Graduate School of Journalism, University of California at Berkeley

**J243: Advanced Narrative Writing**

**Syllabus**

Spring semester, 2019

3 units

Time: Tuesdays, 10 am to 1 pm

Instructor: Adam Hochschild

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*Introduction:*

Please don’t take this course unless you have a strong appetite for writing, for rewriting, and for close, attentive reading—and unless you **come into the class with a couple of stories you are eager to report and write.**

Please don’t take this course if anticipated end-of-the-school-year pressures (finishing a master’s project, job interviews, travel, etc.) make it likely you’ll miss class more than once. This can especially be a problem for final-year students. We meet only once a week, and I’d like everyone to be here.

Advanced Narrative Writing is primarily for 2nd year students. 1st year students I would urge to take Introduction to Reported Narrative Writing unless you’ve had some experience writing larger narrative stories. People outside the J-School I will usually not have room for, but if you’re interested, contact me in advance to be put on a waiting list.

This course is based on the belief that the best way to hold a reader’s attention for more than a few paragraphs is through the art of storytelling. If you want your reader to stay with you for a newspaper feature story, a magazine article, or a “long reads” piece on a website, you have to learn what good storytellers have been doing for thousands of years to make people sit up and pay attention. As a reader, you know the difference between writing that makes you eagerly turn the page and writing that makes your eyes glaze over. We’re going to work on writing the first and not the second. This course will be of particular interest to students who want to write for magazines, although well-crafted narrative stories are increasingly valued by good newspapers and websites as well. And an ability to write strong narrative is the foundation of effective work in every other journalistic medium, from radio to TV to film. Think of it this way: your ultimate ambition may be to play the violin or the clarinet, but you’ll have an enormous head start if you’ve already mastered the piano.

For every class meeting, there is a reading assignment equal to 3 or 4 magazine-length pieces. We will read material that ranges from George Orwell on India to Jill Lepore on Ben Franklin’s sister to Anne Hull on Mexican migrant workers. We will also read a few short stories, because there is so much to learn about good narrative from them. I may also throw in a radio script or two, because exactly the same narrative principles can be studied there. We will try to figure out how great fiction writers and journalists create characters so real that they walk off the page.

This reading is pen-in-hand, note-taking reading, not read-yourself-to-sleep reading. Allow plenty of time for it. Don’t wait to do it until the last minute! We will spend the first half of each class closely analyzing the assigned reading to figure out how the author deploys his or her powers of storytelling. Each time, I will ask a different student to draw a diagram of how one of these pieces was structured. Inside each of our bodies is a skeleton, even if others can’t see it from the outside. The same is true of any good piece of writing. We will also discuss how writers choose their sources, gather information, and decide whether or not to believe what people tell them. To learn something from a good writer's work, you have to take a book or article or short story apart and figure out why it held your attention.

In the second half of each class, we will act as an editorial board to critique writing assignments you do. Due dates of the assignments will be staggered, so that we will have some pieces to discuss at every session after the first. Part of the work required for this class is to critically read and mark up pieces written by your classmates each week. Allow plenty of time for this, too. Editing well is just as hard as writing well.

The key to writing the sorts of stories we're doing here ismany drafts. First, *before* you send your piece to the whole class, show it to someone else--friend, enemy, spouse, lover, classmate--and get his or her response. Then revise. Then read it aloud to yourself--it is amazing how many unnecessary sidetracks and pieces of fuzzy verbiage you can pick up this way. Then revise again. Then--and only then--show it to all of us.

Many pieces first written for this class have found their way into print in publications ranging from the *East Bay Express* to *Mother Jones* to an 8,000 word story in the *Atlantic*—sometimes half a dozen in a semester. I’ll be glad to show you some of these The author of a superb book, *The Last Days of Old Beijing: Life in the Vanishing Backstreets of a City Transformed* (2008), Mike Meyer, took this class a few years earlier. He has written two books since then. At least four other former students in the course have also published books; most recently, Meghan Laskocky’s *The Little Book of Heartbreak: Love Gone Wrong Through the Ages*. There is no reason why *every* piece written for this class cannot be published: none of the assignments are mere exercises; all of them are the lengths of articles that newspapers, magazines and web sites are looking for. We will also spend some time talking about preparing pitches and other aspects of getting your work published.

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*FAQ:*

*Q. I already took a class last year—or I’m in one right now--with a lot of narrative or feature writing; won’t this course duplicate that?*

A*.* No way. Learning to write well takes a lifetime. I’m still working at it myself.

*Q. Can I use my master’s project for the longest of the writing assignments here?*

A. Yes—but *only* if it fits the requirements for that assignment (see the next question) and if it reads like a final draft by the due date assigned to you in this class. Your advisor, of course, has final say over whether it meets the requirements for a master’s project, and over what shape he or she wants it in for that purpose. But you can apply feedback from our discussion of it in class.

*Q. Can I use rough drafts of pieces in progress for the writing assignments here?*

A*.* No! This class is about learning to write suspenseful, polished, well-structured pieces that could be published in a magazine or newspaper or other outlet with high standards. First drafts full of TK’s or missing sections, fragments that don’t stand alone, and pieces that are essentially long, rambling news stories, are not acceptable.

*Q. I did some reporting on this story when I was in (Antarctica) (among the Tauregs of the Sahara) (undercover in Afghanistan) last summer. Can I write up what I’ve got for one of the assignments, and fill in the gaps after I go back next summer?*

A. No.

*Q. Can I use pieces I’ve written for other classes for the assignments here?*

A. No. Although I will be glad to look at them and critique them if you want.

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*Writing assignments:*

**Assignment #1:** You’re aiming at an op-ed page, or at a Sunday newspaper feature section that publishes pieces by non-staff members, or at a magazine-style website*.* Write a piece of narrative from memory. It can be a memoir of someone--living or dead--whom you bring alive for your readers: a teacher, friend, parent, relative, or mentor; a public figure or an unknown; a saint or a scoundrel. Take someone you know or knew personally and make him or her live and breathe on the page. The piece can also talk about your relationship with this person. Or, what you write can be a piece of personal experience, where you evoke a time, a place, an event with meaning for you and with relevance to your readers today. For an op-ed page, the outer limit is usually 900 or 1,000 words; for another outlet the story can be longer. So the word length of this assignment is up to you. This is an opportunity to learn what stories you already have within you. Pieces written for this assignment in past years have appeared in print; there’s no reason why yours can’t as well. Part of the assignment: at the top of page 1, list, in order of preference, 3 outlets you would like to try it on.

**Assignment #2:** Come up with an idea for a reported story and write an enticing pitch for it. This letter should be addressed to a specific editor, at a specific magazine, website or section of a newspaper that publishes freelancers, who is likely to be interested in the subject you have in mind. Also part of this assignment: name, at the top of the page, two other outlets you will next try the pitch on if your first choice says no. An integral part of writing *anything* is strategizing long and hard about where you have the best shot at getting it into print or online. And an integral part of that is having a couple of back-up outlets in mind as well. Even though this assignment is just to write the pitch, *now is also the time to start work on this story*. Sources disappear or clam up, plans fall through; allow yourself plenty of time and begin reporting far in advance. Do this pitch for the story you plan to write for either Assignment #3 or #5.

**Assignment # 3:** A story of at least 1,500 words, based on shoe-leather reporting of some sort. Remember, this is not an inverted-pyramid news story (“The President’s press secretary today announced that . . .”). An essential part of this assignment: write something you actually plan to try to get published in a magazine or newspaper or on a website. At the top of Page 1, give us the list of the three places you plan to try it on. If there is no publication likely to be interested, pick another subject! Writing a piece and aiming it at a ranked list of possible outlets are two sides of the same coin. If you’re talented enough to get admitted to the J-School, you are already too far along in the profession to still be writing anything just as an exercise.

**Assignment #4:** Pick one of the first two pieces you turned in, the one that has the best shot at getting published, and, making use of the feedback you got from the class, rewrite it and let us see it again. Again tell us the three places where you plan to submit it.

**Assignment #5:** Write a reported story of 3,000 to 5,000 words. And remind us on page 1—whether or not these choices have changed since you wrote your pitch—of your first, second and third choices of where you will try to publish.

**Assignment #6:** Making use of the feedback you’ve gotten from the class, rewrite #5 and let us see it again.

Five further points about the writing assignments:

1) All three pieces of writing must be on different subjects; no reworking the same topic at greater length.

2) Although not required, I strongly urge you to revise your pitch and actually send it to the editor named, after it has been critiqued in class. And try the next editor on the list if the first says no. Keep on going down the list. Let us know what kind of response you get. Most professional freelance writers don’t have their own private editorial board to critique their pitches and articles before they send these out into the world. In this class, you do. Don’t waste this opportunity.

3) Although not absolutely required, I suggest you make one of your three pieces a profile. Whether the person you profile is a heart surgeon or harpsichordist, a skydiver or sewer technician, there’s nothing more fun than inserting yourself into someone else’s life for a few days.

4) Because the longest piece—Assignment #5--is going to take some reporting time, get started on it early in the semester.

5) Neither #3 nor #5 necessarily has to follow from the pitch you wrote for #2—the purpose of that assignment is to get some practice in pitching a story idea. Quite frequently the story you pitch does not necessarily work out as expected. In the real world you would go back to an editor with a different or modified idea and get his or her approval before going ahead, but for the class you need not worry about that. Although I’m always glad to talk over your change of plans.

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*Additional details:*

1) Please tell me, either in class the week before, or by email, if you absolutely have to miss a class session.

2) I’d like everybody to be there mentally. No electronic devices of any kind in class, please! Studies show that people read more carefully, thoughtfully and attentively on paper. Unless vision problems require you to read in some other form, I’d like you to print out the readings I send you and read them in that form.

3) Office hours: I will plan on always being available after class for as long as there are any of you who want to talk. If this is not a convenient time for you, I’m always glad to meet at some other time by arrangement.

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*Class schedule:*

For writing assignments, please email it to the class list **three** days in advance of the date it’s scheduled for discussion, so all of us can read it carefully. So that means that even though Tuesday, January 28 is listed as the due date for Assignment #1, you need to email your piece to the class list sometime before midnight on Saturday, January 25, so as to give everyone two full days to critique it.

Reading assignments will be distributed to you by email one week in advance.

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January 22 – first class.

January 29 – Assignment #1, Group 1, **due three days before**.

February 5 – Assignment #1, Group 2, **due three days before**.

February 12 – Assignment #2, Group 1, **due three days before**.

February 19 – Assignment #2, Group 2, **due three days before**.

February 26 – Assignment #3, Group 1, **due three days before**.

March 5 – Assignment #3, Group 2, **due three days before**.

March 12 – Assignment #4, Group 1, **due three days before**.

March 19 -- Assignment #4, Group 2, **due three days before**.

---------Spring Break------------

April 2 -- Assignment #5, Group A, **due three days before**.

April 9 – Assignment #5, Group B, **due three days before**.

April 16 – Assignment #5, Group C, **due three days before**.

April 23 – Assignment #6, Group A, **due three days before**.

April 30 -- Assignment #6, Group B, **due three days before**.

May 7 (final class) – Assignment #6, Group C, **due three days before**.

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