

This is a course involving reading, and a good deal of your own writing; it is neither exactly a workshop nor quite a seminar but something I'm learning to call a "studio class". As such, it will demand an unusual degree of thinking and participation from you. I hope we will arrive at an ideal balance between reading, writing, and speaking. Don't stay if you don't like reading, thinking aloud, and listening to others.

I have it in mind that you will produce three pieces of your own writing for the class: one about a person (2 pages), one about a place, and one about a subject that involves some research (ideally going beyond Wikipedia); both of the latter two are to be 5 pages or more. If any of you – as has happened in past classes, with individuals – happen to be engaged on some project of your own that you would like to advance instead of all or part of these, talk about that with me.

We will begin by reading 3 "portraits" that I will bring in: of John Berryman by Saul Bellow, of Randall Jarrell by Robert Lowell, and of Rainer Werner Fassbinder by Wim Wenders (that makes two poets and one film director). I want you to get your feet wet by writing a portrait of someone you know personally – not of yourself, and not of anyone in the class. (My three examples happen to be elegiac reminiscences of celebrated individuals – yours don't have to be/ are unlikely to be.)

All written work is to be presented on paper, and with enough copies to go round (and two for me, so that I can keep one for reference and emergencies); the magic number is 19; say, 20 for luck. Not everything will be workshopped, but I will always be happy to read anything you write.

I am not greatly exercised by definitions here. Still, for the purposes of the class 'creative non-fiction' is truthful or reportorial writing in which the 'how' is (at least) as important as the 'what'. Things that bear re-reading, weeks or months or years later. My way in might have been science writing, sports, autobiography, any number of things. I've ended up going for history, tending towards geography: an engaging (and always evolving) mix of politics, travel, and memoir. I propose this time that we read eight books, seven by foreigners, one by an American (all short). Six of the books are translations. The average cultural locus of the authors is Eastern Europe, but the chosen books nevertheless manage to cover 4 continents and 80 years.

I propose to read in order: Kapuscinski, Roth, Handke, Sebald, Ernaux, Stasiuk, Chatwin, and McPhee. ca. two weeks on each book. There is a lot of reading, and you should always come prepared to class. Any chance you have, any time you have, just read. Read ahead if you can. (In MLK week, most obviously.) A counsel of perfection would be to have read all the books once through, by, say, the end of January. Read around the subject, read more from the authors: it's all good, as someone says. I will ask you during 'off' weeks, when none of the three major-ish pieces fall due, to write 1-page response papers to the books, to guide and fuel discussion of them.

Obviously, the matter of content will be distracting or beguiling. Many of the places and people and events will be unfamiliar to you. But you should still try to read in a critical/ appraising way: see how a topic is identified and isolated; how a tone is established; what approach is taken; what form is found; is the authority personal or impersonal; how the totality of a book stacks up. That's what's guided me in choosing the books: some are 'whole', some are in parts; some were conceived as fitting together, some are assembled on the spot, or by others, later. There is cake, biscuits, bread and crumbs. All are what they are.

Learning is much more important than grading. (For what it's worth, it'll be the usual: attendance, participation, quality of written and spoken work.) Please don't insult me or your classmates by being absent without leave (and this includes fooling around with your smartphones and whatnots). The motto is BE HERE NOW.

I look to you to bring energy, imagination, commitment, and discipline to the class. It's a huge and quickly expanding field. I'd be a little surprised if you've come across any of the books before. They're all different, all wonderful, all held together by some idea of what it is to have lived through a certain experience, a certain historical era, a certain place. There are so many ways in which life is not at all to do with choosing. But this course should, if it works, allow you to cope with – and more effectively witness – whatever lies before you.

Here is a sketch of how I see the semester going. Approximately so:

11 January: Introductions, Syllabus, first materials

18 January: no class – Martin Luther King Day

25 January: I bring in materials from antiquity; you bring in your portrait pieces

1 February: Kapuscinski (the first section of *Another Day of Life*)

8 February: Roth

15 February: Roth

22 February: Handke

29 February: – no class, Spring Break

7 March: Sebald

14 March: Sebald

21 March: Ernaux

28 March: Stasiuk

4 April: Chatwin

11 April: Chatwin

18 April: Oranges

25 April: Conclusions/ reprises/

The books (in order):

Ryszard Kapuscinski: Another Day of Life  
Joseph Roth: The Wandering Jews  
Peter Handke: Once Again for Thucydides  
W.G. Sebald: The Rings of Saturn  
Annie Ernaux: A Woman's Story  
Andrzej Stasiuk: Fado  
Bruce Chatwin: Songlines  
John McPhee: Oranges

Switches and cancellations of books, and changes of timings are a constant possibility, but I'm hoping to stick to this.

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Office hours, Thursdays 12-2 pm, or by appointment