

Syllabus for Honors 122
Reading the Arts: Narrative Journalism
Spring, 2021
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10:30 – 11:45
Mason Hall - D001

Professor Steven Pearlstein

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Office Hours: Mon. 3:00-4:15, Tues. 1:00-2:00, or by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION: Story-telling has always been at the heart of great journalism. In this course, we'll explore the last century of American history by reading some of the best examples of narrative—that is, story-telling—journalism as published in books, newspapers and magazines. We will explore how narrative journalism is done, what is the historical and media context in which it is written, what makes it effective and what impact it has had on readers and society. This is not a journalism course as much as it is a literature and history course. The aim is not to teach you how to write great journalism but how to recognize it and get the most out of reading it.

CLASS SESSIONS. This is a discussion seminar, so what you and your classmates get from it will depend in large part on your participation in the discussions. Those who are naturally shy will need to learn how to

overcome it. I have a habit of calling on students randomly and unbidden to participate in the discussions.

Generally speaking, one reading will be assigned for each class session. Most weeks, one student will be assigned to lay the groundwork for the discussion with a 10 minute oral presentation (see below). Class discussion will follow.

You will be expected to come to class not only having done the reading, but with some preliminary thoughts about what the author was trying to say and how effective (or not) he or she was in saying it. You should be ready to cite a passage or two that stands out in terms of its significance or the quality of the writing. Because we will refer to such passages in our discussion, it will be necessary for you to bring with you a copy of the assigned book or article to class.

Please pick up the tent card with your name on it at the beginning of each class and return it at the end of class.

INDIVIDUAL PRESENTATION: Each student will be assigned one oral presentation. Your first task will be to familiarize us with the author and his/her career, the publication in which the work originally appeared and the historical and literary context in which the piece was written—what was going on in the world at that time that provides a backdrop for the piece. You are encouraged to use photographs, video clips, historical timelines, tape recordings and other multi-media elements that help bring your subject alive. Please be warned, however, that reading from power point slides that are made up of words and bullet-points is not an effective presentation technique, so stay away from that. **You must meet with me the week before your presentation to go over the topics you will need to cover.**

Assignments for student presentations will be made on the first day of class, based as much as possible on your choices. You might want to look down the reading list before the first class to determine your preferences.

PAPER: Your presentation will provide a thin foundation—but only that—for a much different 8-page essay that will be due a week following the presentation. The paper should focus on one important and interesting analytical insight you have about the work, or an issue raised by the work.

One way to think about this essay is to imagine you are writing a review of the work for people who haven't read it but are interested to know what you think about it. So somewhere in the essay you will need to: (1) summarize what is in the work for someone who hasn't read or seen it; (2) present a bit of background on the work, the author, the publication and the historical context; (3) offer your opinion about how effective it is, or not, and why; and, most important, (4) lay out one important and interesting analytical insight you have about the work that gets to its central theme or message—what it is *really* about. The challenge will be to organize the essay around the last of those – the big theme or analytic conclusion—while finding a way to weave in the other things as you bring the reader along to your main conclusion.

Papers will be graded on the basis of the quality of the research, writing and analysis. **They should read like an essay, not an academic paper.** For a model of such essays, read some book reviews in the New York Times or the New Yorker.

Here's a hint: good essays don't follow the familiar formula of telling the reader what you're going to say, saying it, then summarizing what you just said. Your challenge is to entice the reader in your essay with an interesting or intriguing opening, lay a factual foundation that the reader will need to understand and appreciate what you are about to say about the work, and then develop your theme until it reaches a satisfying analytic conclusion. Save some good stuff – maybe even the best, or most powerful or most original stuff—for last.

Here's another hint: First, figure out what is the one big analytical point you want to make about the work—your theme. Then make a list of all the smaller points you want to make, or information you need to

refer to, to support your conclusion. Then make an outline that allows you to present all those elements in a logical order that brings the reader along to your thematic conclusion. Only then should you sit down to write. Although you will probably have to tweak the outline as you proceed through the writing, don't fall into the trap of hoping the structure will magically emerge as you write. Unless you are an experienced essayist, it won't. Get the thinking (what you want to say) and structure (the outline) straight first—that's the hard part. After that, the writing will be much easier.

Unlike most professors, I don't just read and grade these essays. I edit them and hand them back to be rewritten as many times as necessary until we are both satisfied with the result. It usually requires several drafts, which is why I'm going to be somewhat insistent about getting the first one a week after your presentation. This editing process won't work if everyone waits until the end of the semester.

Several weeks into the semester, I will spend an entire class offering more advice about essay writing.

FINAL: There will be a final exam for this course. The first part of the exam is meant to determine if you did the required reading. The second part will ask you to apply the analytical tools and techniques learned in the course to another short piece of narrative journalism that I will make available to you the morning of the exam. If you've done the reading all semester, there will be no need to study for the final.

COURSE EVALUATION:

Class Participation	30 percent
Presentation/Paper	40 percent
Final	30 percent

BOOKS AND COURSE MATERIALS: There are three books we will use for this course. All are available at the bookstore or from online sellers.

Hiroshima, by John Hersey (1946)

In Cold Blood, by Truman Capote (1966)

Levels of the Game, by John McPhee (1969)

Most of the other readings are articles that are available on library reserve that you can access directly from Blackboard. You may also find many of the assigned articles online by searching the web, or through the GMU library site. It is your responsibility to find the reading materials. If you can't find or access them, let me know right away.

*Ernie Pyle, dispatches from World War II in Europe, Reporting World War II, Vol. 1 and 2 (Library of America): Sicilian campaign (Vol. 1, p. 606ff), Italian campaign (728 ff., Vol. 2, 1ff, 35ff), and Normandy campaign (194ff, 273ff) (1943-44).

*E.B. White, "Death of a Pig," The Atlantic (Jan., 1948). Also available online at:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/ideastour/animals/white-full.html>

*Updike, "Hub Man Bids Kid Adieu," The New Yorker (Oct. 22, 1960). Available at

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1960/10/22/hub-fans-bid-kid-adieu>

*Tom Wolfe, "Last American Hero is Junior Johnson. Yes." Esquire, (March 1965). Available at: <http://www.esquire.com/features/life-of-junior-johnson-tom-wolfe-0365>

*Frank DeFord, The Boxer and the Blonde, Sports Illustrated (June, 1985. Also available online at:

<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1119578/index.htm>

*Calvin Trillin, "Rumors Around Town," New Yorker (Jan., 1986). Available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1986/01/06/rumors-around-town>

* Richard Ben Cramer, "The Strange and Mysterious Death of Mrs. Jerry Lee Jones," Rolling Stone, March 1, 1984. Available at <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/the-strange-and-mysterious-death-of-mrs-jerry-lee-lewis-179980/>

*Leon Dash, "Rosa Lee's Story," Washington Post (Sept. 18-25, 1994). Also available online in **seven** parts. Part one at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/local/longterm/library/rosalee/part1.htm>

*Malcolm Gladwell, "The Pitchman," New Yorker (Oct. 30, 2000). Also available online at: <http://www.gladwell.com/pdf/pitchman.pdf>

*Michael Lewis, "John Lebed: Stock Manipulator, S.E.C. Nemesis—and 15," New York Times Magazine (Feb. 21, 2001). Also available online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/25/magazine/25STOCK-TRADER.html?pagewanted=all>

*Anne Hull, "In the Bible Belt, Acceptance Hard Won," Washington Post (Sept. 26-29, 2004). Also available online in **several parts**. First part can be found at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A49856-2004Sep25.html>

*Andrew Corsello, "The Wronged Man," GQ (Nov., 2007). Also available online at <http://www.gq.com/news-politics/big-issues/200711/calvin-willis-exonerated-dna-evidence-freedom?currentPage=2&printable=true>

*Gene Weingarten, "Fatal Distraction," Washington Post Magazine (March, 2009). Also available online at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/27/AR2009022701549.html>

*Ian Parker, “The Story of a Suicide,” New Yorker, (Feb. 6, 2012).
Also available online at:
http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/02/06/120206fa_fact_parker

*T. Christian Miller and Ken Armstrong, “An Unbelievable Story of Rape,” Pro Publica, Dec. 15, 2015. Available at
<https://www.propublica.org/article/false-rape-accusations-an-unbelievable-story>

*Josh Dean, “The Great Buenos Aires Bank Heist,” GQ, Feb. 20, 2020. Available at <https://www.gq.com/story/the-great-buenos-aires-bank-heist>.

*Washington Post staff, “George Floyd’s America,” six-part series which ran in Post beginning on Oct. 26, 2020

For our second day of discussion about In Cold Blood, you will need to download and watch the movie “Capote,” starring Phillip Seymour Hoffman.

You will also have to download all 12 episodes (over two seasons) of the NPR podcast, Serial, by Sarah Koenig. Available at <https://serialpodcast.org/season-one> and <https://serialpodcast.org/season-two>.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Jan. 26	Orientation / Presentation Assignments
Aug. 28	Introduction to Narrative Journalism
Feb 2.	Pyle, Brave Men *
Feb. 4	White, Death of a Pig *
Feb. 9	Hersey, Hiroshima (short book)

Feb. 11 Updike, Hub Man Bids Kid Adieu

Feb. 16 Wolfe, Last American Hero

Feb. 18 Lecture on Essay Writing

Feb. 23 DeFord, The Boxer and the Blonde

Feb. 25 McPhee, Levels of the Game (short book)

Mar. 2 Trillin, Rumors Around Town

Mar 4 Ben Cramer, The Strange and Mysterious Death of Mrs. Jerry Lee Jones

Mar. 9 Capote, In Cold Blood (book)

Mar. 11 "Capote" (a movie) *

Mar. 16 Dash, Rosa Lee's Story

Mar 18 Gladwell, The Pitchman

Mar. 23 Lewis, John Lebed: Stock Manipulator

Mar. 25 Hull, In the Bible Belt

Mar. 30 Corsello, The Wronged Man

April 1 Weingarten, Fatal Distraction

April 6 Parker, The Story of a Suicide

April 8 Miller/Armstrong, An Unbelievable Story of Rape

April 13 Koenig, Serial, Season One, Episodes 1-6 (podcast)*

April 15 Koenig, Serial, Season One, Episodes 7-12 (podcast) *

April 20 Dean, The Great Buenos Aires Bank Heist *

April 23 George Floyd's America (six-part series) *

April 27 Wrap-up Discussion – Narrative Journalism

April 29 Course Evaluation

May 4 Final Exam

* = no student presentation/paper

ELECTRONIC DEVICES: Students will not be allowed to use computers in class except to refer to that day's reading. All cell phones and other communications devices should be shut off during class.

COMMUNICATION: All students should check university e-mail accounts for class updates. I will access e-mail through Blackboard. If you cannot attend a class session, please e-mail me in advance to let me know the reason.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodation, please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center at 703-993-2474.

ENROLLMENT: Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in the class. The last day to add or drop classes without penalty is Friday, February 12. Please do me the courtesy of letting me know if you drop the class before or after that date.

The Honor Code Policy:

1. No help may be given or received by students when taking quizzes, tests or examinations, whatever the type or wherever taken, unless the instructor specifically permits deviation from this standard.
2. All work submitted to fulfill course requirements is to be solely the product of the individual(s) whose name(s) appear on it. Except with permission of the instructor, no resource is to be had to projects, papers, lab reports or any other written work previously prepared by another student, and except with permission of the instructor, no paper or work of any type

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of another course may be used a second time to satisfy a requirement of any course. No assistance is to be obtained from commercial organizations that sell or lease research help or written papers. With respect to all written work, proper footnotes and attribution are required.