Alex Kotlowitz

Syllabus for Telling Stories: the Art of Narrative Non-Fiction

This course will explore the art of telling stories – true stories. The craft is often called Literary Journalism or Creative Nonfiction. The writer John McPhee calls it The Literature of Fact, which I prefer for its lack of pretention and for its lack of ambiguity. In this class, we’ll talk about finding story, about reporting and of course about writing, about how one goes about making sense of the tale at hand. I want to push people to find stories outside of the familiar. It’s what makes this craft so exhilarating, to find yourself in places you’d never have reason to be or with people you’d never have reason to meet. What could be more exciting. More challenging.

Consider this syllabus an outline. Reporting and writing skewers schedules, so I’m allowing for flexibility in the syllabus. We’ll do a good deal of reading as well as writing in this course. We’ll also listen to some radio pieces and watch a documentary or two. One-third of your grade will be class participation, another third will be your short writings (which will include two short pieces) and the final third will be your longer paper (which can either be a reported piece or an essay on a particular writer or on two or three books that touch on the same subject.) We will work in this class as a professional writer might, from draft to draft, meaning that you will have opportunity to refine and revise some of your papers (time won’t permit us to do this with all of them.) We will workshop the shorter pieces in class. This course will undoubtedly be a lot of work, but I also want it to be fun. It will give you an opportunity to follow your passions.

GRADING:

One-third: two short papers
One-third: class participation
One-third: longer paper

Books to purchase:

Hiroshima by John Hersey
The Journalist and the Murderer by Janet Malcolm
Hope in the Unseen by Ron Suskind
We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families by Philip Gourevitch

Week One:

What is narrative non-fiction?
Assignment for first class:

Read *The New Journalism*, and essay by Tom Wolfe, an essay be EB White, pieces by Jamaica Kincaid, Jimmy Breslin and the opening to *The Last Shot* by Darcy Frey.

Assignment for second class:

Read *The Smuggler’s Due* (New York Times Magazine) and *Khalid* (Granta) – and an excerpt from *Never a City So Real* (all by Kotlowitz)

For next week:
- Writing assignment: a profile of someone at work
- Proposal due for longer paper
- Read: *Hiroshima* by John Hersey

**Week Two:** On Reporting – and irony…

- Is there such a thing as objectivity?
- How does one shape a story.
- A writer’s relationships with his or her subjects
- Immersion journalism vs. recreation of scenes

We’ll workshop short pieces.

**Week Three:** The Disappearing writer: A discussion on writing in the third person.

- Read: Ron Suskind’s *A Hope in the Unseen* and Katherine Boo’s *The Marriage Cure* (The New Yorker)

We’ll continue to workshop short pieces.

Second short assignment: a recreation of a moment..

**Week Four:**

First Person: Do we care what the writer thinks?

- Read: pieces by Susan Orlean (*The American Man at Age Ten*, The New Yorker,) David Foster Wallace (from his nonfiction collection, *Consider the Lobster*), an excerpt from Joan Didion’s *The White Album*, as well as *We Wish to Inform You …* by Philip Gourevitch

We’ll workshop short pieces.
Week Five:

Memor as reporting. (Or reporting as memoir.)

Read: Alex Kusczynski’s Her Body, My Baby (The New York Times Magazine), Michael Lewis’s Walking Towards Home and George Orwell’s How the Poor Die.

We’ll workshop short pieces.

Week Six:

Finding empathy (in the toughest of places)

Watch: Stevie, a documentary by filmmaker Steve James

Read: Grant Pick’s Bigot for Hire (The Chicago Reader) and an excerpt from Ted Conover’s Newjack.

Week Seven:

Do we even need a writer?

Read: Excerpts from Studs Terkels’ books (Working, Division Street, Race); excerpts from Ryscard Kapuscinski’s The Emperor and from Liao Yiwu’s The Corpse Walker

Listen to radio pieces: Ghetto Life 101 (Dave Isay, producer), Thembi’s AIDS Diary (Joe Richman, producer), Stories of Money (Alex Kotlowitz and Amy Dorn, producers)

Week Eight:

Are we, in the end, just a confidence man?

Read: Janet Malcolm’s The Journalist and the Murderer

A celebration of your final pieces.