

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY – DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH (Rose Hill Campus)

TEXTS AND CONTEXTS: LITERARY JOURNALISM ACROSS CULTURES – Spring 2014

ISABELLE MEURET, PHD

Introductory Remarks

In the context of an exchange program between Fordham University in New York and Universiteit Gent in Belgium, I was offered the opportunity to teach two classes entitled “Literary Journalism across Cultures” in the spring 2014 term. The students were undergraduates majoring in all kinds of fields (accounting, physics, sports, literature, communication, business, psychology, biology, anthropology, etc.), which made the experience both challenging and rewarding. Challenging because of the students’ eclectic backgrounds and levels, rewarding because their responses and engagement were very positive. The policy of the university was that all students should have a course in literature, whatever their majors, hence the “Texts and Contexts” series, from which they had to choose one course out of a wide range of options. The class I was teaching was thus one among a vast choice of subjects ranging from slave-narratives to Shakespeare’s sonnets to Oprah’s Book Club. The reason why my two classes were full was essentially because journalism, given its link to current events and actuality, had some resonance with students who felt estranged from Chaucerian tales, Victorian novels, or Elizabethan drama. The intrinsically interdisciplinary nature of literary journalism was undoubtedly a winning edge. Indeed, all students were somehow able to connect to literary journalism – e.g. business students showed interest for Michael Lewis’s *Flashboys*, while sports students enjoyed Hunter S. Thompson’s quirky reportages. All this to say that my assignments may read as a bit simplistic, but given that students were most often in their first or second year at university, or further in the process but from backgrounds that were extremely remote from journalism and literature, I had to stick to essentials. Also, with a background in literature, not in journalism, and as a non-native speaker of English, I could not possibly teach creative writing. Therefore, the objectives of the courses were essentially to see whether students 1) understood the basic principles of literary journalism (assignment 1); 2) were capable of doing some close (albeit quite systematic) reading of essential texts, starting from theoretical material (assignment 2).

This teaching opportunity at Fordham proved to be an unforgettable and life-changing experience thanks to the students’ enthusiasm and supporting staff at Fordham, and also because the students and I had the privilege and honor to welcome Ted Conover as a guest in the final class, to discuss our final reading.

Paper Guidelines

Paper 1: Writing an Essay

Topic: students must choose one of the following topics:

1. “Literary journalism deals with the *look* and the *feel* of the world.” (Connery)
Elaborate on this definition and illustrate by means of (at least two) examples.
2. Yellow journalism, muckraking, stunt journalism, whistleblowing, are all variations on a same theme. Comment and justify your argument.
3. In the context of wars and tragedies, literary journalism is an appropriate strategy to provide “the other side of the story.” Discuss this statement in the light of one (or two) writer(s).

Paper 2: Writing a Research Paper

Topic: students must choose one of the following topics:

1. Starting from Mark Kramer's "Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists," discuss to what extent these rules are applicable to John Hersey's *Hiroshima*.
2. Starting from Tom Wolfe's four tenets of the "New Journalism," discuss to what extent these devices are applicable to Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*.
3. Starting from Robert S. Boynton's "Introduction" to the *New New Journalism* anthology, discuss to what extent Ted Conover's *Coyotes* belongs to this movement.

Note that besides the references from Kramer (1), Wolfe (2), or Boynton (3) students must also use at least one source from the library (not online). The above references will be presented in class in due course.

Paper Evaluation

The evaluation is both periodic and permanent. Papers are part of the *periodic evaluation*:

- *Periodic evaluation*:
 - Two papers (50%, i.e. 25% each). Students must write two well-executed 1,800 to 2,000-word papers individually.
 - Final examination (30%) based on the course content.

The evaluation is based on the Fordham University Grading System (see document on BlackBoard).

The policy for late submissions is –half a grade for each day a paper is late.

Academic Integrity

For plagiarism, cheating, falsification, and unapproved collaboration, please see Fordham University's general policy (Undergraduate Policy on Academic Policy).