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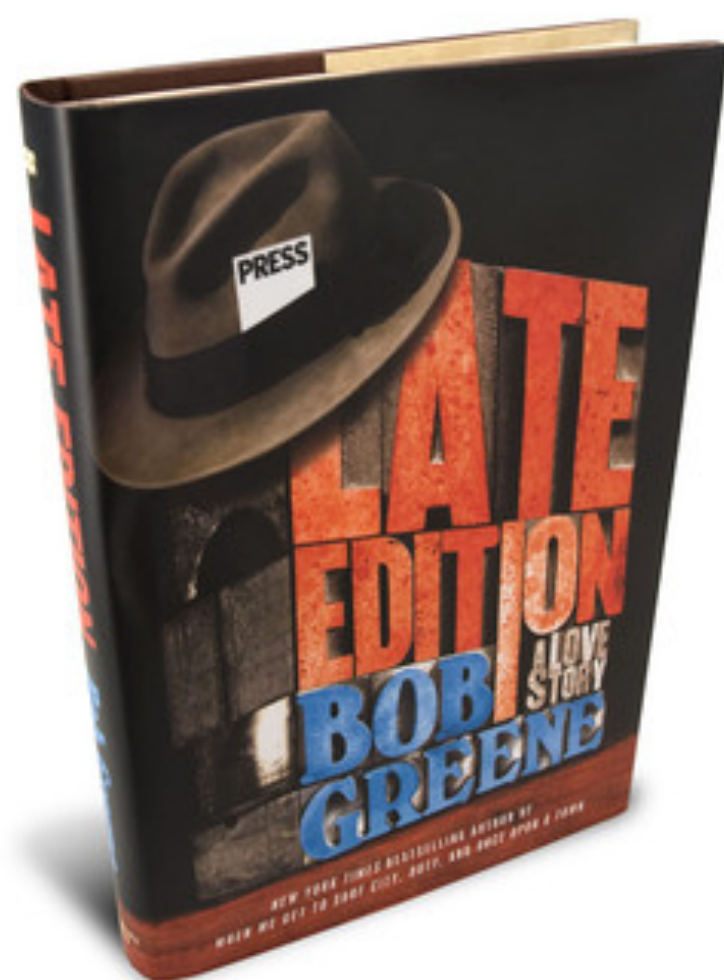
A lamentation for the lost world of raffish newspapering.

By Edward Kosner
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"There is nothing so beautiful as a young newspaperman," wrote Stanley Walker, the great Jazz Age city editor of the New York Herald-Tribune, whose credo was: "Clean copy. Hard work. Better to know the truth than not."

Bob Greene was a gifted young newspaperman, but Walker might have found him a little mawkish. Mr. Greene made his newspaper debut as a copy boy for the Columbus Citizen-Journal, the Ohio capital's scrappy morning paper, which had a circulation of 112,000 when the 17-year-old high-school junior pushed through the glass doors into the clackety city room one summer morning in 1964.



The C-J is long gone, and Mr. Greene, now 62 and the author of 23 books, is a wounded veteran of the newspaper game. He was hounded out of a 25-year career as a columnist for the Chicago Tribune seven years ago for having "dated," as it were, a 17-year-old student journalist in 1988 after writing a column about her. "Late Edition" is his love song to journalism, a lamentation for a lost world of raffish newspapering, no less affecting for being drenched in schmaltz.

In Mr. Greene's telling, the Columbus Citizen-Journal, put out on the cramped mezzanine of a downtown building owned by the dominant Columbus Dispatch, was a prelapsarian Eden. It was populated by crusty but good-hearted editors, sporty photogs and a cast of reporters - "rumpled mutts" -- not quite ready for Hildy

Johnson's "Front Page" but nonetheless sweetly lovable. They recognized not only Mr. Greene's precocious talent but his naked addiction to the life of the paper.

Young Bob did all the surreptitious things newskids do when they hope nobody is watching. He craned his neck to see if the city editor had deemed him worthy of a byline and was penciling it in before sending his story to the copy desk; he took the "dupes" of his articles home to reread before the paper came out; and he snatched the edition off the doorstep at 6 a.m. to hunt for his piece, then bought six more copies of the paper for his clip file.

Late Edition: A Love Story
By Bob Greene
(St. Martin's, 306 pages, \$25.99)

He fondly recalls his very first story, a three-paragraph short about a man who wanted to know what was inside a liquid-core golf ball, drilled into it and found out: a burst of goo in the eye. The city editor boiled it down to two paragraphs and the copy desk succinctly

headlined it: "Golf Ball Fights Back."

Like any grizzled inky, Mr. Greene has his share of war stories -- covering the riotous 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago and, later, the trial of Abbie Hoffman and the rest of "The Chicago Seven." There was the time he was sent to a saloon (in vain, as it turned out) in search of the newly sprung convicted murderer Dr. Sam Sheppard, the supposed inspiration for "The Fugitive" television series. And there was Mr. Greene's prison interview with serial killer Richard Speck, who obligingly confessed to his crimes for the first time.

But "Final Edition" is actually less about Mr. Greene's rise than about the homely virtues of old-school provincial newspapering in the pre-Internet-cable-Twitter-Facebook-blog days, when the TV evening news was just beginning to compete for the attention of the good folks of Columbus. In Mr. Greene's fond recollection, the C-J and its ragtag staff were good citizens -- devoted to the readers, modest about their skills but determined to get things right, satisfied with their lowly wages, oblivious to business concerns like the amount of advertising in the paper or the stock price of parent Scripps-Howard.

One day, a gruff but heart-of-gold city editor finds cub Greene idling at his desk, and the young man confesses that he has nothing to write. The boss leads him over to the window overlooking Broad and Third streets, points outside and says: "Nothing to write! There are people out there!"

Mr. Greene is plainly sincere about how he instantly recognized that the city room was his destined home. And his insatiable joy at the way the C-J started from scratch each morning and wound up with a fresh paper rolling off the presses that night captures the repetitious novelty of daily newspaper work. But his coltish conviction that his paper and the entire newspaper business would churn on happily ever after was shortsighted even at the time. By the early 1960s, big papers like the Herald-Trib and the New York Daily Mirror were starting to go under and many more would follow, including the C-J 20 years later.

Still, Mr. Greene was quick to recognize the benefits that new technology could bring to newspapering. When the early Atex editing computers turned up in the Chicago Sun-Times newsroom in the 1970s, he eagerly made the switch from using a typewriter. "What I didn't see coming," he writes, "was that . . . the computer screens would become the newspapers - that the paper part of newspapers would become optional." He is contemptuous of newspaper publishers who ape their competitors by paying "the prodigious costs associated with their business while giving away the product" on the Web. He calls it "mutually assured destruction."

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Mr. Greene rolled into Columbus aboard an electronics-stuffed bus called the CNN Election Express, from which he had been blogging by satellite dish to the world. Inevitably, he decided to revisit the scruffy old offices of the Columbus Citizen-Journal. He found them transformed into a carpeted cubicle-hive for the business side of the surviving Dispatch. The visit, as recounted in "Late Edition," occasions a predictable reverie. But however gauzy Mr. Greene's take on the lost world of newspapers may be, his heart, as ever, is in the right place.

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News. His memoir, "It's News to Me," has been reissued in paperback.

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