

TRUE STORIES

THE CONVERGENCE OF LITERATURE AND JOURNALISM

Honors Syllabus: Fall 2018

Temple University
JRN 3908
Wednesdays, 5:30 – 8:00 pm
Wachman 307

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Office hour: before class

“The distinction between ‘journalism’ and ‘literature’ is quite futile...”

T. S. Eliot

Course Description

It would be gross negligence on our part if you graduated from Temple without ever reading the words of Joan Didion, or Gay Talese, or David Foster Wallace or Katherine Boo. These writers and others have honed a storytelling style that is now producing some of today’s most distinctive journalism.

The subject matter of this course goes by a few names: creative nonfiction, literary journalism, narrative journalism. In digital circles it’s called “longform.” But it’s all the same thing, really. Here’s a one-sentence definition, courtesy of the Neiman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard: “A genre that takes the techniques of fiction and applies them to nonfiction.” In other words, we’ll be reading journalism that tells stories... true stories.

Narrative journalism is practiced in newspapers, magazines, podcasts and books; it can be seen and heard in documentaries and on websites. We’ll read many examples, both classic and contemporary. And you will try your hand at two narrative works of your own: a short work of immersion journalism and a memoir. But my main goal is to introduce you to some of the best nonfiction of our times.

Required Reading

Katherine Boo: *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*

Truman Capote: *In Cold Blood*

Lee Gutkind: *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up*. Da Capo Books, 2012. 978-0-7382-1554-9

John Hersey: *Hiroshima*

Zora Neale Hurston: *Barracoon*. Amistad/HarperCollins, 2018

David Foster Wallace: *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. Back Bay Books, 1998. ISBN 978-0-316-92528-0.

Recommended:

Mark Kramer and Wendy Call, editors: *Telling True Stories*, 2007. Plume/Penguin. ISBN 978-0-452-28755-6

Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda: *The Art of Fact*. ISBN 0-684-84630-6

Grading

Your two creative nonfiction assignments, an **immersion** and a **memoir**, will be narratives of at least 1,000 words. They typically consist of one or two scenes, and they contain all the essential elements of narrative journalism: character, dialogue, description and action. Together they count for **50 percent** of your grade (25 points each).

You will also write a short assignment of a preparatory nature—an overheard dialogue—that will count for **10 percent** of your grade.

Also, I'll be assigning each of you to lead a class discussion once during the semester. In advance of this, you'll gather discussion questions from your fellow students and create a Google Slides presentation listing those questions and any other contextual material you'd like to share. Your presentation will count for **20 percent** of your grade. The discussion questions you send to each week's presenter in advance will count for the final **20 percent** of your grade.

Some official notification, just so these issues are clear:

(1) Meet the deadlines that are part of this course. I don't have to accept any assignment that is more than a week late. (2) Plagiarism (copying work from another student or any other source) and other forms of academic dishonesty (for instance, making stuff up, or reusing an assignment you turned in for another class) will result in a grade of F. In the real world, plagiarism is the only mistake you'll never recover from—because nothing is more important than the trust your readers place in you.

CLASS SCHEDULE

August 29

Introduction: A fourth genre and a larger truth

September 5

Immersion and Memoirs

Read for tonight in Gutkind: pages 14-43, 105-113, 119-123

- September 12 The Quest Narrative
Read: “My Favorite Teacher” by Robert Kurson
 “The Falling Man” by Tom Junod
- September 19 Making the story happen
Read: Nellie Bly’s “Ten Days in a Mad-House”
- September 26 True Crime
Read: “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” by Joan Didion
 “The Wronged Man” by Andrew Corsello
- Due: Overheard Dialogue**
- October 3 *Read: In Cold Blood*
- October 10 The New Journalism of the 1960s
Read: “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold” by Gay Talese
 “The Girl of the Year” by Tom Wolfe
- October 17 *Read: Hiroshima*
- October 24 *Read: Barracoon*
- October 31 **Due: Immersion Narrative**
- November 7 *Read: A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*
- November 14 *Read: Behind The Beautiful Forevers*
- November 21 THANKSGIVING BREAK
- November 28 Memoirs
Read: “Our Perfect Summer” by David Sedaris
 “Once More to The Lake” by E. B. White
 “My Drawer” by Phillip Lopate
 “The It Bird” by Susan Orlean
 “Thanksgiving in Mongolia” by April Levy
 “My Family’s Slave” by Alex Tizon
- December 5 Podcasts TBA
- December 17 **Due: Memoir Narrative**