

**NARRATIVE NONFICTION  
SPRING 2014 SEMESTER  
T 6-8:40PM  
208 BIDDLE HALL**

PROFESSOR MARISSA LANDRIGAN  
[MKL18@PITT.EDU](mailto:MKL18@PITT.EDU)  
PROFESSORMARISSA.WORDPRESS.COM  
MARISSALANDRIGAN.COM  
OFFICE: 233B BIDDLE  
OFFICE HOURS: MWF 11AM-1PM & TH 1-2PM

**Overview**

*The difference between literature and journalism is that journalism is unreadable, and literature is not read.*  
~ Oscar Wilde

This course has many names: literary journalism, narrative reportage, long-form feature writing. When we settled on narrative nonfiction, it was only because we had to settle on something. Suffice it to say what we'll be doing in this course is attempting to outwit Mr. Wilde there: to make journalism readable and literature read. To combine a journalistic adherence to fact with the literary writer's toolbox in order to tell long-form, research-driven nonfiction stories in a creative, compelling way.

Of course, nothing is that simple. Over the course of the semester, we will grapple with the questions fundamental to this fuzzy hybrid genre. What is a fact? What is the truth? How can a nonfiction writer conduct research without succumbing to the Heisenberg principle? How can we shape the plot arc of a story and develop compelling characters without sacrificing our journalistic integrity? What stories do we have a right to tell? What stories do we have an obligation to tell? We will discuss the role of the narrator and the ideology of objectivity. We will learn and practice the imaginative writing techniques of the novelist alongside the research strategies of any good journalist, and we might, if Hunter S. Thompson is any indication, drive ourselves a little crazy.<sup>1</sup>

We will do all this in two main ways: we will read a lot and we will write a lot. We will read extensive contemporary examples of writers in the field, and will endeavor to research the venues publishing the best modern narrative reportage. You will produce three long-form pieces of nonfiction to be workshopped by your peers and me. The semester will culminate in the production of a portfolio consisting of revisions to your long-form pieces, and producing short-form versions of those stories suitable for a digital audience.

---

<sup>1</sup> Here, I'm referring both to Thompson's life in general, and also to this quote from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which I really wanted to make the header quote for this syllabus:

“Journalism is not a profession or a trade. It is a cheap catch-all for fuckoffs and misfits – a false doorway to the backside of life, a filthy piss-ridden little hole nailed off by the building inspector, but just deep enough for a wino to curl up from the sidewalk and masturbate like a chimp in a zoo-cage.”

But I decided that quote probably wasn't appropriate for your young, innocent eyes and ears.

Oops.

## Learning Objectives

By completion of this course, students should be able to:

- Express an understanding of the genre of literary journalism, including its personal essay and narrative reportage legacies
- Identify, analyze, and ultimately, apply specific techniques of creative writing to crafting long-form nonfiction
- Discuss the ethical issues of fact and truth inherent in literary journalism
- Identify compelling story angles in their world, including everyday events and social issues
- Deploy a range of research strategies, including both journalistic interviews, and creative observation skills, to develop story ideas

## What You'll Need

*Hidden America*, by Jeanne Marie Laskas

A dedicated folder/notebook for writing in the classroom and for conducting research.

Access to a reliable printer for other reading materials (PM) and your essays

MOST of our course reading will be available online. I expect that these essays will be read in advance of class, and printed or brought to class digitally for discussion. Computer issues are not an excuse for not having the reading done – you have many computers and printers at your disposal here.

## Stuff You Should Do to Get On My Good Side:

1. **Attend classes.** Come to class. Just do. As often as possible. Class can and will be fun if you join in. Most of what we do in a creative writing/discussion-based classroom can't be replicated in notes or emails. You get one freebie – an absence for whatever you want. Save it for when you are genuinely sick/swamped. If you blow it on a hangover early in the semester and then have a quarter-life crisis involving days of weeping in front of an NCIS marathon while you eat Ben & Jerry's straight from the carton, you'll regret it. When you do have to miss class, check with me and/or your classmates to see what (not IF) you missed. Miss more than one absence and your final grade goes down one letter grade per additional absence. Miss three or more and you automatically fail the class.
2. **Listen and talk.** A workshop class is a collaborative project, in which we all need to participate in order to maximize our learning. It's no hippie hokey-pokey to say that I learn from you as much as you from me. You'll all see things in the readings I'd never dreamed of, and your imaginative work affords us even more possibilities for experimentation and exploration. Initiate discussion. Ask questions. Challenge me and each other. Be kind. You'll learn more if you participate, I guarantee it. Plus, I'll be so warm and fuzzy I'll love you all forever, and isn't that the attitude you want to cultivate in the person dolling out the grades?
3. **Do the work.** Blog posts are how I know you're reading and ready to participate. Writing is how you demonstrate your learning. Hence, not completing all major assignments results in an automatic failure of the class. Late assignments will be accepted by me, penalized at one letter grade per day late, but will not be workshopped by your peers. If you have any extenuating circumstances that will conflict with the deadlines for these major assignments, you must speak with me *in advance* of the conflict to make other arrangements. There's always a way to work around a conflict, rather than hand in an assignment late. No late blogs or final portfolios will be accepted.

4. **Challenge yourself.** In-depth critical reading, thoughtful commentary, and ambitious essays are so much more captivating than safe, easy ones. Stretch yourself and I'll be impressed, even if you don't always pull it off. I promise, no one will be a bigger cheerleader for your success this semester than I will be – as long as I know you're working hard.

### **Office Hours**

...are the most underused resource available to college students. Come to me with specific questions about your essays at *any stage* of the writing process. Run your ideas by me, use me as a sounding board, ask me about a hitch in your draft you can't see your way around. I'll gladly schedule special appointments if my regular hours conflict with your other commitments.

Office visits are opportunities for one-on-one instruction; they are not editing sessions where I merely correct your work. Whenever you want to work with me on an essay draft, it is helpful if you bring two copies. You should make any handwritten changes to your own draft. I will not serve as your proofreader. I don't believe you will learn anything from having me merely edit your work. Do not come to my office and ask me to look over a paper "in general." If I am to help you develop as a writer, you must come to me with specific questions, and you must learn to recognize the areas in which you need help.

Asking me for help on an essay does not guarantee that you will receive a high grade. Use my advice along with your own knowledge and skill to revise and edit carefully. I will help you, but you are ultimately responsible for the quality of your essay.

You need to participate in all draft workshops in order to be eligible for individual help. Giving individual assistance to those students who missed workshops would, I fear, provide an incentive for absence on workshop days.

### **Classroom Respect & Coursework Ethics**

Imaginative writing is a form of art, not an excuse to shock people. Dark subjects and taboo topics are par for the course in the world of artistic exploration; we will certainly read "dark" and/or "edgy" published work in class and you may choose subject matters that deal with sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Foul language is fine if it is in the context of the story and consistent with the character's way of speaking. If this makes you nervous/uncomfortable, good. It ought to. We're not here to be comfortable and complacent—we're here to stretch and challenge ourselves, to blow each other's minds. Be prepared to read tough stuff and learn to respond with empathy and sensitivity.

However, I do not accept essays or exercises that rely on excessive shock value: inappropriately graphic violence, blatant pornography, and/or hate speech masquerading as art are not acceptable. These are weak. These are boring. These do not blow my mind. Students whose work is deemed to be a direct or indirect threat to other students or instructors will be taken seriously and dealt with by, among other things, verbal flogging.

Workshop discussions are a chance for us all to practice our critique and learn both as a reader and writer of nonfiction. This requires we all hold ourselves to rigorous standards of clarity and respect in sharing our opinions in workshop. Please keep in mind that everyone's emotional connection to his or her story is different and requires consideration, and that critique is not the same as criticism. That being said, writers should not submit pieces for workshop that deal with subjects about which they are not ready to receive critique.

A writing class is a chance for you to showcase your brilliant originality, the depth of your own experience and your emotional truths. You are so cool. Why fake it with someone else's words or ideas? Plagiarism, aside from being a poor choice academically, is a waste of everyone's time. Such work will be dealt with in accordance with university policy.

UPJ does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, age, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, sex, marital status, or disability. An effective learning environment values and supports diversity. Our classroom should be a place of lively discussion and all opinions are welcome. Intolerance and hateful statements of any kind are not welcome, and anyone making the classroom environment uncomfortable for shared learning will be asked to leave.

### **Assignments**

Your grade in this class will be determined by a combination of your own original writing, your participation in workshops, and your active participation in reading and discussion as detailed below:

#### **Essay #1: People & Places (15%)**

A 2000-word plus essay that takes as its primary subject a person, group of people, or place. You may choose to write a detailed profile of a famous, interesting, or unknown person. You may choose to write an ethnography of sorts, illuminating the lives of a group of people, or subculture. You may choose to report on a place—literal or figurative—of any size or type. The point-of-view, tone, and angle of focus are entirely up to you, and should be chosen carefully with respect to the needs of the subject and story. Think carefully about the ethical choices involved in reporting on others' lives, and demonstrate integrity. Make sure to emphasize sensory detail and descriptive writing.

#### **Essay #2: Commentary & Criticism (15%)**

A 2000-word plus essay that takes an opinionated view of its subject. Your work may be critical or analytical, as in a review, or meditative and reflective. You may choose to focus on cultural products, popular or otherwise, or you may take a political or social issue as your focus. You may also choose to include personal experience and perspective. Tone and point-of-view is again up to you, but I do expect to see you-as-narrator playing some sort of integral role in this piece. Remember that commentary and criticism still require journalistic integrity: opinions should be well thought out and well-supported, even if light-hearted or satirical.

#### **Essay #3: Investigating & Exploring (15%)**

A 2000-word plus essay whose goal is to enlighten your audience on an unknown or not-well-understood subject. Hard-hitting investigative reporting has its place here, but so does any personal narrative that explores a marginalized, oppressed, or voiceless perspective. You may choose to educate your readers about a problem or controversy; you may report on the people working to find a solution. Shine a light somewhere in the darkness. Again, tone is flexible – this kind of illumination can happen from a humorous perspective, but should still remain ethical towards its subject. Likely the most distant point-of-view, though you may still be present as the investigator or narrator.

#### **Writer's Journal (20%)**

Your writer's journal will consist of your written responses to readings and written pitches of your ideas that you will share with me and the class via our Courseweb blog forums. For Weeks 2-7, and 11-14 you have weekly reading-response blogs to post. Your blogs should be 200-300 words and are due by 5pm

Sunday nights. The blog posts should respond to one or more of the essays assigned for the forthcoming Tuesday's class. This gives us all ample time to peruse each other's thoughts on the readings in advance of Tuesday's discussions.

In weeks 3, 7, and 12, you should post a blog (in addition to your regular reading-response blog) to "pitch" your ideas for each of your essays. You may post these pitches at any time in advance of those deadlines. These can be relatively informal, but should demonstrate that your idea is thought-out, and that you have considered the necessary research for your subject. Show me you know what research you need to conduct, and convince me it's feasible within the timeframe of the assignment. I will read and respond to these posts to greenlight your ideas, and you may feel free to look at and comment on each other's pitches for comments or inspiration.

Note: these deadlines are also listed on the course calendar below.

### **Journal/Magazine Presentation (5%)**

Once a week during weeks 3-13 of our semester, each of you will give a brief (7-10 minute) presentation on a journal or magazine of your choosing to help us better understand potential target markets for our work in this course. You will each choose one publication from the list below (and get my approval – only one student per publication) and next week, we will randomly assign presentation dates. You should then research the publication to learn as much about its editorial choices as possible—read sample issues and peruse the website, read mission statements and about pages, view the regular columns and categories, etc. Your presentation should be your report back to the class on what you learned, including a basic overview of the publication, its subject matter/editorial focus, regular sections and columns (including likely places for a beginning writer to "break in"), and any information regarding submission policies you were able to find. You should create a digital short handout summarizing your presentation and email it to me before the class period of your presentation. I will upload these to our class website.

#### Journal/Magazine Choices:

The New Yorker	Grantland	The Daily Beast
Harper's	Rolling Stone	Aeon
The Atlantic	Spin	The Atavist
The New York Times	Wired	The Awl
Magazine	Outside	Mother Jones
Vanity Fair	National Geographic	The Believer
GQ	Smithsonian	Lucky Peach
Esquire	Slate	Food & Wine

*If you'd like to present on a publication not listed here, that's probably fine – just run it by me first to make sure it focuses on the kind of long-form nonfiction we'll be working on in this class.*

### **Portfolio (30%)**

Your final grade in this course will be a cumulative portfolio of your work over the course of the semester. Your real task will be to develop new, short-form versions of each of those three stories in a format suitable for digital publication. You should think about targeting specific publications, based on what you learned during the course, and what kinds of columns or recurring segments might be an appropriate fit for your work. Your final portfolio then, will consist of three long-form pieces, each with a corresponding short version, and a cover letter to a hypothetical target publication, as if you were submitting the short piece as a teaser for the longer version.

## Course Schedule

*Please note this schedule is tentative and subject to change.*

Week	Day	In Class	To Do This Week
1	T, Jan 7	<p>What is literary journalism? What is truth?</p> <p>Listen to Radiolab “The Fact of the Matter” Read and discuss D’Agata “The Lifespan of a Fact”</p> <p>Review journal presentation assignment Review Essay #1</p>	<p>Show up!</p> <p>Acquire stockpiles of caffeine</p>
2	T, Jan 14	<p>Research techniques: immersion, observation, and interview</p> <p>The distant narrative presence</p>	<p>Read: Laskas, “Introduction,” “Underworld,” “Hecho en America,” G-L-O-R-Y!” and “Traffic.”</p> <p>Write: blog post in response to readings by Sunday, 5pm</p> <p>Choose journal (and backup choices) for presentation</p>
3	T, Jan 21	<p>The closer narrative presence</p> <p>Shaping characters</p> <p>Choices in point-of-view</p>	<p>Read: Sullivan, Halpern, Didion</p> <p>Write: blog post in response to readings by Sunday, 5pm <b>AND</b> blog post pitching idea for Essay #1 by class time.</p>
4	T, Jan 28	<p>Group A draft exchange</p> <p>Discuss people and places</p> <p>Review workshop process and protocol</p>	<p>Read: Navarro, Rubin Erdely</p> <p>Write: blog post in response to readings by Sunday, 5pm</p> <p><b>Group A Essay #1 due today</b></p>
5	T, Feb 4	<p>Workshop Group A</p> <p>Group B draft exchange</p> <p>Discuss Klosterman, Commentary &amp; Criticism</p> <p>Discuss Essay #2</p>	<p>Read: Klosterman</p> <p>Write: blog post in response to readings by Sunday, 5pm</p> <p><b>Group B Essay #1 due today</b></p>
6	T, Feb 11	<p>Workshop Group B</p> <p>Discuss cultural criticism</p> <p>Structuring a Story</p>	<p>Read: Daum, Passarello, Smith</p> <p>Write: blog post in response to readings by Sunday, 5pm</p>

7	T, Feb 18	The personal is political Issue-based criticism Relying on personal experience	Read: Coates, Hitchens, Laymon, Mann  Write: blog post in response to readings by Sunday, 5pm <b>AND</b> blog post pitching idea for Essay #2 by class time.
8	T, Feb 25	BRAIN BREAK: View and discuss <i>Capote</i>  Group A draft exchange	<b>Group A Essay #2 due today</b>
9	T, Mar 4	Workshop Group A  Group B draft exchange  Review Essay #3  Revisit research strategies	<b>Group B Essay #2 due today</b>
10	T, Mar 11	Spring Break	Be thinking about, and possibly even researching, essay #3
11	T, Mar 18	Group B workshop  “Hard-hitting” investigation  Issue-based features  Problem/controversy/solution	Read: Laskas, “Guns R’ Us,” McClelland, Elliott, Norton  Write: blog post in response to readings by Sunday, 5pm
12	T, Mar 25	Explorative reporting  Finding an untold/quiet story  Voicing the Voiceless	Read: Boo, Conover, Jamison, Rao  Write: blog post in response to readings by Sunday, 5pm <b>AND</b> blog post pitching idea for Essay #3 by class time.
13	T, Apr 1	Blogging: the new sidebar  Group A draft exchange	Read: Orlean, “Free Range,” and Alberto Urrea on <i>Orion</i>  Write: blog post in response to readings by Sunday, 5pm  <b>Group A Essay #3 due today</b>
14	T, Apr 8	Workshop Group A  Group B draft exchange  Review final portfolio assignment	Read: Taibbi, “Taibblog,” and Adrian Chen Kinja  Write: blog post in response to readings by Sunday, 5pm  <b>Group B Essay #3 due today</b>
15	T, Apr 15	Group B workshop  Finding digital venues Crafting a cover letter/pitch	Read: Research target publications and digital break-in opportunities (spin-off sites, blogs, columns, sections, etc.) Come to class ready to share a few possibilities.

<b>16</b>	Final Exam	Final Portfolio due Thurs. 4/24 by 5pm	Bring portfolio to 233B Biddle (my office/mailbox) by deadline.
-----------	------------	---	--