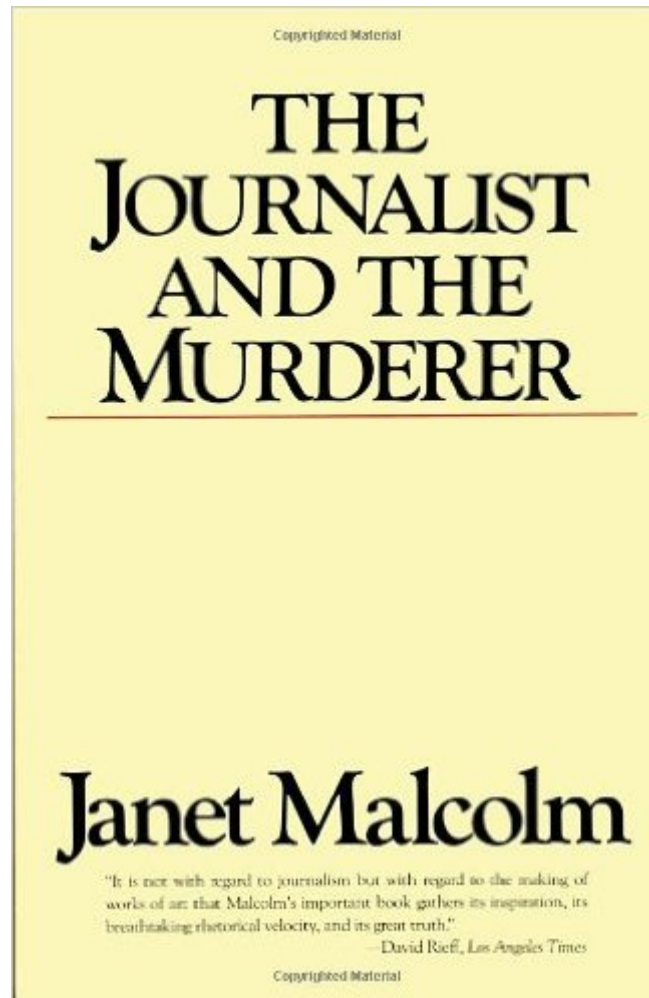


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The Journalist And The Murderer



Synopsis

In two previous books, Janet Malcolm explored the hidden sides of, respectively, institutional psychoanalysis and Freudian biography. In this book, she examines the psychopathology of journalism. Using a strange and unprecedented lawsuit as her larger-than-life example -- the lawsuit of Jeffrey MacDonald, a convicted murderer, against Joe McGinniss, the author of *Fatal Vision*, a book about the crime -- she delves into the always uneasy, sometimes tragic relationship that exists between journalist and subject. In Malcolm's view, neither journalist nor subject can avoid the moral impasse that is built into the journalistic situation. When the text first appeared, as a two-part article in *The New Yorker*, its thesis seemed so radical and its irony so pitiless that journalists across the country reacted as if stung. Her book is a work of journalism as well as an essay on journalism: it at once exemplifies and dissects its subject. In her interviews with the leading and subsidiary characters in the MacDonald-McGinniss case -- the principals, their lawyers, the members of the jury, and the various persons who testified as expert witnesses at the trial -- Malcolm is always aware of herself as a player in a game that, as she points out, she cannot lose. The journalist-subject encounter has always troubled journalists, but never before has it been looked at so unflinchingly and so ruefully. Hovering over the narrative -- and always on the edge of the reader's consciousness -- is the MacDonald murder case itself, which imparts to the book an atmosphere of anxiety and uncanniness. *The Journalist and the Murderer* derives from and reflects many of the dominant intellectual concerns of our time, and it will have a particular appeal for those who cherish the odd, the off-center, and the unsolved.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In 1970, a respected army physician named Dr. Jeffrey MacDonald claimed that four strangers broke into his home in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and killed his wife and two daughters. Although an army tribunal tried Dr. MacDonald and cleared him, years later the case was reopened. This time, MacDonald was convicted and sent to prison. Janet Malcolm does not retry the MacDonald case in her book, "The Journalist and the Murderer." Rather, she examines the issues behind a lawsuit that MacDonald brought in 1984 against his supposed friend, Joe McGinniss, author of "Fatal Vision." Joe McGinniss posed as an ally of Jeffrey MacDonald for years. McGinniss lived with MacDonald for a while and even joined his defense team. McGinniss sent MacDonald sympathetic letters in support of his cause. In these letters, he frequently expressed his support for MacDonald. It was only after "Fatal Vision" was published that MacDonald discovered the truth. McGinniss did not believe in MacDonald's innocence; on the contrary, he portrays MacDonald as a psychopathic murderer. The author posed as a friend for the sole purpose of keeping MacDonald in the dark so that McGinniss would continue to have access to his subject. "Fatal Vision" became a huge bestseller and eventually became a miniseries. Malcolm's book, written in 1990, takes on added significance in 2003, when the ethics of journalists are under fire. Some have been accused of plagiarizing and fabricating stories. The public is beginning to recognize that reporters are fallible and suffer from the same pressures, ambitions, and psychological disorders as other ordinary mortals. This is not merely a condemnation of McGinniss's behavior towards MacDonald.

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