THE BEAT: TRAVEL WRITING
Syllabus Spring 2012

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Course description
“...and I found the greatest difficulty was to put down what really happened in action; what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced...the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion and which would be as valid in a year or ten years or, with luck and if you stated it purely enough, always.”
Ernest Hemingway

The course focuses on combining the creative techniques of fiction with the rigor of journalistic travel writing to produce stories that move beyond the constraints of the news and feature story: stories that engage, resonate with readers, provide insight – stories which “produce the emotion”.

The course proceeds by the reading and analysis of important contemporary journalism and classic travel pieces: examination of the narrative; fictional and literary devices used in travel writing; examination of and practice with various information gathering strategies; humor; point of view; unique voice.

It focuses on the creative process from the first idea to the identification of sources, choice of appropriate style and form, revisions, editing and the presentation of short works. You will be encouraged to attempt a variety of forms to examine your own writing processes, to trial methods used by professional writers (such as journal writing). You will also continually develop stories from your own travel experiences. The regular assignments will prepare you for the final project: a substantial travel narrative of your own.

At specific times during the semester, we will use the workshop process and class discussion to help you develop your pieces. Please note: you are expected to read and evaluate each others’ papers as part of this process.

Grading policy
Class participation/attendance/readings: 20 %
Special assignments/travel journal: 15 %
Short article I, historical monument: 10 % (due February 29)
Mid-term article, profile: 20 % (due March 21)
Short article II, feature: 10 % (due April 23)
Final travel reportage: 25 % (due May 21)

All written assignments will be specified in class:
Short article I A 500-word historical monument. Due February 29.
Mid-term article A 1000-word profile. Due March 21.
Short article II A 900-word food feature. Due April 23.

Schedule of classes
Mondays and Wednesdays 9:00 – 10:20 am, two classes on Fridays.

Week 1
13 February – Class 1
Introduction, Course Outline
“We travel, initially, to lose ourselves; and we travel, next, to find ourselves. We travel to open our hearts and eyes and learn more about the world than our newspapers will accommodate.”


Special assignment for the whole course: Start an “old-fashioned” travel journal (in can be a blog) and write at least one paragraph in it every day. Occasional class readings from your journal will be expected.

15 February – Class 2
The Art of Christopher Columbus: Discovering Place
Differences between holiday traveling and traveling for work. What makes TW distinctive from other genres of journalism? Does travel have news? Basic travel genres. Skills needed: reporting, investigative journalism, and interviewing. Why destination is not yet a story.

●Recommended Readings:

Mark Twain (The American Assault on the Pyramids, 1869), p. 56-62.
John Steinbeck (Death in the Dust, 1936), p. 200-204.

Special Assignment 1
Bring your travel journal with you. Write neatly one short paragraph about a surprising phenomenon you observed since arriving in Prague. What is different here? Why? Try to be clear and innovative. Class discussion.

Week 2
20 February – Class 3
Travel Stories: Technique, Style, Unique Voice
Why travel books are inspirational. Exploring the techniques of non fiction used – introducing the work of the great Czech novelist, short-story writer, playwright, and essayist who also created the word “robot” :-)).

●Recommended Readings:
Karel Čapek (In the Natural History Museum), p. 41-50.
Selected chapters in: Letters from Holland, Faber & Faber, “
Karel Čapek (Old Masters), p. 47-51.
Selected chapters in: Letters from Spain, Buttler & Tanner Ltd., 1931.
Karel Čapek (Posada de la Sangre, Velázquez o la Grandeza) p. 34-41.

22 February – Class 4
GUEST LECTURE
STORIES by Jan Sibik, a World Press Photo Award winning photographer and reporter.
See www.sibik.cz

Week 3
27 February – Class 5
Point of View
Pros and Cons of Narrating in First Person. Important task: try to define your unique point of view. Why is it crucial? How do you avoid making observations that have already been made? Cultural identity/stereotyping. Introducing Slavenka Drakulic, a noted Croatian writer and journalist.

Recommended Readings:
Pizza in Warsaw, Torte in Prague, p. 11-20.
Make-up and Other Crucial Questions, p. 21-32.
A Communist Eye, or What Did I See in New York?, p. 113-122.

29 February – Class 6
Watching REPORTER (2009). It is a feature documentary about Nicholas Kristof, the two-time Pulitzer Prize winning columnist for the New York Times, who almost single-handedly put the crisis in Darfur on the world map.
See http://www.reporterfilm.com/synopsis.html

SHORT ARTICLES 1 DUE

2 March - MAKE UP FRIDAY
Class 7
Writing About Place: Captivating Theme, Dramatic Scenes. Developing a Clear Narrative, Concrete Details. Travelogue. The angle. The hook.
The secrets of a good lead. The hardest part: what to leave out. Show instead of tell. Ways to put literary devices into practice: overly descriptive/minimally descriptive, every word matters, capturing the moment in space and time, discovering insight/judging, mobilizing the imagination (you have been there, the reader may not have been).

Recommended Readings:
Peter Hessler (Wheels of Fortune), p. 107-121.
Melik Kaylan (Georgia in the Time of Misha), p. 122-129.

Week 4
5 March – Class 8
On the Road I: Research Before You Go
New subgenre in travel writing: the Travel Writer Tells All. Thomas Kohnstamm’s case study. What are the best sources for understanding a country and its residents? The importance of cultural identity.

●Recommended Readings:
Alexi Mostrous. Lonely Planet writer, Thomas Kohnstamm, claims he fabricated guidebook, Times Online, 14. april 2008
http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article3742731.ece


Special Assignment 2
Bring your travel journal with you. What do you know about “us” (the Czech people) so far? Class discussion and readings.

7 March – Class 8
Workshop of Short Articles I & Discussion of Midterm Topics

Week 5
12 March – Class 9
Workshop of Short Articles I & Discussion of Midterm Topics

14 March – Class 10
On the Road II: Information Gathering Strategies
Research and reporting techniques. Books-Guidebooks-Personal contacts. Why “Around the world in 80 clicks” does not necessarily help in being a travel writer with a unique voice. Further exploration of techniques of non fiction: sense of mood, atmosphere, place, use of short sentences, direct speech, indirect speech, rhythm, story, sense of conflict or tension and release of tension in writing, moving between past and present tense.

●Recommended Readings:

Week 6
19 March – Class 11
**On the Road III – Interviewing**

- **Recommended Readings:**
  - Andrew Brown: *Hoffman’s Tale*, The Guardian, April 28 2001,
    [http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/apr/28/internationaleducationnews.socialsciences](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/apr/28/internationaleducationnews.socialsciences)

21 March – Class 12
**DVD: Michael Pallin Collection – Hemingway Adventures**
Articles to help inspire your final travel reportage will be given out in class.

**MID-TERM ARTICLE DUE**

Week 7
26 March – Class 13
**People and Their Voices – Dialogue**
Describing people and places with dialogue. How do you get good dialogue? How to let the situation play out? What kind of people do we manage to meet? Why is crucial to talk to them? How do we make them trust us?

- **Recommended Readings:**

28 March – Class 14
**Humor**
What is humor, irony, wit?
Exploring different types of humor: irony, the joke, the story, dialogue. Culture and humour. How to create an engaging tone. Balance between entertaining and informative writing.

- **Recommended Readings:**
  II. Bill Bryson: *Notes from a Small Island*, p. 142-151.

**Special Assignment 3**
Bring your travel journal with you. Choose a paragraph you find humorous. Where is the humor? Class discussion and readings.

**Week 8**
2 April – Class 15
Workshop of Midterm Articles & Discussion of Final Topics

4 April – Class 16
Workshop of Midterm Articles & Discussion of Final Topics

**Week 9 – Spring Break – no classes**

**Week 10**
16 April – Class 17
**A Cook’s Tour**
Experiencing cultural difference/similarities/humor/personal experience through food.

**Recommended Readings:**


**Special Assignment 4**
Bring your travel journal with you. Share some of your drinking/eating experiences in Europe that may one day be a seed for a travel story.

18 April – Class 18
**Deconstructing the Adventure Story. Travel Essay.**
How does a sense of adventure help your story? What is adventure? What techniques of fiction can be used to help to create the feeling of adventure? What are the literary techniques which go beyond being simply entertaining, descriptive, didactic or vague? The Pyramids of Egypt, Machu Picchu Peru, Safari in South Africa, Great Wall of China, Expedition to Antarctica: how to make an adventure of your ride in a Prague subway.

**Recommended Readings:**
Christina Dodwell (*Travels with Pegasus*), p. 332-337.
Beryl Markham (*West With the Night*), p. 69-82.

20 April – MAKE UP FRIDAY
Class 19
**OUTLINE FOR THE FINAL TRAVEL REPORTAGE DUE**
DISCUSSION ABOUT THE FINAL TOPICS
Week 11
23 April – Class 20

A) What Makes Good Writing
Word usage and misusage, show instead of tell, credibility. Work routine.

● Recommended Readings:
I. Hunter Thompson: The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Deprived, p. 195-211.

B) Travel Writing Ethics and Standards
● Recommended Readings:

SHORT ARTICLES 2 DUE
25 April – Class 21
The Journalist in Conflict Areas
Guest Lecturer
IGOR BLAZEVIC, the founder of the Human Rights Film Festival ONE WORLD, is a
Bosnian human rights campaigner who works for the Foundation People in Need in Prague.

Week 12
30 April – Class 22
Workshop of Short Articles & Discussion of Final Reportages

2 May – Class 23
Workshop of Short Articles & Discussion of Final Reportages

Week 13
7 May – Class 24
The Future of Travel Writing
Handouts to be given in class

9 May – Class 25
Editing Your Final Product
Ultimate goal: tight, insightful writing. What if there is no time? How many times should you
rewrite and why? How important are word counts?
“Its funny – the harder I practice, the luckier I get” – Tiger Woods
“Courage is the act that exceeds confidence” — Schonberg

● Recommended Readings:
Concluding discussion of course – visit to a coffee shop near NYU.

Week 14
14 May – Class 26
NO CLASS. Students to work on papers. 10-15-minute individual consultations (previously
scheduled) are compulsory.
16 May - Class 27
NO CLASS. Students to work on papers. 10-15-minute individual consultations (previously scheduled) are compulsory.

Week 15
21 May – Class 28
**FINAL REPORTAGE DUE** (hard copy in Veronika Bednarova’s mailbox). “
Deadline 11:00 am.