

*This is a generic version of the actual syllabus available the first day of class or shortly before.*

LITERARY JOURNALISM  
(Sample Syllabus—Subject to major changes)

MICHAEL NORMAN  
10 Washington Place, Room 401, New York, NY 10003  
212-998-7964  
michael.norman@nyu.edu

Office hours: Tuesdays and Wednesdays, BY APPOINTMENT

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This is an advanced graduate seminar; it will concentrate on some of the best book-length reporting and non-fiction narrative produced across the last forty years. We will read five or six books of original reporting, selected for both their strengths and their weaknesses. And we will apply a book of critical theory to those texts to try to tease out the technique that makes them “literary.”

We will critique the structure, the language, the development of the characters, the story line, the plot. We will look at how some authors take a non-fiction template and dress it up with fictional techniques while others adopt the more difficult course of using fiction's conventions consistently from the opening sentence to the closing word.

We will attempt to answer the question: Does the reporting dictate the design of the book or does the design determine the reporting? Along the way we may also consider: the reporting, the sources, the background, the research, the standards of proof and verification, the practice of oral history, the uses of memoir and so on.

The course will emphasize the art and scholarship of reading, the kind of reading a writer does.

ASSIGNMENTS: Leading The Seminar

Each week student a group of three presenters will lead the seminar. They will:

- A) First deliver a brief -- 5-10 minute -- biographical presentation on the author. You should devote no more than two minutes to the facts of the author's life – all we want is some sense of how that life shaped the author's work, if such is the case, and some sense of the “writing apprenticeship” the author served. The majority of the time should be spent on what that author said about her work or about writing in general. Finally, if you can discover a journal or diary by the author, you should deliver some of that to the seminar.

- B) This is to be followed by a discussion and critique of the reviews and articles generated at the time the book was published. (Copy and distribute or read aloud.) This is important. We want to know how the critics received the book and we want to cull from those criticism any useful general principles on the language and structure.
- C) Then the presenters will highlight what they believe are the most important points in the Booth chapters assigned for that day and how that day's Booth reading relates to the narrative that is on the table.
- C) Then the presenters will present the book to the seminar following protocols set by the instructor.
- D) The presenters will then critique the book -- suggest its weaknesses, its strengths, where and how it might be improved.
- E) Throughout, the presenters will lead a class discussion of the book by posing a series of carefully framed questions. They will have a class list and will be calling on each member of the seminar across the day.

### ASSIGNMENTS, Writing.

Since we are a class of writers reading to strengthen our writing, we will write as we read. Each book presents an opportunity to try a different technique -- language, structure, tropes and so on. We will attempt five graded exercises (see Seminar schedule for details). All assignments will run some 500-750 words. DO NOT EXCEED THAT LIMIT UNLESS YOU HAVE PERMISSION.

### FINAL PAPER.

You must, at the end of the term, submit a 2,000-3,000 word paper. Your choices are:

- A. A formal academic paper in which you compare by theme and style of three of the authors in the course, or you may take a general topic -- "The Use Of Metaphors," for example, and take a look at that concept in all the narratives we have read. There are many approaches you can take to this kind of paper.
- B. A modified book proposal on a topic of your choice. Here a student would attempt to apply the lessons of the course to a piece of reporting. The proposal should be written in three parts. First, a discursive section in plain language that describes the project and the reporting you have done and expect to do. Second a chapter by chapter outline. Third, the beginning of the first chapter (2,000 words).
- C. A monograph on one thing or one subject based solely on library research. This monograph would ostensibly be a chapter in a book

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on an aspect of the subject. An example of this would be the first part of John McPhee's *ORANGES*. The idea here is to take applied research -- so-called soft reporting -- and **create from it a compelling narrative.**

NB: These options are at the sole discretion of the professor and can change depending on the circumstances and the experience and skill of the student.

SAMPLE REQUIRED TEXTS:

- \*1. The Duke of Deception, Geoffrey Wolff
- \*2. Praying For Sheetrock, Melissa Fay Greene
- \* 3. My Traitor's Heart, Rian Milan
4. The Last Cowboy, Jane Kramer (Coursepack at Unique Copy Center)
5. Memories of Old Montana, Con Price (NYU Bookstore Coursepack)
- \*5. Young Men and Fire, Norman Maclean
6. The Right Stuff, Tom Wolfe (Hold off buying this one.)
- \*7. The Rhetoric of Fiction, Wayne C. Booth
8. English Prose Style, Herbert Read (Coursepack at Unique Copy Center )

NB: Books with a \* will be part of the course every semester. Others are there for example only.

(In the library, consider the following:)

- \* Style as Argument: Contemporary Nonfiction, Chris Anderson
- \* The Function of Criticism, Terry Eagleton
- \* From Fact to Fiction: Journalism & Imaginative Writing in America, Shelly Fishkin.
- \* Fact & Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel, John Hollowell
- \* The Art of Fact: Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction, Barbara Lounsberry
- \* The Literature of Fact: Literary Nonfiction in American Writing, Ronald Weber.

SEMESTER SCHEDULE  
(Subject to change)

Week 1

1. Class structure
2. Seminar protocols
3. Dialogue: What is literature? What is fiction? What is non-fiction? Can the literature of fact be art? Is the book in the reporting or the writing?
4. Beginnings, attacks, leads, approaches, openings (Part 1)
5. Seminar Assignments for the semester

*-Assignment 500 words. If you enter Washington Square Park from the east (Washington Place) you will soon encounter a statue of Giuseppe Garibaldi . Write about the man and the statue: 1. Describe the statue. 2. Capture some of the scene immediately surrounding the statue. 3. Get some history on Garibaldi and use it in this piece, including at least one primary source (journal, diary, letters). 4. Who put the statue in the park and why? All this in 500 words, seamless woven together in a coherent narrative. NB: This is due by midnight Friday 1/21 . You will send it to me via e-mail in MsWord, double-spaced. The entire assignment must fit on one page front and back (I have a duplex printer). So if you have to use 10-pt. type do so.*

Week 2

1. Booth, RHETORIC OF FICTION, Chapters 1-4
2. Read, pp 3-79
3. Beginnings, attacks, leads, approaches, openings (Part 2)
4. A Very Basic Guide To Explicating Text (whole thing)
4. Workshop “Garibaldi” piece, applying “basic guide” to critique

*-Assignment: 500 words. Define myth. You must provide multiple views (5) of this concept. Then you must reconcile these views and deliver your own understanding of the concept. Finally what is the dominant myth in America, the one that shapes or drives our culture?*

Weeks 3-4

1. Booth, Chapters 5-7
2. Read, pp 80-124 (Class presents pages, not Seminar leaders)
3. Kramer: THE LAST COWBOY; Price: MEMORIES OF OLD MONTANA.
4. (Background reports: Frederick Jackson Turner Essays: “The Problem of the West,” “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” Insights from: THE COWBOY WAY by Paul H. Carlson and other books on cowboys, the myth and their lives.)

*-Assignment: 500 words. Write about your father – honestly, but not cruelly. You may interview your father; you may include material from other writers (citing*

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*them, of course); you may research fatherhood or cultural notions of fatherhood. You may use any approach you wish, but...with such a limited amount of space, I'd suggest you consider writing about just one aspect of your father's life or personality. Make the reader see your father, if you can, then, through some action, perhaps reveal your father's personality. The action should, literally, be a moment -- some small thing, or habitual action, that's revealing; i.e., the way your father walks, eats, reads, gets up in the morning or takes out the garbage, talks. Personality in a glance. Remember Aristotle: Character is action, action is character.*

### Weeks 5-6

1. Booth, Chapters 8-9
2. Wolff, DUKE OF DECEPTION
3. (Background reports: Memoir vs. autobiography and short history of memoir as a genre. List of other "father" memoirs.)

*-Assignment: 500 words. In the Bible, turn Genesis 1-4 into modern narrative. Do add to or embellish the story. Create simple, effective narrative.*

### Weeks 7-8

1. Booth, Chapters 10-11
2. Greene, PRAYING FOR SHEETROCK.
3. (Background reports: Brief history of Civil Rights Movement with emphasis on Georgia; current status.)

*-Assignment: 750 words. Take a moment in history, literally "a moment," research it, and deliver it in "a narrative." Make it "read." Use Milan's first chapter as your guide, or look at other "narrative" historians: Barbara Tuchman, Simon Schama. Examples of "moments": December 7, 1941; September 11, 2001; April 23, 1616; April 14, 1865. If you like, you may take your birthday and write about the historic events unfolding that day.*

### Weeks 9-10

1. Booth, Chapters 12-13
2. Milan, MY TRAITOR'S HEART
3. (Background reports: Brief history of South Africa since date book was published.)

### Weeks 11-12

1. Maclean, YOUNG MEN AND FIRE

2. (Background reports: U.S Forest Service, modern fire-fighting and the role of smoke jumpers.)

Weeks 13-14]

1. Wolff, THE RIGHT STUFF
2. (Background reports: Update on the world of test pilots)
3. Individual assessment.
4. Best book and why: a debate.
5. Round table on future book projects (3-page proposal)

FINAL PAPER DUE \_\_\_\_\_ . No exceptions.

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## **SIGN-UP SHEET**

### Weeks 3-4: (Kramer and Price)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### Weeks 5-6: (Wolff)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### Weeks 7-8: (Greene)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### Weeks 9-10 (Milan)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### Weeks 11-12 (Maclean)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### Weeks 13-14 (Wolff)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### Your Weekly Tasks:

1. Make sure you have read the narrative twice. Once to get the story and the second time so you are prepared to talk about language and structure. The seminar leaders will be calling on you...or I will. Be fully prepared.
2. Read the assigned chapter(s) in Booth and make sure...make doubly sure you understand the concepts. Again you should be prepared to talk about every page. Same with Herbert Read, though we will use him only for the first two weeks of class.
3. Clip and bring to class the week's daily New York Times book reviews. Make sure they are annotated and that you have written out (in your notebook) what you want to say about the points in the reviews you either found useful or useless.
4. Make sure you have looked up any word you do not know from the assigned readings.
5. Review the literary concepts necessary to do our work. I suggest you buy a copy of M.H. Abrams A GLOSSARY OF LITERARY TERMS. Also review the explication guide you received the first week.

### Final Paper:

1. By \_\_\_\_ you must tell me what you intend for the final paper – earlier if you are sure you are going to write a first chapter and require advice on the reporting.
2. On \_\_\_\_\_ everyone, including those who plan an academic paper, must submit in writing a 500-word summary of what you plan for the final paper. This should be double-spaced and clearly written.
3. By \_\_\_\_\_ I want to see the first few pages of your final paper to make sure you're on the right track.

All these deadlines mean that you will have to poke around in the five narratives almost immediately, this to decide which ones you will include in the paper. If you are writing a book chapter, obviously you are already behind; it must be based on original reporting. (Portfolio students see me immediately.)

I will accept memoirs, but they must, absolutely must, include interviews and a schedule of interviews. If you intend a memoir you should immediately read *Inventing the Truth : The Art and Craft of Memoir* by William Zinsser (it's in paperback).