

**A SOURCEBOOK OF
AMERICAN
LITERARY JOURNALISM**

Representative Writers in an
Emerging Genre

Edited by THOMAS B. CONNERY



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BOB GREENE

Steve Jones

Bob Greene's work is deceptively simple. Like the hook from a Beatles' song that goes in one ear and, instead of going out the other, reverberates inside one's mind for days, Greene's writing arouses the senses. His columns for *Esquire*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune* and his books about subjects such as life on the Alice Cooper rock 'n' roll tour and the Nixon-McGovern campaign combine plain but well-crafted writing, keen observation, and even sharper sifting of details and impressions to tell good stories.

Though Greene is unquestionably a fine writer, perhaps his greatest skill is in finding those stories. His *American Beat* collection brings together some of his finest columns, including "Kathy's Abortion," the story of a young woman's few hours in an abortion clinic; "Speck," an interview with mass murderer Richard Speck; and "Michael Testifies," the story of a boy paralyzed from an attack in a Chicago housing project.

Greene's stories are about America and the American dream—gone wrong and gone right. Piece them together and the picture is as comprehensive and satisfying as a cross-country drive along Route 66.

But for each American dream he describes, a price is paid, and nowhere is this more evident than in *Billion Dollar Baby*, Greene's unmasking of the image manipulation that lies at the heart of the popular music industry.

Elvis Presley's first appearance on the Ed Sullivan show affected Greene's life as it did the lives of millions of others—it made him a devout rock 'n' roll fan. It also reoriented the American dream. Once, most kids wanted to be like Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio, or their favorite movie star. Rock 'n' roll soon became the touchstone for America's fantasy life. Once, most kids had baseball gloves or Barbie dolls in their bedrooms. Now they have Casios.

Rock music was a part of everyday life for Greene, too, and he sought to discover what it is really like to be a rock star. Having recently completed

Running: A Nixon-McGovern Campaign Journal, Greene was dissatisfied with playing the role of outsider, covering stories as an observer and not a participant. His introduction to *Billion Dollar Baby* not only reveals his motives for researching and writing the book, but gives insight into his adoption of a form of participatory journalism.

The giant rock and roll tours represented a fantasy life that millions of people all over the world thought about and, at least during wistful moments, longed to be a part of, if only to affirm that someone really was living that way. If, in the 1920s and '30s and '40s, the dream of a kid growing up was to be a member of the New York Yankees or the Brooklyn Dodgers, then by the '70s the dream of America's young was the rock and roll dream, and the heroes were the rock and roll heroes. The cross-country tours—with their daily jet flights and lavish hotel suites and packed concert halls and astonishing profits and beautiful young girls and loud, throbbing music every night—embodied all the facets of that dream.

On a number of occasions I had been out on tour briefly with big-money bands, working on magazine and newspaper stories. It had always been exciting and fast and fun to watch—but every time I finished one of those road trips, I felt, in the end, frustrated, wondering why it was that I still was not satisfied that I knew what it felt like to live in the rock and roll world. And the conclusion was always the same: I didn't know because I wasn't really living in that world, I was only a visitor from the real world on a three-day pass. (1974, 4)

Greene's solution? Become a performer on Alice Cooper's 1973 Holiday Tour.

Billion Dollar Baby thus chronicles the ups and downs of the daily routine that comprises major league rock 'n' roll. Greene is with the group every step of the way, from recording background vocals in a New York studio for a new Alice Cooper album, to playing the part of Santa Claus during the closing of the Cooper stage show (during which Santa is kicked, beaten, and stomped to death by the band).

As a performer he becomes part of the inner circle of musicians, treated much the same as they are, and his observations of their world simultaneously evoke envy and pity. On the one hand there were the perks that have physical evidence of the rock star's life. Greene describes the Alice Cooper tour jet:

The outside of the airplane was painted brown and gold. I got out of the lead limousine and walked up the portable stairway and into the plane, and I burst out laughing. It was ridiculous; it was a dream. The first section of the airplane had the look of an elegant private club. Red wall-to-wall carpeting covered the floor. Against one wall was a long, multi-section couch, covered with an expensive patterned fabric. There were card tables and leather swivel chairs in this compartment; against the wall opposite the couch was a television set; complete with a cabinet full of videotape cassettes featuring movies from *Deep Throat* to *The Maltese Falcon*. Farther back in this compartment were more couches, and a second television set.

The next compartment back was dominated by a long, brass-topped bar. Behind the bar was a butler, who had already laid out a steak-and-salad buffet for us. Beneath the bar, the butler had arranged every conceivable kind of liquor.... At the rear of the plane there was a short hallway, with framed paintings hung on the walls. Two rooms opened off this hallway: a library-study, complete with easy chairs and work tables, and a master bedroom, with a king-size bed and an adjoining bathroom complete with full-size shower. (1974, 1480)

The extravagance of the tour corresponds to the stereotypical image of big-time rock 'n' roll life, and Greene illustrates it in detail. There are parties, trashed hotel rooms, limousines, groupies, and on and on.

The power of the book, and indeed of virtually all Greene's writing, is that he sees and describes the scenes he encounters as would the average person. Though he is obviously a part of the story, he is primarily a recorder of events, and as such he remains largely *out* of the story. Never mind that he includes his reactions—they are as much *our* reactions as his. Though he is not in the background, one does not get the sense that he intrudes on the story in any way.

Greene's weaving of dialogue and observation is noteworthy. He faithfully records dialogue but uses it as another form of illustration rather than a documentary device. That is, quotes do not explain; they unfold a setting or situation just as the details of a room or a person's character traits tell part of the story. In a particularly evocative passage from *Billion Dollar Baby*, Greene exposes Alice Cooper's true self:

Montreal was full of clothes shops that featured the freaky, outlandish, glittery fashions that Alice Cooper had first made popular on stage, and which had since become acceptable street attire for the young and the hip. There were tiny spangled shrink tee shirts, and see-through blouses for men, and rainbow-colored boots with six-inch heels, and denim jackets covered with sequined stars and stripes. All of the stores seemed to be doing a brisk business, and judging from the attire of the young people around town, the sleazo fop look was very much in vogue.

When I got back to the hotel, I stopped by Alice's suite. He and Norm were watching television, and I told them about the clothing stores.

"Yeah, I know," Alice said. "I bought some clothes today."

"What did you get?" I asked him.


He smiled at Norm. "Should I?" Alice said.

"Sure," Norm said. "Go ahead."

"Okay," Alice said. "But don't tell the others."

He went up to his bedroom, which was at the top of a winding staircase. He was gone for about five minutes. Then I heard him call, "Okay."

I looked at the stairs. He came down wearing his purchase of the day. It was a gray flannel suit, cut very conservatively and severely. "It was the only thing I saw that I could stand," he said. (1974, 327-28)

Though he made a point of conducting lengthy interviews with each of the principal members of the group and tour managers (and  wove

them into the book), Greene observes the dialogue around him as he beholds the physical reality surrounding him. It is all part of the story, part of the life that becomes evident to him only after he *processes* his observations by checking his reactions against those of the others on the tour.

What makes his observations especially insightful is his ability to relate the slightly skewed, the lightly troubling. As an episode of "The Twilight Zone" relinquishes its off-balance sensibility only gradually, Greene's stories surrender their vision a little at a time. *Billion Dollar Baby*, piece by piece, reveals the down side of rock 'n' roll, in penetrating passages such as the one describing Greene's last performance on stage:

It was supposed to be a joyous, unbridled, happy bit of slapstick, a final public blast of communal energy for everyone in the tour party. The pie plates and the shaving cream flew, and we all tumbled over one another and slid across the slick stage floor, and it seemed to go on and on. But then, at one point, I stood up and looked out at the audience. They were out of their minds with frenzy. . . . And then I looked back, and I saw Alice. He was standing near the rear of the stage, detached from the lunacy. His arms were hanging limply by his sides. He was not moving. He was just staring out into the shrieking, churning audience, as if hypnotized by what he was seeing. . . . when our eyes met I saw as dejected and empty a look in his face as I ever hope to witness. He shook his head from side to side, once. Then, without waiting for the others, he turned and walked off the stage. (1974, 359-60)

Cooper had become trapped by the image that made him famous. Not only did he become inaccessible and slightly paranoid (he drank only from sealed bottles for fear of being poisoned), but he traded part of his personality for that of the public image presented each night on stage.

Much of Greene's writing carries through that theme of something lost, or someone disappointed. Greene himself, in the autobiographical *Be True to Your School*, longs for his early sixties high school days. In particular, Greene's reconstructed diary of high school circa 1964 is a nostalgic reliving of early sixties teenage life in the Midwest. It is suggestive in a way that invokes the timeliness of growing up:

We went to the Bexley basketball game tonight, and afterward we went over to Steve Pariser's house to hang out with the seniors. The seniors were all smoking pipes.

We cruised in Gary Robins's car, and they lent us their pipes. I smoked one with some cherry-flavored tobacco. I didn't know you weren't supposed to inhale it, so I just kept sucking it in and not saying anything, and I felt my head getting dizzier and dizzier. No one else seemed to be affected by it, though, so I just kept it up. Everyone in the car had pipes in their mouths, and the whole inside of the car was filled with smoke. You could hardly breathe.

By the time they dropped me at home I felt like I was about to pass out. All I could feel was that burning cherry flavor in my throat and this hot sickness in my

stomach. I've just thrown up twice; Mom knocked on the door to ask if I was all right—I guess she heard me in the bathroom. Never again. (1987, 54)

It is in his short pieces, though, that Greene best evokes the themes of disappointment and loneliness—perhaps because the shorter format forces him to reach quickly for the heart of the matter. Among the most evocative is a story in *American Beat* titled "Night Callers," about Audrey Loehr, a woman who approves credit card charges for a gas company. Greene writes:

Most of the time they are straightforward business calls—gas dealers dialing to confirm a charge card.

But on weekends . . . late at night, the obscene calls will begin. . . .

She has it figured out: "At that time of the night, most gas stations are manned by only one person," she said. "It's usually a young man who has been assigned to work all night. He's alone there, and it's dark, and there's no one to talk to."

"I just answer the calls," she said. "When I find out that it's one of those calls, I hang up. But I always silently wish that the men find inner peace, and that they somehow get better." (1983, 24-25)

In Greene's work generally, as in this story, there is no social analysis. He is a reporter, and telling stories is what he does best. But the social commentary is there, in the understanding and consideration given to everyday lives. It is in the expression Greene finds by giving voice to the decisions, the trade-offs, that are made daily.

Indeed, much of Greene's work carries through a theme of exchange. In *Good Morning, Merry Sunshine*, Greene's journal of his daughter's first year, the focus shifts—this time it is on Greene himself, and the changes brought about it in his life by his daughter. He has traded in barhopping for going home to be with her, traded his study for a nursery, and we see him balancing his professional drive with the happiness he derives from being at home:

A sixteen-year-old high school girl came to see me at the newspaper late this afternoon. She has been coming around for about three years; she will disappear for months on end, and then show up with news about her life . . . in the middle of listening to her I realized that I don't necessarily want to be in Chicago anymore. I have a little girl who has to grow up in this world; I'm not sure I want her to grow up with the same diversions that this girl was talking about. Maybe you can't run away from the changes that have overtaken the world; but there must be a way to do your work and yet avoid an environment that offers readily available dope and booze and gang membership and one-night stands with famous young television stars. There must be a place where sixteen-year-old girls don't automatically turn for companionship to thirty-five-year-old men whom they've seen in their newspapers. (1984, 146-47)

And though *Good Morning, Merry Sunshine* is a book about Bob Greene, his hopes and fears, he still does not get in the way of presenting a slice of life that is interesting without being sloppily sentimental or corny. True, one has to wonder how the most banal events in his daughter's life can maintain any poignancy. But they do, and therein lies Greene's strength. He lacks pretentiousness and does not aim at being profound. Instead it is most ordinary events that he reports on, be it in ordinary situations like *Good Morning, Merry Sunshine*, extraordinary ones like *Billion Dollar Baby*, or some combination such as that found in his columns.

Perhaps that is the key to Greene's ability to keep from drying up despite writing hundreds of daily columns. It is the smaller, everyday events that he covers that make his work interesting and worthwhile and that keep Greene squarely within the ranks of journalists. Indeed, such events are the bread and butter of journalism. They are the points at which the news intersects with human life, and Greene expresses this human, emotional face of the news in a manner that betrays no bias, only thoughtfulness.

"Kathy's Abortion," for instance, *American Beat*'s powerful account of a young woman's abortion, is neither an argument for or against abortion nor a report of the facts surrounding the issue. It is, instead, Kathy's story, but Greene gives it a distinct focus and a specific shape by choosing how to tell it and what to tell. For instance, he begins this way:

"Oh Jesus," she moaned softly. She squeezed my hand. The vacuum machine purred steadily and the fetus that was her unborn child was sucked through a clear plastic hose and into a large glass bottle.

"Oh," she said again, and scratched my forearm.

"We're almost done," the doctor said. "I just have to check and make sure you're all clean and empty."

She squeezed my hand harder.

He then switches from that dramatic moment to the previous afternoon, and Kathy describes how she "felt guilty about not feeling guilty." She talks about the growth inside her not being a baby, and Greene writes: "That night Kathy went to see a play at the Goodman Theatre. The production was *Much Ado About Nothing*."

He regularly provides this type of ironic contrasting in the piece, at one point allowing the word "Catholic" to stand as its own single-word sentence and a paragraph's conclusion, or noting that the song "Stayin' Alive" plays as Kathy lies on her back in the operating room, and that the emotionally wrought and culturally significant process takes only two and a half minutes. The article's controlling irony comes from the peculiar shared intimacy between Greene, the narrator, and Kathy, who met Greene only twenty-four hours before the abortion. "Kathy's Abortion" ends with just a hint of ambiguous tension, which has been running through the piece from the start:

At 10:15 A.M. Kathy and I walked out of the Concord Medical Center and into the sunlight. The counselor had told her to eat some lunch and then to rest for the remainder of the day.

"I don't want to think about it now," Kathy said. "I was on the bed in the recovery room... and all of a sudden I wanted to burst out and cry a whole lot. I looked at the ceiling and... I tried to think about Miami. I didn't want to think about what had happened. I looked up at the ceiling and I tried to pretend I was in Miami." (1983, 50-54)

Greene is, ultimately, keeping journals, be they his own (*Good Morning, Merry Sunshine*) or someone else's (*Billion Dollar Baby*, "Kathy's Abortion"), long or short. Yet the bits and pieces he chooses to reveal shape a complete and coherent narrative unlike the fractured tales one usually finds in a diary. Greene is simultaneously journal keeper and editor, keeping a record of what goes on around him, finding meaning in the events and conversations he records, and organizing that meaning into a comprehensible tale.

It is the struggle between the timeliness of journalism and the timelessness of literature that makes Greene's work absorbing, particularly in the case of *Good Morning, Merry Sunshine*, based as it is on the matter-of-fact chronicle of his daughter's first year of life. Greene writes quintessential "human interest" stories, peopled with immediately memorable characters and resonant narratives. While he seems well aware of journalism's emphasis on timeliness, on newsworthiness, Greene also seeks to illuminate what is timeless about the stories he tells, and that is what makes Bob Greene more a storyteller and less a traditional journalist.

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