

WRITING MATTERS

VOL. 5 NO. 1

Celebrating writing in all its forms at Northwestern University.

FALL 2004

DIRECTOR'S LETTER

A Treasured Tradition at Northwestern

By David Abrahamson

Director, NU Center for the Writing Arts
and Helen G. Brown Research Professor of
Journalism, Medill School of Journalism



Once again, beginning-of-term greetings from Northwestern's Center for the Writing Arts! A few weeks ago I was in a conversation

with a number of colleagues, eclectically drawn from a range of schools and departments across the campus. The conversation turned to address what might be called—though, interestingly, the phrase was never mentioned—the "essential culture" of our university. The resulting discussion focused on a single topic: interdisciplinarity. Given the fact that this is the chosen theme of the university's current campus-wide accreditation effort, as well as the long-standing and deeply embedded tradition of cross-department and inter-school collaboration, it was perhaps not surprising that the discussion included neither dissenting voices nor alternative suggestions.

But the next day, as I recalled the conversation, it occurred to me that a case can be made for another essential cultural constant to be found at Northwestern: the inherent importance of writing in the lives of this university's faculty and students. Further than that, the centrality of writing is one of our defining aspects; it serves as a vital

source of our uniqueness—and, it must be added, distinction—as an institution. This is but one reason we are so delighted to be able to announce a new speaker series for the 2004–2005 academic year. The title of the series, we hope, says it all: "Writers and Their Writing."

Enlisting our accomplished faculty colleagues from across the university, the new series will be a program of authorial readings. The presentations will be followed by time set aside for the audience to interact with the author. The events will be open and free of charge to both the university community and the general public. Given the notable range of publishing success by Northwestern faculty, it is hoped that we will be able to present readings in a variety of writerly forms: fiction, nonfiction, drama, and poetry.

The inaugural program in our "Writers and Their Writing" series will be presented at noon on Thursday, November 11 in Scott Hall's Ripton Room. And we could not be more pleased that our esteemed colleague, Garry Wills, will help launch the series with a reading from his latest book, *St. Augustine's Conversion*, which will be published that month. So please mark your calendar and do try to join us if you can.

And as the new school year begins, if there is any way the Center for the Writing Arts can support you in your efforts to advance the commitment to—indeed, celebration of—writing here at Northwestern, please don't hesitate to let us know. ♦



GARRY WILLS

ARE YOU PLANNING WRITING EVENTS FOR 2004–2005? LET US KNOW!

Last spring, the Center debuted a new event resource for the Northwestern community. The biweekly *Writing at Northwestern* highlights NU writing events and reaches students, faculty, and staff via the Center's growing listserv. If you know of an upcoming event related to writing, whether it be an author visit, departmental program or even an off-campus event involving NU students or faculty, please let us know! We will do our best to publicize all writing-related programming. If you would like to receive the electronic *Writing at Northwestern*, please send an email to words@northwestern.edu. And don't forget to give us a call! #467-4099

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www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/

NOW PLAYING AT A CLASSROOM NEAR YOU!

WRITING ABOUT CHILDREN
AND THE HOLOCAUST

ENGLISH 205, FALL 2004
PHYLLIS LASSNER, WRITING
PROGRAM

This new Intermediate Writing course introduces students to the art and writing of child victims and survivors in several forms. The course's major concern is to try to understand the painful and often incomprehensible experiences of children who were persecuted and murdered simply for who they were. Students choose their own paper topics based on the readings. The course requires no prior historical knowledge, which will be offered in presentations and supplementary short readings.

Beginning with personal reflections by survivors on the problems of memory and representation, students then read writing by the child victims incarcerated at Theresienstadt, followed by writing by adults recalling their experiences as children during the Holocaust. The final segment consists of two novels about young people's experiences and written specifically for a young audience. Earlier readings help students create questions aimed at evaluating this literature in the context of educating young readers.

Given the painful nature of the subject, the format of peer paper exchange will help provide opportunities for discussing how best to shape personal responses into effective writing. ♦

WRITING MATTERS

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Special thanks to Professors Phyllis Lassner and James L. O'Laughlin.

IN BRIEF: NORTHWESTERN WRITING NEWS

*Longtime Professor of English & Writing Honored;
Mini-Course Fiction Writers Publish Anthology ;
2005 Elie Wiesel Prize in Ethics Essay Contest*

FIRST RUN

Reginald Gibbons, poet, novelist, editor, and

Chair and Professor of English and Creative Writing at Northwestern will accept the 2004 O.B. Hardison prize this October during a ceremony at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D. C. The Hardison is the only major American award to honor excellence in both poetry and teaching. Gibbons is the author of seven books of poetry and several translations, the most recent of which, Sophocles' *Antigone*, he'll share with an audience on Tuesday, March 8, 2005. This reading is part of the new "Writers and Their Writing" series sponsored by the Center for the Writing Arts. ♦

First Person Imperfect is not a book of grammar exercises, but rather a collection of short stories written by students (or past students) from Paul McComas' fiction writing mini-course offered through NU's Norris Student Center. Most of the authors in the book are Northwestern students or alumni. McComas, both instructor and editor, published the book through an NU grant. For more information or to purchase the book, visit www.paulmccomas.com ♦

The 2005 Elie Wiesel Prize in Ethics Essay Contest is open to junior and senior college students. Winning essays examining ethical issues in topics from art to politics may receive up to \$5,000 in prize money. Submission deadline is December 3, 2004. Guidelines are available at www.eliewiesel.org ♦

NU CENTER FOR THE WRITING ARTS ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS

2004
&
2005

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WRITING MATTERS

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CWA NOW ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS FOR ALEX KOTLOWITZ'S NARRATIVE NON- FICTION COURSE, "TELLING STORIES"

*Students from all schools and majors encouraged to apply
for this unique course offered by the award-winning author.*

WINTER QUARTER 2005

If you can take this course," writes one student in author Alex Kotlowitz's 2004 nonfiction seminar, "you would be a fool not to." For the sixth consecutive year, journalist Alex Kotlowitz joins the NU Center for the Writing Arts as a Writer-in-Residence to teach "Telling Stories: The Art of Narrative Nonfiction (Writing 303)," a course in a genre he has mastered.

Winner of the Carl Sandburg Award for *There Are No Children Here* (1991), author of the best-selling book *The Other Side of the River* (1998) and, most recently, of *Never a City So Real: A Walk in Chicago* (2004), Kotlowitz has shared his enthusiasm, insight,

and experience with students from all over campus.

The 2005 course is open for enrollment by application only and to only those undergraduates who have previously taken a writing-intensive course at Northwestern. In past years, most of the 15 students selected for the course are upperclassmen with a substantial amount of writing experience, and with the number of applications growing each year (80+ in 2004), the competition is healthy.

Beginning the week of October 11, applications for the course will be available for download on the Center's Web site: www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/ Applications will also be available at the Center

for the Writing Arts and various other departments on campus. Application deadline is Friday, October 22, 2004.



ALEX KOTLOWITZ

Requirements are as follows:

- ♦ Undergraduate standing and completion of one writing-intensive course.
- ♦ Completed application form.
- ♦ Writing sample of prose, 5-15 pages in length on any topic.

All applications are confidential. Final acceptance is determined by the instructor. For more information, please call the Center at (847) 467-4099 or email words@northwestern.edu. ♦

CENTER FOR THE WRITING ARTS EVENTS CALENDAR 2004-2005

For up-to-date information, please visit our Web site: www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/

FALL QUARTER 2004

This year, please join NU's Center for the Writing Arts as we celebrate writing in all its forms by welcoming distinguished guests from both on and off campus.

Wednesday, October 13, 2004

4:00 PM-5:00 PM

McCormick Tribune Center Forum
Crain Lecture Series

E.L. Doctorow on "Apprehending Reality."

Monday, November 8, 2004

12 Noon

Fisk Hall 211

Gail Collins of the *New York Times* on "Penning up Opinions."



Thursday, November 11, 2004

12 Noon

Scott Hall, Ripton Room

NU Professor of History **Garry Wills** reads from his latest book, *St. Augustine's Conversion* (2004) in our inaugural event in the new "Writers and Their Writing" series.

Monday, November 15, 2004

12 Noon

Fisk Hall 211

Peter Landesman on "Covering Other Realities: Reporting on the Heart of Darkness."

Continued on page 6

NU WELCOMES DISTINGUISHED LITERARY GUEST, E.L. DOCTOROW: OCTOBER 12–14, 2004

The following excerpt is from the short story "Baby Wilson," which appears in his recent Sweet Land Stories (2004).

AN ORIGINAL EXCERPT

I had done everything Brenda said to do by way of food and sanitation, and now there was peace in the house. I didn't want to alarm Karen in any way, so I treated her with nothing but cooperation. By the time I had gotten back from the store, she had just begun to realize a baby needed taking care of. She was so grateful she hugged me, and I helped her fuss over that child as if it was truly ours. Isn't he the sweetest thing? Karen said. How he seems to know us—oh that is so dear! Look at that sweet face. He is surely the most beautiful baby I have ever seen!

Now with everything calmed down and both Karen and Baby Wilson asleep on our bed, it was time to do some thinking. I put on the five o'clock news to get the lay of the land.

Oh my. The Crenshaw Commissioner of Police saying the entire CPD has been put on alert and deployed throughout the city to find the infant and apprehend the kidnapper or kidnappers. He'd also notified the FBI.

Hey, I said, it is just my slightly crazy girl Karen. You don't have to worry, we're not kidnappers, man.

The female they wanted for questioning was probably in her twenties, young, white, about five-six, slight of build with straight brown hair. She had brought a bouquet of flowers and, when approached by a nurse, claimed to be a friend of Mrs. Wilson.

She was that cool, my Karen?

Behind the commissioner was a worried-looking hospital official and, I supposed, the nurse in question, tearful now for having turned her back for a moment to look for a vase.

Then a doctor stepped to the microphone and said whoever had the baby to remember that there was an open wound at the site of the umbilical cord. It should be kept clean and dressed with an antibacterial agent and a fresh bandage at least once a day.

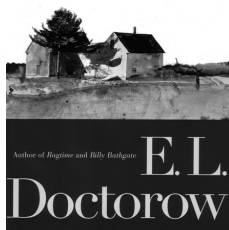
Well, I knew that, I had seen it for myself. I'd found the Polysporin in the medicine chest I had once bought for a cut on my forehead and applied it only after I washed my hands. I am not stupid. The doctor said the baby should only have sponge baths until the wound healed. I would have figured that out, too.

A reporter asked if a ransom note had been received. That really got me riled. Of course not, you moron, I said. What do you think we are? No ransom note as yet, the commissioner said, emphasizing the "as yet," which offended me even more.

Then we were back in the studio with the handsome news anchor: He said Mrs. Wilson the mother was under sedation. He quoted Mr. Wilson the father as saying he didn't understand—they were not rich people, that he was a CPA who worked for his living like everyone else.

I had seen enough. I woke up Karen and hustled her and the baby and all the Kmart paraphernalia into the Durango.

Sweet Land Stories



DOCTOROW'S LATEST COLLECTION
FEATURES STORIES
FIRST PUBLISHED IN
THE NEW YORKER.

Why, whatever is the matter, Lester? Karen said. She was still half asleep. Are we going somewhere? She looked frightened for a



E. L. DOCTOROW

moment until I put Baby Wilson in her arms. I ran back to the house and grabbed some clothes and things for each of us. Then I ran back again and turned off the lights and locked the door.

I could imagine them any minute coming up the road and through the woods around us at the same time. We were in a cul-de-sac at the end of a dirt road here. I drove down to the two-lane. It was a mile from there to the freeway ramp. I pointed east for Nevada, though not planning to go there necessarily but just to be out on the highway away from town, feeling safer on the move, though expecting any minute to see a cop car in the rearview.

I wasn't worried about Brenda—she would think twice before getting involved. But I reasoned that if the police were smart they would talk to every florist in the city. Of course their being Crenshaw's finest, it was only even odds they would make the connection to an employee of Nature's Basket who had not shown up to work, one Karen Robileaux, age twenty-six. But even odds was not good enough as far as I was concerned, besides which the FBI were getting on the case, so say the odds were now sixty-forty, and if they made an I.D. of Karen it would be too late for an anonymous return of the baby. And if they came knocking on the door before I had the chance to deliver him back of our own accord, as appeared likely, there would be no alleviating circumstances for a judge to consider, that I could see.

And so we were out of there. ♦

NU'S JAMES R. O'LAUGHLIN ON READING, WRITING, AND ROCK 'N ROLL.

For this award-winning educator who tries to see his students as fellow writers, even R.E.M. can inspire great writing.

TEACHING & WRITING

James O'Laughlin, senior Lecturer in the Writing Program and Weinberg College Advisor, is a man of

many writing hats: teacher, editor, critic, essayist, short story writer. In 1999–2000, he received the Distinguished Teaching Award from NU's School of Continuing Studies. He shared his thoughts on writing via email with CWA Assistant Director Jessica Belle Smith.

How does being a writer, of both fiction and non-fiction, help you in the teaching of writing?

Writing is work, sometimes quite humbling work. It doesn't always go as fast or as well as we hope, and enthusiasm from others is often restrained, in comparison to our expectations. I try to remember this, especially when my students are hesitant to share their work, or to explain a certain passage in it. I try to see my students as fellow writers who (like me) want to know how to move forward on the next draft.

It is oft-repeated that in order to write well one must also read, often and widely. How does this play out in your classroom and in the various courses that you teach, for example Creative Nonfiction vs. Composition?

I don't take for granted that class members will be very familiar with the kind of writing I'm asking them to do. For example, at the beginning of my "Creative Nonfiction" class students often ask: what is creative nonfiction? In the early part of my courses we tend to concentrate more on reading than on writing, to get a shared sense of some important aspects of writing and of a genre. The readings reveal ways of seeing and illus-

trate features of writing that might interest us for our own work—matters of organization, development, tone, coherence, etc. In discussions (and response papers) students often note interesting things about a reading which have completely escaped my notice; and from these examples they can develop their sharpest sense of what's possible in their own writing.

Last year was your first year as a seminar leader in the "Modes of Writing" course, offered in a two-quarter sequence and open only to freshmen. Describe that course in terms of teaching writing. How does it differ from other kinds of writing-intensive courses?

The relative autonomy of the writing seminars and lectures allows some interesting interplay, and, by the end of the second quarter, the independent contributions of the students in the seminars emerges quite visibly. The two quarter structure also creates momentum, as students develop research proposals out of the ideas and interests that surface in the first quarter, and work on a single research project for the entire second quarter. They're given a good opportunity to grapple with complexity, and because of the considerable time they spend together as writers, they can devel-

op a much stronger sense of themselves as a community, and that comes out in their observations about each others' work, and in their awareness of audience in their own writing. Some very impressive writing came out of those spring quarter projects. I'd love to see what they'd do two years from now, in an advanced version of this class.

Can you share a memorable teaching experience in terms of a student breakthrough in writing?

It's usually something like this: through feedback from me, another reader, a student sees something in a draft of his or her writing that is much stronger or has much more promise than the student imagined, and the piece is then transformed. Here's a recent example. Last year a student in one of my classes was writing a review-memoir about the band R.E.M., analyzing why they appealed to her over the course of several years, and drawing on specific examples from CD's and concerts. Embedded in this account were bits about her brother, who had introduced her to this music, and shared her passion for it. When she'd finished a draft she still thought R.E.M. was great, but she thought her essay was not great. At some point in our individual conference or in the group discussion, she was asked about her brother, and this eventually led her to a discovery: her real interest was not so much that she and her brother loved this band, but that they had become (for a while) friends because of it; she was drawn in not by the wonder of R.E.M, but the wonder of her changing relationship to her brother. After this, strong, new material came almost immediately for her, and she produced a powerfully introspective and at times beautifully written essay.

If you could give undergraduates one of piece of writing advice what would it be?

Take the time to figure out what interests you most about your subject (through quick sketching or drafting), and find a way to write about it; then give yourself time for feedback and revision. You'll learn a lot more, write a lot better, and have a lot more fun along the way. ♦



JAMES R. O'LAUGHLIN

CENTER FOR THE WRITING ARTS EVENTS CALENDAR 2004–2005

For up-to-date information, please visit our Web site: www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/

WINTER QUARTER 2005

Con't
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Monday, January 24, 2005

5:30 PM

Harris Hall 108

Alex Kotlowitz, NU Center for the Writing Arts Writer-in-Residence, presents a reading of *Never a City So Real: A Walk in Chicago* (2004).

Tuesday, February 15, 2005

4 PM

Harris Hall 108

WIR **Alex Kotlowitz** presents the second of two public presentations, a lecture on a topic TBA.

Monday, February 21, 2005

12 Noon

Fisk Hall 211

Deborah Sontag, investigative reporter at *The New York Times* and former contributing writer to *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* presents "Investigative Reporting: Outside the Comfort Zone."

Monday, February 28, 2005

12 Noon

Fisk Hall 211

Two-time Pulitzer-Prize winning author **Rick Atkinson** presents "Reporting on the New American Empire."

Tuesday, March 8, 2005

12 Noon

Harris Hall 108

Reginald Gibbons, NU Professor and Chair of the English Department, reads from his recently published translation of Sophocles' *Antigone* (2003) as part of the "Writers and Their Writing" series.

and coming this spring...

Tuesday, May 17, 2005

12 Noon

Harris Hall 108

NU's William Smith Mason Professor of American History **T.H. Breen** reads from *The Marketplace of Revolution* (2004) as part of the "Writers and Their Writing" series. ♦

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WRITING MATTERS

NEWSLETTER OF THE CENTER

FOR THE WRITING ARTS

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