

Reviewed by
Robert K. Landers

The reviewer, a former newspaperman, is associate editor of *The Wilson Quarterly*.

The morning after, Sidney Zion's phone rang. "You rat bastard, you're a criminal," began the voice. "I'll get you for this." The ranter turned out to be a fellow journalist, an old friend, outraged that Zion the night before had gone on a New York

Book World

READ ALL ABOUT IT!

The Collected Adventures of a Maverick Reporter.

By Sidney Zion.

(Summit, 363 pp. \$16.50)

SCANDALS, SCAMPS AND SCOUNDRELS: The Casebook of an Investigative Reporter.

By James Phelan.

(Random House, 223 pp. \$13.95)

radio talk show and informed Mr. and Mrs. Nixonian America and all the ships at sea that it was one Daniel Ellsberg from whom *The New York Times'* Neil Sheehan had gotten the Pentagon Papers.

Zion, on a lark, just to impress his old Times buddies, had set out to determine Sheehan's source; that accomplished, he realized he had a "hot story" and lacked only a stage on which to perform the sensational unmasking. A London newspaper was eager to oblige, but its lawyers wanted first to know his sources; these, of course, Zion virtuously declined to reveal. Finally, the excited "maverick reporter" bolted for a talk show on WMCA—and the rest is not history but only journalism.

Zion's act of revelation generated transient excitement but had no larger consequences (except, to be sure, for himself, for as a result of his perfidy he was blacklisted for a while by *The Times*, where he had spent close to five "merry" years as a reporter). Little, if anything, in the wider world would have been significantly different had Zion remained silent that night. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* had been only 20 minutes behind him, and Ellsberg himself, in any event, hardly had planned to remain shyly in the shadows.

Zion had known this; indeed, he had feared not that the American public would be denied an important truth if he failed to reach a microphone, but merely that the public would get the "news" first from someone else. Hence, his frenzied rush to convey a "hot story" of dubious significance.

The member of the herd so engaged on assignment has at least the excuse that he must feed his children; the maverick leaves himself naked before the charge that he seeks merely to feed his ravenous ego. Zion, who intermittently practices law, musters the defense that a reporter without a newspaper is a reporter still. Yet a self-reliant reporter so completely in thrall to his desire to "scoop the world press" hardly seems an exemplar of skeptical journalistic detachment.

Before he vaulted onto the set of "The Front Page," as performed by

The News Sleuths

the inmates of the city room of *The New York Post*, circa 1963, Zion had been an assistant U.S. attorney in Newark. On the evidence of the pieces he has assembled in this collection-cum-memoir intended to show him as a Ben Hecht of a guy, Zion the journalist has remained essentially a prosecutor. (He even romanticizes Meyer Lansky and kindred outlaws.) The defendants in the dock range from George McGovern (allegedly a "fake reform candidate" who was "groomed" for the 1972 Democratic nomination by the party "bosses") to the Burger Court (allegedly bent on eviscerating "the givens" of our American heritage) by reinterpreting the Warren Court "revolution" that, mysteriously, gave us the aforementioned "givens" to rock 'n' roll (its ascendancy allegedly "all a hype—an effort to sell a lower form of music to impressionable adolescents"). Mr. D.A.'s record of convictions, at least in my court, is not very impressive. (Still, he may be right about rock music.)

The last word on Zion's sort of reporter belongs to James Phelan, who modestly tags himself a mere solver of journalistic jigsaw puzzles: "To approach a tangle of facts thus,

as a puzzle to be solved rather than as an indictment to be prosecuted, is an effective safeguard against the journalistic hazards of partisanship or ideological distortion. In their fervor, partisans and ideologues sometimes hammer jigsaw pieces into holes they don't fit. That kind of solution affords a puzzle-addict no satisfaction whatever."

But useful as the puzzle analogy may be to a reporter trying to keep his perspective as he delves into, and then writes about, a complicated case, it cannot often be adequate to encompass the larger reality. When Clifford Irving popped up in the early 1970s with his fake Howard Hughes autobiography (actually drawn from the manuscript of a former Hughes aide's memoirs that Phelan had ghost-written), that perhaps was merely a "puzzle." But when the U.S. Air Force in the early 1960s decided to press murder charges against an airman it knew to be innocent, just in an effort to avoid having to explain how it had gotten a confession from him—that was less a puzzle than a simple outrage. As Phelan, of course, well knows.

He has been an investigative re-

porter, mostly for the Saturday Evening Post and other magazines, for four decades. What he has done here is to use the puzzle analogy as a literary device and to rework his most interesting pieces so as to produce, in effect, a series of short nonfiction detective stories, with a puzzle-addict named James Phelan in the Lew Archer role. The stories are engrossing; several are excellent; a few are even important.

In journalistic circles, Phelan was long labeled a Howard Hughes "watcher," as, in fact, he was (although he never saw or spoke to the billionaire and did not admire him). *Time's* famous cover story about Hughes' tragic last years was based on Phelan's research; he retells that story here (albeit "in my own language" rather than in *Time-ese*). Indeed, Hughes is the nearest equivalent in Phelan's "casebook" to a Professor Moriarty. Yet the best story in the book does not involve Hughes at all; instead it tells of New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison's bizarre and chilling attempt to railroad an innocent man for allegedly conspiring to assassinate John F. Kennedy. Garrison fooled the *New Republic*, the *New York Review of Books* and *Ramparts* magazine for a while, but Phelan got the story straight. His retelling of it here is worthy of Ross MacDonal. Read All About It!—in Phelan's casebook.