

ANT 391: NARRATIVE JOURNALISM & ETHNOGRAPHY

Cecilia Ballí
cballi@austin.utexas.edu

Spring 2012
Mondays 3-6 p.m.
SAC 5.118

Office & Phone: SAC 5.134, 471-8522
Office Hours: T Th 3:30-5 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 literary journalism and ethnography, including James Agee, John McPhee, Joan Didion, Philippe Bourgois, Ted Conover, David Finkel, Ryszard Kapuściński, Tracy Kidder, João Biehl, and Anne Fadiman. 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:

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

David Finkel, *The Good Soldiers*. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010)

Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998)

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

GRADING:

Final essay – 50%

Class participation – 30%

Other assignments and exercises – 20%

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 sharpen and 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 a *process*, not 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:

Attendance: There is no attendance policy because this is a writer’s workshop and you’re expected to attend every session barring personal emergencies or critical travel. Since others will be investing heavily in writing, they deserve the same

investment from you. If you absolutely must miss, please let me know as far in advance as possible, and be prepared to submit any writing assignments due as well as your written feedback for those students whose work is scheduled for in-class review.

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:

Jan. 23: Class Introduction

Jan. 30: Creative Nonfiction and Literary Journalism

Featured Author: James Agee

Readings:

Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (selections)

Ballí, "The Border Is Wide," *Harper's*

Gutkind, "Becoming the Godfather of Creative Nonfiction," *Writing Creative Nonfiction*

Sims, "The Art of Literary Journalism," *Literary Journalism*

Kramer, "Breakable Rules for Literary Journalism," *Literary Journalism*

Feb. 6: Interpretive Ethnography

Featured Author: John McPhee

Readings:

Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," *The Interpretation of Cultures*

Agar, "Literary Journalism as Ethnography: Exploring the Excluded Middle," *Representation in Ethnography*

McPhee, "The Search for Marvin Gardens (pp. 309-320); "Encounters With the Archdruid" (partial selection, pp. 189-198); "Pine Barrens" (partial selection, pp. 72-74), from *The John McPhee Reader*

Hessler, "John McPhee," *Paris Review*

Feb. 13: Writing for Story

Featured Author: Joan Didion

Workshop:

Readings:

Didion, "Why I Write," *Joan Didion*

Didion, selections

Telling True Stories: Banaszynski (p. 3); DeGregory (p. 20); Winburn (p. 22); LeBlanc (p. 59); Clark (p. 70); Brown (p. 100); Harrington (p. 148); Wolfe (p. 149)

Franklin, "Ch 2: Mrs. Kelly's Monster" and "Ch 4: Stalking the True Short Story," *Writing for Story*

Feb. 20: Narrative Structure (I)

Featured Author: Philippe Bourgois

Workshop:

Readings:

Bourgois, "Introduction" and "Ch 1: Violating Apartheid in the United States," *In Search of Respect*

Narrative structure: *Telling True Stories:* Franklin (p. 109); Hart (p. 111); Lemann (p. 112); DeSilva (p. 116); French (p. 140)

Feb. 27: Narrative Structure (II)

Featured Author: TBD

Workshop:

Readings:

Mar. 5: Scenes

Featured Author: Katherine Boo & David Grann

Workshop:

Readings:

Boo, "The Marriage Cure"

Grann, "A Murder Foretold"

Ballí, "Calderón's War"

Telling True Stories: Hochschild (p. 132); Hochschild (p. 135); Kramer (p. 136); DeSilva (p. 139)

Mar. 12: SPRING BREAK

Mar. 19: Writing as Process

Featured Author: David Finkel

Workshop:

Readings:

Finkel, *The Good Soldiers* (complete)

Mar. 26: Narrators and Point of View

Featured Author: Ryszard Kapuściński

Workshop:

Readings:

Kapuściński, selections

Telling True Stories: Lopate (p. 78); Brown (p. 81); Hart (p. 103); Guillermprieto (p. 154)

Apr. 2: Character

Featured Author: Ted Conover

Workshop:

Readings:

Conover, "Participatory Reporting," *Telling True Stories*

Conover, Ch. 1-3, *Newjack*

Telling True Stories: Banaszynski (p. 66); Tizon (p. 71); Gladwell (p. 73); Benham (p. 104); Franklin (p. 126); Harrington (p. 128)

Apr. 9: Dialogue

Featured Author: Tracy Kidder

Workshop:

Readings:

Kidder, "Field Notes to Full Draft" (p. 51), "Securing Consent" (p. 176), *Telling True Stories*

Kidder, selections

Telling True Stories: Boo, "Difficult Journalism That's Slap-Up Fun" (p. 14), "Narrative Investigative Writing" (p. 89), and "Truth and Consequences" (p. 177)

Apr. 16: Ethics

Featured Author: João Biehl

Workshop:

Readings:

Biehl, *Vita* (selections)

Telling True Stories: Kramer and Call (p. 163); Clark (p. 164); Harrington (p. 170); Wilkerson (p. 172); Kidder (p. 176); Boo (p. 177); Nazario (p. 178); Hull (p. 182); Clark (p. 189); Power (p. 281)

Apr 23: Other Tools of the Trade

Featured Author: Anne Fadiman

Workshop:

Readings:

Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (first half)
Telling True Stories: Orlean (p. 158); Hiestand (p. 198); Nazario (p. 208); Kramer
and Call (p. 125)

Apr. 30: Why We Write

Readings:

Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (second half)

May 7: PAPERS DUE BY 10 A.M.

Suggested:

Franklin, "The Ballad of Old Man Peters" *Writing for Story* [29 pp.]

Telling True Stories: Kramer (p. 24); Hochschild, et. al. (p. 28); Wilkerson (p. 30); Franklin (p. 34); Hull (p. 39); Kiernan (p. 45); Kiernan (p. 145); Hull (p. 205); DeGregory (p. 239) [26 pp.]

Orwell, "Why I Write"

Telling True Stories: Orlean (p. 284) [3 pp.]

