

The Literature of Journalism

JO 542 Spring 2021



Roxane Gay
author of
Hunger and
Bad Feminist

About this course

In this course, we study literary journalism and experiment with writing beyond the norm of everyday journalism. We also study the lives and works of several great practitioners. You will become an expert on one writer and share everything you learn with your classmates. After studying these great writers, you will put what you know into practice by trying some of these techniques for yourself. The only way to improve as a writer is to read and to write.

Our required reading follows:

- Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (Random House, 1966)
- Debbie Cenziper, *Love Wins* (William Morrow, 2016)
- Dave Cullen, *Columbine* (Twelve, 2009)
- Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005)
- Roxane Gay, *Hunger* (Harper Collins, 2017)

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- John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1946)
- Gilbert King, *Beneath a Ruthless Sun* (Riverhead, 2018)
- Lillian Ross, *Reporting Always* (Scribner, 2016)
- Cheryl Strayed, *Wild* (Random House, 2012)
- Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968)

Be well informed. At the very least, read the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times* daily.

Grading and other issues

There will be a lot of reading and a lot of writing.

You will write a research paper and two articles (along the lines of magazine pieces or extended newspaper features).

You also will write a weekly reading memo and a couple of short assignments. These must be completed for credit, but will not carry letter grades. The reading memos allow you to discuss the assigned readings as well as what you read on your phone during your commute. The short pieces will be workshopped during class.

Details will follow.

Most of your final grade will be determined by your performance on the research paper and the two articles, as well as on your class participation.

Speaking of class participation: It should go

without saying that I expect you not to talk, dance or make rude noises while I am trying to lecture. Any sort of disruptive behavior will be damaging to your grade.

We follow the standard grading scale:

- 93 and up A
- 90 to 92.99 A-
- 87 to 89.99 B+
- 83 to 86.99 B
- 80 to 82.99 B-
- 77 to 79.99 C+
- 73 to 76.99 C
- 70 to 72.99 C-
- 67 to 69.99 D+
- 60 to 66.99 D

Attendance

Attendance is critical. Come to class fully prepared to participate in a discussion based on the readings. We cannot have a successful class without you. Be here every day.

If you don't show up, the quality of class will be diminished.

Remember your John Donne (and, of course, remove the gender bias from this centuries-old quote):

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less.... (A)ny man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

In short, don't be a clod. But do be polite.

You will not be allowed to make up any missed work unless the reason for your absence is extremely grave (a death in the family or perhaps the contraction of some loathsome disease), and you call me before the class period to be missed.

I have strong feelings about attendance. It would be stupid to walk into Best Buy, pick out four or five CD's, pay for them and tell the clerk, "Naw, I don't want them. You keep them."

Yet that's what we often do in college. As Herman B (no period) Wells, chancellor of Indiana University (my beloved alma mater) once said:

"Education is the one thing people pay for then do not insist upon receiving."

Doing your research project

You will do a research project about a literary journalist. It can be any person whose work is featured in our bibliography except those we study as a group. You can propose someone not on the bibliography of course. I'll just need to approve it.

The project will be due in the last two weeks of the semester, but you must make a class presentation about your subject earlier in the term.

So pick your author early and plunge into research.

It can take the form of a paper, a website or a podcast.



Young Truman Capote shows off his suspenders.

Here is advice on writing a paper, the route most students choose: Pick a subject that interests you. You will have to live with the writer – figuratively, at least. Do interviews. However, this will only work with writers who are alive. If you are writing about a living writer, what the heck do you have to lose by letting your fingers do some walking?

For advice and counsel on basic research, I recommend an excellent book called *The Modern Researcher* by Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff (Wadsworth, 2003).

Here are answers to questions you might ask:

Style. Consistency is what matters most. Historical papers generally follow the style outlined in *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations* by Kate Turabian and Wayne C. Booth (University of Chicago Press, 2013). This is recommended. But you do not have to follow Turabian style. As long as you are consistent and supply me with the bibliographical information I need, I will be happy. Hell, I'd be happy with Associated Press Style. We ain't fancy.

Citations. Follow the simple practice of indicating a citation with a superior number, then put all your notes at the end or at the bottom of the page. I prefer that book citations follow the format under the required- texts section of this syllabus. Cite interviews with a superior number and include all relevant information in the endnote. Thus: 47. *Edna Buchanan, telephone interview, October 8, 2018.*

continued

Writing your research paper continued

Page numbering. Some beefwits apparently think if they don't number the pages I won't notice that they did not make the minimum length. I can count. But make it easy on me. Don't include a lot of blank paper to make your paper fatter. It will make me think that your paper is flimsy. It's a waste, too.

Title page. Put this sort of stuff on the cover: Title of paper, your name, course number (JO 542: The Literature of Journalism) and the date (Fall Semester, 2019). That's all. Center it. Make it look pretty.

Errors. Fact errors will seriously damage your grade. Spelling and grammatical errors also hurt. Typographical errors will be considered spelling errors. It will behoove you to edit your papers carefully.

Two copies. One I will grade and return. The other will go into the McKeen Archive.

Revision. I may ask you to revise your paper. This will not affect the grade, but I will not record your grade -- give you credit for the work -- unless you turn in a revision if one is requested. Don't insult me by turning in a sloppy paper.

Report covers. I hate those flimsy little plastic things. I usually throw them away. Paper covers and other fancy forms of presentation are mere annoyances. Save your money. Just staple or paper clip the pages together. And don't come to class the day that paper is to be turned in expecting me to have a stapler. You think I carry one in my back pocket?

General quality. One last, vital thing: Do not think of this as "another boring term paper." You are a student in a college of communication. You are supposed to be a writer. I will be judging your paper as a piece of writing. It must be interesting. It should read like a good magazine article.

Bibliography

There is an extensive bibliography available at the Courses tab of my website, williammckeen.com.

Use it as a starter list for building a library of literary journalism. Feel free to make suggestions for my bibliography. It is a work in progress, after all.

Joan Didion was America's reporter-on-the-ground in California during its term as the capital of weirdness.



Honesty

BU has a student honor code. Know it. Take this pledge: "On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing the assignment." I will not tolerate cheating. If I discover that you have violated the honor code, I will do everything I can to boot you from the class and from the college. The Boston University academic conduct code is here: www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code/



Cheryl Strayed, author of *Wild*.



Dave Cullen, author of the intense nonfiction masterpiece *Columbine*.

Some final words

Consider this syllabus a contract. I've made promises I intend to keep. By not dropping the class, I assume you accept the conditions.

There are two guiding philosophers in my life: Elvis Presley (who said, "If this ceases to be fun, we will cease to do it.") and my late mother (who said, "If we all liked the same thing, it would be a pretty dull world.") Those two great thinkers shape my approach to this course.

I hope this course deepens your interest in literary journalism and helps you understand the legacies of these storytellers.

Instructor biography

I worked for newspapers and magazines before I started teaching. My first job, at *The Courier-Tribune* in Bloomington, Ind., lasted until that fine little newspaper went out of business. I was at *The Palm Beach Post* briefly and then joined *The American Spectator*, then served two years at *The Saturday Evening Post*. While at the *Post*, I helped edit a couple of books, including an anthology called *The American Story*.

Since I started teaching, I've taken several short term jobs — sometimes in the summers, sometimes night work on the copy desk during the school year — on *The Norman (Okla.) Transcript*, *The Courier-Journal* (Louisville, Ky.), *The Tampa Bay Times* and *The Gainesville (Fla.) Sun*. I've written reviews and features for *The Orlando Sentinel*, *The Tampa Bay Times* and *The Boston Globe* fairly regularly since 1989. I also served as book editor for an alt weekly called *Creative Loafing*.

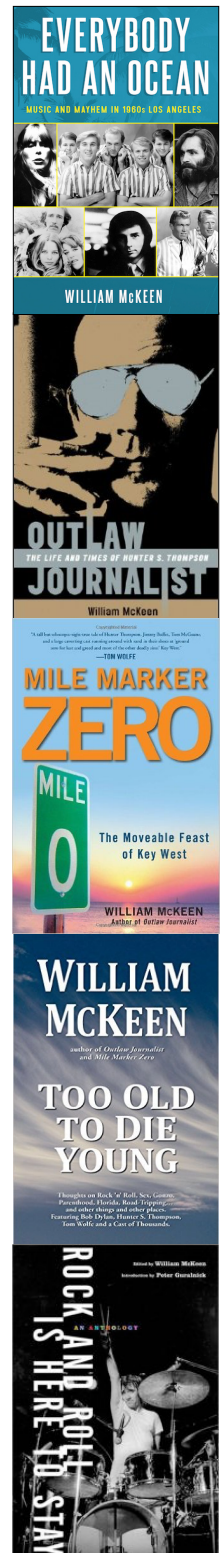
I earned a bachelor's in history and a master's in journalism from Indiana University, writing a historical survey of the portrayal of journalists in popular culture. I earned my Ph.D. in education from the University of Oklahoma, though that was largely a history degree.

Some of my books:

- *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay* (W.W. Norton, 2000) is an anthology tracing the history of popular music.
- *Highway 61* (W.W. Norton, 2003) is a memoir of a 6,000-mile road trip I took with my eldest son.
- *Outlaw Journalist* (W.W. Norton, 2008) is my biography of Hunter S. Thompson.
- *Mile Marker Zero* (Crown Books, 2011) is about the writers, artists, actors and musicians who found their artistic identities in Key West.
- *Homegrown in Florida* (University Press of Florida, 2012) is a collection of stories about growing up in Florida.
- *Too Old to Die Young* (Dredger's Lane, 2015) is a collection of articles, short stories, reviews and other stuff.
- *Everybody Had an Ocean* (Chicago Review Press, 2017) is a nonfiction narrative about the crossroads of rock'n'roll and murder in Los Angeles.

I have seven children — Sarah, a designer in New York; Graham, chief environmental officer for the Indiana University system; Mary, who works for Chance the Rapper in Chicago; Savannah, a nurse in Florida; Jack, an artist in residence at my residence; and Travis and Charley, teen-age scholars at Cohasset High School. I also have four magnificent granddaughters, Mabel, Pearl, Rose and Myer.

Before becoming professor and chairman of the Boston University Department of Journalism, I taught at Western Kentucky University for five years, the University of Oklahoma for four years, and the University of Florida for 24 years, the last dozen as department chairman.

Shameless plug: I have seven children and they'd like to go back to three meals a day. Feel free to purchase and support this cause.