

This is a course involving (quite a lot of) reading, and some 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 substantial pieces of writing for the class: something about a person, something about a place, and something on a subject that involves some research (ideally going beyond Wikipedia). If any of you – as has happened before – happen to be engaged on some project of your own that you would like to advance, talk about that with me.

We will begin with 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.)

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); the magic number is 17; say, 18 for luck. Not everything will be workshopped, but I will always be happy to read anything you write.

Over time (and this is the fourth time I will have taught it), the course has evolved from history to an engaging mix of politics, travel, and memoir. (Perhaps history with a little added geography?) I propose this time that we read six books, five by foreigners, all short; one by an American, and long. Three books are translations; one was written in English by someone whose native language was not English; one is by an Englishman; and again, one by an American. The cultural locus of the authors is Eastern Europe, but the chosen books nevertheless manage to cover 4 continents and 80 years. And George Packer's wonderful *Unwinding* (of 2013) brings us back to the US of A, and the present.

I propose to read in order: Kapuscinski, Roth, Stasiuk, Brodsky, and Chatwin, 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 be keen to have you present parts or aspects of the books, and offer/ try out other samples of writing yourselves. As I say above, these may be either ad hoc pieces, or some project you have been meaning to pursue for some time.

Obviously, the matter of content will be distracting or beguiling. But you should 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.

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).

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'd come across any of the books before (possible exception: Packer). 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:

12 January: Introductions, Syllabus, first materials

19 January: no class – Martin Luther King Day

26 January: Kapuscinski

2 February: Kapuscinski

9 February: Roth

16 February: Roth

23 February: Stasiuk

2 March: – no class, Spring Break

9 March: Stasiuk

16 March: Brodsky

23 March: Brodsky

30 March: Chatwin

6 April: Chatwin

13 April: Packer

20 April: Packer

27 April: Conclusions/ reprises/ Packer

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Office hours, Tuesdays 2-4 pm, or by appointment