

# **Jour 304 Literary Journalism Syllabus**

**Spring 2008**

**Teacher: Mike Spear**

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**Office Hours: 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. Monday and Wednesday**

**(Note: It is much easier to contact me by e-mail than by phone. Avoid phone frustration and use e-mail.)**

**Course goal:** The broad goal of this course is to make you aware of the genre of literary journalism, to make you critical, analytical and skeptical readers, to expose you to the works of many literary journalists and to make you aware of the difference between the work of literary journalists and that of journalists who do traditional reporting. We will look at the methods the reporters use, and we will see how literary journalism has emerged as an art form, how it transcends the practical fact of journalism, how it can be powerful, stirring and important. At its best, like fiction, it shows the human condition in many lights. Occasionally it may suggest the meaning of this existence and question its purpose.

We will start with some of the early examples of notable writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and observe how writers with an abundance of talent began to write beyond the ordinary restrictions of journalism. We will follow this to the present as it developed into long-form magazine writing or reportage, as it is widely known. As we go through the decades, we will consider the ties between form and content as well as the key historical factors of the time these pieces were written.

This course is designed as a seminar. It is not a writing workshop. You will be expected to analyze and write (type) a report on everything we cover during the 14-week semester. You will be asked to look closely at the writing styles of the various writers, in particular how they use the language to tell stories, the “sound” of their writing voices and the literary techniques they use. You will always be asked to access the methods writers use to get the stories and to point out any areas that might be suspect if you encounter them. Along the way, you might ask such things as what purpose does the writer have in telling the story? Is he or she mainly trying to entertain, inform, enlighten or illuminate? Has the writer met the standard of literary journalism through research and literary techniques? Are there limits to the freedom the writer has in this genre?

**Responsibility:** Grading in this course is based on the assumption that you read every book or article assigned during the semester, did all the things required in each reading assignment and that you came to class and readily and enthusiastically took part in discussions of the assignments.

**Course Plan:** (Always subject to the slings and arrows of fortune) Besides the analysis of everything read during the semester, there will be a report and short quiz at the completion of each book. There will be graded reports about some of the writers we

cover. There will be a midterm research paper. And there will be a final, which consists of an outline for a proposed nonfiction book and a completed first chapter of that book.

**Course Grades:** Course grades are based on performance in the classroom, on homework and on a series of quizzes and tests on the reading, a midterm and a final examination.

**Attendance:** You must come to class and you must come on time. You cut class at your peril. This course is packed with reading assignments that we will talk about extensively in class. If you are forced to miss a class by conditions beyond your control, let me know ahead of time. The bonus: If you miss no classes during the semester and are not late for any classes, I will add a half point to your overall final grade. In other words, if you earn a B for the course, I will boost that to a B+ for perfect and punctual attendance.

**Course Texts:** Because these are all easily acquired in second-hand bookstores in your neighborhood or online, you will not find them in the campus bookstore. If you have any problem getting them, go to Amazon.com or Half.com.

“Hiroshima” by John Hersey.

“Up at the Old Hotel” by Joseph Mitchell

“The World of Jimmy Breslin” (Out of print, but it can be found)

“In Cold Blood” by Truman Capote

“Slouching Towards Bethlehem” by Joan Didion

“NewJack” by Tim Conover

“Praying for Sheetrock” by Melissa Fay Green

“The Blind Side” by Michael Lewis

“The Demon in the Freezer” by Richard Preston

“The John McPhee Reader”

“The Second John McPhee Reader”

Books in the library that you will use for research papers, but you might want to buy anyway because they are not expensive. Your call.

“The New New Journalism” by Robert S. Boynton

“The Art of Fact” edited by Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda

“The Gang That Wouldn’t Write Straight” by Marc Weingarten

“The New Journalism” edited by Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson

“The Literary Journalist” by Norman Sims

“The Reporter as Artist: A look at the New Journalism Controversy” edited by Ron Weber

**Note:** I will provide a number of long-form magazine articles during the semester. These include pieces by Grantland Rice, Damon Runyan, Bob Considine, Red Smith, Lillian Ross, John Updike, Gay Talese, Hunter Thompson, Tom Wolfe, Sara Davidson, Gary

Smith, Michael Paterniti, Mark Singer, Walt Harrington, Adrian LeBlanc and Richard West among others.

### **Week 1: Jan. 15 & 17**

**Tuesday:** “Language Day” Reading assignments: “Dr. Livingston, I Presume” (1872) by Henry Morton Stanley. “Death Comes to Mata Hari” (1917) by Henry G. Wales.

**Thursday:** Optional Assignment Reports. Assignments: “The Four Horsemen” (1924) by Grantland Rice and “The War of the Tabloids” (1968) by Jim Bishop.

### **Week 2: Jan. 22 & 24**

**Tuesday:** Assignments: “Louis Uncovers Dynamite” (1935) by Richard Wright, “The Louis-Schmeling Fight” (1938) by Bob Considine.

**Thursday:** Assignments: “John Dillinger Gets His” (1934) by Jack Lait. “The Dumbbell Murder” (1927) by Damon Runyan.

### **Week 3: Jan. 29 & 31**

**Tuesday:** Assignments: “The Death of Captain Henry Waskow” (1944) by Ernie Pyle, “Mr. Wells and Mass Delusion” by Dorothy Thompson, New York Herald-Tribune (1938).

**Thursday:** Assignment: “Down and Out in Paris and London” (1933) by George Orwell.

### **Week 4: Feb. 5 & 7**

**Tuesday:** Assignments: “Up in the Old Hotel” (1938) and “Rats on the Waterfront,” (1944) by Joseph Mitchell.

**Thursday:** Assignments: “Portrait of Hemingway” (1950) by Lillian Ross, “Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu” (1960) by John Updike.

### **Week 5: Feb. 12 & 14**

**Tuesday:** Assignments: “Marvin the Torch,” “Sam Silverware,” Jerry the Booster” and “It’s an Honor” from “The World of Jimmy Breslin.” (1969).

**Thursday:** Assignments: Read the preface to “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” before reading “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” and “Goodby to All That” by Joan Didion (1968).

### **Week 6: Feb. 19 & 21**

**Tuesday:** Assignment: “Levels of the Game” (1969) by John McPhee .

**Thursday:** Assignment: “Atchafalaya” (1989) -- McPhee

### **Week 7: Feb. 26 & 28**

**Tuesday:** Assignment: “Radical Chic and Mau-Maung the Flak Catcher” (1969) by Tom Wolfe.

**Thursday:** Assignment: “Yeager” (1979) -- Wolfe

### **Week 8: March 4 & 6**

**Tuesday:** Assignment: “The Hell’s Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga” (1966) by Hunter Thompson.

**Thursday:** Assignment: “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” (1970) -- Thompson.

### **Week 9: March 18 & 20**

**Tuesday:** Assignment: “La Dolce Viva” (1968) by Barbara L. Goldsmith

**Thursday:** Assignment: “Sinatra Has a Cold” (1966) by Gay Talese.

### **Week 10: March 25 & 27**

**Tuesday:** Assignment: “September”(1989) by Tracy Kidder.

**Thursday:** Assignment: “The Subterranean World of the Bomb” (1978) by Ron

Rosenbaum .

**Week 11: April 1 & 3**

**Tuesday:** Assignment: "Driving Mr. Albert" (1998) by Michael Paterniti

**Thursday:** Assignment: "Rosa Lee's Story" (1994) by Leon Dash

**Week 12: April 8 & 10**

**Tuesday:** Assignment: "The Detective" (1992) by Walt Harrington

**Thursday:** Assignment: "The Mountains of Pi" (1992) Preston

**Week 13: April 15 & 17**

**Tuesday:** Assignment: "The Agent" (2006) by Lawrence Wright.

**Thursday:** Assignment: "Columbia's Last Flight" (2001) by William Langeweische.

**Week 14: April 22 & 24**

**Tuesday:** Assignment: "Coach Leach" (2007) by Michael Lewis

**Thursday:** Assignment: "Terminal Ice" (2003) by Ian Frazier

**Book assignments for the semester:**

**"Hiroshima" by John Hersey (Read between these dates: Jan. 15 and Jan. 31. Report due on Jan. 31)**

**"In Cold Blood" by Truman Capote (Read between these dates: Jan. 31 and Feb. 21. Report due on Feb. 21.)**

**"Praying for Sheetrock" by Melissa Fay Greene (Read between these dates: Feb. 21 and March 18. Report due on March 18.)**

**"The Demon in the Freezer" by Richard Preston (Read between these dates: March 13 and April 8 (Report due on April 8.)**

**"Newjack" by Ted Conover (Read between these dates: April 3 and April 24. Report due on April 24.**

**"The Blind Side" by Michael Lewis (Extra Credit. If anyone wants to read this book and write a comprehensive report on it, see me.)**

**Note:** You may start reading these books at any time, but you must get your book assignment from me before you do. These assignments (reports) will be due on the dates listed above.

**Class presentations:**

During the semester you will be assigned class presentations on many of the writers we will be reading. These should include general biographic information, summaries of their journalistic careers, including what experts say about their work. You should use both general reference sources (encyclopedias, biographical dictionaries, but avoid Wikipedia) and specific biographies and/or works of literary criticism. These should be typed and double-spaced with a bibliography for evaluation. **Note:** In this you should include a sentence or passage by the writer that you have uncovered in your reading of his or her work that is the apotheosis of his or her **writing style, world view** and **voice** that could only have been written by him or her. Here are the writers we will examine for class presentations and their dates:

**presentations:**

Jimmy Breslin\_\_\_\_\_Feb. 12  
Joan Didion\_\_\_\_\_Feb. 14  
John McPhee\_\_\_\_\_Feb. 19  
Tom Wolfe\_\_\_\_\_Feb. 26  
Hunter Thompson\_\_\_\_\_March 4  
Melissa Fay Greene\_\_\_\_\_March 13  
Gay Talese\_\_\_\_\_March 20  
Tracy Kidder \_\_\_\_\_March 25  
Michael Paterniti\_\_\_\_\_April 1  
Richard Preston\_\_\_\_\_April 3  
Lawrence Wright\_\_\_\_\_April 15  
William Langeweische\_\_\_\_\_April 17  
Ted Conover\_\_\_\_\_April 22  
Ian Frazier\_\_\_\_\_April 24