

SHOCK HORROR

THE TABLOIDS IN ACTION

Ever wondered what kind of person writes your daily paper? Or where they get their stories? Or who decides what goes in? Or what is news? Or why so many newspapers are obsessed with sex, violence and such non-news items as what Madonna eats for breakfast or the drinking habits of Oliver Reid? Look no further.

Dog Eat Dog is written by a former tabloid journalist who spent ten years in Fleet Street covering everything from a randy prison chef who reputedly ran a vice ring from the prison kitchen, to an Iberian 'saint' who hadn't eaten for six years. Unlike most of the exclusives he penned for the *Sunday Mirror*, Wensley Clarkson's memoirs are refreshingly honest, if remarkably tame.

An incredibly poorly written book in a purely grammatical sense: littered with expletives, phrases like *try and* instead of *try to*, and *freelancer* instead of *freelance*, - the author nevertheless brings a breath of fresh air to what was once (and some say still is) an open sewer as he lifts the lid on Fleet Street, candidly confessing to falsifying his expenses, fabricating interviews and ripping off his colleagues.

An entirely different kettle of fish is the much more business-like *Shock Horror*. Written by a media historian, this book surveys the tabloids in action on both sides of the Atlantic, and gives a much more gutsy account of the underhand methods used by the paparazzi, the news manufacturers and manipulators and the just plain nasty.

About the only journalists who come out of this with any credit are those engaged in investigative reporting. It is a curious paradox that the criteria for this are much higher than for any other branch of "tabloidism". Thus, while going undercover, it is standard practice for interviews to be taped and for enough

corroborative evidence to be amassed to "stand up" a case in a court of law. While, when it comes to "celebrities", news, stories and quotes are unscrupulously manufactured. Taylor cites an hypothetical case: a paper rings X's grandmother and asks is X gay? (homosexual). Granny, confused that a national newspaper has rung and asked such a curious question replies, "Well, I don't know. I never thought (about it)".

"Bang! It's a quote....And its done as easily as that."

Many real examples are also given (by both Taylor and Clarkson). The tasteless, sick and depraved are also covered too: the *Sun's* infamous "Gotcha" headline, alluding to the sinking of the *Belgrano* and resultant massive loss of life; the photograph of Elvis Presley lying in his coffin, and many more.

The section on ethics is the shortest in the book, which is not surprising, because ethics is the one thing the gutter press is unquestionably short of. Anyone thinking of betraying an old flame to the tabloids had best get it in writing before spilling the beans:

"There are a lot of times (sic) when I told people that the *Sun* would pay them X amount....Then, when you've got the interview, the editor, on numerous occasions will say....'tell them to fuck off'....unless they've got the gumption or resources to see a lawyer, then they are left high and dry."

The Press Council is of course a watchdog without teeth, so the only recourse most people have against any fifth the press decides to throw at them is through the courts. In practice, it is, with rare exceptions, only the rich who are able to resort to litigation to defend their good name (perhaps). Thus, when in 1987 the *Sun* printed a series of outrageous libels against Elton John, he was able and willing to sue

the paper for what the author considers an equally outrageous sum. This is hardly surprising as she is also a journalist herself.

Predictably, Taylor considers libel in Britain to be "a thriving cottage industry". She completely misses the point that the press is the only institution in this supposed democracy which wields power without the slightest accountability, and often with a total lack of responsibility.

On a (perhaps) lighter note, believers in the supernatural, occult or alien abductions might like to ponder how many of the myths of modern time have been given substance by the press, and not just the tabloids. Although Taylor doesn't mention it, the famous photograph of a captured alien, which fooled amongst others paradoxer, Charles Berlitz, started life as an April Fool's Day joke in a German newspaper in the 1950s. It could be that thirty years hence, berlitz's successors will be writing books based on such headlines as *Cheeseburger Kills Space Alien*, or that yet another Christian evangelising sect will be founded after some New Age Messiah digs up *I Found Face of Jesus on My Fish Finger* from the archives. Though the fact that this latter article was written by a certain paper's religious affairs correspondent, Bertie Ollacks, does at least show that whatever opprobrium may rightly be heaped upon the tabloids by politicians, celebrities and an outraged public, no-one could take them to task better than the *Sunday Sport*.

Dog Eat Dog: Confessions of a tabloid journalist by Wensley Clarkson is published by Fourth Estate at £12.95. ISBN 1-872180-56-6.

Shock Horror: The Tabloids in Action by S. J. Taylor is published by Bantam at £14.99. ISBN 0-593-02106-1.