

“You tell lies sometimes too, don’t you, Ryszard?”

- Gabriel Garcia Marquez to Ryszard Kapuscinski

This is a course involving quite a lot of reading and a fair amount 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, writing, thinking aloud, and listening to others.

I have it in mind that you will produce reading response papers on some of the books (1 page is enough) and four pieces of writing for the class (perhaps 3, 1, 5 and 5 pages respectively, minimum): a piece about a person, a piece about an object, a piece about a place, and a piece on a subject that involves some research (ideally going beyond Wikipedia and the usual online slacker sleuthing). If any of you – as has been the case in these classes once or twice before – happen to be engaged on some project of your own that you would like to advance instead of one, two, three, or all four other assignments, talk to me about it, I’ll be sympathetic to your ideas.

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/ are unlikely to be.)

All written work is to be presented on paper, and with enough copies to go around (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.

My way in might have been science writing, sports, autobiography, any number of things. In this newest incarnation of the course, I’ve ended up going for memoir, spiced with history and a little geography. I propose that we read nine books: six translations, and three titles in original English. (A tenth book, by John McPhee, on being edited, is optional and recommended.) The cultural locus of the authors is (still!) more or less Eastern Europe, but the chosen books nevertheless manage to cover 100 years and 4 continents. Obviously, the matter of content will be distracting or beguiling. But you should try to read in a critical/ appraising way: observe 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.

I propose to read in order: Kapuscinski and Didion (the Originators); then Roth and Stasiuk (the Eastern Europeans); then after Spring Break, Chatwin and Krakauer (the Walkers); followed by Handke and Ernaux (the Memoirists); with David Wallace Wells's title (published just last year) bringing up the rear. 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. (It's not possible to ideally synchronize everything: sometimes 'helpful' books lie ahead of assigned writing work – the Handke/ Ernaux for 'people', the Chatwin with place, the Stasiuk with objects. Reading ahead will help enormously.) A counsel of perfection would be to have read all the books once through, by, say, the middle of February. Read around the subject, too, read more from the authors: it's all good, as someone says.

For me, the reading response papers are a wonderful way to find out that (and then how and what) you are thinking. Occasionally, I will ask a student to read his/ her paper aloud in class. I see them as an aid to discussion, not something to be discussed in themselves. Most times we move onto a new book, you will be writing one of these little papers. Write me a question of a book, or an issue for discussion. One copy only, for me, which I will mark up and return to you.

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, any marked improvement in these.) Please don't insult me or your classmates by being absent without leave (and this includes fooling around with your smartphones). The motto is BE HERE NOW.

I look to you to bring energy, imagination, commitment, and discipline to the class. It's a huge, lawless, and quickly expanding field. I'd be very surprised if you've come across any of the books before (maybe Didion, to whom I came late, or Krakauer, which was a huge popular success?). 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 better to cope with – and more effectively to observe and understand – whatever lies before you.

A list of the books:

(John McPhee: 4<sup>th</sup> DRAFT – suggested)  
Ryszard Kapuscinski: ANOTHER DAY OF LIFE (first part only)  
Joan Didion: SLOUCHING TOWARDS BETHLEHEM

Joseph Roth: THE HOTEL YEARS  
Andrzej Stasiuk: FADO

Peter Handke: A SORROW BEYOND DREAMS  
Annie Ernaux: A WOMAN'S STORY

Bruce Chatwin: IN PATAGONIA  
Jon Krakauer: INTO THE WILD

David Wallace Wells: THE UNINHABITABLE EARTH

M.H.

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

6 January: Introductions, syllabus, first materials, Wenders, McPhee's 4<sup>th</sup> DRAFT

13 January: Lowell, Bellow

20 January: No class, MLK day

27 January: Kapuscinski (1<sup>st</sup> part only) and Didion (personal description and response paper due)

3 February: Didion

10 February: Roth (response paper)

17 February: Stasiuk (object description)

24 February: Roth/ Stasiuk

2 March: Spring Break

9 March: Chatwin (response paper due)

16 March: Krakauer (place paper due)

3 March: Handke/ Ernaux (response paper due)

30 March: Handke/ Ernaux ('researched' paper due)

6 April: Wallace Wells (response paper due)

13 April: Wallace Wells

20 April: conclusions

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Office hours, Tuesdays 1-3 pm, or by appointment