He wanted her to go out and be an unemployed woman, to “uncover mistakes and demand new drive in this emergency” by conducting herself as if her state was truly tragic. He wanted her to take the era’s theme song, “Brother Can You Spare a Dime,” as her personal anthem and carry no more than a dime in her own pocket. “I want you to tell it exactly as it is,” she recalled him saying. “We have no sacred cows, social, political, religious, nor professional. I know of not one we need consider at this time.”

A week later, St. Johns, in rimmed glasses and a dress purloined from the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer wardrobe, put on a raggedy old coat and started her brief out-of-work life as May Harrison, following Ernie Pyle’s advice to “unpack your heart.” She produced
a sixteen-part series that appeared from mid-December until just past Christmas. The “sob sister” moniker never bothered St. Johns. She wore it proudly. “Why not?” she asked. “Who are we that we should not weep for our brothers?”

St. Johns walked “right into the experience” and described what she had accomplished as an altogether new technique, a new journalistic form. “To reach hearts,” she said, “you have to do more than report facts. Get under the skin, become part of another life, let your heart beat with another’s heart. Be it. Become it.”

Of course it was not a new technique at all. The ephemeral nature of newspapers and magazines may have kept recollection of that legacy deeply submerged, but by 1931, women reporters had been assuming guises to get their stories for nearly half a century and men for a generation or three before that. Not even her subject matter was new. Twenty-six years earlier, under Chapin’s editorship of the New York Evening World, Emmeline Pendennis had performed a variation on the same theme. Presenting herself as Helen King, a woman who had lost her bags and purse, she produced a series that explored over two weeks where a young woman without means in New York could go for help. The Evening World followed up with a crowd-sourcing exercise, although no one called it that at the time, inviting readers to share their similar experiences.

Although many others, male and female, attempted this type of ruse, no other works of this kind particularly stand out until the start of the next decade when Whiting Williams, the former assistant to a college president and a personal director for a Cleveland Steel Company, produced What’s on the Worker’s Mind: By One Who Put on Overalls to Find Out in 1920. Over seven months,
Williams worked as a common laborer in the steel mills and in a rolling mill, as a coal miner in two towns, as a shipbuilder, as an oil man in a refinery, and as a worker in the iron mines. He “adopted no half-measures in the manner of disguise,” equipping himself with “a different name, a slim pocketbook, rough clothes, an unshaven face and a grammarless lingo.” He made a point of announcing that he had “cheated no employer,” working hard in his effort to better understand the ruptured relations between “Labor, Management, and the Public—the investors of brawn, brains, and bullion, and the ‘bourgeoisie.’”

Williams also told his readers up front that he had changed or obscured all identifying details of individuals, companies, and geographic locations “because neither commendation nor criticism of communities or companies is intended or desired.” He was just as unwilling to offer conclusions or prescriptions, but did pinpoint what he had heard again and again as the foremost worker complaint: terrible foremen. His goal, he said, was to observe closely but undetected so that he could get inside the feelings of the workers he got to know, something he did not believe a conventional journalistic interview could elicit. He believed that actions spring from feelings, not from thoughts, and that “people cannot be interviewed for their feelings. The interviewer can only listen, and then try to understand because he is not only hearing but experiencing and sympathizing.”

A reviewer for the *New York Tribune* said that Williams had “succeeded to a far greater degree than many men who have launched similar projects and merely posed as workingmen,” but in the end, considered his observations “perhaps, more interesting than important.” The reviewer also pointed out a key flaw in Williams’s method, which critics of such immersion efforts still find
objectionable: that two weeks of tossing bricks from pile to pile was time too short to “get the exact point of view of a man who has spent thirty years doing the same job.”

By 1927, when the aspiring young writer Eric Blair began his “underworld” explorations among the down-and-out of Paris and London, the circumstances that led him to do so could not have been more cliché. He badly needed money. He badly wanted eyewitness material that would help him to be the writer he yearned to become. His experiences as a colonial official in Burma had left him with such a burning discomfort with his upbringing that he began tramping from time to time—“sometimes from choice, sometimes from necessity,” as his personal antidote to privilege, his way of “getting out of the respectable world altogether.” The most searing of his recollections of life on the road were those from his earliest experiences. He recalled how strange he found it to be “on terms of utter equality with working class people.”

A faint but distinguishable trail leads directly from Jack London to Blair, who had read People of the Abyss in his student days at Eton and credited it with enlightening him—“at a distance and through the medium of books”—and helping him to grasp the humanity of members of the working classes. In later years, too, he wrote introductions to collections of London’s stories and did broadcasts about the older author’s later works.

Literary scholars have been quick to point out how much of young Blair’s roadmap to the East End seems to have been drawn by London twenty-five years earlier. Like London, Blair traded in his own clothes for secondhand rags and made the rounds of all of the same East End haunts, from the doss houses to the spikes to the casual wards. The book that resulted, Blair’s first, also gave rise to
the pseudonym he insisted upon to mask his embarrassment over the work—George Orwell.\textsuperscript{34}

There was no call for embarrassment. True, \textit{Down and Out in Paris and London} sold modestly in Europe in 1933 and just as poorly in the United States, where it was published six months later.\textsuperscript{35} By 1936, it was so thoroughly out of print that Orwell wrote in letters, only half in jest, that the last two known people still to have copies of it in their possession were himself and his mother. Reviewers, nonetheless, saw the book’s merits from the start, and presaged its status as a minor classic long before Orwell was Orwell. The effusive but unsigned reviewer for the \textit{Washington Post} called it a story of such “absolute destitution, brightened all through by hope and determination” that no reader, whether sympathetic or unsympathetic to the conditions Orwell described, could believe the work was fiction.\textsuperscript{36}

The \textit{New York Times} reviewer also approved, even though he found the narrative to be “not wholly unvarnished.”\textsuperscript{37} Indeed, Orwell himself acknowledged enough refashioning of his characters into composites to cost the work its journalistic purity. As the author himself explained in his personal introduction to the book’s 1934 French edition:

\begin{quote}
As for the truth of my story, I think I can say that I have exaggerated nothing except in so far as all writers exaggerate by selecting. I did not feel I had to describe events in the exact order in which they happened, but everything I have described did take place at one time or another. At the same time I have refrained, as far as possible, from drawing individual portraits of particular people. All the characters I have described in both parts of the book are intended more as representative types of the Parisian or Londoner of the class to which they belong as individuals.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}
The *Post* reviewer was taken with “the simple force” of Orwell’s writing, its courage and lack of self-pity, adding, “No man but one who himself had experienced some of the pangs of destitution could show such an absolute understanding or tell his tale so well.” As Orwell became Orwell, the book got the whoosh of a second wind, engaging successive generations of readers and inspiring undercover reporters ever since, including Pete Jordan, who, in homage, washed dishes as a *plongeur* in all fifty U.S. states so that he could write about it.