Undercover Reporting

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Reporters have been infiltrating prisons, hospitals, and mental institutions at least since Nellie Bly auditioned for the *New York World* in 1887 from an asylum in the middle of the East River. Then and much later, those who have dared to pose for journalism’s sake as patients, inmates, guards, and aides are short on fear and long on empathy and endurance, both physical and emotional. Their excursions into radically different lives last anywhere from a day to a year—a week or two is more the standard. Their efforts often follow hard-to-verify rumblings of horrid conditions, filth, overcrowding, abuse, neglect, or administrative wrongdoing. Responding to a news imperative after slayings, riots, or during lockdowns is another reason for the effort, as is the chance to assess a new administrator’s touted reforms or sometimes to provide readers with an inside look at an opaque but public institution that deliberately walls the public out.

In almost all cases, such stories want most of all to elicit reader empathy, to open a window into an unseen world, providing a stark but tacit warning. Undercover investigations of asylums, hospitals, and nursing homes often have an implicit it-could-happen-to-
you dimension, as did a series in the *Boston Globe*’s Living section about a reporter’s week in jail on a trumped-up drunk-driving charge. The newspaper published it as an apparent don’t-drink-and-drive admonition in the five days leading up to New Year’s Eve, 1983.¹

The *Globe* jail series was an exception, but rarely are the undercover stories that come out of these institutions presented as stand-alones. They generally work best as “frosting on the cake of a thoroughly investigated story,”² as William Gaines once said, explaining the week he spent working as a janitor in 1975³ for Chicago’s only private hospital, the von Solbrig, and the resulting impact of the series—patients fled; no new ones came. Within just a few months, the hospital was forced to shut down. The von Solbrig was one of a number of undercover assignments Gaines undertook for the *Chicago Tribune* between 1973 and 1979.⁴

The *Tribune*, for years, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, was in the vanguard of newspapers that made prominent, unapologetic use of the techniques of undercover reporting for investigations on these and other topics. “Aggressive and righteous”⁵ was Gaines’s description of the newspaper’s bywords in those years, under editor Clayton Kirkpatrick. Acting on ideas generated by reporter George Bliss, the *Tribune* investigated the suspected collusion of Chicago police and private ambulance drivers to restrict service in low-income areas. Bliss suggested that William Jones take a job as a driver to help confirm the reports, and William Recktenwald, then with the Better Government Association, did, too. The series won a 1971 Pulitzer Prize.⁶ The same year, in February 1971, the newspaper premiered its legendary *Tribune* Task Force—“a new concept in comprehensive news gathering”⁷—with a six-week team investigation of twenty-one Chicago-area nursing homes.⁸ The newspaper reported in a sidebar that the unit’s reporters had
fanned out to work briefly as nurse’s aides, janitors, kitchen help, drifters, supervisors, and college students looking for temporary jobs. In the process, they engaged in everything from “emptying bed pans, changing sheets, scrubbing floors and painting rooms” to facing “ominous warnings from fellow workers who suspected them of being state investigators.”

Four years later, Gaines took the janitor’s job to confirm a tip from a former custodian about disturbing practices at the hospital. “It wasn’t hard to get a job,” he later recalled. “The first guy would find out what they [the hospital] wanted. The second guy would be exactly that. In a sense we falsified our backgrounds. We could say we were anything, but we couldn’t say we were Tribune reporters.”

Editors instructed him to collect information “not from overheard conversations or stolen documents,” but from what he could glean from his own workaday experiences. He took notes on paper towels, which he put into his pockets to share later with teammates who then followed up on his leads. For instance, just from working his shift every day for a week, he noticed how routinely the hospital’s doctors were recommending tonsillectomies to welfare recipients, a procedure for which Medicaid could be billed. Gaines’s investigative colleagues then determined how rare it would be for two members of a family to need the procedure at the same time, let alone as many as five members of the same family. To Michael Miner of the Chicago Reader, Gaines later acknowledged that the information actually could have been obtained by other means, since it appears on Medicaid vouchers which are available as public records. Someone could have gone through the vouchers and tallied up the instances, should they have had a notion in the first place that there was a possible abuse worth searching out. That would be the rub.

So what Gaines’s performance was able to supply to the se-
ries was frosting, but frosting of buttercream, lick-the-bowl-clean quality. His story not only provided the needed eyewitness verification to clinch the investigation and led to important reporting areas to follow up, but it added texture and richness—narrative pow!—to the more conventional aspects of the series, such as interviews with patients and medical experts, corroboration from former hospital employees, and deep searches of public records. Plus, his janitorial service enabled him to confirm independently one of the most startling tips to come to the newspaper’s attention: that janitors were being instructed to drop their mops and help out with patients who were lying unconscious in the operating rooms immediately after surgery. During that week, in soiled clothes, he was personally ordered into the operating rooms six times. That part of the story, he later said, would have been impossible to verify without having been on the scene, undetected.

Experiential narratives provided by companion stories such as Gaines’s sweeten and embellish the more essential, data-laden efforts of an investigative series with facts that have been equally, although differently, hard won. They enrich and enliven a presentation that otherwise would consist of data and statistics supplemented with retold anecdotes, dry expert commentary, and disembodied quotes from officials with long bureaucratic titles—with some descriptive elements sprinkled in as a binding agent. The narrative dimension of most undercover efforts has a way of magnetically attracting attention to the main subject, which is, and should always be, one of the high-value propositions of such an undertaking. It is also the element that generates the buzz. In the von Solbrig case, this meant an overspill of visceral outrage. The undercover dimension adds the readability and storyline to long-form reporting, which, contrary to popular perception, are
as important in the information–crowded, click–driven universe proliferating on the web as they have been on paper.\textsuperscript{15}

To make this point, Miner in 2001 asked Gaines to compare the radical difference in impact of the two Pulitzer Prizes for the \textit{Tribune} in which Gaines played pivotal roles: the von Solbrig in 1976 and the straight investigative reporting of the \textit{Tribune’s} 1988 win twelve years later. The latter required six months of poring over records and conducting interviews to expose the “self–interest and waste that plague Chicago’s City Council.” The impact of the von Solbrig investigation was clear. What did the 1988 probe achieve? “That’s a tough one,” Gaines said. “I’d have to say it just educated people to how the City Council worked. It put it all in one big story people could read. I don’t think it reformed one thing.”\textsuperscript{16}

The risk, of course, is that especially in a time such as the present when serious news articles and broadcasts now compete directly for audiences and resources with pure entertainment vehicles, the push to dramatize presentation for its own sake becomes harder to restrain.\textsuperscript{17}

During the period the \textit{Tribune’s} investigative work was at its undercover zenith, other newspapers also embraced the method. The \textit{Nashville Tennessean}, the \textit{Los Angeles Times},\textsuperscript{18} the \textit{Chicago Sun-Times} and \textit{Daily News}, and the \textit{San Francisco Chronicle} all produced similarly memorable work in the genre, and yet all, like the \textit{Tribune}, eventually soured to some extent on the most blatant forms of the practice as others stepped forward to embrace it.

Considered in retrospect, it is significant that the undercover aspect of these investigations invariably becomes the shorthand description for the whole project, the only aspect that anyone can summon from memory. How telling that in common recollection, it is to Gaines’ and his janitorial pose that the 1976 Pulitzer Prize
for Local Investigative Specialized Reporting is often attributed, even though the award was given to the Tribune’s “staff” and was shared with a completely separate project. As Gaines himself once mused to an interviewer, “I always felt that I got the prize for being a good janitor rather than a journalist.” It is what readers and other reporters and editors most readily and amazedly recall about the achievement, reminding the public of journalism’s potential for impact by being enterprising, resourceful, significant, and attention-getting, straightforward in the telling if not entirely so in the process. “The readers responded to us favorably,” Gaines recalled at a symposium in 2007, “the journalism community gave us awards, and even Congress loved us. We had cause to believe that we were on the good side and above criticism.”

What does it take to enter what the sociologist Erving Goffman called a “total institution?” As in many other undercover ruses, the alteration of the writer’s name is common. This happens most often when the writer’s byline is likely to be known. Bly, for the asylum report, became Nellie Brown or Nellie Moreno. Pierre Salinger assumed a full-on alias; for a week he split between two California jails in 1953, he was Peter Emil Flik. Nat Caldwell signed into nursing homes with his middle name, Green. In 1983, Richard H. Stewart became “Richard Leader, convicted felon,” for his pre-New Year’s drunk-driving sentence on assignment from the Boston Globe. In 1997, Ted Conover wrote down Frederick, the given name on his birth certificate, as he applied to be a prison guard at Sing Sing, a position he held for nearly eleven months.

Creating a persona for the assignment is typical. Sometimes, the reporters will costume and create elaborate if fleeting identities in the way that other undercover efforts require. Bly, to get herself
committed to the Women’s Lunatic Asylum, dressed shabbily and practiced looking deranged in front of a boarding house mirror. Three years later, in 1890, Annie Laurie also dressed down, put belladonna drops in her eyes, and faked a faint on the street to gain admission to a San Francisco receiving hospital, where she was treated rudely and sent home after a “mustard emetic.” Salinger drank himself silly on command in 1953 and wandered into a car on a San Francisco street. To be convincing for a week each in three different Nashville nursing homes in 1968, Caldwell grew a beard, dyed his hair white, walked with a cane, and made application at each facility accompanied by two younger reporters who claimed to be distant relatives in charge of his care. Also in Nashville, six years later, Frank Sutherland got coaching from a psychiatrist before his month-long commitment to a mental hospital. In 1998, Kevin Heldman, for the New York City investigative magazine City Limits, put on layers of shabby clothes before walking into Woodhull Medical and Mental Health Center in Brooklyn and asking a succession of admitting personnel for help, saying he was depressed, not a drug addict, tired of living, and thinking seriously about killing himself.

But as important as a strategy for entry is a plan for getting out, a far more involved issue in the planning phase of these operations than in attempts to, say, infiltrate a factory or set out on the open road. It starts with devising ways to keep the project secret from as many people as possible. This of course is to avoid influencing the dynamics of what the reporter witnesses and experiences on site; but it is also to help ensure the reporter’s personal safety. In jail, “secrets are currency and everyone is selling secrets,” Ray Ring explained. And moreover, anyone found to have entered jail under false pretences is presumed to be a planted informer. A planted
informer, Ben H. Bagdikian once deadpanned, “is an occupation with high mortality rates.” Both Ring and Bagdikian went to jail on imagined murder convictions, Bagdikian for the *Washington Post* in 1972 and Ring for the *Arizona Daily Star* a decade later.

No one on site may know what the reporter is really up to, but for the prisoner pose especially, it is almost a given that someone in officialdom sanctions the venture. Since incarceration in these cases is not voluntary, how else could the faux jail sentence eventually be commuted or the record erased? Also, such ruses often require legal cover, as much for authorization as to stave off actual charges against the reporter. Bly in 1887 managed to convince a battery of judges and doctors that she was out of her mind, having confided her plans to no one other than her editors and an assistant state’s attorney, who agreed to shield her from prosecution. Salinger reported that his jail experiences for the *San Francisco Chronicle* had been made possible under an undisclosed “secret arrangement” that expressly did not include the knowledge of his jailers or fellow prisoners. Only years later, in his 1995 memoir, did Salinger explain in detail how he went about the assignment. It started with his coverage of a meeting of the American Friends Service Committee to demand more humane treatment of prisoners in California’s county jails. Pat Brown, the state’s attorney general at the time, was presiding. Salinger was horrified by what was reported at the meeting and decided that a series on the appalling conditions the committee had uncovered would make more sense than a secondhand report on the committee’s work. “And the more I thought about it,” he wrote, “the more I realized that the best way to do the story would be from the inside. If I was to tell this ugly story accurately, I would have to become a prisoner myself.”

From previous reporting assignments, Salinger had developed
a professional rapport with Brown and felt comfortable proposing the idea to him. Brown thought about it for a minute or two and then not only agreed but offered to cook up the circumstances that would lead to Salinger’s arrest. Several days later, Brown called Salinger and told him to stop shaving for five or six days, start looking a little weird, and then go to a bar in Stockton and stay there drinking beer for at least three hours: “At twelve-thirty-nine, walk down Main Avenue to the hotel and you’ll see a brown four-door Hudson parked on the street.” Salinger said Brown instructed him to get into the backseat of the car, which would be unlocked, go to sleep, and await arrest. Once in court, Brown told him to insult the judge. Why? Salinger asked. “So that he’ll be sure to throw you in jail.”

Salinger spent four days in the Stockton jail and then another three days in the Bakersfield facility on a trumped-up speeding charge that had been similarly arranged. Deliberately, the two jails were chosen because they represented typical conditions in California’s prison system, rather than the best or worst. Salinger’s personal jailhouse stories opened the series but represented only a small but potent portion of his seventeen-article report, which considered numerous other facilities that he visited in the more conventional way.

Again for the Chronicle nearly twenty years later, Charles Howe arranged to do a week of guard duty at San Quentin, and Tim Findley spent a week as a would-be convict at Soledad Prison. Their firsthand reports were included in the results of a three-month investigation of the California penal system in 1971, published by the Chronicle in fifteen daily installments. The stories Findley wrote were in the third person with almost no direct personal references, both from his jail time at Soledad and from the other prisons he visited as an identified reporter. He described what he observed,
quoted what he heard, and characterized what he witnessed. Coincidentally, Findley endured an actual, more impromptu overnight experience at the Alameda County prison farm at Santa Rita, arrested and roughed up by police during the People’s Park demonstrations of May 23, 1969. Once apprehended and herded into the bus, he did not identify himself as a reporter, but quickly handed his press credentials to a colleague and got aboard to be able to report on the experience. **Inside Santa Rita: I was a UC prisoner, ran on the front page of the *Chronicle* the following day.** The stories in the more comprehensive prison series of 1971 skirted reference to the specifics of how the reporters had gotten inside the facility, but thirty years later, in an interview for this book, Findley explained that the *Chronicle* had gotten permission both from top officials in the penal system as well as from Soledad’s warden. Including the warden in the informed circle is unusual in these types of investigations, mostly because of the increased risk it poses for word of the ruse to get out among the prisoners or staff on site.

Also atypically, Findley said that once inside, he did, in fact, make himself known by his real name and occupation to a select number of inmates. Prisons at the time, he said, had “succeeded in becoming the celebrity cause of the Left,” helping to create a generation of inmates, especially among blacks, who considered themselves political detainees. Violence often erupted inside the jails, egged on by political agitation from outside. In the brief time Findley was inside Soledad—“a few days, maybe a couple of weeks”—he needed to interact with as many groups as possible while avoiding being identified as a member of any one of them. “We didn’t have the time to leave me in there a year,” he explained, “nor was I interested in that.” It made no sense to spend the little time he had inside trying to establish a convincing iden-
tity, so he didn’t try. This was about news, not an academic study. Time was simply too short.

The following year, Bagdikian engineered his own faked murder conviction for the *Washington Post* as part of a major report on the state of the penal system nationally. He expressed gratitude to the “prison administrators in state and local systems that gave me freedom to inspect their institutions and speak at length and in private with inmates.” He found them open and enlightened. “The harsh fact is that newspaper reporters are not permitted into the worst penal institutions, except, of course, for the privilege of inspecting that great Potemkin village of American prisons—the stainless steel kitchen—during off hours.”

Bagdikian initially planned his incarceration at a prison in Oklahoma, but a warning from a former inmate at the facility forced him to change course. “You’ll never get out alive,” he was told. “Too many people knew about the project, and the grapevine down there has picked it up.” He ended up instead at the state penitentiary in Pennsylvania with the authorization and protection of the state attorney general and a few of his close aides, the only people let in on the plan. In case of emergency, the attorney general gave Bagdikian his home telephone number. What would have happened, Bagdikian later mused, if he had told a guard that he was actually a reporter who needed to reach the attorney general? “Oh, he could do that, all right,” he quoted the state’s director of corrections as saying at the time. “They’d just think he was crazy.”

For two personal pieces in a major 1982 prison series in Tucson’s *Arizona Daily Star*, Ring’s pose was as a prisoner, again on a murder conviction, and John Long’s was as a guard. It took repeated approaches, but Ring and his editors managed to convince the new state troubleshooter to authorize the ruse. He had been
hired to overhaul the state prison system and clearly saw he had little to gain from allowing the newspaper reporters in. He had little to gain from refusing, either, so he arranged the conviction and jail sentence for Ring.43

Long lasted the fully intended period in his correctional officer’s uniform, but Ring had to cut short the two weeks he intended to stay inside. Four days before he planned to leave, a gang of inmates trapped him in a stairwell and demanded he hand over his belt. When Ring refused, the inmates pummeled him, leaving a huge bruise on his torso and breaking six of his teeth. Guards spirited him away for treatment and that became his way out.44

For infiltrations that involve applying for a job instead of contriving a jail sentence, approaches have varied. Pamela Zekman reported that in responding to an ad to apply for a nurse’s aide position for a Chicago Tribune nursing home series in 1971, she provided phony references and a made-up work history that no one checked or challenged—“testimony to the poor administration of a nursing home which receives thousands of dollars every month in welfare payments,”45 she wrote. Gaines “falsified his credentials”46 to get the janitorial job at von Solbrig. Ring recalled that Long sought top-level authorization in 1982 to work as a prison guard in Arizona, as Ring had done to be a prisoner. Howe did the same to be a guard at San Quentin a decade earlier, yet he further involved the prison’s warden in the ruse—again, one of the few—along with top officials in the California penal system.47 Gaines revealed his plans to no one when he applied for the janitor position at Chicago’s von Solbrig Hospital in 1975. Neither did Recktenwald, reporting for the Chicago Tribune, when he got hired as a prison guard for two weeks at the Pontiac Correctional Center in Illinois. That was in 1978 during a lockdown that followed the killing of three guards.48 For Conover’s stint as a cor-
rectional officer at Sing Sing some twenty years later, he also kept his real purpose totally secret from just about everyone, except his publisher and his wife.49

In cases where officials higher up in the system have been complicit in the ruse, a related issue no one has fully addressed is how on-site administrators have reacted to being left out of the information loop. Bagdikian raised it but didn’t comment further in the preface to the paperback book that grew out of his series with Leon Dash, *The Shame of the Prisons*. In thanking the Pennsylvania state director of corrections at the time, the man who had helped him gain entry, he wrote, “I’m sure that [Allyn] Sielaff did not make his wardens happy with the thought that they might be unwitting host to a journalist prisoner.”50

Over the years, journalism historians, critics, ethicists, and pundits have debated this subset of the undercover exposé, underscoring their approval or disdain. Silas Bent, for instance, in his 1939 book *Newspaper Crusaders*, alluded with apparent admiration to a spate of such investigations in that period, but mentioned specifically only one,51 a Bly-like venture for the *Chicago Daily Times* in 1935 that was headlined *Seven Days in the Madhouse*. Its eight installments were written by Frank Smith, whom the newspaper described in a boxed item as “a *Times* reporter, former college football player and lifeguard who tips the scale at 200 pounds.”52 Bent said the series both increased the newspaper’s circulation and led to a cleanup of the state-run mental asylum that was its target at Kankakee, Illinois.53 *Time* magazine cited the same series prominently in 1937 in a paean to the newspaper—“Chicago’s liveliest sheet”54—under the impressive leadership of publisher Samuel Emory Thomason and managing editor Louis Ruppel.

Albert Deutsch, a New York reporter and mental health expert
of the period, took a dimmer view of the value of such newspaper exposés as tools of social reform, a subject he explored in two different essays, first, in his 1937 book on the history of the mental health movement in the United States, and again in a 1950 article for a scholarly journal. Like Bent, he, too, remarked on the prevalence of newspaper undercover work. Deutsch described it as an “occasional” phenomenon in the late 1930s that had burgeoned by 1950 into an “epidemic” that was “spreading from paper to paper like a benign infection.” He compared the exposé to the surgeon’s scalpel, with its capacity to be useful or dangerous, constructive or destructive, depending on the user’s skill. Yet for specific examples, he mentioned only one, Bly’s from the early years, derisively dubbing it and its many imitators the “nine-day sensation.” He noted one major change in 1950 from earlier infiltration attempts: the complicity of institutional administrators in the investigative effort. In the later period, reporters had been able to enter these institutions “not as hostile invaders, threatening the reputation and security of superintendents and other officers, but as welcome allies enlisted in a common cause,” he said.

Deutsch offered few examples but did single out one landmark exposé of the middle years of the twentieth century that won his approval, one that has subsequently been of interest to scholars. Headlined Bedlam, it appeared in the May 1946 issue of Life magazine as a disturbing photographic essay with accompanying text based on the reports of some three thousand conscientious objectors—mostly young Methodists, Quakers, Mennonites, and Brethren—assigned in lieu of military service to work as attendants in a third of all state mental hospitals in the United States. As the writer, Albert Q. Maisel, explained, their work involved not only what they witnessed but questionnaires they filled out and “narratives” they wrote as instructional material for mental hospi-
tal workers. Their reports were supported by other official data, including statistics on brutality and the physical abuse of patients. 60

Their work made them privy to all manner of appalling and inhumane treatment, and the photographic evidence Life published was all too reminiscent of pictures coming out of Nazi concentration camps in the same time period. In this instance, the conscientious objectors acted both as authorized whistleblowers and, from a privileged insider position over many months, as informants and surrogate undercover reporters for Life. Yet how often can a publication count on such sources to surface and make themselves available for such assignments—sources who combine the qualities of reliable witness, ability to document, and the willingness to share?

Almost always in the presentation of institutional exposés there is follow-up reporting to chronicle the impact of the initial investigation as it unfolds—committee hearings, reform initiatives, closures, indictments, arrests. They report the developments but are also intended to document the longer-term impact of the exposés, and to affirm, underscore, and justify their value. Ten months after Salinger’s monumental prison series ran in the San Francisco Chronicle, he followed up with a second series, this one three articles that detailed various resulting improvements in the system statewide. An editor’s note said the improvements stemmed from the reaction to Salinger’s series from an “aroused public.” 61 Salinger spoke about his series at more than fifty public gatherings, the newspaper reported, and testified before state legislators as they considered a prison reform bill, which passed.

In his memoir, Salinger remembered the response from the reading public as “electric” in the way it had ignited the calls for hearings and new legislation. He said California’s governor at the
time, Earl Warren, took personal charge of the investigation into conditions at the prisons “and the result was real reform,” including the construction of new prisons for Stockton and Bakersfield, where Salinger had been jailed, “but of even greater importance was that the state of California took a new and enlightened approach to penology—rehabilitation, not just punishment.”

Recktenwald of the Tribune also waited nearly a year after his tour of guard duty in 1978 before he returned to the Pontiac Correctional Center, this time identifying himself as a Tribune reporter. In a clear methodological justification for going undercover, with his newspaper credentials, he could no longer get inside. He resorted to standing at the gates and managed to interview the few guards he still knew from his time among them—turnover was still constant and most that he had worked with less than a year earlier by then had quit. Later, he also tracked down some of those no longer working at the facility. Those who remained on staff reported that some conditions had improved but others not.

For an exposé of horrific conditions at an orphanage in Podolsk, Russia, Diane Sawyer, for ABC’s television newsmagazine, 20/20, put a hidden camera in her purse for the sake of “documenting the institutionalized neglect and abuse of thousands of handicapped children warehoused in Russian orphanages,” according to the citation that accompanied the project’s duPont–Columbia Award. Called “Forgotten Children of Russia,” the investigation, which aired January 13, 1999, also won the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Award. The duPont citation praised the segment for the way it conveyed the shocking nature of conditions at the orphanage with “intelligence and restraint,” producing “fine international reporting in a magazine format, demonstrating that television news at its best can devote prime time programs to important humanitarian issues.” Human Rights Watch collaborated on the project.
In a follow-up segment that aired fifteen months later, Sawyer reported that all of the babies the 20/20 team had seen had been adopted, “due to pressure generated by our broadcast,”\textsuperscript{66} with the aid of the Russian Orthodox Church, which got assistance from the Russian government.\textsuperscript{67}

A further word about impact: Both the Tribune’s 1971 investigation into nursing homes and its 1975 series on von Solbrig Hospital generated extremely swift official responses. Within weeks, the nursing home probe triggered city, state, and federal investigations, and even arrests.\textsuperscript{68} Recktenwald, who also worked on the project, said in an interview for this book that he still considered that 1971 series the most important work he ever did.\textsuperscript{69}

For the von Solbrig investigation, within two days of publication, all but three patients had checked out of the hospital. By two months later, even before a scheduled hearing on license revocation before the Chicago Board of Health—also triggered by the series—the hospital, patientless, was forced to shut down entirely.\textsuperscript{70}

And then a second hospital came under investigation because of reports on the first.

Both of these Tribune investigations point out yet another high value of the method: the reporter as unmediated witness. How else could Zekman have been present when an elderly man and woman, not related, were forced to undress for baths in front of each other, face-to-face, “in helpless humiliation.”\textsuperscript{71} Gaines later explained that the assignment to get hired as a janitor emanated from a tip to the newspaper from a former janitor who said that custodians who hadn’t washed up were being used in surgery to move patients. “There was really no question about what had to be done,” Gaines told Steve Weinberg in the IRE Journal. “No newspaper reader would be expected to believe such a shocking
account by an uneducated and disgruntled janitor.” Gaines also said that in lying about his background, he “claimed no special expertise to get the job. Once hired, I only acted under direct orders from my supervisors. I worked hard to make sure that my janitorial skills would not be criticized.”

Reporters posing as prison guards have done likewise, investing fully in the tasks assigned on the job. And very soon during the week Gaines worked at von Solbrig, he too was instructed to put down his mop and wheel patients from the surgery table to their beds. He saw plenty else, including the tonsil-removing assembly line.

His reporting, he said, “removed the middleman” (“middle filter” was Anne Hull’s phrase more than thirty years later for the Walter Reed investigation). “Now I could tell readers in a first-person account about what I saw.” And what he saw was highly instrumental in forcing the shutdown of the multimillion-dollar facility. “I knew I had better be right,” Gaines said. “I was.” Later, he said, other hospital employees, including the head nurse, corroborated his account.

Recktenwald’s series about his stint as a prison guard also advances the notion of eyewitness potency. One day’s installment of the series featured side-by-side photographs of what the media saw on October 9 during an organized press tour of a very well-kept West Cell House of the facility and of what Recktenwald saw eight days later as he made his rounds unescorted in the prison’s garbage-strewn South Cell House. He had managed to photograph it that day with a concealed miniature camera. “It was the size of a pack of cigarettes,” he said. “I was able to bring it in without anyone seeing it.”

We also cannot underestimate the importance of the element of wonder, brought to the assignments by the undercover reporter
who is experiencing such conditions for the first time, but with
forethought, preparation, and intention to share, charged with the
responsibility of describing the experience for those who likely
never will have the chance.

Immediacy is another value well served by the undercover method.
To report from inside one of these institutions fulfills a primary
journalistic mission: to provide news or information for publica-
tion that ordinary citizens should have but cannot easily or reli-
ably obtain on their own. This is often in response to conditions
that cry out for information right now, while an issue involving
the institution or the system is current. Sometimes, however, such
information gains currency because a social reformer or former
inmate or worker happens to provide a tip or produce a memoir
or other writing that finds its way to publication. Bly, for instance,
acted on reports of “shocking abuse” at the asylum that surfaced
in summer 1887;76 Salinger’s series responded to reports of severe
overcrowding in the California jails in 1953.77

In 1971, Findley and Howe’s undercover prisoner-guard duet
for the Chronicle came in the aftermath of major unrest at Sole-
dad and a politicization of the prison population across the state,
largely instigated, as Findley explained, by polarizing forces from
the outside. From the East Coast and in roughly the same period,
Bagdikian investigated the nation’s penal system because, in his
words, “almost everyone seems to agree that our prisons are ter-
rible.”78 Recktenwald was sent in during a lockdown,79 and in
Arizona, the appointment in 1982 of a new prison system trouble-
shooter bent on major reform sent Ring and Long inside for a
closer look.80

Deutsch, back in 1950, likened the journalistic exposé to shock
treatment. There is no expectation that the shocks will cure a
mental patient; they only open the way for follow-up rounds of psychotherapy. Deutsch went on, mixing the metaphor, saying that the responsible journalist “follows the jolting exposé with discussions illuminating the problem digging toward its roots, helping the reader gain insight,” and suggesting solutions. The exposé, he said, represents a calculated risk. Realizing that its failure may cause harm, the reporter also knows that “at best, it is but the opening wedge in arousing public interest that can be transmuted into desired public action.”

The decision to “go deceptive” is rarely incidental to the willingness of reporters to undertake the assignments or to their ability to amass great material and put their reports across in an unusually compelling way. Talent and personal disposition matter absolutely. The articles and books these writers have produced showcase gutsy flair. Unapologetically, the expectation in return for the editorial investment in risks, costs, and effort is the creation of a narrative tour de force on a significant social issue, stories that will evoke in readers a call to action, or at least a more subtle expression of amazement, even awe. The writing is often, but not always, theatrical, confessional, more personal than usual, meant to provoke a public connection and reaction with enough force to ignite an official response or government action. Often, the narratives reveal the reporter’s thoughts as they react to the disturbingly alien worlds in which they find themselves, sometimes with writing that may seem overly self-involved. More importantly, the stories are meant to give voice to the silenced or the stigmatized, to those who lack credibility even when heard.

Largely, no doubt, because of the early 1980s timeframe in which the Arizona Daily Star and Boston Globe jail exposés appeared, Tom Goldstein in 1985 happened to single out all three as examples of
the undercover genre’s inherent deficiencies. Although he found Ring’s ten-thousand-word opus “powerfully written,” he thought much of it was too self-conscious, in the way undercover narratives can be, filled with “lapses in and out of stream of consciousness” that “bespeaks a rebellious reporter” and that revealed “more about Ring and his feelings than about the prison.” In Stewart’s case, Goldstein said, his aim had been to present a no-holds-barred view of prison life to those who were unlikely ever to experience it. Yet the Globe had primly deleted all the expletives to meet its family newspaper standard and the writer, Goldstein thought, provided too many “bland insights.” He also zeroed in on how one of Stewart’s reflections in the text revealed a central flaw in the undercover methodology: his admission that because the conviction and jail time were based on no crime, “I would not have to live the rest of my life with the burden of trying to conceal the fact that I was a criminal, a man with a prison record.” That led Goldstein to point out the inherent lack of authenticity in the method itself. “Capturing the reality of prison life,” he concluded, “is as elusive and difficult for the undercover reporter as it is for the reporter who identifies himself.”

Twenty-five years later, Ring could not have disagreed more with the professor. Regardless of how the reporter wound up in the situation, in Ring’s view, that very self-consciousness along with the writer’s unique narrative force gave the method much of its value. “That’s what I think you get with a first person piece—narrative power, the power of the writing; I was there. This happened to me,” he said in an interview. “I look for the first person voice because of that power and I think many readers are like me. . . . It’s different than a third person voice. Believe me, for many years after, as I go around, this is the most likely thing I hear. ‘You’re the guy who did the prison story.’ This was very well
received in the community. It’s good for journalism. It’s good for the newspaper. It establishes an authority. People are slipping into your shoes.”

At least one other researcher has pointed out that the personal and financial investment required to do this kind of reporting has the potential to contaminate the results, predisposing the reporters to find evidence of wrongdoing that may not exist.

Ring said this tendency can be counteracted with strict adherence to two key principles: First, accuracy—“you never want to be wrong and whatever you can do to move from eighty percent to ninety percent accuracy, you do, digging, and that’s where this undercover work fits. It’s a highly accurate form of reporting.” Second, adherence to the maxim: Do No Harm. “You don’t hurt people who don’t deserve to be hurt,” he said. What costs journalism its credibility is not the free use of the first person or a creative approach to telling a story, Ring said. It is being weak. “If we had more assertive journalists,” he said, “we would have people respecting journalism more.” Looking back at his brief incarceration, he said, “I wouldn’t have done anything differently. Even getting roughed up. Even the chipped teeth.”

From the personal standpoint of the writer, undercover reporting on prisons, hospitals, and asylums has consistently meant outstanding payoff in both peer accolades and audience response, going back to the earliest-known examples. Bly and Annie Laurie launched legendary careers on the strength of their undercover assignments in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Salinger’s 1953 prison series earned that year’s Edward V. McQuade Memorial Award and a commendation from then California governor Warren. The Chronicle reported that penologists hailed Salinger’s effort as “a great contribution to the public understanding of the problem.”
Michael Mok’s *I WAS A MENTAL PATIENT* was an eight-part exposé on the treatment of mental patients at Kings County Hospital in 1961 for the *New York World-Telegram & Sun*. It won both the prestigious Albert Lasker Medical Journalism Award and the Newspaper Guild’s Heywood Broun Award. The union honor he shared that year with his colleague on the newspaper, Dale Wright, who won for his migrant series.

Caldwell’s 1968 pose as a new resident at three area nursing homes brought an overwhelming reader response to the *Nashville Tennessean*. In a follow-up story, Caldwell described the flood of letters as “the largest I have seen in thirty-six years as a reporter.” Only 2 of the 162 letters received by two weeks after the series ran were “unqualifiedly unfavorable.” Thirty-five years later, at Caldwell’s induction into the Tennessee Newspaper Hall of Fame, a press release mentioned the series on a very short list of the major achievements of his long, outstanding career, saying the series had led to the state licensing of such privately owned facilities.

Findley and Howe won a San Francisco Press Club Award for their California prison series in 1971, and the Bagdikian-Dash series for the *Washington Post* placed second with an honorable mention at the 1973 Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Awards behind a landmark mental asylum investigation that employed a different kind of subterfuge. This was Geraldo Rivera’s exposé for New York’s WABC-TV of appalling conditions for the five thousand residents of the Willowbrook State School, which forced the complete shutdown of a troubled facility for the state’s mentally challenged. That subterfuge involved no poseurs. Rivera and his crew entered the facility early one morning in an act of criminal trespass, never prosecuted, with the help of a stolen key. They shot startling footage of feces-smeared patients screaming and fighting. The von Solbrig Hospital exposé, of course, helped land the big-
gest honor of all for the *Chicago Tribune*, the newspaper’s second Pulitzer Prize in five years to have incorporated an undercover aspect.  

The awards list goes on. In 1982, Ring’s “murder conviction” for the *Arizona Daily Star* prison series received a Scroll Award from the Investigative Reporters and Editors, an American Bar Association Gavel Award, and a first-place finish in state press club’s annual investigative reporting contest. As for Recktenwald, also for the *Tribune*, a prison reform group honored him with its eponymous John Howard Award for 1979 for his Pontiac prison guard series. He also received the *Tribune*’s Edward Scott Beck Award, the newspaper’s annual internal honor, and several local accolades. The *Tribune*’s von Solbrig Hospital series shut down a substandard facility, as did the Willowbrook investigation. Findley said his prison series for the *Chronicle* got important public attention and helped bring about determinate sentencing.

In 2001, Conover’s near-year undercover as a corrections officer for his widely acclaimed book, *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing*, was a Pulitzer finalist in the General Nonfiction category and a winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Even more significantly, these assignments, regardless of the media platform in which they appeared, have often generated substantive civic action. Of all the very early efforts, nothing topped the most frequently cited of all reportage in this genre, Bly’s jaw-dropper of a debut as a New York City reporter in fall 1887. As a “girl reporter” in her early twenties, she accepted a life-imperiling, man-size assignment to feign insanity and get herself committed to the Women’s Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell’s (now Roosevelt) Island. On release, she quickly filled two pages of the *World*’s Sunday feature section with her heavily detailed account, starting with
her step-by-step preparation for the ruse and then her encounters with the judges and doctors who sent her across the river to endure inedible food, filth, harsh treatment, and stark-raving boredom. Interestingly, the conditions Mok described at King’s County seventy years later sounded horrifyingly much the same.

Bly’s performance was so convincing—and this part remains wholly unique—that unwitting beat reporters from competing newspapers who had encountered her in court as her insanity determination was being made covered developments daily as a fascinating local mystery. WHO IS THIS INSANE GIRL? the rival New York Sun asked in a headline. The World followed up day after day with news of the story’s impact: an immediate grand jury investigation, which included her testimony, followed. Soon after, the city Board of Estimate and Apportionment approved an increase in the appropriation to the dilapidated facility.

Even Annie Laurie’s one-day wonder for the San Francisco Examiner in 1890 was credited, at least by her newspaper, with prompting an official investigation that led to the dismissal of some hospital staff, and other reforms.

For Bly personally, as for Annie Laurie, going undercover was the moment of celebrity coronation. For undercover reporting more generally, it gave the method instant credence as a sure-fire circulation-building gimmick for any other publication that could manage to hire as capable and fetching a stunt girl. Bly’s work, especially, burnished a weapon long stored in the journalistic armory: not just the undercover sensation for sensation’s sake but the undercover sensation with a clear civic or social agenda, a notion completely in tune with the sensibilities of the Age of Reform. The trick then and thereafter was to use the construct selectively, and for high purpose, so as not to wear it out. It was
a mark that would often be hit in the years to come, but one that was just as often missed, and one that also would repeatedly invite controversy.

Recktenwald’s prison series, too, was one of his many hits. A new warden appointed just before Recktenwald’s story ran praised the series but defended the lax hiring procedure under which Recktenwald got the job, explaining that longer background checks had proved to be a deterrent to hiring for good candidates who could not wait for employment until the process was completed. The same day the Recktenwald series concluded, the lockdown was lifted. Three days after that, the Illinois General Assembly, citing the Tribune series, called for a special joint advisory committee to investigate conditions in prisons across the state. Although Recktenwald had come to the Chicago Tribune from the Better Government Association, and had been involved with several exceedingly difficult watchdog investigations, he considered his turn as a Pontiac prison guard “his toughest yet.”

Late in 1973, as a reporter for the Nashville Tennessean, the coaching Sutherland received from a licensed psychiatrist taught him how to pose convincingly as mentally ill. On December 14, he registered, in his formal name of Ernest Franklin Sutherland Jr., as a patient of Nashville’s Central State Psychiatric Hospital, where he would remain for the next thirty-one days. He shared with no one on staff or above them why he was really there. The Tennessean assured its readers that Sutherland had given a fictitious name to any patient whom he quoted or described in his stories, that the newspaper had double-checked to be sure the hospital had empty beds before he entered the facility, and that it had covered the cost of Sutherland’s stay at the regular patient rate. Further, to test security precautions at the facility, Sutherland had simply walked
away when he left without announcing his departure to anyone. Concurrently, the newspaper clued local police to his “disappearance” to ensure that no taxpayer-paid time or effort would be wasted in trying to locate him.¹¹¹

On January 20, 1974, a week after his release, Sutherland’s opening paragraph in the Sunday newspaper hit hard. He flat-out condemned Central State as “a warehouse for the storage of people—an unaccredited and unclean hospital with more than half its doctors unlicensed to practice in Tennessee.” He further charged that patients often were admitted without a comprehensive medical examination or a psychiatric evaluation and rarely received psychiatric treatment during their stays. Security was lax; illegal drugs like marijuana were being smuggled in easily; and although violence was not the rule, violence did occur. He characterized his stay with four d-words: degrading, dehumanizing, dreary, and depressing, and reported with specifics and impressions in a way that escorted reporter’s visits, even repeated ones, could never have matched.¹¹²

Nine long articles devoted to his findings comprised the series, ending with the requisite prescriptions for change. Follow-up reporting continued into February and March, including a report of the conclusions of a blue ribbon committee that had been hastily formed to investigate the hospital in the aftermath of Sutherland’s series.¹¹³ Its members recommended a number of improvements, including an increased appropriation to the hospital, accelerated movement toward accreditation, a doubling of its housekeeping staff, a substantial increase in its professional care, and demolition of two of its older structures. Two days later, former officials of the facility—all licensed psychiatrists—issued a statement recommending a total change in the institution’s scope and leadership.¹¹⁴

A couple of days later, at a panel discussion on which the
hospital’s superintendent and Sutherland both appeared, the superintendent defended his own leadership. Other hospital aides criticized Sutherland for blaming aides for some of the hospital’s failings, which Sutherland denied he had done. Another aide accused Sutherland of focusing only on the negative aspects of the facility and none of its good programs. Sutherland retorted that his story was confined only to what he personally witnessed and experienced in the part of the hospital where he had been placed. He also flatly denied an accusation that he had been “set up” by the “personal vendetta” of a former psychiatrist at the hospital. Sutherland said he never contacted any of the former hospital doctors until after his investigation was well under way. The newspaper reprinted the series as a special edition, ending with an obligatory analysis and a set of proposals for reform.

Twenty-five years later, in July 1999, Sutherland reflected in print on his own undercover triumph, this time in his then current role as the Tennessean’s vice president and editor in chief. By that point, he had been the newspaper’s editor for a decade. Writing for the Gannett Company newsletter, he mentioned his and other momentous undercover exposés that the Tennessean had sponsored, acknowledging that there had not been more than ten of them in the preceding twenty years. Undercover efforts had produced some of the newspaper’s proudest hours, he said, some on Sutherland’s own watch. He cited Jerry Thompson’s eighteen months undercover as a member of the Ku Klux Klan and the month Susan Thomas and Brad Schmitt had spent “living incognito in a public housing project, observing the drug trade and how it affects the lives of families and children in most of these cases.” Yet each of these, he acknowledged, had involved Tennessean reporters misrepresenting themselves to news sources, a practice
he then decreed against in announcing a set of new “Principles” for the paper.\textsuperscript{116}

As editor, Sutherland acknowledged this was a full about-face from the position he consistently had taken as a reporter years before in story brainstorming sessions at the newspaper. In fact, he remembered himself as “the representative of lying, cheating and stealing.” Without the subterfuge, he acknowledged, Thompson’s KKK reporting would have proved too dangerous. His own mental hospital investigation would have been a no-go altogether. Thomas and Schmitt might have been subject to a greater safety risk had their identities as reporters been known, but, Sutherland surmised, they could have avoided misrepresenting themselves. As it happened, they were never asked to reveal who they really were, what they were doing, or why. Then he said, “Weigh those stories, some of which resulted in major changes in the fabric of our society, against the credibility issues raised by readers to us every day.” He said that readers put inaccuracy, printing falsehoods, and slanting the news at the top of the list and followed up in the next sentence with, “Would I trade all my undercover stories for a favorable credibility rating from my readers today? You betcha.” Some, he said, could still be done within these principles. Some veteran reporters and editors no doubt would question his decision to take away these reporting tools. To them, he said he would reply: “It doesn’t matter how many tools we have if our readers don’t believe us. And they are only going to believe us if we have a set of Principles that say we don’t lie, cheat, or steal, and that we are honest in the way we gather the news.”\textsuperscript{117}

With a curious logic not uncommon among editors at the time, Sutherland conflated the methods used for the \textit{Tennessean}’s very occasional undercover exposés over two decades—roughly one every
other year—with the more generalized reader disgruntlement and distrust that had developed during that period—not so much over the gathering of the news, but over the way the news was being presented. And yet, in the same breath, he acknowledged how those same few undercover exposés had served one of the profession’s highest callings and had encouraged “major changes in the fabric of our society.”

None of the undercover stories the Tennessean published in those years appears to have been fairly accused of inaccuracy, falsehood, or slanting—the top reader complaints Sutherland set out to address. Yet his statement appeared to hold only this small handful of outstanding pieces to account for the industry’s much wider failings.

In 2001, the city’s alternative weekly, the Nashville Scene, reported out another view of what had happened to the newspaper. The article based its reporting on responses it had solicited from more than 130 community leaders and “many of those who were once so close to it.” Its conclusion was that the newspaper’s real problem was not trust or believability but ennui, nothing like its “story book history—an epic chapter in Southern journalism filled with crusades for black men and women, for open government, disenfranchised voters, the poor and infirm, and the otherwise dispossessed.”

Newspaper alumni quoted at other points in the series included illustrious Tennessean alumni such as Caldwell, David Halberstam, Jim Squires, Tom Wicker, and Bill Kovach. In interviews, several of them waxed nostalgic about what it had meant to be on the Tennessean’s staff in its glory days under John Seigenthaler. Halberstam described it as “an addiction for us. It was like eating. We couldn’t live without it” and Kovach as “like breathing pure oxygen.”
Sutherland countered calmly that circulation had grown “substantially and consistently” during his years at the paper. “The rest,” he said, “is subjective.”

Nonetheless, it is also true that to send a reporter undercover has never been the only route to the effective journalistic exposé. Both reporters and social reformers have been highly effective using more conventional means to investigate closed institutions. Such an exemplar was Deutsch himself, who won the George Polk Award in 1948 and the Albert Lasker Award in 1949 for his mental health reporting. At his death in 1961, an obituary in the leading psychoanalytic journal described him as a “journalistic leader” known for his advocacy of the “scientific and humane treatment” of the mentally ill. Deutsch had the great advantage of an insider’s view. He had been a New York welfare department employee for four years before he became a reporter and columnist for New York City’s PM and then Compass newspapers. In his essays, he defined the word exposé broadly, à la Webster’s, as “an exposure or revelation of something discreditable.” He singled out a number of contemporaneous reporters whose conventionally reported work in the mental health area he admired. But for Deutsch, the true “apostle of the insane” was Dorothea Lynde Dix, who in the 1840s took up the cause of getting the mentally ill out of the jails and almshouses and into specially designed asylums. Dix collected facts and data by visiting institution after institution, information she then presented as memorials to state legislatures. Deutsch was especially enamored of the way her version of the exposé, which sometimes appeared in local newspapers, was able to “prick the public conscience and to prod the conscience-stricken into constructive action through the press and other media, in state after state.” He considered her work a model for any modern-day
reporter. What, for any writer, he asked rhetorically, could top Dix’s unembellished, staccato presentation to the Massachusetts State Legislature in 1843, which began:

LINCOLN: A woman in a cage.
MEDFORD: One idiot subject chained, and one in a close stall for seventeen years.\(^{130}\)

Ironically, in 1887, it was an investigation of abuses and deterioration at exactly the kind of facility Dix had championed that Bly set out to expose in her two-part series that fall.\(^{131}\) Dix died that very year.

Still others have been successful at bringing closed institutions into view without going undercover. The tell-all memoirs of bona fide former inmates or former employees also figure under the rubric of the exposé and have been extremely effective over the centuries in rousing public sentiment and sometimes a meaningful response.

Up to a point, but only up to a point, the journalist’s role in these cases can resemble that of the social reformer or even the inmate or worker turned memoirist. Over the years, writers who do not identify as journalists have effectively turned what they have witnessed or personally experienced in these situations into words for publication. Their writing has been successful at unleashing a flood of public sympathy as well as civic or legislative interest. The fact is, save the limits of talent, timing, access to an effective publishing venue, and the force of will, there are no bars on entry to journalism or authorship or to success. In principle, anyone can attempt it, so patients and incarcerates who have the ability to write effectively for wide audiences—before release and after—are among them.\(^{132}\)
But the role of the memoirist differs from the role of the reporter, just as the social reformer’s role differs. In the journalistic case, there is a much higher priority on dispassionate observation as well as on urgency and timeliness, even, as already noted, at the expense of thoroughness. In fact, Deutsch in 1937 was highly critical of this aspect of the journalistic practice at the time. He considered the “nine day sensation” froth at best, perhaps with laudable motives and perhaps providing accurate facts, but facts that would be “lost to sight as suddenly as they had flared up,”\textsuperscript{133} facts that would not generate meaningful reforms.

Actually, the record does not support this. Even the seven- or nine-day undercover effort has been very effective in instigating changes, especially when combined with other investigative strategies. But even worse, in Deutsch’s view, was that the early efforts were often “hastily conceived and superficially executed,” and more likely had the net effect of widening the gap between the institution and the community in the way they generated more undifferentiated fear and horror than context and understanding.\textsuperscript{134} Deutsch argued that an exposé without proposed solutions can actually cause more harm than good by conditioning the “frustrated reader to an acceptance of a situation that initially shocked him.”\textsuperscript{135}

Deutsch acknowledged that in the postwar period, especially, reporters had been going to concerted lengths to provide adequate analysis and to propose solutions. And it is true that almost every undercover investigation from the late 1930s onward concludes with a finale piece that provides prescriptions and suggestions for meaningful reform, as Jack London had offered in \textit{Abyss} as far back as 1902. Yet, these finale pieces are usually the weakest element of any such series. They often seem editor ordered, perfunctory, obligatorily tacked on.

Furthermore, Deutsch’s position loses sight of the reporter’s
primary function of creating awareness. Follow up for the reporter or for the publication almost always means more stories—reports on actions taken as well as editorial and opinion-page advocacy. But by engagement, news organizations do not mean for the activists’ business of organizing or fundraising for a movement to become an editorial function. Journalists typically stop at the rallying cry that is the exposé itself, the presentation of the problem, along with reporting on whatever the reporting itself generates. Reporters and editors move on to other subjects, to newer news. They do this without apology; that is the nature of the job.

Then, there is the question of timing. If and when the work of memoirists might happen is serendipitous at best, wholly dependent on the presence of such an individual in such a newsworthy situation—and one who can write at that. No one can predict or direct when such an opportunity will come along, or when a writer will find him—or herself—a bona fide patient or inmate with the presence of mind to document the experience and then write about it as if that were the intention. Barbara Ehrenreich in Harper’s on her own breast cancer treatment comes to mind,136 or Sallie Tisdale, also for Harper’s, on working as a nurse in an abortion clinic.137 What could be more explicitly or starkly moving than William Styron’s examination of his own depression for Darkness Visible, a Memoir of Madness?138 There are many other similar efforts, too, self-consciously conceived ones such as Norah Vincent on her self-directed “year lost and found in the loony bin,” for a book she titled Voluntary Madness. It followed her year-long impersonation of a man, another book idea, that she had crafted two years earlier.139

Conover’s turn as a prison guard at Sing Sing began by approaching prison officials for access as a reporter as far back as 1992. He wanted to follow a recruit through the training process but per-
mission was denied. Plan B some years later was to try again by applying to be a guard himself. To apply, he presented a résumé that omitted his authorship of three books and his position as a contributing writer to the New York Times Magazine. He did however list his bachelor’s degree from Amherst and a job he once held as a reporter for the Aspen Times.140

For this book, Conover has said he was less interested in being a character, as he had been in Rolling Nowhere, than he was in being a “narrative presence.”141 The exceptionally long duration of his stay relative to his fellow journalist-guardsmen contributes greatly to this ability, providing the chance for a broad familiarity with staff, the inmates, and the institution itself, its recent and longer-ago history. While short-term guards can describe another officer or an inmate they encounter, they can’t really tell you how typical the person is, nor can they comment on it. Recktenwald, for example, talks about how many guards in his group had departed by the time he returned to Pontiac ten months later. As he interviewed the few who remained as well as those who had left, he reported that many were reacting to racial tensions and feared for their lives. At Sing Sing, Conover watched the exodus as it took place. Two-thirds of his class dropped out during the months he was on the job.

Another obvious difference would be the time it naturally takes in any situation to get to know people reasonably well. Just as an interview is not long enough, neither is a week or two. “With officers you do it by carpooling with them, by having beers after hours,” Conover said. “With inmates you do it by encountering them day after day, week after week, month after month.”142

And more than that, he said, was the opportunity that the much longer stay afforded to allow him to identify personally as a correctional officer. “The work was intense and demanding and stress-
ful,” he said. “I took it home with me; it made me different from my friends who were not working in prison, and had no idea what I was going through. So a distance grew between me and my old friends whom I couldn’t tell about my secret work, and distance shrank between me and my new associates who knew a lot about what I was going through every day, even though I was very different from them in terms of education, previous experience, etc. I still catch myself saying ‘we’ when I am telling somebody about what it was like for ‘us’ CO’s to work in Sing Sing. Because I was one.”

Conover retold an incident from *Newjack* in which an inmate accidentally ran into him, but in a way that seemed to a fellow officer that Conover had been attacked. He saw his colleague ball up his fists as he sized things up. “You okay?” he asked. Conover said he was, and as the inmate apologized, both Conover and his fellow guard accepted that it had been an accident. “But in that split second, where I saw him ready to defend me, I was filled with love (exactly the right word) for that officer,” he said, adding that it was “the kind of qualitatively different experience” made possible by the longer stay.

“Let me make it clear,” Conover said. “I admire all of these journalists for the chances they took. The result, in each case, was fascinating journalism in the public interest. But if you’re asking me, *did they do the same thing as you?* I’d have to say no. They visited a scary foreign country for a few days. I was an ex-pat there.”

As editorial hands began to wring over the ethics of misrepresentation in the 1980s, a common argument in favor of abandoning the practice of undercover reporting was that great insider journalism could be produced just as effectively without misrepresentation or subterfuge. As evidence, Goldstein offered a regular column about
prison life that the *Nevada Appeal* of Carson City was running at the time, the work of Gerald Crane, a high-school dropout who was serving a thirty-five-year sentence for kidnapping and bank robbery in a local jail. And, what Goldstein described as “probably the best contemporary picture of prison life”146 had arrived in 1972 in the form of the paperback edition of the official New York State report on the 1971 Attica prison riots and the police takeover that followed. He also mentioned an excellent and lengthy investigative piece with no undercover dimension,147 an examination of the main jail in Los Angeles, published in 1980 by * Corrections*, a short-lived magazine about the prison system. The writer was William Hart, who at the time was covering the criminal justice beat for the *Detroit Free Press*. Thirty years later, Hart was on the research staff at the Morrison Institute for Public Policy at Arizona State University, still working mainly on criminal justice issues.

Hart never engaged in undercover reporting himself but turns out to be one of its great advocates. “However well you think you are doing as a journalist,” he said in an interview for this book, “and I thought I was doing pretty well, especially after a year or so of going to prisons, of having interviewed five hundred inmates, gaining some sense of what to expect, what they’re like, and how to report on them and the staff and everyone else, I still think there are things that you don’t find out that way.

“Prisons are such unusual and special places,” he went on. “Inmates are one hundred percent vulnerable individuals; I think it’s relatively rare when they are as candid as they could be. I can’t point to anything in particular that I didn’t get or that I’ve read that I wouldn’t have gotten from someone because he knew he was speaking to a journalist. I’ve learned that people lie—good guys, bad guys, people lie. There is just no substitute for being there yourself. I saw this. I experienced this. There are subtleties in
communications that won’t come through from an event reported later.”

He said another benefit, smaller but measurable, is in “letting institutions know that this could be happening—a deterrent, in a sense. I would be pleased if prison wardens and police chiefs and corporate CEOs and packinghouse executives knew it was possible that a reporter could come in there undercover. It would keep them honest.”

Another hard-to-refute argument in favor of the reported personal experience under guise was one that Bagdikian offhandedly offered in the *Washington Post* piece he wrote about his own jail time, a passage repeated in the paperback reprint of his series, also in 1972: he had researched and reported on the American prison system as an outsider for three months, interviewing prisoners, former prisoners, corrections administrators, and research scientists, and “observing men behind bars and talking about them the way a tourist visits a zoo.” None of that had prepared him “for the emotional and intellectual impact of maximum-security incarceration.”

The Shame of the Prisons was the headline on the eight-part series in the *Post*. From the standpoint of perceived reader appeal, what the newspaper’s promoters emphasized about the series in a house ad says it all: “Ben H. Bagdikian of the *Washington Post* spent a week behind bars as part of his four months’ research into The Shame of the Prisons.”