

# WRITING MATTERS

VOL. 6 NO. 1

Celebrating writing in all its forms at Northwestern University.

FALL 2005

## DIRECTOR'S LETTER

### *A New Window On the Rich Array of Writing Classes Here at NU*

By David Abrahamson  
 Director, NU Center for the Writing Arts,  
 Charles Deering McCormick Professor of  
 Teaching Excellence, Medill School  
 of Journalism



A warm hello from the Northwestern Center for the Writing Arts, and best wishes for a promising start to your 2005-2006 school year!

With the very able assistance of our new assistant director, Stacy Oliver, we are looking forward to an exciting year of programming at the Center. In addition to our "Modes of Writing" freshman seminar and our three Writers in Residence (Landon Y. Jones, William Clark and the Shaping of the West; Alex Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*; and Arthur Golden, *Memoirs of a Geisha*), as well as our usual fare of public lectures, readings and visiting authors, we hope to launch a new service to all Northwestern undergraduates this fall.

It is an brand-new initiative, undertaken at the urging of Provost Larry Dumas and largely the result of the labors of a somewhat ad hoc "Writing at NU" steering committee. Meeting under the auspices of the Center since last spring, the

committee was first convened with Reg Gibbons, Bob Gundlach, Jack Doppelt, Dave Tolchinsky and Ana Puga -- but other NU faculty members have given generously of their time in meetings since. The core premise was that, at both the grad and undergrad level, there might be a way to take advantage of the fact that the Northwestern culture is so rich in offerings of writing courses -- in fiction, poetry, nonfiction, journalism, script-and screening writing and dramatic writing and more.

If the entire corpus of such courses was surveyed and analyzed, might certain patterns suggest themselves? Areas discovered that could benefit from expansion? Courses could be combined and/or enriched? Subjects which might have been overlooked or perhaps with a somewhat recent claim to the canon?

The first step has been to gather the data and to attempt to present it in a useful fashion. A major part of the initiative has focused on undergraduate writing courses, and our objective is both to bring a certain informational coherence to the large number of courses available across campus and to assist students (and their advisors) in their decision-making when selecting and enrolling in writing classes.

To that end, there is a new link on the left rail of our home page [www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts](http://www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts). Even though it is still a work in progress, we hope that you will come to regard the "Study Writing at NU!" link as a particularly useful window onto the vast and robust array of writing classes available at Northwestern.

If you have any suggestions for its updating and/or improvement, do please let us know. It is yet another way in which we hope that the Center for the Writing Arts can support you in your efforts to enhance writing here at Northwestern. ♦

## PLANNING WRITING EVENTS THIS QUARTER? LET US KNOW!

Just a reminder that the Center's biweekly digest, *NU Writing Event Digest*, highlights NU writing events and reaches students, faculty, and staff via the Center's growing email list. If you know of an upcoming event related to writing, whether it be an author's 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 *NU Writing Event Digest*, please send an email to [words@northwestern.edu](mailto:words@northwestern.edu). You can also give us a call at 847-467-4099! ♦

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## IN BRIEF: NORTHWESTERN WRITING NEWS

**October 11, 2005**

### A Conversation with Helen Cixous About Writing

The Center is proud to be a partner with the NU English Department in welcoming this extraordinary theorist, novelist, playwright, and educational innovator.

**12 noon- 2 p.m.**  
**1845 Sheridan Road**  
**Fisk Hall 211**

**This event is free and open to the public**

Please contact the English Department for more details  
847-4917294

### Spring Quarter 2006

**Arthur Golden** will be the Spring 2006 Writer-in-Residence. Novelist and author of the best-selling *Memoirs of a Geisha*, as well as a forthcoming biographical novel based on the life of Gustafson Swift.

To view our complete writing events calendar, please visit our web site:

[www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/](http://www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/)

### WRITING MATTERS

Editor: Stacy L. Oliver  
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Special thanks to Peter Ho Davies, Robert Gundlach, and Alex Kolowitz

## STUDENT VOICES: I Learned About Writing From That!

This new column will be dedicated to hearing firsthand from the students their experiences of what's making them better writers. The agony or ecstasy of that one reporting or writing assignment that made the light-bulb go off over their head to say, "Ah, I learned how to write because of that!" Maybe it was a random experience, a freelance job, or moment in their journey as a student. We'll find out here!

*Our first contributor is Lauren Murrow. Lauren is a senior in Medill, majoring in journalism and history.*

I began in San Francisco. Then London, Dublin, Venice, Rome, Barcelona, Paris, and, after a year of exploring, working, and writing, back to Evanston, Illinois. It was a daunting agenda for me, a reluctant suburbanite and panicky flier.

From an internship in San Francisco in the fall, I decided to study at University College in central London, hoping that by putting myself in the middle of a place so fast-paced and diverse I could cull stories from its crowds.

My time away from Northwestern was both strenuous and liberating. My travel-mates and I deciphered the various systems of buses, trains, subways, and airports as we went. We encountered language barriers and poverty. We accepted our lot against the whims of the weather and horrific exchange rates. And throughout, I wrote it all down—the grief surrounding the Pope's death in Rome, London's cultural nuances, how Paris looks in pouring rain—I wanted to capture the beauty, the humor, the conflict and the quirks.

*con't on page 11*

## NU CENTER FOR THE WRITING ARTS ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS

**2005  
&  
2006**

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## NU'S CENTER FOR THE WRITING ARTS INTRODUCES 2006 WINTER QUARTER WRITER IN RESIDENCE, ALEX KOTLOWITZ



ALEX KOTLOWITZ

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Alex Kotlowitz, winner of the Carl Sandburg Award for *There Are No Children Here* (1991), author of best-seller *The Other Side of the River* (1998) and *Never a City So Real* (2004), distinguished recipient of the Tribune Heartland Prize (1998), writes about issues of social policy, urban affairs, poverty, and race.

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### AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEX

*You have a new career as an NPR correspondent. Tell us about what you're doing there? What types of stories you're working on, who you're working with, how often you submit your pieces, etc.*

It's not so much a new career as the revival of an old one. Some twenty-five years ago when I was just starting out as a journalist much of my work was for *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition*. I love radio. It's so organic. It's such a terrific medium to tell stories. I'm not so much a radio correspondent as much as a dabbler in radio. In recent years --in between my writing -- I've been contributing the occasional story to *This American Life* (in my mind the best show on radio) and along with my colleague Amy Dorn producing a collection of personal narratives for Chicago Public Radio.

Each year, the collections have been around a theme: home, love and money. It's storytelling at its sparest, people telling their stories themselves (with a big assist from Amy and myself in editing their tales). They're admittedly a bit quirky. I kind of think it as the journalistic equivalent of a short story collection. There's a portrait of an artist who for years has been painting murals in the apartments of public housing. Another is about the courtship of a priest and a nun. Still another is about a commodities trader who after going belly up resorts to robbing banks. Well, you get the idea. (Amy and I adapted some of these stories for the stage this past Spring. An *Unobstructed View* ran at Pegasus Players for a month.) My first love is writing, but I so cherish radio.

*Any new projects you're working on you can share with us?*

I'm finishing up a piece for *This American Life* (actually adapting

a few of the money stories) and a book review (of a collection of short stories by a first-time terrific young writer.) And then I'm hoping to embark on my next book. I'm reticent to talk much about it. I apologize but it's my nature. I don't like talking about my projects, mostly out of fear that if I do the story at hand it will begin to feel stale.

*You've built a strong relationship with the NU writing students over the years. How do you plan on approaching your winter quarter this year for Writing Arts 303-The Art of Non-Fiction class?*

I love the teaching, the interaction with the students, watching their writing grow and mature, even over just ten weeks. I'm entering this winter like I have every other, putting together a reading list and trying to think of some different writing exercises. The students are demanding, as they should be -- and so I try to reserve my time in the winter to read my students' work.

*What have you learned and enjoyed most from your teaching experience with the students?*

*Con't on page 4*



**KOTLOWITZ  
INTERVIEW  
CON'T**

My students have pushed me. I've come to admire and appreciate the varied sensibilities students bring to the class and to the writing projects. I've become much more flexible in the kinds of stories I'll accept for class. The one thing I keep on pushing for though is getting the students to engage with the unfamiliar, to venture into places and communities they otherwise might not spend time. I'm exhilarated reading of their discoveries.

The perk in teaching is that many of the students stay in touch with me. I get to see them grow -- especially their writing. I have one former student now at *The Nation*, another who just received a write-up as one of the nation's promising young writers, two who are applying for Fulbrights (both journalistic ventures). I could go on. I feel like a proud parent.

*Do you have any advice for students who are aspiring writers on how to pursue their dream? Is there a writer's credo you live by?*

Read, read and read some more. When I'm having trouble putting pen to paper, I pick up a book or a good magazine article, something to inspire. And as a nonfiction writer, it's imperative that you fully engage with others. We're not landscape artists. We can't just sit back and observe. We've got to poke and prod, probe, ask questions we have no business asking, show up places we have no business being. Nonfiction narrative shines not because of the writing but because of the reporting. (Not to understate the importance of good writing, but you can be the most lyrical, poetic writer and if you haven't anything to say no one's going to read you.)

The other thing I tell my students is: it's all about story. I pound it into them, the importance of narrative.

*Finally, who are some of the literary icons you admired growing up as you discovered your passion for writing?*

*As you've become a more seasoned writer who are your mentors now?*

Well, my dad's a writer, a novelist and memoirist and though I wasn't fully aware of it growing up (and too proud and stubborn to admit it back then) he's had an enormous influence on me. He taught me the importance and beauty of economical writing. (His World War Two memoir, *Before Their Time*, is as taut a piece of storytelling you'll find anywhere.) I spent my teenage years reading nothing but fiction: the dark novels of 19th century Russia, the great fiction of mid-20th century Germany and Faulkner and Steinbeck. Then in the mid-1980s when I was a correspondent at the *Wall Street Journal* I read Tony Lukas' *Common Ground*, and I knew that was what I wanted to do: try to tell true stories with a novelistic flair. I admire folks like Truman Capote, Tracy Kidder, David Halberstam and Studs Terkel. But my dirty little secret is that I still read more fiction than nonfiction. I've been reading a lot of contemporary fiction of late: "War Trash", "The Lone Surfer of Montana, Kansas", and "When the Emperor Was Divine." ♦

**Writing 303 -Winter  
Quarter 2006**

"TELLING STORIES: THE ART OF NARRATIVE NONFICTION"  
with Writer-in Residence Winter  
Quarter 2006  
ALEX KOTLOWITZ  
Mondays and Wednesdays  
2:00-5:00 pm

*This course is open by application  
only to undergraduates*

**Course description:** This course will-through both reading

and writing-explore the art of what is often called literary journalism, narrative nonfiction, or what John McPhee calls "the literature of fact." The best of nonfiction narrative wields a fierce power, poking and prodding our preconceptions of the world, pushing us to look at ourselves and others through a different prism. What makes for a compelling story? (What tools might we borrow from fiction?) Why employ the use of narrative? How does it help form our view of people and events? We'll explore the craft of reporting and research which borrows from a variety of disciplines, including anthropolo-

gy, history and sociology - and work with rigor and discipline on the art of good writing. We'll read nonfiction narratives-both book and magazine articles-on a host of subjects, ranging from war and poverty to the environment and sports. We'll work in this class as a professional writer might, from draft to draft. There will be regular writing assignments, and students will be asked to craft a longer narrative on a subject of interest to them. The course will be run as a seminar, so there will be an emphasis on critical class discussion. ♦

For application and more details go to:  
[www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/](http://www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/)

## MODES OF WRITING COURSE

### Winter and Spring Quarters 2006 - Time and Chance A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY FOR FRESHMEN ONLY!

WRITING 115-5/115-6 (Winter Quarter)

Professors Gary Saul Morson, Robert Gundlach, Marcia Gealy, and James O'Laughlin

Mondays 2-3:20 p.m.

Wednesdays 2-3:20 p.m.

**W**inter and Spring Quarters, 2005-06 This special two-quarter, team-taught course, designed specifically for only freshmen, combines a rigorous, wide-ranging exploration of an important theme with close attention to helping students become strong writers. By listening to lectures given by Professor Morson, participating in discussions led by experienced writing seminar instructors, and working on their own writing projects, students examine how people understand their choices with respect to the conception of time with which they live. Is time best understood as "open" or "closed"? What relation does ethics have to questions of free will or determinism? When we judge the moral ideas of people in the past,

are we right or wrong to assume that the values of our own time offer a standard for judging other times? In planning cities, societies, and our own lives, is it moral to choose what we think is the best or is it more moral to choose flexibility and so not close off too many options? These and other questions will be discussed with reference to a range of texts, including essays by Charles Darwin, William James, Herbert Butterfield, and Stephen Jay Gould, and literary works by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

Through both quarters, students will write steadily, both to improve their writing and to deepen their understanding of the issues they are exploring. In the winter, students will write three essays of intermediate length (4-6 pages), along with several briefer response pieces (1-2 pages each). In the spring, each student will complete a longer research paper on a topic of individual interest (12-15 pages) and continue to write brief response pieces (1-2 pages each). Research projects will be organized in stages, with students receiving instruction and

coaching in developing a proposal, conducting research, analyzing material, formulating an argument, drafting, revising, and editing. Students will be evaluated on the basis of their written work and their participation. There will be no exams.

**Important note:** Students are expected to enroll for **both quarters** of this special sequence. For WCAS freshmen, the two quarters together will confer one unit of credit toward the distribution requirement in Area V, Values, in Winter Quarter, and one unit of Freshman Seminar credit in Spring Quarter. Freshmen in undergraduate schools other than WCAS should check with their advisers to determine how Modes of Writing may provide credit for requirements in their schools. ♦

For additional information, please contact Stacy Oliver, Assistant Director, Center for the Writing Arts, slp@northwestern.edu.

#### Here's what students said on their CTEC evaluations about Modes of Writing:

- "This is a great class for freshmen to improve their writing and critical thinking and a good introduction to a lot of literature too."
- "The lectures are fascinating and introduce you to a wide range of authors/thinkers."
- "It really helped me with my own writing and taught me a lot about the practice of writing itself."
- "A wonderful and unique opportunity to work in a small lecture."

“A Short History Of A Short Story” the lecture given by Spring 2005 Writer-in-Residence Peter Ho Davies is available only in limited print copies of the CWA Fall 2005 newsletter. It is not viewable on-line in this issue.

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## WHAT ARE YOU READING?

We asked the following writers, scholars, and lovers of literature these questions: 1) What scholarly / professional book or article are you currently reading? 2) What book are you reading at the moment largely for pleasure? 3) What is the next book (work or pleasure) you hope to read? Here's what they had to say!



**Alex Kotlowitz**  
Winter Quarter  
Writer in Residence 2006

- 1) *Ghost Wars* by Steve Coll
- 2) *The Lone Surfer of Montana, Kansas* by Davy Rothbart and *War Trash* by Ha Jin
- 3) *The Death of the Detective* by Mark Smith



**Judy Rosenbaum**  
Professor Clinical, Law Instruction

- 1) *Geography of Thought* by Richard Nisbett
- 2) *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen
- 3) *Story of Lucy Gault* by William Trevor



**Donald Norman**  
Professor, Computer Science

- 1) *Humans and Automation: System Design and Research Issues*, T.B. Sheridan ; *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*, Y.-f. Tuan; and *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, J.M Diamond.

2) *Quicksilver* by N. Stephenson 3) *Shift: Inside Nissan's Historic Revival* by C. Ghosn, P. Riès, & J. Cullen



**Carol Simpson Stern**  
Professor, SoC Performance

- 1) *Volcano Lover* by Susan Sontag; *Edward Lear's Indian Journal and Biography of Lear; Complete Stories of Eudora Welty*; a book edition by Lytton Strachey and Harold Nicholson of their favorite (less frequently read) poems.

2) Agatha Christie, Helen MacInnes, and Jack Higgins novels 3) Issues of *Text and Performance Quarterly* and finishing reading C.S. Lewis' *On Words*

STUDENT VOICES  
CON'T



Lauren Murrow

I discovered more than I ever had about my writing, not from lab sessions or hunting for witty man-on-the-street quotes, but by throwing myself into the foreignness and scribbling it all down. It's a far-flung journey from the gentrified, self-contained streets of Evanston to the cobblestone back alleys of London or the bicycle-cluttered labyrinth of Venice.

I had just finished my magazine internship in San Francisco, a vibrant, arty city. It is an eclectic population counting activists, artists, and dot-comers among its own. It's part hipster and part high fashion, where gorgeous women stalked the aisle of my daily bus ride as though striding down a catwalk, taking seats beside little women and men en route to Chinatown.

San Franciscans are an outspoken breed. Here, when you write, people are eager to be heard, competing to be quoted. I spoke to yuppie homeowners, public art enthusiasts, and glorified vandals in an article on the conflict surrounding recent anti-graffiti initiatives. I was at the magazine leading up to the 2004 presidential elections, when political demonstrations routinely halted traffic and my beloved local bookstore stocked

a sizeable "anti-Bush" selection. At the magazine, we covered the despondency and outright indignation of San Franciscans after Kerry's loss, including a report on the hoards that claimed they would run for Canada. They are an opinionated bunch.

From the almost aggressive approachability of San Franciscans, the reservation of Londoners proved to be a jarring transition. An American abroad is often despised. Notorious for our ignorance and bravado, it was difficult to overcome the role of the bumbling tourist. Regardless of what I was writing abroad, whether observing religious fanaticism in Rome, the pub culture in Dublin, or political demonstrations in London, I was perceived as an American outsider

Encountering a different culture, political system, and, sometimes, language while traveling led me to reexamine the roles of the foreign media. There is a global sensibility in London and other European cities that I found lacking in the United States media. The individualism and independence so revered in the States suddenly turns out to be damning.

But for all this, such writing carries with it a sense of responsibility and value. I learned how inspiring and stereotype-shattering the media can be, born from channeling the incessant impulse to write. Back in Chicago, I attended a discussion with James Janega, a young Metro reporter for the Chicago Tribune who had volunteered to report from Iraq. He said he learned to conquer his fear by compulsively writing.

In his beat up, blood-spattered notebook he would later find notations: "Loud explosion; screams," scribbled hurriedly, unthinkingly in a critical moment.

In the year I was away I attempted to claim a compulsion to write. I learned to focus the impulse to tell someone else's story, whether it be a British protester or a San Francisco street artist. From the determination of the British, the outspoken Italians, and the tenacity of San Franciscans, my writing gained an invaluable sense of perspective. ♦

*'What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing'*

*- Aristotle*





**CWA 2005  
FALL QUARTER  
CALENDAR**

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. For complete calendar and recent additions visit:

[www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/](http://www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/).

**Monday, October 17, 2005**

12:00 PM

University Hall, Hagstrum Room

**Christina Pugh** reads from *Rotary* as part of the "Writers and Their Writing" series.

**Monday, November 7, 2005**

12 PM

University Hall, Hagstrum Room

**Elmer Lewis** reads from *Masterworks of Technology* as part of the "Writers and Their Writing" series.

**Monday, November 14, 2005**

12:00 PM

Fisk Hall, Room 211

**Katherine Boo**, Pulitzer Prize winner and MacArthur Fellow discusses *Questioning the Purposes of Journalism* as part of the "Literature in Journalism" series.

**Monday, November 21, 2005**

12:00 PM

Fisk Hall, Room 211

**Jennifer 8. Lee**, Consumer Technology reporter for the *New York Times* discusses *Reporting on Other Worlds* as part of the "Literature in Journalism" series.

**Thursday, December 1, 2005**

12:00 PM

University Hall, Hagstrum Room

**Dan McAdams** reads from *The Redemptive Self* as part of the "Writers and Their Writing" series.

**WRITING MATTERS**  
NEWSLETTER OF THE CENTER  
FOR THE WRITING ARTS  
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