

**A SOURCEBOOK OF
AMERICAN
LITERARY JOURNALISM**

Representative Writers in an
Emerging Genre

Edited by THOMAS B. CONNERY



GREENWOOD PRESS
New York • Westport, Connecticut • London

1992

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Jane Kramer's writing for the *New Yorker* and *Village Voice* (collected and augmented in her several books) features her reports from countries around the world. Morocco, Sweden, Uganda—dozens of exotic locations have been the backdrop for her explorations inside the lives and cultures of individuals who seem to be always on the move. Kramer sometimes writes about famous and well-known people such as Kurt Waldheim and Klaus Barbie, whose portrayals figure prominently in *Europeans*, or the simultaneously pointed and flattering characterization of poet Allen Ginsberg in her first widely reviewed book, *Allen Ginsberg in America*.

But it is Kramer's depictions of ordinary people and their traditions, rituals, and everyday lives that allow her to delve deeply into the psyche of the culture she is examining. The four families she writes about in *Unsettling Europe*, for instance, represent a class of citizens that has fallen through the gaps in Europe's post-World War II restructuring. Modernization, the sweeping economic, political, and ideological reorganization that accelerated almost exponentially, and whose effects have been most visible in 1980s Poland, is Kramer's topic. But she approaches it by observing the people modernization has set adrift, people uprooted physically and culturally.

Predrag Ilic, for instance, lives in Sweden, one of 10 million foreign workers living in Western Europe, struggling to make enough money to support his family in Sweden and build a house in his hometown. Ilic is from Yugoslavia, but millions like him come from Greece, Italy, Albania, Hungary, Turkey, and Spain as well. Kramer captures his homesickness by watching his actions and interpreting his moods. Ilic himself speaks very little; there is little dialogue, a smattering of monologue, and overall the narrative closely resembles fiction. On the journalistic level, it is an article about foreign workers in Europe; on the literary plane it is a story about

a lonely, displaced man. Instead of dialogue, passages such as the following illustrate his state of mind:

In August of a good year, Predrag comes home with 10,000 kronor. August, he is somebody, a gentleman on holiday with his family, a gentleman with a wallet full of cash and a 1967 Peugeot. But in a month the money is gone, and he flees—warily enough to pay for the food and gas on the long drive north to Soderteralje—before the confidence he has shored up over a month of spending is gone, too. . . .

Winters in Soderteralje, Predrag lives a kind of half-life. He says that in his mind he does not live there at all, that in his mind he is always home. He sits by the kitchen window in his little flat, listening to Serbian music on a secondhand short-wave radio, staring at snapshots in a family album that by now is entirely given over to the villa under construction, nibbling on chunks of Yugoslavian cheese and sausage that he buys, Saturdays, at the Haymarket in downtown Stockholm, drinking the sirovitz he smuggles into Sweden each September in empty beer bottles. (1981, 82–83)

Ultimately, Kramer breaks down the lines between sociology and journalism by engaging in a form of social history that meshes the individual and myth. Illic and the millions like him scattered about Europe are deeply connected, and Kramer implicitly makes a social representation that implicates her own feeling and judgments, by way of the graphic, select details she reports and by her choice of subject. She reveals much about her intention (and her journalistic sensibilities) in the introduction to *Unsettling Europe*:

I wrote about the particular people in this book because I liked them (or at least most of them), because they moved me, because they had what seems to me more and more to have been a remarkable kind of courage. A professor of the genre that usually refers to itself as "neo-Marxist" pleased me the other day by complaining that my "sociology" of Italian Communism fell away (he meant apart) when the Communists themselves took over the narrative of "The San Vincenzo Cell" and distracted me with their rich and eccentric histories as "people." I do not believe much in sociologies. In a way, the people in this book are my analogue to what my friend would probably call "alienation." And the often ordinary details of their lives, the dramas that absorb them, would be *their* answer, I imagine, to the hypotheses of armchair class analysis. . . .

It is the triumph of these private people over their public "sociology" that interested me. (1981, xvii–xviii)

Honor to the Bride, Kramer's third book (portions of which appeared in the *New Yorker*), marks the expansion of her sociological interests. Written during a stay in Morocco, the story is an Arabian fable about Khadija, the thirteen-year-old daughter (and only valuable, convertible asset) of Omar ben Allel. Khadija, while taking a walk, is kidnapped and taken to a brothel, where she loses her virginity—the very thing that made her valuable to Omar.

Honor to the Bride is an important development in Kramer's writing. It shows her skill as a journal-keeper (and, by extension, as a journalist), and it is very entertaining. What it offers is an extraordinary look into Arab values, via Kramer's extensive use of dialogue and a narrative that propels the reader into an exotic world of mosques, seers, and whitewashed huts:

Monday, June 19th: This morning, Omar told Dawia that he was of many minds on the subject of their daughter. Now that she had been stolen, he said, he could not help thinking that perhaps she should stay stolen forever and spare him a reconciliation which would bring great hshuma [shame] to everyone. Still, yesterday the blind seer claimed to have "seen" Khadija in a white hut near a lemon tree somewhere south of the city, and he was insisting that it was Allah's will that Omar go looking for her there. (Like most of the men in Sidi Youssef, Omar often said that the seer, the shuwwaf, had no power—"If he is blind, tell me, how can he see?") Omar would ask whenever Dawia slipped a dirham from the mint money into her pocket and paid the seer a visit—but already, since Khadija's disappearance, he had sent Dawia down the road for a consultation five times.)

Finally, Omar came to the conclusion that he could not abandon Khadija entirely. Dawia had been refusing food as a mark of grief, and Sidi Mohammed had been bawling all morning for his sister, who had always been next to him at night on the family's sleeping carpet. (1970, 32)

Essentially, *Honor to the Bride* reads like a folk tale, or, as Kramer calls it in the book's introduction, a love story. As with all good journalism, it is astounding that Kramer was at the scene of such revealing moments. But it is likely that she is better able than most to understand which moments are revealing and which are not. It is also likely that she is able to understand which people are most revealing of their culture, and it is by way of that understanding that she allows her subjects to interpret society.

Generally, Kramer's writing can be divided into two categories. *Honor to the Bride* is an indication of the intimate style of personality profile that Kramer would bring to fruition in *The Last Cowboy*. *Europeans*, along with many of Kramer's *New Yorker* pieces, is evidence of her interest in political and intellectual trends, though she rarely abandons writing about people. In a revealing interview in *Contemporary Authors*, Kramer said:

I enjoy switching back and forth between two types of pieces, because each allows me to learn about a country and its people in different ways. . . . While I enjoy the challenge of the theoretical pieces, I find it equally important to come back to the personal. In truth, I prefer the profiles. When I write them I am consciously creating; they are about real people, but I structure them as novels. (May 1983, 312–13)

In due time it becomes apparent that Kramer is celebrating the idiosyncratic expressiveness of the people she writes about. That she treats her books as novels is a clue to her contempt for sociology; it does not account

for the distinctive resilience she finds among people such as Omar ben Allal and Predrag Ilie.

In these terms Kramer's greatest success is her book *The Last Cowboy*. Having spent several years in Europe, Kramer returned to New York and embarked on a search for America. Her journey mirrored the traditional journalistic adventure that attracted writers from Kerouac to Capote. Kramer decided to go west, to find cowboys, the quintessential American character. Instead she discovered Henry Blanton, the "last cowboy," a man caught between his desire to live in the mythological "old West" and his life as a *modern*, professional cowboy.

Blanton, who had just turned forty when Kramer met him in Texas, manages a 90,000 acre ranch—for someone else. He seems all too aware that he will never manage a ranch of his own. And, it seems, he understands that his life will remain forever mundane, untouched by the cowboy myth he so desperately wishes to live and whose evanescence frustrates him.

Though it is unlikely that prior to researching *The Last Cowboy* Kramer had been any further west than New Jersey, she maintains a familiarity with Texas, a familiarity based on the common American myths and traditions that guide her (despite ill-chosen cowboy boots). Her American heritage serves her well—she knows what questions to ask Blanton. But it is her skill as a journalist that allows her to formulate and ask those questions. And what makes this book her best is precisely that she finds the answers mysterious, and each new question she asks belies the wonder of her discovery—but still her questioning never intrudes. She scans the myth:

It took . . . the imagination of Easterners to produce a proper cowboy—a cowboy whom children could idolize, and grown men, chafing at their own domesticated competence, hold as a model of some profoundly masculine truth. . . . The proper cowboy was a fiction appropriate to a frontier so wild and inhospitable that most Easterners regarded it as a landscape of Manichaean possibilities. He became for those Easterners the frontier's custodian. They made him Rousseau's Emile with a six-gun. They turned man-in-nature into a myth of natural man, and added natural justice to ease the menace of a place that lay beyond their hegemony and their institutions. (1977, 6-7)

Then she probes it:

There was not much room in the cowboy myth for the real cowboys of the nineteenth century—range bums and drifters and failed outlaws, freed slaves and impoverished half-breeds, ruined farmers from the Reconstruction South and the tough, wild boys from all over who were the frontier's dropouts, boys who had no appetite for the ties of land or family, who could make a four-month cattle drive across a thousand miles and not be missed by anyone. . . . Henry Blanton's grandfather Abel was one of the ruined farmers. (9)

Finally, Kramer observes Henry Blanton's legacy, and weighs myth against Blanton's experience. Chronically underpaid by the ranch owner, Blanton strikes a deal with him for some calves—but is warned by friends that he should sign a contract. His responses illustrate the intersection of myth and reality and are the highlight of Kramer's exploration of American values:

"Seems to me a man's handshake ought to be enough. My Granddaddy Abel never signed no contract. My granddaddy always said a man's word should be his contract, and that's what I do believe, and that's what any cowboy believes, and"—he took a long drink—"that's how I'm going to live." (85)

The connection to the unsettled *Europeans* is obvious: alienation is the link. Kramer's expression of the myth to which Henry Blanton clings is as telling of America's cultural underpinnings as it is of Blanton's situation. But the American imagination which constructed the West is of little help to Blanton. The fact that he shares in that construction only serves to alienate him from the social organization of his surroundings. He knows what it is like to be a cowboy (movies provide the evidence), he knows what he wants cowboys to be like, but he also instinctively knows that it is difficult to mesh myth and reality.

The Last Cowboy is an account of the rituals and social structures of the mythic West as they intersect with the real world—it just so happens that the intersection takes place in the person of Henry Blanton. And that is what makes *The Last Cowboy* so like a novel. The scenes Kramer depicts are as evocative as those in a Louis L'Amour book or a John Wayne movie. And Blanton himself draws most of his inspiration from countless viewings of Glenn Ford and Gary Cooper movies:

Henry valued his authority. . . . He liked to sit on the wagon, waiting, with his scratch pad in his hand and a pencil behind his ear, and he made it a point to be properly dressed for the morning's work in his black boots, a pair of clean black jeans, and his old black hat and jacket. Henry liked wearing black. The Virginian, he had heard, wore black, and so had Gary Cooper in the movie "High Noon," and now Henry wore it with a kind of innocent pride, as if the color carried respect and a hero's stern, elegant qualities. Once, Betsy discovered him at the bathroom mirror dressed in his black gear, his eyes narrowed and his right hand poised over an imaginary holster. (17)

Blanton, though, knows in his heart that he is not Gary Cooper, is not at all like him, and the knowledge erodes his belief in himself and his circumstances; he grew up with the mythical West much the way boys in New York did, by way of the movies:

Henry's Granddaddy Wesley took him to the movies. Every other Sunday . . . they drove in Wesley's jeep a hundred and five miles to Amarillo and made the rounds

of the movie theaters, watching one Western after another, with the old man poking and pointing and guffawing, and sometimes even shouting at the screen. Afterward, at the soda fountain, they went over the day's movies, one by one, discussing what was accurate and appropriate and what was not. . . . Henry and Tom started playing hooky on weekdays and hitching rides to Amarillo alone. They took up brooding like Joel McCrea. They practiced staring into sunsets. They tried on John Wayne's wise, squinty looks and Gary Cooper's virile silences. They lit campfires in the backyard and sat there after supper, alert to all sorts of danger in the darkness past the shed. They rode their horses as if rustlers were after them, or wild Indians. They longed for six-guns. They kept the girls in town giggling as they trotted down Main Street with their empty holsters, tipping big black hats to everyone they saw. (97-98)

A boy in New York may see a John Wayne western and play cowboys and Indians; Blanton, due to his upbringing and his environment, wished to live the cowboy life he saw in the movies. But, like most of the figures Kramer writes about throughout her books and articles, Blanton cannot make his dreams and reality mesh. Blanton's sadness and alienation are felt by the reader as it becomes plain that Blanton's reality is wonderful in and of itself. It is only by comparison to myth that it pales. To quote singer/songwriter Lynn Canfield, "the mundane can be beautiful, too." Kramer's ability to show the beauty and wonder of everyday people, who are nonetheless authentic and substantive, is her real strength.

Her talent at conveying the displacement such people feel in a society that rigidly segments dreams and reality is social commentary of the most powerful order. Kramer's settings, plots, and characters are not only *based* in reality, they *are* real. Perhaps the names have been changed to protect the characters. But where does one draw the line between fiction and nonfiction? Such distinctions can be made easily in a library. Kramer's approach, to write about real people in real situations as candidly as possible, is not much different from a novelist's—or a journalist's. Possibly the main feature that distinguishes *The Last Cowboy* as nonfiction is Kramer's inclusion of facts and details about the cattle industry and ranching. Her writing in these sections is so influenced by the *New Yorker's* reporting style that one cannot help being aware of the reality of the cattle industry. In chapters that divide Henry Blanton's narrative from Kramer's reporting, she explores the political and economic history of "the new ranching":

There are parts of America where ranching has kept its character. Up in Montana, the ranchers still run herds of their favorite cows, and their cows calve every spring, and their yearlings pasture in the summer on mountains that the state preserves as open range. But the Panhandle is not one of those places. West Texans live on the frontier of money. They believe in luck and high stakes and big killings—in oil splashing up suddenly from a neighbor's pasture, in feedyards that in ten years' time are servicing a million steers. . . . Memory is short in west Texas, and only the cow-

boys and the rich widows talk much anymore about the good old days of ranching. (76-77)

Such passages provide an alternate narrative that helps explain Blanton's fractured existence. On the one hand he is attracted to the cowboy legend. On the other hand he is relentlessly buffeted by the pecuniary nature of modern ranching. It is Kramer's weaving together of the two narratives that causes *The Last Cowboy* to fall between the cracks of the standard definitions of fiction and nonfiction. Blanton's story, as he tells it and as real as it may be, is rooted in romantic ideals of the old West. But his circumstances are structured by the market forces that define the cattleman's usefulness. It may very well be that Blanton would have been better off watching episodes of "Dallas" instead of westerns.

The end of *The Last Cowboy* brings the narrative strands together and provides a much different view of the West than any fiction might. Instead of saddling up for a shootout with a rancher whose prize bulls have worked over a cow, Blanton settles for getting drunk and castrating the bulls. The myth of the West is not exploded—it still lives in Blanton and his friend Sam, who will pass their ideas on to their children. Ironically, the conversions Kramer records throughout the book seem like a parody of life on the range and undermine the cowboys' intentions. For instance: "I'd say here's four men what don't like working with these chutes." Blanton's friend Sam says. The image of John Wayne (with Walter Brennan teetering behind him) is irrepressibly evoked. The question, then, is not whether their children will learn the skills necessary to be cowboys, but how and from whom they will acquire the mythology (and reality) of the American West. Kramer exposes the *reality* of the West, in scenes that elicit anger, sadness, and pity. A novelist couldn't ask for more.

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