Magazine Writing:

The Concept and Craft of Long-Form Narrative Journalism

JO 703 A1 – Fall 2014
Tuesday /Thursday 12:30-2:00 PM
COM 109

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Office Hours: Monday 1:00-3:00 PM
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Great journalism may be descriptive, as in these opening words from “The Marriage Cure,” by Katherine Boo: “One July morning last year in Oklahoma City, in a public-housing project named Sooner Haven, twenty-two-year-old Kim Henderson pulled a pair of low-rider jeans over a high-rising gold lame thong and declared herself ready for church….” [The New Yorker, 2003; winner of the National Magazine Award]

On other occasions, good writing characterizes and evokes, often by means of metaphor: “Southern political personalities, like sweet corn, travel badly. They lose flavor with every hundred yards away from the patch. By the time they reach New York, they are like Golden Bantam that has been trucked up from Texas – stale and unprofitable. The consumer forgets that the corn tastes different where it grows. That, I suppose is why for twenty-five years I underrated [Louisiana governor] Huey Pierce Long. During the early thirties, as a feature writer for a New York evening paper, I interviewed him twice – once at the brand-new Waldorf and once at the brand-new Hotel New Yorker. The city desk showed what it thought of him by sending me instead of a regular political reporter; the idea was that he might say something funny but certainly nothing important. He said neither….” [A. J. Liebling, “Joe Sims, Where the Hell?” The New Yorker, 1960]
Most important of all, fine journalism illuminates an aspect of the world, as it does in the following excerpt by bringing together observations about television imagery, mass misery, European history, and the philosophy of the Enlightenment: “Images of human suffering do not assert their own meaning; they can only instantiate a moral claim if those who watch understand themselves to be potentially under obligation to those they see. Behind the seemingly natural mechanics of empathy at work in viewers’ response to these images lies a history by which their consciences were formed to respond as they do. It is the history by which Europeans gradually came to believe in a myth of human universality...that human needs and pain are universally the same, and that we may be obliged to help those to whom we are unrelated by birth or citizenship, race or geographic proximity....” [Michael Ignatieff, “Is Nothing Sacred? The Ethics of Television,” Daedalus, 1985]

We are going to spend the next twelve weeks investigating how Boo, Liebling, Ignatieff and other great journalists ply their trade, discovering some of the secrets behind terrific magazine journalism – theirs and others’. We are going to talk about many of the thinking, reporting, researching and writing challenges that stand between you and such accomplishment – and, throughout, you’re going to take on these challenges by working on stories of your own.

**Goals of the Course**

This is a class in long-form narrative writing – the kind of journalism you will find in *The New Yorker, Harper’s, Rolling Stone, Outside, Vanity Fair, The Atlantic, The New York Times Magazine, New York Magazine, Boston Magazine, National Geographic, and Wired*, as well as in *The American Scholar, The New York Review of Books, Granta*, and other literary journals. Such long-form journalism (LFJ) typically runs from 3,000 words on up. At the extreme end of this spectrum LFJ merges with non-fiction book writing, and, in fact, many books of this sort begin life as long-form magazine pieces.

Because it is impossible to become a competent LFJ writer without reading many long-form pieces, reading is an important dimension of this course. We will be reading to understand how good LFJ is put together: We’re going to take such journalism apart piece by piece to discover what makes it tick. We will reconstruct the reporting and research behind the stories. We’re going to examine how stories are structured by different writers, at how they introduce and manage complicated narratives and explanatory complexity. We will be looking closely at writers’ specific word choices and at the phrases, sentences, and paragraphs they have built. Above all, we’ll be paying careful attention to how writers take the world’s brute facts and fashion them into meaningful and compelling accounts.

This is a course in which we take careful, logical, and creative thinking most seriously of all, since journalism ought not to be, like dentistry, merely devoted to filling holes. We are therefore going to look a bit at some literary theory, at the history of magazine writing and how its forms came to be, at what kind of a thing this thing, *journalism, really is*. We will also talk about what journalism is for – the public purpose of our individual labors. We will do all this in the name of professional self-awareness and in the belief that the more we understand about this profession of ours, the better will we be able to practice it.
In doing so, we will bear in mind that long-form narrative writing is not a generic activity but is always undertaken for a specific publication that has a particular editorial profile, addresses a specific readership, deploys a unique sensibility, aims at a certain level of diction, welcomes only specific writing styles, and has a particular way of marshaling its facts and developing its arguments: long-from narrative writing is not a one-size-fits-all activity.

The course will take you through the entire process of creating quality long-form journalism, including:

- Conceptualizing, reporting, researching, and shaping article ideas;
- Presenting story ideas to editors in the form of story memoranda and queries;
- Researching a subject and thinking about it freshly by rejecting your taken-for-granted assumptions about it;
- Doing the reporting that long-form journalism specifically requires;
- Identifying sources – and developing and managing relationships with them
- Conducting the interview as a form of conversation;
- Developing character(s) and place(s) through your narrative;
- Practicing the dialectic between the ideas you bring to the story and the experiences you undergo while reporting it;
- Taking the notes LFJ requires (this is not as obvious as it may appear), writing them up, and discovering what’s really in them;
- Avoiding idees fixes and identifying the sometimes-hidden story within your story;
- Developing writing as a personal process;
- Replacing the instrumentalist view of language while learning to revel in its expressive possibilities;
- Editing your work;
- Seeking feedback and knowing how to make use of it;
- Being a writer who learns from editors and with whom editors like to work;
- Preparing for and undergoing fact-checking; and
- Rewriting and rewriting again.

Among the questions and issues we’ll be discussing are:

- The relationship between the long-form journalist and the ethnographer/anthropologist, both of whom often place themselves in novel circumstances among unusual people in order to report back their “truth” to wider audiences;
- Where do story ideas come from? How and where do you find and develop them? What’s a good one, and how do you know it when you see it?
- The difference between newspaper reporting and long-form-magazine reporting; developing the different eye, ear, and memory needed for LFJ.
- Why, as a LFJ writer, developing an analytical attitude (a point of view) is not only OK but necessary?
- The concept and practice of Depth Journalism – journalism informed by thoroughgoing knowledge of, and immersion in, your subject;
• How the usual answers to Who, What, When, Where and Why and How are professionally, culturally and politically determined – and the burdens this places on you, the journalist;
• The limitations of narrative as a concept and practice;
• What the “aboutness” of a story is, and how to struggle to discover it;
• The distinction between research and reporting – and why and how research is fundamental to LFJ;
• Why telling stories is a primordial human act, and how LFJ journalists can turn this to their advantage by creating narratives;
• Why LFJ is actually not only about telling stories – and how meaning counts most of all;
• How place differs from situation, and how the French Existentialists can give you the key to understanding the latter;
• Why much (though not all) LFJ, like the fiction-writing from which “journalism” was indistinguishable hundreds of years ago, must create characters, and how you can do so;
• The dialectic of knowledge and experience: is seeing really believing (for a journalist)?
• What philosophical empathy is, why it's a critical journalistic skill, and how to practice it;
• The difference between writing dialogue and inserting quotes and the kind of reporting that is necessary in anticipation of doing either;
• Reporting as total immersion;
• The inescapable moral ambiguity of the reporter-source relationship and the options you have for your own conduct in light of this fact;
• Journalism as pattern recognition, and the importance of understanding genres;
• Why you must write the way you sing;
• The distinction between denotative language and connotative language and how you can help the reader experience pleasure in your text;
• Stance and point of view, and how to develop yours;
• The establishment and maintenance of writerly authority;
• Why simpler is not necessarily better in LFJ, and why the injunction to simplify must be balanced by one to complexify;
• The structure, rhythm, and flow of stories;
• Language and style: Simplicity and transparency vs. complexity and opacity?
• Why “It’s always the last phone call that matters,” and the tragic implications of this fact;
• How to write and rewrite until you become your own best editor (and why you can’t succeed if you aren’t);
• Journalism and the social construction of the world through discourse.
How the Course Works

This is a seminar in the fullest sense of that word: a Socratic, cooperative undertaking in which learning takes place through active engagement with ideas, with your fellow students, with “stories,” and with your computer screen in the depths of the night.

I will be working with you as the fellow professionals you are. This places considerable responsibility for learning on your own shoulders – where it belongs. I am committed to helping you in every way I know how to learn the theory and practice of long-form journalism; I will do my best to be clear and explicit (and ask others to be so, too), but if something is opaque, or you get lost, or a passing reference is unfamiliar to you, please do ask for clarification. I honor and respect the courage this sometimes requires.

However, you cannot expect everything to be clear all of the time: true learning sometimes takes place when a student is able to hang out amidst ambiguity – until, through thinking and hard work, something like clarity emerges. In fact, if you feel that you are on top of everything all of the time then you are probably not allowing yourself to be adequately challenged by the course. Allowing yourself to be challenged, and rising to meet challenges, is also where fun enters the picture: your best work will often be nourished by the playful part of yourself.

In purely operational terms, there is an implicit Social Contract that underlies this course, and it is this:

I contract
to work as hard and smartly as I can to teach you (and to help you teach yourself) what I know

You contract
to work as hard and smartly as you can to do what’s necessary to learn, and, in the process, to help your classmates do likewise (this involves teaching what you know, too)

Practically speaking, this means, among other things, that class attendance is mandatory and

- You must attend all class meetings. (Attendance will influence your grade.)
- You must have completed the week’s reading assignment before coming to class.
  There will be occasional quizzes on the assigned reading.
- You must be prepared to discuss, debate, contest, and be creative with the ideas the reading presents. In other words, you should be an active, not a passive, reader.
- You must meet all deadlines; failure to do so will affect your grade.
- You must participate in class discussions. Participation, in fact, is something you owe other students in the class, since JO 703 is a learning community.
- Please do not text, e-mail, surf the Web, etc., during class.
The Assigned Reading

As I mentioned above, reading will be assigned throughout the semester. It consists of some writing about writing; some historical and theoretical background, and, mainly, of diverse examples of long-form narrative journalism.

In addition to what I will post on the course’s Blackboard Web site (see below), the required reading includes the following books, which have been ordered by the BU Barnes & Noble:.

- Ira Glass, ed., The New Kings of Nonfiction
- Michael Pollan, The Omnivore’s Dilemma
- Tom Wolfe, The Right Stuff

- In addition please subscribe (at the Web site) ASAP to The New Yorker. This subscription will not only provide you weekly with among of the best LFJ but will give you access to the complete archives of the magazine from the first issue in 1925 – an extraordinary repository of the finest reporting and writing.

I am also suggesting the additional books below (optional. The Boynton is a collection of revealing interviews about their craft with some of the best long-form writers; the second is a thorough, readable, and insightful soup-to-nuts how-to-do-it book about getting the most from sources; the Fish and Yagoda are very different books about the act of writing; the Smith is a very valuable guide to help you navigate the treacherous shoals of fact checking; Stewart, a master storyteller, has written a useful book in the how-to-do-it genre, which is generally undistinguished.

- Robert Boynton, The New New Journalism
- John Brady, The Craft of Interviewing
- Stanley Fish, How to Write a Sentence, and Read One
- Sarah Smith, The Fact Checker’s Bible Michael Pollan, The Omnivore’s Dilemma
- James Stewart, Follow the Story
- Ben Yagoda, The Sound on the Page

We will be reading the work of a number of different writers this semester and I’ll be choosing among them in response to the work and interests of the class. Among those whose journalism (from many different magazine and books) may be assigned are:


Most of the pieces we will be reading this semester will be found on the Web, posted on the course Blackboard site, or handed out in class. Please note that not all assigned reading will be
discussed extensively in class in as much as I don’t want your reading to be limited by the extent of our class time. Nevertheless, I encourage you to raise issues regarding any pieces we do not formally discuss. I also encourage you to make suggestions for class assignments based on your own outside reading, and I will do my best to add these to the syllabus.

Please also note that the reading and syllabus are subject to change -- indeed, certainly will change -- as the semester progresses in response to the class’s needs and interests, and the natural progression of our work.

Individual New Yorker Story Analyses

During the latter part of the semester, everyone will be responsible for choosing a recent New Yorker piece and analyzing it according to such criteria as structure, research and reporting, development of characters, evocative writing, the complexity of the argument, consciousness of the “aboutness” of the story, as well as other criteria we will develop.

Discretionary Reading

Because it is absolutely impossible to become an accomplished writer without being a voracious reader (see above), I expect you to supplement the assigned reading with other reading of your choice. (This may not be reading assigned in other courses, since the goal here is to read more, not to repurpose what you’ve already read.)

You should read as much LFJ as you possibly can in the current New Yorker and its on-line archives, among many other places, but at least one piece a week that is not on the syllabus or the course Web site. In order to benefit from this reading, please do not wait until the end of the semester to do it all.

Please keep a Discretionary Reading Log – to be handed in at the end of the course – in which you write 250-word analytical responses to each piece you have read.

I will also provide you with a list of the “100 best works of journalism of the twentieth century” (which I helped develop for publication in 2000) to assist you in selecting additional reading.

I cannot emphasize strongly enough that it is absolutely impossible to become a long-form magazine writer without reading (now and in the future) so much long-form narrative journalism that (in the words of the poet Dylan Thomas) your eyeballs fall out.
Writing and the Writing Process

I will be asking you to write two long-form pieces this semester, each of at least 3,000 words. I will take an active role as ‘Editor-in-Chief’ throughout the story selection, research, reporting, writing and rewriting process, modeling for you the relationship you will have with editors in the future, while the class as a whole will function as an Editorial Board for the Workshopping process.

- Each member of the class will write a 750-word **Story Memorandum**, and the class, acting as an Editorial Board, will help you refine and focus your idea.
  - I will provide you with a sample Story Memorandum and a point-by-point Analysis of what it covers and how it is structured.

- At least 24 hours before they are due, Story Memoranda, drafts, and final copy should be posted on the course Blackboard Web site so that others in the class can prepare for discussion of your work. (Please bring your annotated on-line or hard copies of each story to class so that our discussions can be very specific – even down to the level of specific choices of punctuation.)

  - **Your Story Memorandum and Story Drafts will be workshopped by the class** as whole. In the case of the latter, this will entail a short presentation by you reconsidering what you have done, followed by a structured discussion (workshopping) shaped by detailed Guidelines I will provide.

  - **The workshopping process** in this class is rigorous; your thoughtful participation is essential to the success of the class (and your own, as well)

  - **I will also meet with you individually as often as necessary** to discuss your pieces while you are working on them.

The Class Blackboard Web Site

Most of the pieces we will be reading will be posted on the Course Documents portion of the Web site, where they are organized in alphabetical order. There are dozens of other pieces available there, as well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Everyone will post their successive drafts on a Discussion Board so that others can read and prepare to workshop them.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>After I edit and write comments on the drafts, I will scan and post the edited mss.</strong> (without letter grades) on another DB. This will provide you with an opportunity to benefit from my comments and edits on everyone’s pieces, in addition to those on your own.*</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Any student who wishes to do so may opt out of having a piece posted.*
Grades

Each of your LFJ pieces (including story memos and drafts) will count for 35% of your final grade (for a total of 70%); class participation and workshopping (including occasional quizzes) on the will count for 20%, other written assignments and class exercises for 10%.

I do not mark on a curve. I evaluate your work in the context of the ambitions and expectations I have for you as individuals, not against the performance of other classmates.

It will therefore be to your advantage to help each other both in class and out; the better the class as a whole does, the more likely you are to do well, as well. Teamwork and cooperative learning are strongly encouraged; indeed, they are essential to both your individual success and that of the group as a whole.

Academic Honesty

This should be obvious, but I will restate it for the record:

- All your written work should be reported, researched, and written by you (and written for this class alone);
- If you are thinking of writing on something about which you have also reported and/or written for another class, please clear this in advance with me;
- Be especially careful to avoid importing segments of text from the Internet; standard rules concerning plagiarism apply to cyberspace;
- Be sure to read and comply with Boston University’s Universal Academic Conduct Code, which is available at bu.edu/academics.
The Course Modules

I will determine the sequence and assignments in response to the specific needs and opportunities of the class.

ONE

- Introduction to the course, themes, and issues.
  - Katherine Boo, “The Marriage Cure” (*The New Yorker*; National Magazine Award)
    - Interviews with Katherine Boo about “The Marriage Cure”
  - Ira Glass, “Introduction” in *The New Kings of Nonfiction*

TWO

- Discussion of the LFJ #1 Story Memorandum (Handouts: A prototype story memorandum and an analysis of its structure)
  - Optional
    - Gerald Marzorati (Former Assistant Managing Editor of the *New York Times* and former editor of its *Magazine*), speech on the future of long-form narrative

THREE

- LFJ #1 Story Memorandum due
- Workshopping of Story Memoranda

  - Steve Macone, “A Slow Devouring” (*The American Scholar*; a piece written for this class)
FOUR

- Mind Mapping as a tool for story development
- Virtues and Vices and the “aboutness” of stories

- Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (Introduction and Part One, “Corn”)

- Optional:
  - Michael Pollan, two audio files on the class Web site: “Principles of Narrative Journalism” and “Natural Narratives: Ecology as a Storytelling Device” from the 2006 Nieman Conference on Narrative Journalism; transcript of NPR interview (“On the Media”) on the “nutritionism” of food reporting

FIVE

- Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff* (first half)
- James Stewart, *Follow the Story* (chapters: Transitions, Structure)

- Optional:
  - Francine Prose, *Reading Like a Writer* (excerpts)
  - Ben Yagoda, *The Sound on the Page* (excerpts)

SIX

- Assigned reading and *The New Yorker*

- Side-by-side analysis of Katherine Boo, “The Marriage Cure” and *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*; Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, *Random Family*; and Jason DeParle, *American Dream*

SEVEN

- Assigned reading and *The New Yorker*
- Robert M. Emerson, *et. al.*, “Participant Observation and Fieldnotes”
- Sherry Turkle, ed., *The Inner History of Devices* (“Inner History” by Turkle)

- LFJ #1 First Drafts due
- Workshopping of LFJ #1 First Drafts
• Optional:
  o Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”
  o Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* [excerpt]
  o Nkaj Zeb Yaj, “’I Tell You This Story of Healing:’ A Shaman’s Perspective,” in Kathleen A. Culhane-Pera, *et al.*, *Healing by Heart: Clinical and Ethical Case Stories of Hmong Families and Western Providers*

**EIGHT**

• Tony Kushner, “On Pretentiousness”
• Dylan Thomas, “A Few Words of a Kind” (audio file)
• Marcel Proust, *Contre Saint-Beuve* (excerpts)

**NINE**

• Student Presentations of current *New Yorker* stories
• Charles Tilly, *Why: What Happens When People Give Reasons…and Why* [excerpt]
• **LFJ #2 Final Drafts due**
• Optional:
  o Robert Manoff, “Writing the News (By Telling the ‘Story’)”

**TEN**

• Student Presentations of current *New Yorker* stories
• Isabel Wilkerson, “In a Strange Land: From New Orleans to Sallisaw; Scattered in Storm’s Wake and Caught in a Clash of Cultures” (*The New York Times*)
• **Workshopping of LFJ #1 Final Drafts**

**ELEVEN**

• Student Presentations of current *New Yorker* stories
• **LFJ #2 Story Memorandum due**
• Optional:
  o Samuel Freedman, audio presentation: “Braiding Character, Event, Theme, and Place,” from the 2006 Nieman Conference on Narrative Journalism (audio file on class Web site)
TWELVE

- Student Presentations of current *New Yorker* stories

- Optional:
  - Sara Smith, *The Fact Checker’s Bible*
  - John McPhee, “Checkpoints” (*The New Yorker*)

THIRTEEN

- Student Presentations of current *New Yorker* stories
- Raymond Queneau, *Exercises in Style* [excerpts]
- Dylan Thomas, “A Few Words of a Kind” (audio file on class Web site)

FOURTEEN

- Student Presentations of current *New Yorker* stories
- LFJ #2 First Drafts due
- Workshopping of LFJ #2 First Drafts

FIFTEEN

- Student Presentations of current *New Yorker* stories
- Reading in Class:
  - *Columbia Journalism Review*: Editors’ evaluation package; Columbia Journalism School Dean’s comments on galleys of Todd Gitlin, “Making Democracy Safe for America” (*The Columbia Journalism Review*)

- Discretionary Reading Log due
- LFJ #2 Final Drafts due