

MPW 511: Oral History, Witness, and Writing
Fall 2012
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To Begin

Welcome to ----- (course title). I'm delighted to embark with you upon what I believe will be a unique and transformative journey--both on a personal, and a professional level. To produce great works, a writer needs extensive knowledge of human history and current events, as well as a profound grasp on the intricacies of the human psyche. While it is true that the ultimate purpose of literature is to define, expose, and perhaps resolve what Faulkner called "the mysteries of the human heart at conflict with itself," that conflict takes place within an external context made up of physical and emotional circumstances both past and present. To understand the individual, the writer must know the world he resides in. Similarly, to touch upon universal themes that resonate with readers, the writer must expose her characters' most intimate secrets. The research you are required to do for this class (we'll get to that), will allow you to pick a character and a subject matter that you feel strongly about, to sort through his or her history and find a context and a conflict you find compelling, and tell the story in a dramatic way.

Course Description

The goal of this workshop is to outline and begin a fiction or a nonfiction story, paying particular attention to the way oral history is used and translated into those different forms. We will look at the ethical implications in this kind of storytelling, as well as issues of appropriation, honoring the source material vs. constructing a new narrative, and understanding "the truth."

We will meet for five sessions, each of two hours and 40 minutes' length. As always, the purpose is to make us all better writers. In the extensive archives of the Shoah Foundation Institute (<http://dornsife.usc.edu/vhi/>), we will find unrehearsed, unscripted, unedited interviews with subjects who are not actors, from over 56 countries and four continents, of various ages, religious and ethnic affiliations. The work of the Foundation, and therefore the focus of the interviews, is centered on the issue of genocide in modern times. From a dramatic point of view, this is a subject rife with possibilities: here the "external conflict" is epic, and the stakes are high. That's one reason to use the archives. Another is that the interviews cover not only the period in the characters' lives when they're caught in the genocide, but also the "before" (when there are other conflicts to explore), and "after," (when the conflict is both external and internal).

By using the archives we will employ MEMORY--our own and others'--learn to listen to, and to recast another's story in our own literary voice. Your final project will be a 10-12 page outline of a story that, like all great stories, explores the same grand themes that have always concerned human beings--love and empathy, evil and suffering, forgiveness, fear, and loss.

Course Objectives

Ultimately, the goal is to tell a great story that will resonate with different kinds of readers in different circumstances. This course is designed to help you learn to

1. identify a compelling protagonist
2. single out and define his conflict
3. observe and study subjects in their normal circumstances
4. learn to LISTEN, to read between the lines, to ask yourself why the character does and say something
5. select, from a whole life, the period of time where your story should cover
6. create a dramatic arc.

Required Reading

Song for Night, Chris Abani

Maus I, A Survivor's Tale, My Father Bleeds History, Art Spiegelman (Pantheon, Paperback)

Course Requirements

Attendance is crucial, as is your participation in our discussions, and your feedback on fellow students' work.

Before the first class meeting, please read Chris Abani's *Song for Night*; we will use it as a model for the lecture on dramatic principles. For each of the four subsequent class meetings, we will read 40 pages of *Maus I*.

We will devote part or all of our second meeting to viewing the archives online and selecting your subjects, so please bring a laptop to class if you have one; if you don't, please let me know in advance and I'll make appropriate arrangements.

We will review and discuss your assignments in class. For each assignment, please bring enough copies for your classmates and me.

One-sentence description of your project.

Three-page character study of your protagonist, including his motivation and conflict

1-3 page outline of your story, emphasizing the plot

10-12 page summary of your project

Why Oral History?

In its strictest sense Oral History is the recording of historical information as related by individuals who witnessed or participated in certain events. Historians have increasingly come to rely on Oral History as a more honest, and accurate way of capturing the experiences, especially of minorities, that would not otherwise make it into the history books. Oral History was originally in the form of epic poems passed on verbally by storytellers. In ancient civilizations, "story telling" was a highly esteemed profession in which the people's version of history was told.

For the writer, learning to create a story out of individuals' experiences is a skill that will enhance the quality of whatever work he's engaged in.

For the non-fiction writer or documentary film maker, Oral history is a more genuine, original, and personal way in which to capture history. The challenge here is to sort through the many voices and construct a narrative from the patchwork of stories with a dramatic arc, a clear conflict, etc. Michael Moore's *Sicko*, for example, followed the stories of a handful of individuals as they struggled through the healthcare system. The central conflict was the insurance industry and the healthcare system. Marc Jonathan Harris' "Into the Arms of Strangers" captured the history of the underground railroad during the Second World War by telling the stories of a few children.

Oral History is just as useful a tool for the fiction writer or film maker. Write what you know does not mean that the writer must confine herself to the retelling of personal experiences, but to touch on themes that he or she feels a personal connection with. We find our subjects in our own and others' experiences. Learning to transform the people in the interviews into "characters" in a film or novel, to identify their conflict, locate the "inciting incident" in their journey, create suspense and mystery--these are all basic writing skills.

Why the Shoah Foundation Archives?

<http://dornsife.usc.edu/vhi/>

Here, survivors and other witnesses of the Holocaust, survivors of the genocide in Rwanda, and a survivor of the Cambodian genocide share memories of their experiences. Segments are organized according to topics, which include life before genocide, hiding, ghettos, camps, liberation, life after genocide, and loss of family. There is plenty here to choose from. As a group, we'll be exploring a common theme, but in different manifestations.

Your Grade

Sentence Summary 10%

Character Study 20%

Short outline 20%

Final project 40%

Participation 10%

Note: No unexcused absences. You are expected to arrive on time and stay for the duration of the class. If you have to miss a class, make sure you let me know ahead of time by email. While in class, you're expected to be engaged in the conversation.

Contact Info

I take your careers very seriously. I'm always available to talk and discuss any particular issues you'd like to address. You can reach me at nahai@usc.edu. In case of an emergency, my cell phone # is (310) 666-6343. Your best chance as getting a prompt reply is through email.

Withdrawal Policy

Please consult the University Catalogue, the Schedule of Classes, and the MPW student handbook for applicable policies and deadlines.

Statement for Students with Disabilities

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

Statement on Academic Integrity

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. *Scampus*, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A:

<http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/>. Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at:

<http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/>.

Weekly Schedule, Final Assignment

Week 1

Principles of Dramatic Structure:

Finding your story

Discovering your theme

Where's the conflict?

Creating a dramatic arc

Plot vs. Story

We'll begin with a lecture on Dramatic Structure, then watch a few sample interviews in order to familiarize everyone with the archives.

Please read Chris Abani's *Song for Night* before this class meeting, so that we may use it as a model for our conversation.

Week 2

Each of you will spend this session viewing the long interview that is going to be the basis of your project. We will meet as a class, and I will be there to help you identify the important elements within the narrative. Please bring a laptop and headphones to this class session; if you have trouble locating a laptop, please let me know in advance.

Reading Assignment: *Maus*, pp. 1-40

Week 3

Bring your **one-sentence summary**, plus a three-page **character study** of your protagonist, including his motivation and conflict (see guidelines attached). Please provide copies for other class members and me. We will read and discuss these as a group.

Reading Assignment: *Maus*, pp. 40-80

Week 4

Bring 3 page (double-spaced) **outline** of your story, emphasizing the **plot** (see guidelines attached). Please provide copies for everyone.

Reading Assignment: *Maus*, pp. 80-120

Week 5

Bring your 10-12 (double-spaced) **outline**, with copies for everyone. We will read and discuss these in class.

Reading Assignment: *Maus*, pp. 120-160

Character

Consider your protagonist, or your most compelling character; ask yourself, If you had to DEFINE him or her by one or two overriding traits, what would they be?

Your protagonist has to be MOTIVATED by a desire (not necessarily what he needs, but what he wants). What does she WANT?

His conflict is a result of, a. an obstacle on his way to reaching that “want,” and. b. the consequence(s) of NOT reaching that “want.” In order to identify the conflict, you must first decide,

WHY does the protagonist want this particular end, and what are the consequences of failure to reach it?

What are the strongest, and the weakest, elements of her character?

What do you know about her and how do you know that?

What DON'T you know about her that you'd like to find out (mystery)

Write 1-3 pages, in exposition, dialogue, in YOUR OWN voice about him or her.

Conflict

Conflict can be internal, external, or both.

The best conflict is one as a result of which

The greater the conflict, the better your story.

Not every conflict is complex enough to cause the series of actions you need to create a plot.

You can have the conflict from the minute the book opens, or ten years before it. You don't need to get the character to it (he's already on the battlefield; as opposed to, he makes the decision to join, says goodbye, leaves, arrives...) That decision depends on what story you're trying to tell.

Keep in mind there's a difference between conflict and CLIMAX.

Plot

Plot is sequence of events, each a result of the one preceding it, that lead up to a final climax:

“A” happened and, as a result, “B” happened. In a strong plot, you cannot have something happen just because it did. Everything that happens has to have been caused by something else in the plot. To have a strong plot, make sure that the central action in the plot occurs either by the protagonist, or because of the protagonist.

Story is the part of the narrative that explains WHY things happen. To know your story, you must know your Theme.

To build a dramatic arc (PLOT), you need to answer the following questions:

1. Who's the PROTAGONIST? (Includes his background)
2. What is his QUEST (What does he really, really want)?
3. Why does he want this
4. So what if he doesn't get it?
5. What/Who (ANTAGONIST) stands in his way of getting it?

6. Why is it standing in the way of the protagonist?
7. What's the INCITING INCIDENT?
8. How does the protagonist respond to this incident (Character vs Conflict)?
9. What are the series of events that follow (RISING ACTION)?
10. How does A. result in B. which results in C. (CAUSALITY OF FICTION)?
11. What's the CLIMAX (point of highest tension)?
12. What's the FALLING ACTION?
13. What's the RESOLUTION?
14. What is the STORY?
15. What is the THEME?

Guidelines for Constructive Criticism

The goal is to

1. Recognize and understand the author's intention for the piece, and to offer feedback that best serves that purpose. Whether you like or dislike the writing, the genre, or the content is absolutely irrelevant. Avoid making statements such as "it's confusing, but I like confusing stuff," or "Westerns are not my thing." Neither I, nor any of you, should have any preference for, or pre-conceived notion of what a writer should write.
2. Distinguish areas of strength in the work (that is, features of the writing that best serve the author's intent).
3. Distinguish areas of weakness (avoid phrases such as "just doesn't work for me").
4. Find and formulate the most effective way to communicate your findings (see note on "general criteria").
5. Find and formulate the best remedy for the weakness.

Keep in mind that praise (that is, pointing out the strength in the work) is just as important as the identification of weakness. By presenting their writing to the class, your colleagues are trusting you to approach it carefully and with respect.

Why Add This Course to the MPW Curriculum

To produce great works, a writer needs extensive knowledge of human history and current events, as well as a profound grasp on the intricacies of the human psyche. While it is true that the ultimate purpose of literature is to define, expose, and perhaps resolve what Faulkner called “the mysteries of the human heart at conflict with itself,” that conflict takes place within an external context made up of physical and emotional circumstances both past and present. To understand the individual, the writer must know the world he resides in. Similarly, to touch upon universal themes that resonate with readers, the writer must expose her characters’ most intimate secrets.

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Suggested Reading

Fiction

The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison
The Lover, Marguerite Duras
Disgrace, J.M. Coetzee
Slaughterhouse Five, Kurt Vonnegut
Native Son, Richard Wright
The Naked and the Dead, Norman Mailer
Snow, Orhan Pamuk
Beasts of No Nation, Uzodinma Iweala
Song for Night, Chris Abani
The White Tiger, by Aravind Adiga
All the King's Men, Robert Pen Warren
Portnoy's Complaint, Philip Roth
A case of Exploding Mangoes, Muhammad Hanif

Non-Fiction

In Cold Blood, Truman Capote
Maus, Art Spiegelman
Survival in Auschwitz, Primo Levi
Night, Eli Weisel
Daughter of the Queen of Sheba, Jackie Lyden
The Executioner's Song, Norman Mailer
The First Man, Albert Camus
Living to Tell the Tale, Gabriel Garcia Marquez
A Walk in the Woods, by Bill Bryson
Another Bullshit Night in Suck City, Nick Flynn
Oh the Glory of it All, Sean Wilsey
Mama Makes up her Mind, Bailey White

Plays

“All my Sons” by Arthur Miller
“The Glass Menagerie” by Tennessee Williams
“Long Day's Journey into Night” by Eugene O'Neil
“A Moon for the Misbegotten” by Eugene O'Neil
“The Normal Heart” by Larry Kramer
“Brighton Beach Memoirs” by Neil Simon
“Antigone” by Jean Anouilh
“The Condemned of Altona” by Jean Paul Sartre
“The Just Assassins” by Albert Camus
“The Trojan War Will Not Take Place” by Jean Giraudoux

Screenplays

Harlan County, USA, by Barbara Kopple

Scared Straight, Arnold Shapiro

One Day In September, Kevin McDonald

Into the Arms of Strangers, Marc Jonathan Harris

The Long Way Home, Marc Jonathan Harris

Bowling For Columbine, Michael Moore

The Fog of War, Errol Morris and Michael Williams

Inside Job, Charles H. Ferguson and Audrey Marrs

Genocide, Maarten Rens

Ararat, Eytan Egoyan

The Killing Fields, Bruce Robinson

Be Like Others (also known as Transsexual in Iran), Tanaz Eshaghian

Slum Dog Millionaire, by Simon Beaufoy

Life is Beautiful, by Roberto Benigni and Vincenzo Cerami