

“More nearly right”: Allowing Ambiguity of Female Solidarity in Elizabeth G. Jordan’s *Tales of the City Room*

Monica Petrilli

English

In *Ladies of the Press* (1936), New York *Herald Tribune* front-page reporter Ishbel Ross calls Elizabeth G. Jordan “one of the really notable newspaper women of the country, at a time when merit and recognition were a combination not readily found among the women who had gained a foothold in Park Row” (179). Jordan successfully distinguished herself as a prominent journalist at a time when women struggled to achieve such recognition. In her first published book of fiction, a collection titled *Tales of the City Room*, Jordan portrays a group of female journalists struggling to negotiate their gender with their professional identities.¹ The stories, many of which reveal tensions between feminist concerns and professional interests, influenced many women to enter the profession.² Yet, many of the stories offer ambivalent attitudes toward the advancement of women and the role of female solidarity in the profession. An analysis of “Miss Van Dyke’s Best Story,” “A Point of Ethics,” and “Ruth Herrick’s Assignment,” reveals the extent to which women aligned themselves with feminism in the struggle to resolve their often conflicting identities as journalists and as women.³

Female journalists were likely concerned that membership in a gendered group would undermine their professionalism. Situating the stories in a historical context of professionalism and feminism,⁴ I intend to demonstrate the ways in which the male-dominated profession affected the presence of female solidarity both within and beyond the profession. A close investigation of the aforementioned stories is particularly relevant because Jordan established her career at the New York *World* with “True Stories of the News,” a daily column that treated otherwise minor news items *as if* they were fictional. She later employed the imaginative narrative approach of the column to write her fictional stories.⁵ Through her creative explorations, Jordan wrote about the strategies, solutions, and shortcomings of women who strove to resist marginalization in male-dominated profession.⁶

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a tremendous growth in the number of female journalists. U.S. Census figures demonstrate that only 288 out of 12,308 journalists were women in 1880. By 1900, out of a total of 30,098 journalists, 2,193 were women.⁷ Acknowledging the independent presence of women in the profession, the *Journalist* devoted its entire January 26, 1889 issue to profiles of fifty female editors and reporters. The editor even apologized for not previously devoting more space to women. However, the profiles recognized these women not just as able journalists, but also as charming and feminine wives and mothers, thus casting women primarily in a traditional, domestic light.⁸

Despite such inroads into the profession, women thus largely occupied a marginal status based on stereotypes. Many male journalists endorsed the ‘findings’ of Edward Bok, editor of the *Ladies Home Journal*, that “a girl cannot live in the free-and-easy atmosphere of the local room or do the work required of a reporter without undergoing a decline in the innate qualities of

womanliness or suffering in health.”⁹ He argued that women would lose their femininity, and therefore their appeal to men, when exposed to the rough-and-tumble environment of the newsroom.

Firmly anchored within a male-oriented construction of knowledge, the newly codified dictate of objectivity¹⁰ seemingly welcomed but ultimately excluded women from the professions. Objectivity directly opposed the long-standing stereotypes of women as emotional, subjective, and irrational. Many women embraced the impersonality of professional expertise to forge ahead. In *The Groundings of Modern Feminism*, Nancy Cott argues that the potential to access objectivity motivated many women to enter the professional arena: “Neutral scientific standards, based on knowledge rationally and objectively apprehended, constituted an alternative to subjectively determined sex constraints and an avenue to democratization of the power of knowledge” (216). Furthermore, many women recognized the professions as “arbiters of custom and convention as well as livelihood” and therefore “[their] exclusion from [professions] rankled not only as a reflection but as a positive shaper of sexual hierarchy (215). In theory, objective standards for access to and advancement within the professions were of great benefit to women.

However, many editors maintained stereotypes to insist that women lacked the ability to engage in objective discourse. When editors gave women journalists the opportunity to cover important stories, they defined and judged their work by standards of femininity. Searching for signs of emotion and inexperience, editors questioned their communicative competence. Editors therefore primarily hired women as ‘women journalists’ in order to attract female audiences; they assigned them topics outside of ‘serious’ reportage, such as society news. The emergence of ‘women’s pages’ ensured that female journalists played a central role in writing stories exclusively for women.¹¹

Elizabeth G. Jordan, however, severely criticized the kinds of writing she understood to be typically associated with women. When she began her career in the 1880’s editing the woman’s page of a Milwaukee newspaper, she detested her responsibility to supply “light and warmth to the women of the universe.” She expressed her resentment in her autobiography, *Three Rousing Cheers*: “I myself was not a sentimentalist. It is a miracle that the stuff I had to carry in ‘Sunshine’ did not permanently destroy my interest in newspaper work” (14). Later at the *New York World* in 1890, she specified her willingness to work hard at any assignment except society news. “I drew the line at that” (48). In *Ladies of the Press*, Isabel Ross confirms such a view of Jordan:

She made an impression from the first moment. She had an elaborate wardrobe and was dashing in appearance, and she managed to get into the most inaccessible places. She was never bothered with minor women’s page assignments, but combined the best features of the stunt age with sound writing. (178)

Jordan insisted upon her ability to write objectively for the general public while maintaining her femininity.

Though Jordan appeared to have achieved a balance between objectivity and femininity, many female journalists struggled to conceal their femininity in order to gain credibility in a man’s field. According to Deborah Chambers, Linda Steiner, and Carole Fleming, women journalists were often faced with a central paradox:

Those who refused to accept restrictions on what they could write about and who were not suitably feminine at work were branded as personally deviant, while those who accepted the limitations imposed on them and allowed themselves to be treated as

feminine were professionally marginalized. By marking out the gender of women journalists as odd and abnormal while treating the gender of male journalists as neutral, male editors created an effective barrier to women's success. (24)

Though Jordan ostensibly managed to avoid such a paradox, she explored it in her short story, "Miss Van Dyke's Best Story."

"Miss Van Dyke's Best Story": An Absence of Female Solidarity within the Profession

The character named Miss Van Dyke leaves the female sanctuary of the convent in order to pursue a career in the male-dominated profession of journalism. When she first joins the staff of the "Evening Globe," the men "bestow" on her a great amount of critical observation suggesting the privilege of receiving such scrutiny: "After cursory but thorough consideration of her appearance and manner, they decided that she 'was all right'" (209). Reduced to a curiosity under the male gaze, she first achieves acceptance based on her appearance and manner as a woman, and not on her skills as a journalist. She appeals to the "office taste" even more when she speaks of her approach to journalism. Upon her departure from the convent, one of the nuns, Sister Clare, with whom she shared a special bond, gave her farewell advice: "May angels ever guide your pen!" Punctiliously referring to her as "Little" Miss Van Dyke, the men solicit her "motherly" or "sisterly" guidance, not with their stories, but in their personal relationships with women. In return, they escort her home to ensure her safety. Although they significantly inhibit her ability to work, she relishes the "sweet sense of good-fellowship."

Miss Van Dyke thus feels relatively satisfied while she produces "innocuous" stories. However, the arrival of the new managing editor, who gives "out an oracular utterance to the effect that he was after 'hot stuff' for the paper," causes her great anxiety (213). She quickly learns that "her correct and colorless little stories, perhaps because constructed in the cool shadow of the angel's wings, struck him as having no 'go!'" (213). She realizes that she must drastically alter her writing style and therefore relinquish her innocence to prove herself and preserve her position. Miss Van Dyke requests and receives permission to do a story on the Tenderloin's celebration of Tammany's victory from "a woman's point of view" (217):

[S]he described [the wild scenes of the night] vividly and strongly, setting them down as she had seen them, not wholly understanding what she wrote, but giving to the public a story whose realism haunted many a man and woman who read it the next day. It was the report of innocence on vice, made with the fidelity with which a little child tells of some horror that it does not comprehend and for that very reason describes the more effectively. (221)

Finally, Miss Van Dyke achieves acceptance based on her skill as a journalist. The managing editor enthusiastically expresses his approval: "One of the best things of the kind I ever read. I might have known she had it in her. That quiet, shrinking type of woman always has" (223). In an effort to explain the dramatic shift in Miss Van Dyke, the managing editor immediately evokes a female stereotype. Miss Van Dyke sacrifices her childlike innocence to earn a rite of passage into the male-dominated field, but not without significant consequence: "For the first time, the members of the staff did not trouble themselves to say 'Miss' Van Dyke, which they

had been so careful to do before” (222). As the former “convent girl” begins to take rank with Miss Masters, “who smokes and drinks, and is regarded as ‘a good fellow’ by the boys” (229), she laments such a shift:

She never became reconciled to the fact that the men now treated her as one of themselves, with a good-natured *camaraderie*, in which, however, the deference of the old days was wholly lacking. She knew that they called her “Little Van Dyke” and that “The Tenderfoot of the Tenderloin” still clung to her as a sobriquet. Also that there was no further reference to the angel that guided her pen. The managing editor’s approval and the off-hand kindness of her associates did not repay her for this lack, which she felt in every fibre of her sensitive nature. (228)

Miss Van Dyke cannot escape the story despite her efforts “to slip back into her quiet niche on the paper” (227). She is unable or unwilling to reproduce its effects.

The story ends with Miss Van Dyke in tears over her ruined reputation. Matthews, her male colleague who has been actively pursuing her seizes the opportunity to propose marriage. He gives her an “assignment” to become his wife: “Let me take care of you forever. Surely there is nothing finer in being a self-supporting woman than in marrying a poor human being like me and making him happy” (230-231). After reasoning with herself—“The career on which she had entered so happily seemed to have passed beyond her control. Others were shaping it—to her undoing. After all, a woman’s place is in the home!”— she accepts (231). Yet, she does so with reservation: “I—I think I’ll take the assignment” (231).¹² The story seems to affirm marriage as the most secure pursuit for women.

Perhaps Miss Van Dyke would not have given up so easily if she had received support from her female colleagues. The story proves the lack of solidarity among the female journalists by contrasting it with the solidarity among the sisters of the convent. Not only is solidarity absent, but it is replaced by rivalry. Another young woman, who “wore blond hair and much red paint” and wrote sensational stories “resented keenly the deep respect shown by the staff to Miss Van Dyke.” Jealous of the respect Miss Van Dyke earned simply by being herself, she delights in the men’s altered behavior toward Miss Van Dyke. She participates in the men’s game by hanging a sign of mockery over Miss Van Dyke’s desk: “‘Welcome to Little Van Dyke,’ it read, in large black letters,—‘the Tenderfoot of the Tenderloin’” (224). Through her behavior, she expresses her need for continual approval from her male colleagues and her apprehension towards female solidarity: “When the brilliant originator of this heard the laughter that greeted its appearance, she realized that success had crowned her sisterly efforts” (224). Yet, she acts “sisterly” only toward the men. Within the confines of the story, Miss Van Dyke discerns only two options—heightened sexuality or masculinity—neither of which correctly expresses her perception of herself or earns her respect as a female journalist.

Beginning in the 1880s, women journalists began forming press clubs and associations parallel to male-only organizations in order to promote professional prestige and provide camaraderie.¹³ In 1885, women from around the country formed the National Woman’s Press Association, soon renamed the International Woman’s Press Association. Their founding document stated: “Innumerable benefits will arise from mutual help and encouragement. One aim of the association is to forward the interests of working women in every possible way by combined action of newspaper women.”¹⁴ Though Jordan never explicitly refers to such organizations, she explores possible manifestations of their ideals. While “Miss Van Dyke’s

Best Story ” suggests that such solidarity was not easily attained, “A Point of Ethics” suggests that it was not easily *maintained*.

“A Point of Ethics”: A Test of Female Solidarity within the Profession

“A Point of Ethics” portrays a group of four female journalists, namely Miss Imboden, Miss Herrick, Miss Neville, and Mrs. Ogilvie, discussing the extent they should support another female journalist, Miss Bertram, who now holds a questionable reputation. As the women relax in Ruth Herrick’s apartment, Virginia Imboden questions: “[t]o what extent can a woman of irreproachable character assist a woman of no character without being injured in the eyes of others?” (163). Though such an “unqualified statement” disturbs the restfulness of the “social evening after the strain of the week,” she insists on discussing the issue, namely the alleged exposure of Alice Bertram’s concealed past: “[W]e discover that she is a marked woman in our profession,—that she is credited with a past,—that her reserve, reticence, and gayety are making her talked about,—that we are coming in for some share of the—the—well, feeling that exists about her” (166). As Virginia struggles to articulate the “feeling” that exists about Miss Bertram, she questions the extent of female solidarity: “Now, if this is so, are we held to her by our friendly interest?” (166).

After such a question, Ruth Herrick turns the light on and “[draws] the shades to screen the rooms, with their picturesque group, from the gaze of inquisitive neighbors” (167). This gesture demonstrates her need to separate their private gathering from the public gaze. Addressing the group, Miss Herrick chastises Miss Imboden for articulating her anxiety: “I don’t wish to dictate or to suggest to any one of you what her course should be, but to me we seem very smug and virtuous as we sit here criticizing this girl from our self-assured little pedestals” (168-169). Through the use of “we” as opposed to “you,” she does not single out Miss Imboden as the sole offending party, but rather offers a lesson to the group.

Though Miss Herrick objects to the utterance of such a concern, she does not deny its validity. Echoing Miss Van Dyke, Miss Imboden expresses a legitimate concern for female journalists: “But I’m alone here in New York, and I have nothing in the world except my health, my very ordinary journalistic ability, and my reputation as a ‘hard-working and respectable lady,’ to quote my appreciative janitor” (169). Miss Imboden fears losing her most precious asset—her reputation. Demeaning her own journalistic ability, Miss Herrick quotes her “appreciative” janitor, and not her editor, as a spokesperson for her reputation. She also suggests that her reputation provides her mother with sustenance: “My mother sits in our little home out West reading the newspaper about my work and pasting them in a scrapbook. Every word she reads or hears about me is precious gold to her.” Miss Herrick emphasizes that by being associated with Miss Imboden’s questionable reputation, she and her mother will be subjected to detrimental scrutiny.

Though perhaps justified, Miss Imboden expresses her concern with such fervor that she appears self-centered. Entering the discussion, Miss Neville directly attacks Miss Imboden, labeling her as “something like a prig” (168). She reinforces the need to separate private friendships from public relationships. “You’re not talking to Park row. You’re talking to Miss Bertram’s friends.” Miss Imboden concedes to separate public from private as she emphatically states:

I'm willing to help Miss Bertram in any way I can. I'll advise her about her stories, I'll divide my assignments with her, as we're both on space, but as for 'the precious boon of companionship,' that's another story! Does my companionship do her good enough to compensate for the harm hers does me? (170)

Yet, she reduces her friendship with Miss Bertram to an economic exchange and insists that "we must remember where we are" (170). She suggests that female solidarity should be maintained only when mutually advantageous.

Such concerns, however, are ultimately not resolved, for just as Mrs. Ogilvie suggests that they hear from Miss Bertram herself, she arrives to tell her story. As the daughter of an extremely wealthy man, Miss Bertram dissociates herself from her past as part of her wager with her father. She successfully proves herself to be a hard-working woman rather than the modern product that her father most despises—"the society girl" (179). Attaining personal satisfaction: "I've won my wager and I'm content!" (179), she expresses little concern for the collective struggle of female journalists: "Of course the work was hard and often unpleasant, but now that it's over, I don't mind that" (180).

After Miss Bertram leaves, Miss Imboden seeks to restore the esteem of her friends: "I hope you won't set me down as a double-eyed young prig who goes about tearing her friends up by the roots in their anxiety to discover whether they are good enough for her" (181). With "sisterly care," Miss Herrick finally acknowledges the validity of Miss Imboden's concerns but advises her to proceed with more caution: "Theoretically you were all right. Practically you were wrong, as you now know, in this case. The rest of us felt that, because we're older and more experienced than you. Perhaps we read human nature a little better" (182). With good humor, Miss Herrick instructs Miss Imboden to think over her own question: "After all, the great question of the evening is still unsettled: To what extent can a good woman help an erring sister without being injured in the eyes of others?" Similar to "Miss Van Dyke's Best Story," the story ends with a note of ambiguity concerning the extent of female solidarity, for "Miss Imboden has not solved her problem yet" (182). It seems women both within and beyond the profession continued to struggle with such a problem.

Female professionals seek to define themselves according to the objective ideal and to integrate themselves into the male community of professionals. As a result, they form tentative relationships with their female colleagues. According to Nancy Cott, "What women professionals intended was to amplify the woman into the person, to leave behind only the ascription of inferiority or frivolousness associated with their sex. They were not able to acknowledge that the male-informed professional ethos had enforced their sense of that inferiority" (238). The self-destructive potential of female solidarity therefore derives from women's acceptance, rather than criticism, of "objectivity." Yet, it appears that they lack the power or leverage to do so without being dismissed entirely. Jordan explores such a tension in "Ruth Herrick's Assignment."

"Ruth Herrick's Assignment": A Test of Female Solidarity beyond the Profession

This story begins by contrasting the "presence" of a managing editor with the "appearance" of a female reporter, Miss Ruth Herrick (3). The managing editor assigns her to "the biggest beat of the year" after the other (male) reporters fail to get the story (24). The

author emphasizes that, despite her gender, the protagonist maintains a positive reputation as a “reliable,” “practical,” and “loyal” news reporter (6). “Even” the managing editor acknowledges her value as a female reporter: “He had been heard to remark, in an expansive moment, that Ruth Herrick was a very singular woman, with no nerves or nonsense about her” (4). In other words, he values that she does not display “typical” female characteristics. “The gracious opinion was promptly repeated to the girl, and the memory of it had cheered her during several assignments in which nerves and a woman were equally out of place” (4). Though the managing editor’s “gracious” opinion of Miss Herrick defines her as an exception, it still confirms his derisive view of the female sex. In her acceptance of his opinion, Miss Herrick also confirms such a view.

Initially, it seems that Miss Herrick offers a more accurate representation of Mrs. Brandow, the prisoner accused of poisoning her husband, than the male reporters based on her skill as a reporter, not as a function her gender. When she sees Mrs. Brandow for the first time, she notes that it “was not the kind of face she expected to see. Newspaper men had been *gushing* in their descriptions of the famous prisoner, possibly because their imaginations were stimulated by the fact that many of them had never seen her” (12, italics added). In contrast to the male reporters, who express unscientific “gushing” usually associated with the female sex, Miss Herrick feels confident of her ability to offer a true representation. Her spirits “mounted high” at the thought of giving Mrs. Brandow to the public in “a pen-picture to be long remembered” (14). Thus, she views her representation of the woman as an opportunity for self-advancement not female-advancement.

The story suggests that Miss Herrick and Mrs. Brandow form a bond based on their shared gender. Mrs. Brandow feels confident that Miss Herrick will not represent her as irrational and emotional: “The letter of introduction you bring convinces me that I am safe in doing this, and that you will not go away and picture me as tearing my hair and deluging my pillow with tears” (13). Attracted to a “certain magnetism” in Miss Herrick, Mrs. Brandow feels compelled to lift her silence: “Now I suddenly find myself struggling with a desire to become garrulous, to pour out my soul to you, as it were. I could almost ‘tell you the story of my life.’ All this would be an admirable illustration of the limitations of a woman’s capacity for silence” (17). When Miss Herrick positions herself as confidant to “get the story,” she seems driven *and* sincere. She encourages Mrs. Brandow to use her as a “safety-valve,” or to imagine her as an old friend (17).

However, Miss Herrick finally relinquishes her stoic composure when Mrs. Brandow expresses a “silly desire” to know what she thinks of her (18). Miss Herrick “felt a strange reluctance to analyze her own impressions, but she watched the development of the other’s peculiar mood with an odd mingling of womanly sympathy and professional interest” (18). She finally acts upon her “womanly sympathy” as Mrs. Brandow confesses:

The woman’s voice broke. The listener had felt her face flush as the other’s words came to her, and now, on a sudden impulse, she took the prisoner’s hand. The white fingers closed suddenly upon her own with such force that the stone in a ring she wore sank into the flesh. But the act was involuntary, for the hand was dropped again with no indication on Mrs. Brandow’s face that it had been offered and accepted. (20)

With hands clasped, Mrs. Brandow pours out her soul to Miss Herrick, regaling her with an awful tale of being cruelly abused by her husband. The usually “cool” and “unemotional” Miss Herrick feels “moved” by the information (23-24).

Miss Herrick becomes even more “moved” as Mrs. Brandow expresses the motivation behind the murder—to protect her mother. Mrs. Brandow insists that it was impossible to leave her husband, for her mother, who is dependent on her, and who she loves as she never loved anyone else, lived with them. She claims that she poisoned her husband only after he attacked the mother who sought to protect her. Upon completion of her confession, Mrs. Brandow begs the silent Miss Herrick to say something, who immediately asks if her mother knows. “They were the first words she had spoken, and she realized fully their possible effect” (22). Similar to Miss Imboden of “A Point of Ethics,” Mrs. Brandow expresses the need to protect her mother by preserving her reputation: “No, no!” [Mrs. Brandow] said brokenly. “She believes in me—she does not suspect” (23). Though Jordan’s stories remain ambiguous concerning solidarity among young women, they reinforce a daughter’s allegiance to a mother.

With the “biggest beat of the year,” Miss Herrick must decide what to do with the information (24). She faces a difficult moral choice:

If anything but the life of a human being had been at stake, how proudly and gladly would she have gone to [the managing editor], and how hard she would have tried to write the story of her life, as he ordered. But—this other woman at her feet. *Something* with the reporter asserted itself as counsel for her and pleaded and would not down. (25, italics added)

Though obligated by loyalty to the paper, Miss Herrick decides to withhold the secret. Such a decision, however, significantly affects not only the paper but the public as well. As Jean Lutes argues, “[b]y choosing *not* to tell the abused wife’s story, Herrick protects her from publicity. Yet she also veils the horror of domestic violence and perpetuates the managing editor’s ignorance, virtually ensuring that he, and everyone else, will never understand the cause and nature of the murder” (111). Miss Herrick tells Mrs. Brandow that she will forget the interview. She insists, however, that Mrs. Brandow promise not to see another reporter: “She smiled ironically at this stipulation of her own. ‘He might be more loyal than I,’ she thought” (27-28). Yet, the “something” that asserts itself and produces sympathy with the wronged woman remains undefined.

Emphasizing the degree to which Miss Herrick must sacrifice her desires to maintain her position, the story initially elevates Miss Herrick to heroic status as a truly objective journalist. She foregoes the celebration dinner she was looking forward to for “various and personal reasons” in order to cover the story of Mrs. Brandow (5). It remains unclear to what “various” reasons refers; only that they are somehow different than “personal” ones. Regardless, the incident highlights her ability to separate her personal and professional life. She likewise forgoes the chance to distinguish herself with the “biggest beat of the year” by not exposing Mrs. Brandow’s confession. Yet, the story finally questions such heroic status by emphasizing the morally tenuous position Miss Herrick occupies by not turning in a confessed murderer.

The story ends with the voice of the managing editor whose “presence” looms at the beginning. He reaffirms his ideas about women. Mrs. Brandow was acquitted, because “a pretty woman who can hold her tongue will escape the consequences of almost any crime” (29). He finds it “strange” that Miss Herrick failed to get the story, but he likewise concludes that “after,

all, you can't depend on a woman in this business" (29). Similar to the managing editor of "Miss Van Dyke's Best Story," he relies upon a stereotype of women to explain the "strange" shift in Miss Herrick's performance. He maintains that women, inherently sympathetic, fail to deliver truth and act with moral conscience. And, like the other two stories, "Ruth Herrick's Assignment" ends with a final note of ambiguity: "The managing editor was more nearly right than he knew" (29). What is he "more nearly right" about? Jean Lutes rightly suggests that as "the narrator steps in to validate the editor's lack of confidence in women, Jordan wraps up her story at the expense of female professionalism." She emphasizes that Jordan's story "dramatizes an authorial conflict of interest, not a feminist intervention, and her reporter-heroine remains ambivalent about her choice to suppress the confession" (110). Such a reading presents a pessimistic view about the advancement of women in the profession. A slightly more positive reading might propose that the managing editor is more nearly right, that through her female compassion, Ruth Herrick made the right moral decision. Or that he is more nearly right, though perhaps unconsciously, about the paradoxes of female solidarity both within and beyond the professions. The story invites multiple readings.

Forty years later, in her autobiography, Jordan describes her struggles to allow such ambiguity to exist in her fiction. Specifically, she denies, despite widespread rumor to the contrary, that "Ruth Herrick's Assignment" represented an autobiographical response to the real trial of Lizzie Borden. After reading the story, Jordan's own managing editor is noted to have said, "[s]o that's the kind of reporter you are" (120). When Jordan told Julian Ralph, her fellow newsman, that she believed in Borden's innocence, her friend looked suddenly relieved. She comments that "[a]ll the newspaper men had been afraid that being a woman, and therefore without man's great natural sympathy, I would show a bias in my reports that might divert some of the current of popular feeling which was sweeping toward Miss Borden" (120-121). It is ultimately of little importance whether or not Jordan based her story on Borden. Rather, it is useful to consider her fictional works as an analysis of the difficult negotiations that female journalists are forced to make.

Some contemporary critics, however, also disallow such ambiguity. For instance, June Howard argues that Jordan crossed and combined public and private worlds and commercial and cultural space through her role as editor to *create* room for women in the professional realm. In her effort to view Jordan as a valuable participant in a vast social movement, Howard reads her autobiography, fiction, and letters through a positive lens. Through such a lens, however, she tends to obviate the problematic complexities that exist in the texts. Though Howard acknowledges that "Ruth Herrick's Assignment" "turn[s] on the tensions between an ethic of connection and more-skeptical, self-interested attitudes—one, specifically on a conflict between loyalty to another woman and the imperative to get the story," she fails to fully interrogate its ambiguous ending (67). Rather, she quickly shifts to Jordan's autobiographical dissociation from the story.

It is important, however, to recognize the ambivalent nature of Jordan's fictional explorations when positioning her alongside the emerging feminist agendas of the early twentieth century. Failure to do so obscures an essential element in her work. Though Jordan successfully distinguished herself as a prominent journalist at a time when women struggled to achieve such recognition, she recognized the difficulty of such an endeavor. As she paved the way for many women entering the profession, she also described the tensions between women that inevitably result. Through fiction explorations, she often offered a pessimistic outlook. It therefore

ultimately proves problematic to view Jordan as optimistically trailblazing for the advancement of women in every genre.

¹ She wrote its ten linked stories in the city room of the *World* at night while she supervised the reporters and artists who were producing the material for the Sunday supplement.

² A favorite book of Mary Elizabeth Prim while growing up, *Tales of the City Room* inspired her to begin writing newspaper stories in high school. She later became a leading Boston Transcript reporter of the 1930s (Ross 486). Also see Belford, *Brilliant Bylines*, 152.

³ Though I will use *feminism* to refer to the gender consciousness of women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the term did not come into frequent use until the 1910's replacing *the woman movement*. For an understanding of the historical emergence of the term see Cott, *Groundings of Modern Feminism*, esp. 3-6.

⁴ Nancy Cott considers the historic turning point of the 1910s and 1920s when the paradoxes of the feminist movement began to surface. "As much as feminism asserts the female individual—by challenging delimitation by sex and by opposing the self-abnegation on behalf of others historically expected of women—pure individualism negates feminism because it removes the basis for women's collective self-understanding or action" (*Groundings of Modern Feminism*, 6). She thus offers a study of consciousness—a study of women's willingness or reluctance to identify themselves with the collective. In a chapter specifically focused on the relationship between professionalism and feminism, she provides evidence to suggest that professional women on the whole assumed that any connection with feminism would prove detrimental to their professional progress. Though the stories I consider occur prior to this period such a tension is clearly evident.

⁵ For an example of the "True Stories of the News" that established Jordan's reputation at the *World*, see Belford, *Brilliant Bylines*, 159-164.

⁶ Observing the increased number of autobiographies produced by journalists at the turn of the 20th century, Linda Steiner speculates that autobiography offered an important means of personal expression for journalists to "cope with the increasingly vehement insistence that journalists suppress the self and obey the conventions of objectivity" ("Gender at Work" 5). Fiction seems to have offered Jordan a similar outlet.

⁷ Chambers, Steiner, & Fleming, 13.

⁸ Marzolf, 24-25.

⁹ Chambers, Steiner, & Fleming, 19.

¹⁰ By the 1890s, "objectivity" became codified as the "great law" of journalism according to David T. Z. Mindich. He also notes that objective journalism was "somehow a masculine endeavor." (*Just the Facts*, 114-15, 130-31)

¹¹ Chambers, Steiner, & Fleming, 7.

¹² Jean Lutes notes the "predictable split" that occurs at the end of newspaper novels. Most men abandon journalism to write fiction while most women leave to marry. She reads the ending of the story as "affirm[ing] unpaid domestic work as women's true business" (*Front Page Girls* 105).

¹³ Marzolf, 26.

¹⁴ Chambers, Steiner, & Fleming, 126.

Works Cited:

Belford, Barbara. *Brilliant Bylines: A Biographical Anthology of Notable Newspaperwomen in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Chambers, Deborah, Linda Steiner, and Carole Fleming. *Women and Journalism*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Cott, Nancy F. *The Groundings of Modern Feminism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.

Howard, June. "'Her Very Handwriting Looks as if She Owned the Earth': Elizabeth Jordan and Editorial Power." *Women in Print: Essays on the Print Culture of American Women from the*

Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Ed. James P. Danky and Wayne A. Wiegand. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. 64-76.

Jordan, Elizabeth. *Tales of the City Room*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898.

———. *Three Rousing Cheers*. New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1938.

Lutes, Jean Marie. *Front Page Girls: Women Journalists in American Culture and Fiction, 1880-1930*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.

Marzolf, Marion. *Up From the Footnote: A History of Women Journalists*. New York: Hastings House, 1977.

Mindich, David T. Z. *Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.

Ross, Ishbel. *Ladies of the Press: The Story of Women in Journalism by an Insider*. New York: Harper, 1936.

Steiner, Linda. "Gender at Work: Early Accounts by Women Journalists." *Journalism History*. 23.1 (1997) 2-12.