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Ness, Richard R. *Encyclopedia of Journalists on Film*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020, 532 pp., \$150.00 (hardback).

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Richard R. Ness dives headlong into two debates about films centered on journalism and mass communication in his latest book, *Encyclopedia of Journalists on Film*.

The first debate: What constitutes a “journalism” film? Does the film have to feature the journalist as a primary or instrumental character (e.g. *All the President’s Men*, *Spotlight*)? Or, is it enough if journalists are featured, often as central characters, but journalism itself is only a secondary element of the story (e.g. *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *Richard Jewell*)?

Ness, through the films he chose to include, argues for an expansive concept of “journalism” films—including those movies that are only tangentially about journalism. Ness watched more than 4,000 films but had to whittle that expansive list to 500—still a monumental task. Additional synopses are included in the companion website (textbooks.rowman.com/ness).

The second debate: Is journalism a film genre, or are journalists featured in a variety of genre films? Film historian Jeanine Basinger, in her 1986 book *The World War II Combat Film*, argued that a test for whether a set of movies constitutes a genre is whether a person can generate a definitive list of characteristics found in such movies. “If you can, it’s a genre. If you can’t, it probably isn’t” (pg. 15). Matthew Ehrlich, in *Journalism in the Movies* (2004), argues that journalism movies do have defining features: “aggressive, wisecracking reporters; tough, bellowing editors; fabulous, press-stopping exclusives” (pg. 65). However, Brian McNair, in *Journalists in Film: Heroes and Villains* (2010), argues that journalism is not a genre; instead, journalists are featured in a variety of genre films, including dramas, comedies, satires, thrillers, biopics,

action hero films, war movies, musicals, horror movies, westerns, and documentaries.

Ness’s main argument in writing this book was to identify significant movies about journalism and mass communication in order to reinforce the validity of the journalism film as an established genre. Ness would agree with Ehrlich that there are defining characteristics of journalism movies. Specifically, he writes, the plots of such films “follow a basic pattern involving both an external struggle between the members of the press and outside forces that are trying either to suppress or expose some truth, and an internal struggle within the news organization itself as to how the story should be handled” (pg. vii).

Ness is a professor of Film and Media Studies at Western Illinois University. Additionally, he serves as an associate director of the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture project sponsored by the University of Southern California’s Norman Lear Center. Ness previously authored the book *From Headline Hunter to Superman: A Journalism Filmography* (1997), an encyclopedic collection of more than 2,100 films about journalism and mass communication. Ness writes that he would like readers to view the new book as a reboot instead of a second edition, though, because of his renewed focus on detailed discussion of the films that most clearly define a genre of journalism films.

One major strength of the book is its comprehensiveness. Ness includes films from 1913 (*Fantômas*) to 2019 (*Escaping the Madhouse: The Nellie Bly Story*), including made-for-television and international films from Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hong Kong, Hungary, Italy, and South Africa (and those are just the “A” and “B” listings). Another strength, especially for a reference work, is that each entry prominently features director

and writer credits; a list of the major characters and the actors who portrayed them; the movie studio that produced the film; and the film's running time.

The main weakness of the book is the lack of demarcation for major and minor films. For example, Ness lists *The Front Page* (1931), *All the President's Men* (1976), and *Network* (1976) as three foundational films in the journalism canon. However, the entries for those films have roughly the same amount of synopsis and analysis as the extremely minor entries that precede and succeed them. Ness

would have been better served using more space and thought on major works; greater synopsis and analysis also would signal readers to the relative importance of some films in relation to others.

Ultimately, the book would be a great reference for film scholars and researchers, especially those with an interest in journalism and mass communication. It is not necessarily an appropriate text for a course about journalists in film, though it could be a good secondary text or a reference text available at the university library.