

LITERARY JOURNALISM – CCJN 3390 – Fall 2011

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Office Hours: 3-3:30 p.m. T/Th; 3:30-4 p.m. and 5:30-6 p.m. M/W; and by appointment; U-Lee 212

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

In this class you will:

- Strengthen your analytical and thinking skills through in-depth readings of stories, essays and books by non-fiction writers, past and present.
- Strengthen your verbal communication skills through the comprehensive discussion of these writings and writers.
- Learn about the different forms of literary nonfiction through the study of genres like New Journalism, biography, sports writing, humor, and true crime, and by studying stories on subjects like war, poverty and adventure.
- Strengthen your presentation skills by leading class discussions and offering questions for your colleagues' consideration.
- Strengthen your literary writing skills through your own creative nonfiction assignments.
- Strengthen your research and writing skills by pitching a book idea for the class through a five-page proposal.
- Gain a greater appreciation of news coverage from a literary perspective.

This class is an introduction to some really good non-fiction writers and journalists, past and present. The course requires some heavy reading on your part, but it is reading that should be fascinating and rewarding. There will also be time for you to do some of your own creative non-fiction writing. These writing exercises are designed to be short, fun and to be read aloud in class.

The class is concerned primarily with reading stories and books and discussing them. That's why your grade will be based largely on class participation and oral reports. I will also give quizzes at the top of some classes over the reading material. If you've read, you should have no trouble with the quiz. If you are uncomfortable talking in class or reading your own work, you should consider dropping the course.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas (Thompson); Journalistas (Mills/Cochran); Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia (Sasson); Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History (Spiegelman); 50 Essays: A Portable Anthology (Cohen); Death in a Texas Desert (Stowers); The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test (Wolfe). In addition, you will receive numerous emails with links to essays and articles throughout the semester. Be sure to check your email box regularly.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING:

Discussion participation, including oral reports; quizzes; talking points; attendance - 50%

Q&As; character profiles; short essays - 30%

Final project: Five-page textbook proposal with Q&A - 20%

Total - 100%

Discussion participation, oral reports, quizzes, talking points, attendance - 50%:

You must approach this class with seriousness. That means you must read every assignment and be fully prepared to discuss every story and writer. Do not read too far ahead! You want the readings to be fresh in your mind.

On most days, you'll be required to come to class with notes you've taken from the day's readings. You can analyze writing styles or common themes; compare or contrast stories; discuss strengths and weaknesses; put stories into a political, social or historical context. Always ask yourself: what is this story really about?

These "talking points" will help you get your thoughts in order. They are NOT formal papers. They can be handwritten. They can be short. They are designed to get our discussion started. I will not collect them every day, but sometimes I will. Be prepared. You will be called on to discuss your points for the day. In addition to your own talking points, your job is to be engaged and to meet the challenges and questions presented by the rest of the class. We'll disagree with each other at times, which will lead to thoughtful and lively debate. You will be graded on the quality of your participation and the content of your talking points, which means you have to do some thinking. Just saying you like or dislike a story is meaningless. You'll have to tell us why and back up your points.

An important reminder: you simply cannot understand some of these stories without some context! Therefore, a little research on the writer and other historical, artistic or social elements referenced in the story will be necessary. A quick check via the Internet on unfamiliar names or other references will make your reading vastly more interesting and rewarding.

You will also be graded on your participation during author Carlton Stowers' visit on the last week of class. That means you must come prepared and you must ask thoughtful, thought-provoking questions. I will give you an introduction to Carlton, but you must also do your homework. Learn something about the books he has written. I will call on you by name in class unless you are unable to keep the conversation going.

Obviously, your participation grade is heavily tied to your attendance. If you have an unexcused absence, you will receive an F for a portion of this grade (about 10%). If you walk in late more than once in the semester, you could receive an F for a portion of this grade. I will allow up to two excused absences, as long as you turn in your talking points or Q&A for on the day's

reading. But after that, expect your participation grade to go down quickly. The nature of this class makes it absolutely mandatory that you are here and ready to go.

I will also give short quizzes at the start of some classes. Expect one every week or so, and particularly when we read entire books. The quizzes are to make sure you are on top of the reading. You will see on the schedule that there are several "reading days." On those days we will not meet. That's to give you time to complete an entire book. I have been very generous with these reading days. I do this because I do NOT want you guys to feel pressured. These are really good books and I don't want you to skim two days before class. I've been a student. I know that can happen. But I have spent a lot of time designing this class so that it is rewarding and fun and gets you reading. So respect me for respecting you and take the time to get the reading done. Also, because there are a few days we don't meet, your attendance is even more crucial on the days we do.

Q&As, character profiles, short essays - 30%:

These essays, profiles and Q&As are more formal than your talking points. I'll accept handwritten assignments unless otherwise noted, but only if your handwriting is very, very clear. For these assignments, I'll usually use a check grading system. A check mark means you're doing fine work, in about the "B" range. A check with a plus (+) next to it would be considered "A" work. If you receive a check with a minus (-), see me.

Final book proposal, including a Q&A and answers; proposal presentation - 20%

For this assignment, you will find a book that you believe future students in the class should read. The report will include **1. A brief biography of the writer** **2. An essay about why you believe the book is a good one for the class and what students could learn from it** and **3. A Q&A of six to 10 questions, along with your answers.** This is an assignment that you should get started on early, as it will require reading and research outside of class. It doesn't have to be long - 4 or 5 pages including the Q&A. Be prepared to submit your proposal and pitch the idea to the class in a five-minute presentation on the last class day or on the scheduled exam day.

If you do your reading and come to class prepared, you should have no trouble making As or Bs on most of your assignments. That's the beauty of this course.

At least one, maybe two, short writing assignments will be creative. You must be comfortable reading your own writing aloud, as we will be sharing them in class. *I will not grade creative writing assignments.* These assignments are meant to be fun and to give us an opportunity to try our hand at the sort of writing style we'll be reading.

GRADING POLICY:

1. "A"s are rare. They are awarded only for truly excellent work. Very good work receives a "B"; average work a "C"; below average a "D." This is in accordance with university regulations.
2. All work will be judged rigorously.

3. Letter grades are based on a 10-point scale. For example, the “B” range is as follows: 80-82 B-; 83-86 B; 87-89 B+. The same spread applies to all letter grades (except there is no A+).
4. I will be happy to discuss the content of your papers. I will not, however, discuss the grade you have received. If you wish to protest a semester grade, a formal process is available.
5. Attendance is mandatory. After three unexcused absences, you could be dropped from the course or receive an “F”.
6. All work in this course is governed by the SMU honor code.

DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS: If you need academic accommodations for a disability, you must first contact Rebecca Marin, Coordinator, Services for Students with Disabilities at (214) 768-4563 to verify the disability and establish eligibility for accommodations. You should also schedule an appointment with me to make any necessary arrangements. I require a verification letter from Ms. Marin or another official.

RELIGIOUS ACCOMMODATIONS: Religiously observant students who will be absent on holidays must notify me IN WRITING at the beginning of the semester.

EXCUSED ABSENCES: Please note that the SMU Health Center has changed its policy on giving forms for excused absences. The Health Center’s new policy is found at <http://smu.edu/healthcenter/policy/absenceclass.asp>. Please note that there is a PDF file in this information that you can download and submit to me for consideration of an excused absence. This form must be filled out fully for me to consider your absence as excused. As in the past, if you consult a physician for an illness and receive specific certification for a recovery time, absences will be excused if I am given a form from the physician’s office.