



Reporting at Wit's End: Tales from the New Yorker

By St. Clair McKelway

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"Why does A. J. Liebling remain a vibrant role model for writers while the superb, prolific St. Clair McKelway has been sorely forgotten?" James Wolcott asked this question in a recent review of the Complete *New Yorker* on DVD. Anyone who has read a single paragraph of McKelway's work would struggle to provide an answer.

His articles for the *New Yorker* were defined by their clean language and incomparable wit, by his love of New York's rough edges and his affection for the working man (whether that work was come by honestly or not). Like Joseph Mitchell and A. J. Liebling, McKelway combined the unflagging curiosity of a great reporter with the narrative flair of a master storyteller. William Shawn, the magazine's long-time editor, described him as a writer with the "lightest of light touches." His style is so striking, Shawn went on to say, that "it was too odd to be imitated."

The pieces collected here are drawn from two of McKelway's books--*True Tales from the Annals of Crime and Rascality* (1951) and *The Big Little Man from Brooklyn* (1969). His subjects are the small players who in their particulars defined life in New York during the 36 years McKelway wrote: the junkmen, boxing cornermen, counterfeiters, con artists, fire marshals, priests, and beat cops and detectives. The "rascals."

An amazing portrait of a long forgotten New York by the reporter who helped establish and utterly defined *New Yorker* "fact writing," *Untitled Collection* is long overdue celebration of a truly gifted writer.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

A rogue's gallery of shady, quirky, beguiling figures populates this scintillating collection of essays by one of the *New Yorker's* seldom-sung masters. Writing for the magazine from the 1930s through the 1960s, McKelway specialized in light true crime stories about arsonists, embezzlers, counterfeiters, suspected Communists, and innocent men and the fire investigators, forensic accountants, Secret Service men, clueless FBI agents, and biased cops who pursued them. He's fascinated by procedural, cat-and-mouse games and the sheer artistry of crime for crime's sake; his portrait of serial impostor Stanley Weyman is a gem of motiveless miscreancy, culminating in Weyman's impersonation of the (nonexistent) State Department Naval Liaison Officer in order to introduce one Princess Fatima of Afghanistan to President Harding. In addition to police blotter material, the author pens a cutting profile of the egomaniacal gossip columnist Walter Winchell and recollections of his war-time stint as an air force PR flack (with a rather blithe account of the firebombing of Tokyo). McKelway's deceptively straightforward prose accretes facts, testimony, and court documents into subtle character studies and unobtrusive ruminations on the crooked timber of humanity. His limpid style and wry humor make these pieces as fresh and engaging as the day they appeared. (*Mar.*) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From [Booklist](#)

This volume brings together nearly four decades of memorable reporting and storytelling from one of the *New Yorker's* most prolific but long overlooked writers. Readers can trace changes in the local and national sensibilities as McKelway chronicles the strange and ordinary of city life, favoring the characters who were the lifeblood of New York. Among his subjects: Father Divine, the Harlem charlatan minister, amassing wealth from hundreds of low-wage workers; Mister 880, finally caught by the Secret Service at the age of 73 after 10 years of passing counterfeit dollar bills to supplement his modest income; a summons server who raises a greater indignation than his unhappy targets; gossip columnist Walter Winchell, a favorite of powerful politicians, entertainers, and mobsters alike; and a wealthy, reclusive old woman, who is rediscovered by a well-heeled law firm when her sister dies and then is suddenly and confusedly thrust to their attention. McKelway's writing is deliciously detailed, subtle and wry, full of keen observations and connections. Readers who are fans of the *New Yorker* or great storytelling in general will appreciate this book. --Vanessa Bush

Review

"Nobody tells a story better than [McKelway] does." ?*P.G. Wodehouse*

"McKelway was a born writer and an inspired writer." ?*William Shawn*

"St. Clair McKelway was a fine practitioner of literary journalism. He had a knack for digging up eccentric subjects and polishing them into characters that shine in memory. I was a young McKelway fan, and it's a great pleasure now to see him back in print." ?*Gay Talese*

"A rogue's gallery of shady, quirky, beguiling figures populates this scintillating collection of essays by one of the *New Yorker's* seldom-sung masters. His limpid style and wry humor make these pieces as fresh and engaging as the day they appeared." ?*Publishers Weekly*

"The best essays and articles from a longtime *New Yorker* writer too long relegated to the shadows cast by

A. J. Liebling and Joseph Mitchell, distinguished by vintage portraits of a long-gone NYC.” ?*Barnes and Noble Review*

“A lovely, funny, sad collection of [McKelway's] work. Throughout ‘Reporting at Wit's End,’ his voice is slyly funny, subtly learned, and as slickly styled as his dark blond hair. Locating sense in nonsense may have been McKelway's greatest gift: out of oddness, he crafted a most unusual art.” ?*Columbia Journalism Review*

“*Reporting at Wit's End*...was my favorite book in 2010... The eighteen stories in this collection... are all pieces that transcend time. And, if there is any justice, their re-publication should earn McKelway, at long last, a place alongside Joseph Mitchell, Gay Talese, Joan Didion and Tom Wolfe as one of the masters of literary nonfiction.” ?*David Grann, Salon*

“This generous collection of his work for the magazine spanning four decades should, by any rights, restore this supremely gifted, prolific, droll and idiosyncratic writer to his deserved place in the pantheon. *Reporting at Wit's End* represents the range of McKelway's talents and preoccupations from the 1930s to the 1960s.” ?*San Francisco Chronicle*

“*Reporting at Wit's End*...assembles 18 of McKelway's longer pieces from the 1930s to the 1960s, and every one of them is a treasure... [A] tremendous collection, which, if there's any justice, will begin the process of winning him back the fame he long ago earned.” ?*Craig Seligman, New York Times Book Review*

“When he was on his game, McKelway might have been the best nonfiction writer the [New Yorker] had -- this at a time when Liebling, Mitchell and E.J. Kahn Jr. were also producing signature work. But if McKelway remains perhaps the greatest magazine writer that no one knows about, the publication of a new collection, *Reporting at Wit's End*, brings with it the hope that his long-forgotten byline might be brought back to light.” ?*Los Angeles Times*

“McKelway's writing is deliciously detailed, subtle and wry, full of keen observations and connections. Readers who are fans of the New Yorker or great storytelling in general will appreciate this book.” ?*Booklist*

“A generous new anthology...with eighteen of [McKelway's] articles from the magazine and an introduction by Adam Gopnik, puts his work within reach once again, and high time.” ?*New Yorker*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Mary West:

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Jessica Jackson:

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