

WRITING: R6225 Section 7
Nonfiction Seminar: Magazine Culture and the Modern American Essay
Thursdays, 1:45 pm – 3:45 pm, Dodge 413

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Office Hours: Thursdays, 12:45 pm – 1:45 pm, or by appointment; 415 Dodge

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Essays enter the canon primarily through first-year writing anthologies, where they are yanked from their historical context and used as models for this or that kind of student writing. E. B. White's "Once More to the Lake," for instance, is a well-known and oft anthologized essay about a father and son fishing on a lake in Maine. It is generally read as a nostalgia piece and used to prompt an exercise essay about "what I did on my summer vacation," but when it first appeared in *Harper's* in 1941 and was collected the following year in White's book *One Man's Meat*, readers recognized it also being as a critique of isolationism and warning about the gathering clouds of war.

We will begin by reading articles about the form of the essay, the creation of the essay canon, and the rise of American magazine culture before studying essays by several American writers, including H. L. Mencken, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, John McPhee, Joan Didion, David Shields, David Foster Wallace, Jenny Boully, and Eula Biss. We will examine these essays as they appeared originally in magazines and journals such as the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Ms.*, the *Iowa Review*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* in order to learn what their historical context can tell us about their form and meaning.

Texts:

John D'Agata, ed., *The Next American Essay* (Graywolf, 2003) ISBN 9781555973759
Joyce Carol Oates and Robert Atwan, eds., *The Best American Essays of the Century* (Houghton Mifflin, 2000) ISBN 9780618155873

Both are available at the Book Culture on West 112th; other texts will be available as PDFs.

Student Attendance and Classroom Policies (from Columbia):

1. There is absolutely **no auditing of courses** allowed. All students in a class must be assigned to that course.
2. Students are **not allowed to "shop around"** (sit in on a class they are not assigned to) -- unless the class is not fully enrolled and they have my permission. These exceptions will be allowed, but only during the first week of, but only during the first week of classes.
3. **There are no unexcused absences** -- and no "automatic allowance" of a certain number of absences.
4. Students should try not to be late to class or leave the room when class is in session. Repeated **latenesses** will be noted by the professor and brought to my attention.

5. We have a strict policy that all **cellphones must be turned off** during class. This does not mean putting a phone on vibration, it means turning it off. Calls and text messages cannot be made or received while class is in session. Students must ask the professor for permission to use a laptop or any other electronic device while in class.

6. Course is graded pass/fail.

ASSIGNMENTS

Presentations

Each student will be responsible for an oral presentation on an essay and the magazine in which it first appeared. I would like you to focus on both the form and the context of the essay. By *form* I mean voice, style, technique, organization and so on; by *context*, I mean the historical and rhetorical moment in which the essay appeared. I hope you'll be able to find the magazine in which the essay first appeared and scan some of it in order to show us something about the context. You might want to focus on ads, the table of contents, subsequent letters to the editor, and anything else that seems revealing. Again, my contention is that essays are read differently in magazines than they are when they appear in collections of the author's work or in anthologies (especially if those anthologies are meant to emphasize rhetorical modes, but also more historical anthologies in which the essay is placed alongside the work of other authors).

Each presentation should consist of an 8-10 minute talk followed by discussion. The presentation should be focused and well organized, and designed so as to launch a discussion. You should accompany your presentation with a **one-page (no more)** handout. Make a copy of this for each member of the class. You should also feel free to use PowerPoint, Prezi, and any other digital applications you might find helpful. I will explain the assignment more fully and you'll sign up for an essay later, but for now suffice it to say that your handout should include your interpretation of the essay and its context as well as some questions for discussion.

Web Content

I have launched a website called [Essays in America](#) that brings together materials like those you'll be compiling for your presentation. I would like each of you to gather your presentation materials in such a way that they can be curated at this site, including basic material about the essayist and the essay, the piece's first and subsequent appearances, a bibliographic listing for it, images that might be pertinent, and so on. Again, I'll provide more detailed instructions later. You'll be credited on the website for any material you curate. **This material is due a week after you present.**

Personal Essay/Essay on the Essay

You will each write an essay that explores, interprets, or models one (or more) of the essays we will be studying. This essay should be 8-10 pages long and is due at our last class, December 5. I don't want this to be a burden. I want it to supplement, inform, and perhaps join work you may already be doing for your thesis. It can be more personal than academic, more essay than article, if you'd like.

READING SCHEDULE

Orange and * indicate this essay already has page at the [Essays in America](#) website.

Red indicates that materials have already been compiled for the website.

All readings are in Oates & Atwan unless otherwise indicated.

Week One - What is an Essay?

Th 9/5 – Introductions, Syllabus, Policies, Procedures

Edward Hoagland, “What I Think, What I Am.” *The Tugman's Passage* (New York: Penguin, 1983) 24 – 27.

E. B. White, Forward to *Essays of E. B. White* (1977; New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 1999) ix-xii.

Week Two - What is the Essay Canon and How Might It Be Changed? What Does Context Tell Us?

Th 9/12

Lynn Z. Bloom, “The Essay Canon,” *College English* 61:4 (March 1999) 401-430. [pdf]

E. B. White, “Once More to the Lake” (1941) *Harper's* in Oates and Atwan
Ned Stuckey-French, “Epilogue: “Once More to the Lake,” History, and Freshman Composition, from *The American Essay in the American Century*. [pdf]

Robert Scholes, “The English Curriculum After the Fall,” *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*, 10.1 (2009): 229-40. [pdf]

Supplemental non-required reading:

Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Verso, 1996). Chapters One (“The Experience,” 1-10) & Two (“The Origins of Mass Culture,” 11-30) [pdf]

Stuckey-French, “Expanding the Essay Canon, One Decade at a Time.”

<https://www.creativenonfiction.org/online-reading/expanding-essay-canon-one-decade-time>

Robert Patten, “When is a Book not a Book?”

< <http://web-static.nypl.org/exhibitions/booknotbook/index.html>>

Week Three - *The Atlantic Monthly*

Th 9/19

Randolph Bourne, “The Handicapped” (1911) *The Atlantic Monthly**

Jane Addams, “The Devil Baby at Hull House” (1916) *The Atlantic Monthly**

Gretel Ehrlich, “The Solace of Open Spaces” (1981) *The Atlantic Monthly**

Week Four - Harper's

Th 9/26

Mary McCarthy, "Artists in Uniform" (1953) *Harper's*
 (also Mary McCarthy, "Settling the Colonel's Hash" (1954) *Harper's*) [pdf]
 Richard Rodriguez, "Late Victorians" (1990) *Harper's** [pdf]
 David Foster Wallace, "Ticket to the Fair" (1994) *Harper's*
 (in *The Next American Essay*)

Week Five - The New Yorker

Th 10/3

Harold Ross, "Prospectus" (1924) [pdf]; also available at
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug02/newyorker/prospectus.html>
 John McPhee, "The Search for Marvin Gardens" (1972) *The New Yorker**
 (also in *The Next American Essay*)
 Joyce Carol Oates, "They All Just Went Away" (1995) *The New Yorker*
 Jo Ann Beard, "The Fourth State of Matter" (1996) *The New Yorker**

Supplemental non-required reading:

Trysh Travis, "What We Talk About When We Talk about *The New Yorker*," *Book History* 3 (2000) 253-285.

http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/journals/book_history/v003/3.1travis.html

Week Six – Newspapers

Th 10/10 –

H. L. Mencken, "The Hills of Zion" (1925) *The Baltimore Evening Sun**
 Langston Hughes, "Bop" (1949) *The Chicago Defender**
 Tom Wolfe, "Putting Daddy On" (1964) *NY Herald Tribune Sunday Magazine**

Week Seven – Slicks, Family Magazines, Men's Magazines

Th 10/17

Edmund Wilson, "The Old Stone House" (1933) *Scribner's*
 Loren Eiseley, "The Brown Wasps" (1956) *Gentry*
 Joan Didion, "The White Album" (1979) *Saturday Evening Post (and Points West)**
 (also in *Next American Essay*)

Week Eight - Slicks, Family Magazines, Women's Magazines

Th 10/24

Eudora Welty, "A Sweet Devouring" (1957) *Mademoiselle*
 Maxine Hong Kingston, "No Name Woman" (1975) *Viva**
 Alice Walker, "Looking for Zora" (1975) *Ms.*

Week Nine – Political Magazines

Th 10/31

Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” (1928) *World Tomorrow*Richard Wright, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch” (1939) *American Stuff: WPA Writers’ Anthology*.

Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963) AFS pamphlet*

Supplemental non-required reading:

Wright and Hurston reviews [pdf]

Jordan, June. "On Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston: Notes Toward a Balancing of Love and Hatred." *Black World* 23 (August 1974) 1- 4. [pdf]**Week Ten – Little Magazines**

Th 11/7

Michael Herr, “Illumination Rounds” (1969), *New American Review* #7Annie Dillard, “Total Eclipse” (1982) *Antaeus* (also in *The Next American Essay*)*Jenny Bouilly, “The Body” (2003) *Seneca Review* (in *The Next American Essay*)Eula Biss, “Time and Distance Overcome” (2008) *Iowa Review* [pdf] Also available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102235226#102237046>**Week Eleven– Scientific Magazines**

Th 11/14

Lewis Thomas, “The Lives of a Cell” (1971) *New England Journal of Medicine*Stephen Jay Gould, “The Creation Myths of Cooperstown” (1989) *Natural History***Week Twelve - Book Reviews**

Th 11/21

William H. Gass, “The Doomed in Their Sinking” (1972) *New York Review of Books*Cynthia Ozick, “A Drugstore in Winter” (1982) *NY Times Book Review*

Th 11/28 - Thanksgiving

Week Thirteen – New Media

Th 12/5

Dinty Moore, “Mr. Plimpton’s Revenge.”

<http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?hl=en&gl=us&ie=UTF8&oe=UTF8&msa=0&msid=117518500794242822937.00046c27922ecb66b6fca&ll=40.438586,-76.970215&spn=3.787431,7.064209&z=7>John Bresland, “On the Origins of the Video Essay” & “Video Suite,” *Blackbird* 9.1 (Spring 2010).http://www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v9n1/gallery/ve-bresland_j/index.shtml“The Video Essay: A Sampling.” In *Focus: The Essay’s Future*. *American Book Review* 33.2 (January/February 2012). [pdf]