

# Journalism 5606W: Literary Aspects of Journalism

Nancy Roberts

This is a graduate-level course that studies the literary aspects of journalism as exemplified in, and influenced by, works of British and American writers, past and present. These include such writers as: Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, William Hazlitt, Samuel Clemens, Stephen Crane, Ambrose Bierce, A.J. Liebling, Ernest Hemingway, H.L. Mencken, Ernest Hemingway, Janet Flanner, John Steinbeck, Lillian Ross, Rebecca West, John Hersey, James Agee, Dorothy Day, Meridel LeSueur, Truman Capote, Harry Crews, Jill Ker Conway, and others.

The course takes a wide perspective, tracing the history of literary nonfiction. Literary nonfiction is a broad category that includes journalism, memoir and other autobiographical writing, the essay, history, how-to writing, biography, and scholarly articles. We will be concerned mainly with literary journalism, with some attention to memoir and the essay. During the semester we will explore such questions as: What is the relationship between journalism and literary fiction and nonfiction? How have these genres influenced each other? How has this relationship figured in the history of mass communication and in the development of American journalism?

This course presents opportunities both to read and analyze examples of literary nonfiction, and to create your own. The rationale is that good writers much necessarily be discerning readers. Conversely, the process of trying to write creative nonfiction yourself will help you appreciate the works of other writers who do so. Please note, though, that while I hope the work of these writers inspires you, I encourage you to develop your own unique style.

This course helps prepare graduate students for the Journalism 8662 (Literary Aspects of Journalism) seminar, which is offered in alternate years.

## Books

Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*.

John Hersey, *Hiroshima*.

Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda, eds., *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism*.

Norman Sims and Mark Kramer, eds., *Literary Journalism: A New Collection of the Best American Nonfiction*.

William Zinsser, ed., *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, revised and expanded.

**Choose one:** Harry Crews, *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* or Jean Ker Conway, *The Road from Coorain*. Crews's book is his account of growing up the son of a sharecropper in rural Georgia. Conway's book recalls her childhood on an isolated sheep farm in Australia.

## Readings

There will be some additional readings; details given in class.

## Assignments

All assignments are due at the beginning of class. They should be printed, double-spaced.

**An analysis assignment (Assignment #3)**, due Thursday, March 6, requires you to analyze some of the required readings. It is explained on p. 12 of this syllabus.

**Four creative nonfiction writing assignments/rewrites**, due on these dates, are also required: #1 (February 6/February 18); #2 (February 20/March 4); #4 (April 10/May 1); April 24/May 8). These are explained in more detail below. These five assignments require your own works of creative nonfiction (essay, memoir, literary journalism) and should be approximately 1,000 to 1,500 words in length. You are encouraged to target these for publication in a specific type of magazine, newspaper, or other media outlet. These assignments have generated sales in "the past, including to the Minnesota Daily, the Star Tribune, City Pages, and Minnesota Women's Press, but grades do not depend on sales.

Note: I am open to alternative assignment topics, if you have a compelling idea. But you need to clear it with me in advance.

[Note: These assignments are adapted from ones developed by Professor Norman Sims for a similar course at the University of Massachusetts; used here by permission.]

## Final Examination

The final exam will be distributed in class on Thursday, May; it will be due at noon on Monday, May 19. The final exam questions will deal with a variety of the issues raised by the course.

They will require that you reflect on the material you've been reading and the discussions we've been having throughout the quarter. For instance, you might be asked about the development of the essay and its relationship to journalism, or about the role of the New Yorker and other magazines in nurturing literary journalism.

The format of the final examination is open-book. This means that I encourage you to refer to your written assignments and personal notes and to the readings themselves. Clearly, then, you won't need to memorize information from anyone text for the exam. However, you should recognize that complete access to the texts can have its pitfalls too. As you plan and write your essays, try to avoid minutely detailed plot summary, over-quotation, or unnecessarily extensive quotation while still citing details from the texts to buttress your arguments where appropriate. You will be given length limits for each question.

## Class Presentations

Each student will make a brief presentation introducing an author whose work we are reading and will help lead the subsequent discussion. More on this in class.

## Grading

Approximately 50% of your final grade will be based collectively on the writing assignments, 25% on the final exam, and 25% on the quality of your contribution to class discussion and inquiry.

## Grading Standard

School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota has asked that all syllabi print this copy of the official grading standard, for your information:

**A:** achievement that is outstanding relative to the level necessary to meet course requirements.

**B:** achievement that is significantly above the level necessary to meet course requirements.

**C:** achievement that meets course requirements in every respect.

**D:** achievement that is worthy of credit even though it fails to meet fully the course requirements.

**S:** achievement that is satisfactory, which is equivalent to a C- or better (achievement required for an S is at the discretion of the instructor but may be no lower than a C-).

**F (or N):** represents failure (or no credit) and signifies that the work was either (1) completed but at a level of achievement that is not worthy of credit or (2) was not completed and there was no agreement between the instructor and the student that the student would be awarded an I.

**I (Incomplete):** assigned at the discretion of the instructor when, due to extraordinary circumstances, e.g., hospitalization, a student is prevented from completing the work of the course on time. Requires a written agreement between instructor and student.

## REQUIRED READINGS

### A. Critical Interpretations

Thomas B. Connery, "**Discovering a Literary Form**" (introductory essay) in Thomas B. Connery, ed., *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism: Representative Writers in an Emerging Genre* (Greenwood Press, 1992), 3-28.

Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "**Introduction**" (3-10) and "**Epilogue**" (207-217) from *From Fact to Fiction: Journalism & Imaginative Writing in America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

John Hollowell, **Chapter 2, "The Development of a 'New' Journalism"** (21-47) from *Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (University of North Carolina Press, 1977).

Lois Phillips Hudson, "**Preface**" to *Reapers of the Dust: A Prairie Chronicle* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984), ix-xvi.

Avis Meyer, "**In Defense of Literary Journalism**", *Nieman Reports*, Autumn 1982 (4-10, 52-55).

Ronald Weber, "**Journalism, Writing, and American Literature**", Occasional Paper No.5, Gannett Center for Media Studies, April 1987 (1-15).

## **B. Works**

\*James Agee, "**The American Roadside**" (42-62) and "**Cockfighting**" (19-29), from *James Agee: Selected Journalism*, ed. with an introduction by Paul Ashdown (University of Tennessee Press, 1985).

\*Ambrose Bierce, "**An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge**" (9-18), "**Oil of Dog**" (800-803), and "**An Imperfect Conflagration**" (803-806), from *The Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce* with an introduction by Clifton Fadiman (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1979).

\*Stephen Crane, "**The Men in the Storm**", "**Stephen Crane's Own Story**" (1-7), and Stephen Crane, "**The Open Boat**".

\*Dorothy Day, "**Meditation on the Death of the Rosenbergs**" (*Catholic Worker*, July-Aug. 1953).

Dorothy Day, "**Editorial**" (*Catholic Worker*, Sept. 1945); "**A Good Landlord (An Interview with Our Janitress)**" (279-281), from Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz, eds., *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940* (Feminist Press of the City University of New York, 1987), originally published in *New Masses* (Oct. 1930).

Janet Flanner, four selections from *Paris Was Yesterday 1925-1939*, ed. Irving Drutman (New York: Penguin, 1979): "**Introduction**" (vii-xxiv), "**Mme. Marie Curie (1867-1934)**" (117-118), "**Murder among the Lovebirds**" (158-165), and "**Tourist**" (206-207).

\*William Hazlitt, "**The Fight**", *New Monthly Magazine*, Feb. 1822, pp.78-97. .

Meridel LeSueur, "**The Fetish of Being Outside**" (299-303) from Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz, eds., *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940* (Feminist Press of the City University of New York, 1987), originally published in *New Masses*, Feb. 1935 (free); "**Women on the Breadlines**" (137-138), from Meridel Le Sueur, *Ripening: Selected Work, 1927-1980* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982), originally published in *New Masses*, 1932; "**Sequel to Love**" (36-38) from Nekola and Rabinowitz, eds., *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940*, originally published in *Anvil*, Jan.-Feb. 1935.

Lillian Ross, "**Introduction**" (1-12) from *Takes: Stories from the Talk of the Town* (New York: Congdon & Weed, Inc., 1983); "**The Yellow Bus**" (11-30) from *Reporting* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964); "**The Vinyl Santa**" (595-597) from *Talk Stories* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966).

Rebecca West, "**The Revolutionary**" (320-340) from *Rebecca West: A Celebration* (New York: Penguin, 1978). This is an excerpt from *The New Meaning of Treason* (1964--revised and expanded from *The Meaning of Treason*, 1949).

## **READING AND TOPIC SCHEDULE**

Lectures and class discussions will mostly follow this schedule, so please pace your reading accordingly.

**Tuesday, January 21:** Introduction and introductions

**Thursday, January 23:** Interpretive overview of literary journalism. Read Connery, "Discovering a Literary Form" and pp. 3-34 in Sims and Krarner, eds., *Literary Journalism* (Sims, "The Art of Literary Journalism," 3-19 and Kramer, "Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists," 21-34) .

**Tuesday, January 28:** Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* as "New Journalism" pacesetter. Read first half of *In Cold Blood*.

**Thursday, January 30:** Finish *In Cold Blood*.

**Tuesday, February 4:** Interpretive overview of literary journalism. Finish the readings listed under "A. Critical Interpretations" (Fishkin, Hollowell, Hudson,; Meyer, Weber) before class.

**Thursday, February 6:** Models of contemporary literary journalism: Read Sims & Kramer, eds., *Literary Journalism*, pp. 35-151 (these authors: Mitchell, Trillin, Orlean, Preston, and Harrington).

## **ASSIGNMENT #1 DUE**

**Tuesday, February 11:** In-class critique of Assignment #1

**Thursday, February 13:** Read Sims & Kramer, eds., *Literary Journalism*, pp.177-300 (these authors: Staples, Quammen, LeBlanc, Nocera, and Singer).

**Tuesday, February 18:** Read Sims & Kramer, eds., *Literary Journalism*, pp. 301-467 (these authors: Conover, Mark Kramer, Kidder, Jane Kramer, and McPhee) .

## **ASSIGNMENT # 1 REWRITE DUE**

**Thursday, February 20:** Early British and U.S. writers; William Hazlitt (read), Samuel Clemens, Ambrose Bierce (read).

## **ASSIGNMENT #2 DUE**

**Tuesday, February 25:** In-class critique of Assignment #2

**Thursday, February 27:** Read Kerrane and Yagoda, eds., *The Art of Fact*, pp. 13-89 (incl. The "Pioneers" section); also read additional Stephen Crane material (among the "Required Readings").

**Tuesday, March 4:** Read Kerrane and Yagoda, eds., *The Art of Fact*, pp. 93-241 ("Telling Tales" section).

## **ASSIGNMENT #2 REWRITE DUE**

**Thursday, March 6:** The influence of the *New Yorker*. The influence of the *New Yorker*. Read Rebecca West material.

## **ASSIGNMENT #3 DUE (literary analysis; no rewrite)**

**Tuesday, March 11:** The influence of the *New Yorker*. Read Flanner material.

**Thursday, March 13:** The *New Yorker*: Lillian Ross

## **Spring break, 17-21 March**

**Tuesday, March 25:** John Hersey, *Hiroshima*

**Thursday, March 27:** Social commentary from the 1930s (and beyond): James Agee (read).

**Tuesday April 1:** Social commentary, continued: Meridel LeSueur (read)

**Thursday, April 3:** Social commentary, continued: Dorothy Day (read) .

**Tuesday, April 8:** Memoir. Read Zinsser, *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, first half.

## **Thursday, April 10: ASSIGNMENT #4 DUE**

**Tuesday, April 15:** In-class critique of Assignment #4

**Thursday, April 17:** Read Zinsser, *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, 2nd half.

**Tuesday, April 22:** Harry Crews

**Thursday, April 24:** Jill Ker Conway

**ASSIGNMENT #5 DUE**

**Tuesday, April 29:** In-class critique of Assignment #5

**Thursday, May 1:** Read Kerrane and Yagoda, pp. 245-406 ("The Reporter Takes the Stage")

**REWRITE OF ASSIGNMENT #4 DUE**

**Tuesday, May 6:** Read Kerrane and Yagoda, pp. 407-552 ("Style as Substance")

**Thursday, May 8: REWRITE OF ASSIGNMENT #5 DUE**

**WRITING ASSIGNMENT #1  
THE "SCHOLASTICUS " REVIEW**

College professors around New England were horrified to discover during the 1980s and 1990s that the New England Monthly magazine was publishing reviews of their classes. While we all expect to see reviews of plays, movies, and books, the idea of reviewing classes was new, at least in New England. (Some years ago the Minnesota Daily did the same.)

But why not? These are semi-public events, often paid for by taxpayers. As you all know, some classes are more interesting than others. New England Monthly paid four writers to visit classes at educational institutions, and write the reviews under the name "Scholasticus." Not all the reviews have been successful, but controversy is a part of the game.

Why are some classes better than others? That's like asking what makes one tavern different from another. There may not be one single thing you can point to that accounts for the differences. Little details add up. As you may notice in the "Scholasticus" reviews, the authors tend to present the experience of the class rather than covering it as if it were a speech. Who takes a class-what are the students' majors? How do they respond? What techniques does the professor employ to gain the attention of the audience? The reviewers hold most but not all of their criticisms in reserve, letting the reader experience the situation and draw some conclusions on his/her own. And not all of the criticism is directed at the professors. Sometimes the students are blamed for being apathetic or too career-oriented.

You have all written class reviews before, probably as an end-of-the-quarter evaluation. And you have tried to explain to friends the good or bad qualities about your classes and teachers.

In this assignment, you should write a review of one of your classes (besides this one). Do try to present the experience of the classroom; the students' reactions and your own; the sights, sounds, and annoyances in the room; the professor's reputation and performance. Try to describe the

experience and imply some perspectives or criticisms. Clearly, saying something like "This class really sucks" doesn't cut it. Get down to specific details.

**Suggested length:** Four to five pages, double-spaced. If your report runs less than three pages, chances are you didn't pay attention to the details. If you write beyond eight pages, you probably don't know what you are trying to say.

**DUE THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 6**  
**REWRITE DUE TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 18**

**WRITING ASSIGNMENT #2A**  
**TRAVEL**

I'd feel better about assigning a travel piece if I could give each of you enough money to visit New York City, Japan, or Italy. But not to worry. This doesn't require any travel out of town. In fact, I think travel in town will work much better.

In general, I want you to write a piece about a travel experience. This should be something recent, not last summer's vacation. You can concentrate on your own surroundings, and how you experience them. As usual, five or six pages should be enough.

Travel writing focuses on the symbolic qualities of observed experience. Generally, you can open doors to a culture by concentrating on some detail. Joan Didion, for example, observes radio news broadcasts in Los Angeles and concludes that Californians live in a world without narrative connections. John McPhee gives us another view of Georgia life by concentrating on the travels and offbeat diet of Carol, the naturalist.

This assignment may contain three or four parts, depending on what you decide to write about. First, you have to observe from the point-of-view of a traveler. Secondly, you may need to do some research about the details you have observed. For example, if you're writing about the flour-milling district in Minneapolis, you may need to find out when the Pillsbury "A" Mill was built or the history of Nicollet Island. Thirdly, you need to think about the personal feelings or memories that your observations trigger. Lastly, you might look for the symbolism of observed detail. Does something you have observed say something about the world? Look for those things that, as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz put it, say something to someone about something.

**DUE THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 20**  
**REWRITE DUE TUESDAY, MARCH 4**

**WRITING ASSIGNMENT #2B**  
**BAR STUDY**

I hope you don't have that much experience in bars, but let's say you've been in a few. Ever notice how no two bars are the same? That's what this writing assignment is all about—distinctiveness, difference, culture.

Bars are not simply places; they are cultural arenas. Typically a group of people frequents a set of bars, and by their presence give a particular atmosphere to the place. Owners sometimes decorate their bars to attract certain people. For example, a pool table and a television turned to the hockey game draws one crowd. Exposed brick walls, hanging ferns, and quiet music in the background—a clean, well-lighted place—attract another crowd. Within that cultural arena, meaningful action takes place. People meet at the end of the day to further their friendships. Some arenas are intended to attract strangers, such as bars where serious pool is played for money, or singles bars.

Your job is to discover the key elements that make your bar special. How is it decorated? What's on the jukebox? What kinds of drinks get consumed? Why are people there? Then take a look at the cultural group that frequents the place. What makes a "regular" different from someone who just walked in? How are regulars identified, or how do they identify themselves, say, to a new bartender? Listen to conversations. Interview people. Watch what happens. Your research may require that you spend hours in the place.

Finally, write a profile of this bar. The bar has a social life, a business life, a culture. It will give you good stories—stories of fights, changes in ownership, changes in the drinking crowd, bouncers, bartenders. Don't be a sociologist, but try to convey what a sociologist might know about this place in terms that we can all understand. Tell stories. Use characters, action, and dialogue. Know the background and the facts about the owners and the business. Bring the place to life.

**ALTERNATIVE:** You could also write about a coffeehouse, bowling alley, or other gathering place that offers similar opportunities for observation.

**DUE THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 20**  
**REWRITE DUE TUESDAY, MARCH 4**

### **WRITING ASSIGNMENT #3**

#### **LITERARY ANALYSIS**

Analyze the work you have read for this class by either Janet Flanner or Lillian Ross. In particular, address the following:

1. The apparent research base that informs each piece. What seem to be the sources used? How did the writer get the information?
2. How does the writer make use of literary devices (characterization, scene-setting, flashback, etc.)? What is the writer's method of description? Evaluate its effectiveness.

3. What is the writers' stance relative to her material? How does she regard the people and occurrences she writes about? Analyze the writer's voice and tone.
4. What distinguishes this work as literary as opposed to conventional journalism/nonfiction? Be as specific as possible.

**Length:** 1,000 to 1,500 words (four to six double-spaced pages).

**DUE THURSDAY, MARCH 6**

**WRITING ASSIGNMENT #4  
MEMOIR**

As William Zinsser's *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* makes clear, remembering significant details in our lives does not come as easily as we think it should. Often our memorable moments are not completely understood. The significance may be masked by something we don't want to face. For example, Mom's automobile accident may be memorable, but the fact that Mom was an alcoholic may resurface only after considerable effort. The memory of a wonderful friend during the summer of your thirteenth year may not seem directly related to sexual maturation, yet your readers will undoubtedly be thinking about that topic.

A second problem with memoir arrives in the form of the first person pronoun "I" --the word many journalists cannot force themselves to type. Of course, the inability to write personally simply deprives your readers of the subject matter you know best, with the most authenticity that you can write about most authoritatively.

This writing assignment challenges you to find the significance of some episode in your life, and to write about it so that readers can feel the power in the incident.

This needs not be terribly long, perhaps five or six pages. I don't want to read your entire life history--just one episode will be fine. Tell me a lot about a little, not a little about a lot. You need to set the scene, introduce the characters, bring your own feelings or understandings to the surface, and then let the action unfold. Not an easy task, but growing up wasn't easy either. The episode does not have to be earth shattering, but it does need to convey a meaning. Maybe you learned something about yourself or your friends or your parents. Maybe something about your culture or neighborhood or aspirations became clear.

These things have happened to everyone. I can remember the day in my six-year-old life when, after years of going topless in the hot summer months, it now seemed obligatory to wear at least a t-shirt; the day in elementary school when it seemed that the Palmer Method of Handwriting was a laborious, pointless exercise in stifling individuality; the day on a dairy farm in Germany when I decided to change my major from German to history. Not that anything earth-shaking came from these episodes, but I can explain their significance for me.

**DUE THURSDAY, APRIL 20**  
**REWRITE DUE TUESDAY, MAY 1**

**ASSIGNMENT #5**  
**YOUR CHOICE**

Create a work of art here. The topic is your choice, but I'll try to suggest some fruitful areas for your consideration. You're turned loose in this assignment to write about something meaningful or simply interesting to you. This might be an emotional experience, something historical, a contemporary, cultural experience, an event like a swim meet or a concert, a fresh and personal approach to a standard news topic, a memoir, a portrait of another person, an expedition or an adventure. Keeping in line with the assignments so far, I'd like you to be one of the characters, and to write scenes in narrative form.

For starters, here's a list of topics some published literary journalists have chosen:

Venice, Calif., home of roller skaters and body builders (Sara Davidson)  
A welfare mother's life in New York City (Susan Sheehan)  
Christmas commercialism (Lillian Ross)  
Treason trials (Rebecca West)  
Building a house (Tracy Kidder)  
Life with dachshunds (E.B. White)  
Learning how to steer a steamboat (Samuel Clemens)  
Eating (Calvin Trillin)  
The daily life of a schizophrenic (Susan Sheehan)  
Midwestern high schoolers visiting New York City for the first time (Lillian Ross)  
Homeless women (Meridel LeSueur)  
Pregnancy and birth (Meridel LeSueur)  
A train trip to Patagonia (Paul Theroux)  
Beekeeping (Sue Hubbell)  
Marilyn Monroe (Gloria Steinem)  
Life on a farm (Mark Kramer, Richard Rhodes)  
Coyote hunting (Richard Rhodes)  
Portrait of a Cowboy (Jane Kramer)  
Shipwreck (Stephen Crane)  
Portraits of the homeless (Dorothy Day)  
Patricide (Ambrose Bierce, Janet Flanner)  
War and its effects on the individual soldier (Ambrose Bierce, Ernest Hemingway, Michael Herr)  
The theater (Lillian Hellman)

As you can see, examinations of our common lives predominate. Not that life is "common" when you examine it. People doing such commonplace things as selling vegetables or building a house

engage in genuine artistry. People struggle in dramatic ways as they learn another culture, attempt to achieve their goals, or meet the expectations of others. The worlds glimpsed when barriers fall (high school, welfare, the fire department, the police department in a small town, a restaurant, a farm) fascinate us.

Clearly, you don't have two years to research and write this assignment. You'll probably want to pick something more manageable than a year in the life of the U of M basketball team. As students on campus and as residents of the Twin Cities you have some natural narratives available to you. There are dozens of discreet cultures on campus and in large cities, and you may have access to some of them. The events on campus and in town may be more deeply appreciated when you write about your own involvement in them, even if only as a spectator.

Self-examination may help you find a topic. Look for something that interests you. Don't commit yourself to three weeks' work on something you hardly care about. John McPhee once said that about 90 percent of everything he's written in the last 25 years (more than 20 books so far) has been on topics about which he had at least a passing interest in college. Now's your chance to get started writing about those interests before you reach middle age.

Remember, things ordinary are worth writing about (think of E.B. White's essays on Fred and his other dachshunds). You have to work enough on the writing to make it an interesting experience in reading. Don't panic at the creative freedom—once you settle on a topic, it will rapidly suggest boundaries to you. But don't delay. This will take longer than you can imagine.

Roberts, Nancy. Journalism 5606: Literary Aspects of Journalism. School of Journalism and Mass Communication: University of Minnesota. 17 Feb. 2003.