Modern journalism is often the subject of criticism and opposition. Written by a leading authority on language and the media, this engaging book suggests that view is unfair, and that journalists are in fact skilled ‘word weavers’ whose output is cleverly worked into planned patterns. Drawing on a range of authentic news articles, the book traces the development of journalism from its origins to the present day. Aitchison shows how contemporary news writers have inherited an age-old oral tradition, which over the centuries was incorporated into public notices, ballads and newsbooks – eventually providing the basis of the journalism we see today. She argues that, while journalists have very different aims from literary writers, their work can in no way be regarded as inferior. Entertainingly written, The Word Weavers provides a fascinating insight into journalistic writing, and will be enjoyed by anybody wanting to know more about media language.

The Word Weavers
Newshounds and Wordsmiths

Jean Aitchison
Emeritus Rupert Murdoch Professor of Language and Communication, University of Oxford
Shooting the messenger

The street seller of newspapers is growing old. One glance and you can tell that a lifetime of violence has taken its toll.

War and murder have been meat and drink to him. Think of all the catastrophic news of which he has been the bearer, all the sensational headlines he has put through his hands, all the scandal he has spread, all the famous dead of whom his tabloids have spoken badly. At day's end, when he checks how many papers are left, he counts them pensively, as if preparing a defence, as if each were a year for which he simply cannot account.

Dennis O'Driscoll
CONTENTS

List of figures ix
Preface xi
Acknowledgements xv

1 Weaving and worrying 1
   Journalism versus literature?

2 Singers of tales 12
   Oral narrative

3 The tongue of the hand 32
   Speech and writing

4 Hangings, histories, marvels, mysteries 50
   The birth of journalism

5 Calendars of roguery and woe 72
   Daily newspapers

6 Story-telling 96
   Narrating the news

7 Glimmering words 119
   Boiling down and polishing
Contents

8 Painting with words 145
   Imaginative creativity

9 Two ideas for one 165
   Exploring metaphor

10 The role of journalism 187
   Evaluating the views

Epilogue 213

Notes 215
References 234
Index 251
FIGURES

1.1 Condemnation of newspapers  
2.1 Ancient lyre  
3.1 Early clay tokens  
3.2 ‘Tripod’ tablet (section)  
3.3 Txting (text messaging)  
4.1 Ballad singer  
4.2 Execution in London  
4.3 A PERFECT DIURNALL OF THE PASSAGES In Parliament, 10 April 1643  
5.1 Report of Nelson’s death, The Times, 6 November 1805  
5.2 Nelson’s funeral car and funeral casket, The Times, 10 November 1805  
6.1 Moscow swimming pool disaster, The Times, 5 February 2004  
6.2 ANOTHER MURDER IN WHITECHAPEL, The Times, 1 September 1888  
6.3 Newspaper story structure  
7.1 The famous ‘GOTCHA’ Headline, Sun, 4 May 1982  
7.2 Totty with top botty, Sun, 22 Oct. 1999
List of figures

7.3 Murder headline formula 136
7.4 Violent death headline formula 138
7.5 shoes designed to move you 143
8.1 Conjuring with language 146
8.2 Selection and combination 159
9.1 Birdiness rankings 172
9.2 My pear tree has gone bananas 178
10.1 The copycat of Casterbridge 188
10.2 Filtering raw news 200
10.3 Gatekeeping 202
The word weavers is a book about newshounds (journalists) and wordsmiths (literary writers). Both of them are skilled word weavers, whose output is consciously woven into patterns, unlike most of the words spontaneously uttered in everyday speech.

Humans, alone among apes, have a bizarre extra ability. They open and shut their mouths and utter strange, complex noises which their fellow humans understand. In short, they are born to use language. For tens of thousands of years this linguistic talent was purely oral. Humans gossiped, persuaded, informed and entertained one another by word of mouth. These centuries of oral tradition have largely been forgotten. Yet they had an indelible effect on current-day media and literature. Luckily, we can peel away some of the relatively recent layers and reveal a hidden oral core, which had a huge influence on later written output.

Our own early oral tradition is revealed in sage saws and old ballads. These in turn were incorporated into broadsides, chapbooks and newsbooks and, eventually, into modern journalism. A later literary
tradition undervalued these old roots, and (wrongly) proclaimed itself to be superior. This book explores this old rivalry. It shows that the media need to be properly evaluated, and reinstated in their rightful place as parallel to, and in no way inferior to, conventional English literature.

As always, I am enormously grateful to the numerous people who have helped in the emergence of this book. First of all, my thanks go to News International who funded my Chair at Oxford University, the Rupert Murdoch Professorship of Language and Communication, of which I was the first holder. This was a challenging and enjoyable post. All my life I have eagerly gobbled up media output, so it was a privilege to be paid to read and analyse newspapers, and other media, a pastime that I had previously regarded as a spare-time activity. Secondly, my thanks go to the Faculty of English at Oxford, to both students and staff. The English Faculty students who chose to do the final-year option on language and the media undoubtedly sharpened my thoughts on the topic with their challenging questions and thought-provoking essays. I am also grateful for the support I received from numerous members of staff, especially my research assistant Diana Lewis, and colleagues Ros Ballaster, Lynda Mugglestone and John Carey. Thanks also to Worcester College, Oxford, (the old college of Rupert Murdoch) which provided me with colleagues to whom I enjoyed chatting, and an office which was a pleasure to work in: it looked out onto trees and a lake. Numerous others (too many to mention) have helped me in the ten years I was at Oxford. Their
valuable aid is tucked into several sections of this book: they have provided references, suggested interesting angles, and discussed controversial topics. Staff at News International were also generous with their time, especially Jane Reed. Chris Whalley and Richard Bonfield helped me with illustrations involving newspapers. Andrew Winnard, Helen Barton, Elizabeth Davey and Leigh Mueller at Cambridge University Press deserve my thanks for the efficiency with which the book has been produced. Finally, I thank my husband, the lexicographer John Ayto, who sustains me endlessly with encouraging words, non-stop loving kindness, and mouth-watering meals.

Jean Aitchison
The publishers gratefully acknowledge the help of the many organizations in collecting the illustrations and text extracts for this volume. Every effort has been made to obtain permission to use copyright materials; the publishers apologize for any omissions and would welcome these being brought to their attention.

Text extracts

p. v Poem ‘Shooting the messenger’ by Dennis O’Driscoll. Reproduced with the kind permission of Anvil Press Poetry and the Oxford Magazine

p. 122 Evans 2000:75. ‘Edward the donkey’ from Essential English for journalists, editors and writers. Reproduced with the kind permission of The Random House Group Ltd

Acknowledgements


p. 150 William Carlos Williams d. 1963. Poem ‘From a play’ (sixteen lines, 1942), from Williams 1988:44–5. Reproduced with the kind permission of Bloodaxe Books Ltd


Images

Figure 1.1 Condemnation of newspapers, reproduced with the kind permission of the Bodleian library

Figure 3.1 Clay tokens, from David Crystal, The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language, Second Edition, p. 198, reproduced with the kind permission of Cambridge University Press

Figure 4.1 Robin O’Green of Burnley, in O’Connell 1999:2, 253, reproduced with the kind permission of the British Museum

Figure 4.2 ‘A Proper newe Ballad’, Society’s Broadside, in O’Connell 1989:90, reproduced with the kind permission of the Society of Antiquaries

Figure 4.3 A perfect diurnal of the passages In Parliament (Raymond 1993:474), reproduced with the kind permission of the Bodleian library
Figure 5.1 Souvenir edition of *The Times*, 6 November 1805, reproduced with the kind permission of News International

Figure 5.2 Funeral of Nelson, *The Times*, 10 November 1805, reproduced with the kind permission of News International

Figure 6.2 *Another murder in Whitechapel*, *The Times*, 1 September 1888, reproduced with the kind permission of News International

Figure 7.1 *Gotcha*. *Sun*, 4 May 1982, reproduced with the kind permission of News International

Figure 7.2 ‘Denise is Totty with Top Botty’, *Sun*, 22 October 1999, reproduced with the kind permission of News International

Figure 9.1 Birdiness rankings, from Aitchison 2003b:56, reproduced with the kind permission of Blackwell Publishing Ltd