



## BOOK REVIEWS:

### Ode to Local Daily Journalism

Theodore G. Petersen

Bob Gabordi, *The Truth: Real Stories & the Risk of Losing a Free Press in America*. Author House, 2020.

Bob Gabordi spent 41 years in journalism. The Gannett-lifer recently retired as executive editor of *Florida Today* following a stroke, ending a career that spanned the Northeast, Midwest, Appalachia, and the South.

This book documents that career and is an ode to the value of local daily journalism – showing how intrepid reporters hold elected officials accountable, stand up for forgotten victims, mobilize communities around a cause, and from time to time provide some entertainment.

Under Gabordi's leadership, journalists at the *Tallahassee Democrat* exposed the Tallahassee Police Department's fiasco that led to the 2008 death of a Florida State University senior. Rachel Hoffman, a 23-year-old confidential informant, was pulled into the role after getting caught with five ounces of marijuana and some pills. Hoffman was killed in a botched operation, and the *Democrat* didn't let the police department cover it up.

As a reporter in New London, Connecticut, and as editor at the *Marietta (Ohio) Times*, Gabordi's journalism prevented unsolved murder cases from growing cold. He pushed *Florida Today* to create "Murder on the Space Coast," an award-winning podcast about wrongful convictions in Brevard County and the bad cops and prosecutors who made that happen.

As executive editor at the *Huntington (West Virginia) Herald-Dispatch*, he led the coverage of the bizarre story of locals Jim and Penny Fletcher. The two "prototypical 'ugly Americans'" (p. 101) were wrongfully charged with capital murder in St. Vincent and the Grenadines in 1996. The coverage was expensive,

but the *Herald-Dispatch's* tenacity generated pressure and publicity that led to their release.

Gabordi writes, "Had local journalists not been there, had we not been willing to do – and spend – whatever it took to tell it, the outcome would not have been as happy for the Fletchers. It was journalism that mattered" (p. 94). But this quote also highlights the book's elegiac quality. If he's right, had the Fletchers been accused in 2020 – when newspapers can barely cover local courthouses, much less international murder trials – they would have been convicted and maybe even executed. Officials cheat without watchdogs. Murders get covered up. Justice is harder to achieve; injustice harder to see.

Gabordi writes about his efforts to innovate – not only in coverage but in the business model. He was successful in the former, but struggled in the latter. "It was like trying to change the oil in your car," he writes, "while driving down the highway at 70 mph" (p. 167).

I recommend this book for an Introduction to Journalism course so students see for themselves the pure joy Gabordi got from his career in journalism in the hopes that it will be infectious; so students see that this industry needs new ideas – how to deliver information and how to pay for it; and so students see that small-town journalists can make big impacts.

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