

ANT 324L: CREATIVE NONFICTION & ETHNOGRAPHY

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Fall 2012
T Th 2-3:30 p.m.
SAC 4.118

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Office Hours: T 5-6 p.m., Th 2-3 p.m.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course explores the convergences and divergences between ethnographic and narrative journalistic writing, and their potential for producing powerful, richly textured accounts that capture the depth of human experience and the complexity of social life. Why is good writing so good, and what makes it last? Borrowing from the toolkits of anthropologists and so-called “literary journalists,” students will learn different strategies for making their writing truer and more memorable. The primary goal of the course is to reveal the literary possibilities in anthropology and other scholarly disciplines that employ ethnographic methods, and to make evident the potential for social inquiry within story-driven nonfiction writing.

Students will work on nurturing their own voices as writers and on developing a self-consciousness around writing as practice, process and form. They will be encouraged to approach their written work strategically and imaginatively, employing various literary techniques such as narrative structure, scene construction, character development, dialogue, point of view, tone and style. At the same time, they will be pushed to reflect on how these techniques might advance the ethnographic project itself. Some of the questions posed are: Can narrative writing be both universally true and culturally specific? Can it illuminate and explain while it moves? Can it contribute its own form of knowledge to our broader understanding of social life? Students will address these questions through discussions of weekly readings by some of the most notable authors in narrative nonfiction and ethnography, including James Baldwin, Barbara Myerhoff, Katherine Boo, Ryszard Kapuscinski, Lila Abu-Lughod, David Finkel, Ted Conover, Tracy Kidder, and Angela Garcia. Concurrently, they will develop their own piece of long-form, fieldwork- or reporting-based narrative writing in the setting of a creative writer’s workshop.

Much hand-wringing has dominated anthropology throughout the past twenty-five years as practitioners became absorbed with the fact that all ethnographies are texts, literary representations of sorts. Saddled with worry, even guilt about what this implies for our “science,” many ethnographers have become less compelling and effective writers, even as other scholars have rushed to embrace the method, and as

narrative journalists have churned out stories that reach broader audiences. This course seeks to begin to redress that imbalance by asking students to reach precisely toward literary practices to make ethnography fresh, original and publicly relevant. It recenters writing so that it is no longer just our product, but our reason for being.

TEXTS:

Required:

Jack Hart, *Storycraft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction*. (University of Chicago Press, 2011)

Mark Kramer and Wendy Call, *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University*. (Plume, 2007)

Ted Conover, *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing*. (Vintage, 2001)

Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: Healing the World: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer*. (Random House, 2003)

*The rest of the readings will appear on Blackboard and in a course reader.

GRADING:

Class Participation – 20% (10% reading responses, 10% class discussion)

Author Introduction – 10%

Workshop Feedback – 30%

Final Essay – 40% (10% each of four drafts)

*Plus/minus grades will be used. Your final grade will drop half a letter grade for every four absences.

In this class, you will not be graded on your inherent “writing talent” or level of skill. You will be evaluated for the persistence and sincerity of effort you demonstrate in acquiring tools to elevate your writing, and your willingness to embrace writing as a crucial part of your intellectual, professional and creative life. A writing workshop offers you the unparalleled opportunity to strengthen a piece of writing based on continuous feedback. As such, the grade on your final essay will reflect that progress more than its polish or how ready it is to reach an audience. (Specific guidelines and requirements will be handed out in class.) One of the central arguments of this course is that writing is an ongoing *process* more than it is a product.

Neither workshops nor group discussions work without every member’s wholehearted engagement, so your final grade will also heavily reflect your participation in class. You will be expected to do all of your readings, to have something (if not many things) to contribute to the conversation, and to be generous with your peers in reading their work carefully and providing both supportive and constructive feedback.

OTHER MATTERS:

Classroom Conduct: Please come to class prepared to engage in class discussion and provide detailed, constructive feedback to your peers. Laptops are not allowed in class unless your work is being workshopped and you find it easier to take notes that way. Please speak with the professor if you need special accommodations.

Communicating with the Professor: I presume that most of you will reach a point (or many points) when you'll find it productive to discuss your writing quandaries or progress with me. Please reserve a slot during my office hours (SAC 5.134) or stick around for a moment after class. *Email should be reserved for quick questions about class matters.*

Scholastic Dishonesty: The University takes a strong posture in cases of scholastic dishonesty, which include "cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, collusion, falsifying academic records, misrepresenting facts," and anything else that violates "the basic standard of academic integrity" – including submitting the same paper to two professors without permission. Further details about expectations and consequences are detailed on this Dean of Student's website:
<http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/>.

Students with Disabilities: Upon request, the University will make appropriate academic accommodations for students with disabilities. Please alert me in confidence of any special needs you have and visit <http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/ssd> for additional information.

WEEKLY TOPICS, READINGS AND WORKSHOPS:

WEEK 1

AUG. 30 CLASS INTRODUCTION

WEEK 2

SEP. 4 LITERARY JOURNALISM

Readings:

Sims, "The Art of Literary Journalism"

Kramer, "Breakable Rules for Literary Journalism"

Harrington, "What Journalism Can Offer Ethnography"

SEP. 6 ETHNOGRAPHY

Readings:

Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture"
Behar, "Ethnography in a Time of Blurred Genres"

WEEK 3

SEP. 11 WRITING FOR STORY

Readings:

Gutkind, "Becoming the Godfather of Creative Nonfiction"
Franklin, "Mrs. Kelly's Monster," "Stalking the True Short Story"

SEP. 13 STORY STRUCTURE

Readings:

Hart, "Story," "Story Structure"

WEEK 4

SEP. 18 NARRATIVE TYPES

Readings:

Hart, "Story Narratives"

Workshop 1:

SEP. 20 JOSEPH BALDWIN

Readings:

Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," "The Harlem Ghetto"

WEEK 5

SEP. 25 NARRATIVE TYPES (cont.)

Readings:

Hart, "Explanatory Narratives," "Other Narratives"

Workshop 2:

SEP. 27 DAVID FINKEL

Readings:

Finkel, pp. 3-61 (*The Good Soldiers*)

WEEK 6

OCT. 2 SCENES AND THEMES

Readings:

Hart, "Scene," "Theme"

Workshop 3:

OCT. 4 BARBARA MYERHOFF

Readings:

Myerhoff, "So What Do You Want From Us Here?"

WEEK 7

OCT. 9

Readings:

Conover, *Newjack* (begin reading)

Workshop 4:

OCT. 11 NO CLASS

WEEK 8

OCT. 16

Workshop 5:

OCT. 18 TED CONOVER

Readings:

Conover, *Newjack* (all)

WEEK 9

OCT. 23 CHARACTER AND DIALOGUE

Readings:

Hart, "Character," "Dialogue"

Workshop 6:

OCT. 25 KATHERINE BOO

Readings:

Boo, pp. 3-68 (*Behind the Beautiful Forevers*)

WEEK 10

OCT. 30 ACTION

Readings:

Hart, "Action"

Workshop 7:

NOV. 1 LILA ABU-LUGHOD

Readings:

Bourgeois, "Preface," "Patrilineality"

WEEK 11

NOV. 6 POINT OF VIEW

Readings:

Hart, "Point of View"

Workshop 8:

NOV. 8 RYSZARD KAPUSCINSKI

Readings:

Kapuscinski, "The Hotel Metropol," "The Streets of Harlem," "Lumumba"

WEEK 12

NOV. 13 VOICE AND STYLE

Readings:

Hart, "Voice and Style"

Workshop 9:

NOV. 15 ELENA PONIATOWSKA

Readings:

Poniatowska, pp. 1-51

WEEK 13

NOV. 20

Readings:

Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (begin reading)

Workshop 10:

NOV. 22 THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY

WEEK 14

NOV. 27

Workshop 11:

NOV. 29 TRACY KIDDER

Readings:

Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (all)

WEEK 15

DEC. 4 ANGELA GARCIA

Readings:

Garcia, "The Elegiac Addict"

DEC. 6 ETHICS and ETHNOGRAPHIC STYLE

Readings:

Hart, "Ethics"

Sharman, "Style Matters: Ethnography as Method and Genre"

FINAL PAPERS DUE: DEC. 10

