

Lee Siegel
Literary Journalism 01:050:301:02
Fall 2008

Monday: 2:15-5:15
Office Hours: Mondays, 1-2 (Room RAB 205E)

Requirements:

Class attendance and class participation are essential. You must keep up with the reading, which will be light to moderate. There will be brief weekly assignments and one final essay or project.

Texts:

Truman Capote, Music for Chameleons

James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son.

Norman Mailer, Armies of the Night.

Pauline Kael, I Lost it at the Movies.

Janet Malcolm, The Journalist and the Murderer; The Silent Woman

Joan Didion, Slouching Toward Bethlehem.

Robert Hughes, Nothing if Not Critical.

Bruce Chatwin, What am I Doing Here?

Amanda Hesser, Cooking for Mr. Latte: A Food Lover's Courtship, With Recipes.

Gay Talese, The Gay Talese Reader: Portraits and Encounters.

Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem

Lee Siegel, Falling Upwards; Not Remotely Controlled

Handouts.

Week 1

Literary journalism takes many forms: reportage, essay, profile, polemic, criticism, travel writing. But what qualifies these different genres as literary journalism? We'll begin by asking what makes writing "literary," and what defines "journalism"; then we'll go on to ask what makes journalism literary, and what makes literary writing journalistic. For one thing, journalism appears in a newspaper or magazine. How, then, do its readership's expectations and needs differ from those of the readers of a book? How does this special readership affect the literary journalist? What is the function of literary journalism? What social, cultural, personal needs does it respond to and seek to satisfy? These are not so much questions that can be answered as complicated issues that will recur throughout the course.

Handouts.

Week 2

One quality that defines journalism is a simple one: journalists have to meet deadlines. Flaubert—not a journalist—used to send his disciple Maupassant down to the nearest Parisian train station with a sketchpad and instructions to draw as many faces as he could as fast as he could—Flaubert thought this would help the younger writer catch the essence of character more effectively. At the end of class, you will talk for five minutes with the person sitting next to you and then, in fifteen minutes, attempt to catch the essence of that person in words.

Profiles from Capote and Talese.

Week 3

Arendt's book, which first appeared in the New Yorker, caused a furor, mostly among Jews who claimed that Arendt misrepresented European Jews' response to the Holocaust. Leaving aside for a moment the question of historical accuracy, we'll consider another element of literary journalism: candor

and/or sensationalism. Unlike reportage on the one hand, and scholarship on the other, literary journalism encourages sweeping assertions, inflammatory characterizations, provocative language, a clear and unambiguous perspective. Some writers would even argue that the notion of balance and objectivity is impossible to achieve, and that those concepts are veneers behind which operate an inevitable subjectivity—call it bias—on the part of the author. In this regard, openness about his or her point of view might make an author's partiality powerfully credible.

Forget everything you've learned about fairness in written expression. For next week, write an essay in which you adopt a position and argue it as passionately and vividly and forcefully—even extremely—as possible.

Eichmann in Jerusalem

James Baldwin, Stanley Crouch, James Wood, Dale Peck, Lee Siegel.

Week 4

Is bias inevitable in the work of a literary journalist? Do the memories, feelings, aspirations of the writer cloud his or her judgment? I would like all of you to describe something that you have experienced: the first session of this course. Describe the various aspects of that class: my appearance; my manner; my ideas and sentiments, the physical setting; your fellow students; etc. As part of the assignment, each of you is required to come to my office hours and interview me for five minutes, during which time you will ask me the same questions. You will then incorporate the interview into your account of the first class.

The Journalist and the Murderer.

Week 5

The writer's self, his or her ego, can be artfully suppressed, as in Malcolm's reportage, or it can be flamboyantly expressed, as in the criticism of Renata Adler, Stanley Crouch (see handouts) et al. It can also be dramatically orchestrated. The chief element of the New Journalism during the 'seventies was the manner in which writers placed their

own experience at the center of what they were describing or reporting on. This is where reportage meets social criticism. At their best, the New Journalists wrote about themselves with clinical detachment as social actors. What is the difference between writing about oneself in the first person, and writing about oneself in the third person? Write a four-to-five-page essay in which you describe the first time you fell in love with , or had a crush on someone, but write about yourself in the third-person.

Armies of the Night.

Week 6

Memoir also puts the writer's self at the center of experience, but self and experience occupy different places in memoir than they do in the rambles and rumbles of New Journalism. For next week, rewrite the essay on first love/crush, in the first person.

Didion and Baldwin.

Week 7

We've read the explicitly subjective viewpoints of critics like Adler and Crouch in the context of how one makes one's "bias" colorful and winning and engaging to the point where it doesn't seem like bias at all. Now we'll address the question of what makes a good critic. Is it approaching a work of art or culture with an open mind and as few preconceptions as possible? Or does one need values, prejudices, first principles to be persuasive (and interesting). What is taste? How far can a critic go in expressing his or her own? How far can a critic go in proclaiming his or her own judgment as a universal standard?

For next week, go to the same movie (TBA) and write a review of it.

Kael and Anthony Lane. Siegel on "Eyes Wide Shut."

Week 8

Every medium makes its own distinct demands on the critic. Let's discuss last week's issues in the context of the fine arts. Go to the Zimmerlie Art or a museum in NYC and review a famous old painting as if it had just been painted and exhibited by an unknown.

Robert Hughes. (Handouts.)

Week 9

Stephen Crane wrote Maggie as though it were a documented piece of reportage, even though it is pure fiction. Truman Capote called In Cold Blood, based on fact, a "nonfiction novel." Using what we've learned about how literary journalists do criticism, "review" these two books side by side, making a case for one over the other.

Handouts.

Week 10

The New York Times considers itself, rightly or wrongly, the "paper of record"—in other words, it considers itself the most objective and accurate source historians will have to go to in the future to learn about the events the Times "covered." As such a crucial source of information, the Times, like many publications, edits its writers so that they share a uniform style. Occasionally, however, a writer's style will be allowed to persist through the editorial process. Certain Times writers have become famous for this. Though not "literary" journalism strictly speaking, these powerfully idiosyncratic stylists possess many of the qualities that make journalism literary. We'll read them, compare them to and contrast them with, more institutional writers, and discuss what makes them "literary." For next week, attend (campus event to be announced) and describe it in "objective," reportorial fashion; then redescribe it using your own idiosyncratic, stylistic flair.

Handouts.

Week 11

As with the other styles and genres of literary journalism we've examined, travel writing can be highly personal, highly detached, or any combination, in various degrees, of both. And, again, as with the other types of literary journalism, certain characteristics distinguish literary travel writing from its more generic forms.

Chatwin. Handouts from "Conde Nast Traveler" and other travel magazines.

Week 12

Writing engagingly about the experience of preparing and consuming food, about cooking at home or eating in a restaurant, is nearly as difficult and abstract as writing about music. For next week, take someone you like or love out to dinner, and write about your relationship to that person simply by evoking the ambience and the quality of food. Try not to directly describe your relationship, or your situation with that person.

Hesser. M.F.K. Fisher handout.

Week 13

As we have seen, literary journalism often defines itself by the way it flouts the rules of standard journalism. Literary journalism seems to consist of anything that is evoked rather than straightforwardly described, of positions passionately, even extremely expressed, of unabashedly subjective perspectives, of writing in which the self is the lens through which events are interpreted. We'll spend this last class reviewing, synthesizing, unifying—or, conversely, letting sleeping insolubles lie. We'll also discuss the final assignment, which will be a ten-to-fifteen-page essay. The subject: Take a day of your life and give an account of it using every technique we've explored in this class. Begin perhaps by giving a colorful account of your state of mind by means of describing your breakfast, go on to profile your roommate, describe an incident you witnessed that afternoon as a self-dramatizing New Journalist, and then go back and describe it as an artfully

self-suppressing reporter, then as a memoirist, etc. Finish, as a kind of coda, by either describing a work of art in such a way that you evoke your life through its qualities, or by writing a ferocious adversarial review of what you have just written.