

WRITING MATTERS

VOL 4 NO 2

Celebrating writing in all its forms at Northwestern University.

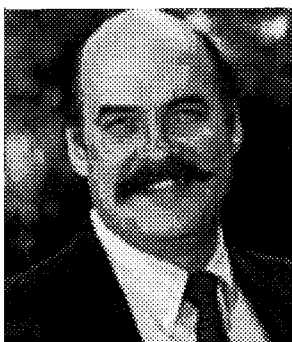
SPRING/SUMMER 2004

DIRECTOR'S LETTER

Faithful to writing in all its forms

By David Abrahamson

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



Once again, greetings from the Northwestern Center for the Writing Arts! As you no doubt know, it is the objective of the Center to celebrate

writing in all its forms. And this means fiction, nonfiction, poetry and dramatic writing. Where this commitment to variety most explicitly manifests itself is in the actual programming of the Center, most specifically in the accomplished writers whom we invite to Evanston to teach for a quarter as Writers-in-Residence and in the programs and lectures that we support in concert with other departments, centers and schools across the university.

Given both the vibrant state of the novel in American letters today and the fact that fiction is so widely appreciated by students, I thought it could do no harm to highlight some of the past and future offerings of the Center in the realm of fiction.

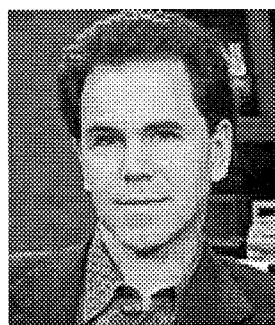
Two very exciting pieces of news have to do with two prominent writers of fiction who have accepted our invitation to come to campus. The first is a visit in the fall of 2004 by E. L. Doctorow, best-selling author of truly extraordinary works of fiction, including *The Book of Daniel*, *Ragtime*, *Loon Lake*, *Billy Bathgate* and *City of God*. In addition, as a Writer-in-Residence during the 2005–2006 school year, we have confirmed the residency of Arthur Golden, 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.

We are equally proud of the fact that in the current 2003–2004 school year, we've been able, with other groups in the university, to help organize and support visits to Evanston by a wide range of accomplished practitioners of the fictional arts. These have included:

- Alice Sebold, novelist and author of *The Lovely Bones* and *Lucky*.
- Glen David Gold, novelist and author of *Carter Beats the Devil*.
- Robert Olen Butler, novelist and Pulitzer-Prize winning author of *The Deep Green Sea* and *Fair Warning*.
- Valerie Martin, novelist and author of *Property* (winner of the Orange Prize).
- David Barber, poet and author of *The Spirit Level*.
- Carolyn Cooke, fiction writer and author of *The Bostons: Stories* (winner of the 2002 PEN/Bingham Award).
- Samuel R. Delany, critic/novelist and author of *Nova*, *The Mad Man* and *Atlantis* and winner of the William Whitehead Memorial Award for a lifetime's contribution to gay and lesbian literature.
- Homer Hickam, novelist and author of *Rocket Boys* (which became the acclaimed feature film *October Sky*).
- Shawn Wong, novelist and author of *Homebase* and *American Knees*.

All in all, we are delighted that we've been able to insure that the fictional forms of writing have enjoyed their rightful place in the affairs of the Center. And as the quarter draws to a close and we once again look forward to the next school year, if there is any way that we can support you in your efforts to advance the cause—indeed, celebration—of writing here at Northwestern, please don't hesitate to let us know. ♦



ARTHUR GOLDEN

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

The Center for the Writing Arts is dedicated to promoting and celebrating writing in all its forms at Northwestern University. 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 writing-related programming on our web site and via our growing listservs. Recently, we've helped publicize visits by authors Pico Iyer, Rick Lyman, Carolyn Cooke and Charles Altieri. 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!

SPRING QUARTER 2004

THE ART OF STORYTELLING
LYNN KELSO, COMMUNICATION
THEATRE 312

Everyone tells stories. Storytelling is the way humans connect through narrative to heal, inform, sell, inspire, reveal, teach, comfort, entertain, as well as build a bridge of understanding between the teller and the listener. In the Art of Storytelling students are introduced to the fundamentals of delivery and performance and learn how to listen to and analyze and critique other stories. They will learn how to create and adapt stories from various sources such as personal memory, written and oral history, literature, folktales and mythology. Students develop a repertoire of stories for performance in class, will observe and discuss each other's stories and will observe and write reflections on storytelling outside of class, and in effect, build a community by connecting with one another and discovering the universal themes of their stories. The students work to find the power of the story to move the audience. The students as well as the audience learn more about who they are and who they have the potential to become. They discover that we are all connected with similar dreams, fears, pains and joys. ♦

WRITING MATTERS

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Special thanks to Professors Sarah Maza, Lynn Kelso and Alex Kotlowitz for their contributions.

LOVE, FAMILY, MONEY AND OTHER MATTERS OF THE HEART: THE ART OF PERSONAL NARRATIVE

excerpt from a lecture presented February 10, 2004 in Harris Hall

by Alex Kotlowitz, *Writer-in-Residence WQ04*

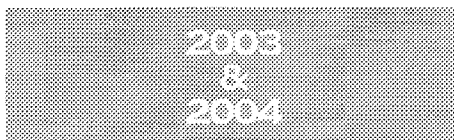


Listening, I believe, is a lost art in our profession [of journalism] and I know that I, for one, have to really work at it. I'm not just talking about hearing what people are saying: It's digesting it, ruminating on it, responding to it, understanding it. I watch the journalists on television. They pontificate. They don't listen. They don't even hear. They shout. They talk over and around each other. They mingle amongst themselves, closing themselves off to 90 percent of the people out there. We have forgotten how to listen. It doesn't come easy. It certainly hasn't come easy for me.

Here's the other problem my profession has with listening: We too often think that what we have to say, what

we're thinking, how it affects us ... matters. Too often, I read pieces about the writer's or narrator's surprise at some turn of events, about their anger or their despair, or how someone didn't meet their expectations. The challenge is not to let the reader or listener in on your emotional gyrations, but to tell a story with empathy so that others experience those emotions as well. I tell this to my students all the time—you, the reader, the listener—don't care about us, the storyteller. You don't care whether we we're surprised by what we see or hear, or whether we're agitated, or whether we're saddened. You care about the person—or people—whose story it is. Which is why, at the end of the day, the best storytelling is that in which we get out of the way of those whose stories we're telling. ♦

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WRITING MATTERS
SPRING 2004 Vol. 4 No. 2
Editor: JESSICA BELLE SMITH
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E. L. DOCTOROW AND ARTHUR GOLDEN AMONG FUTURE GUESTS OF CWA

Award-winning authors accept NU's invitation to read, lecture and teach at Northwestern in upcoming quarters.

DISTINGUISHED GUEST

This fall the entire

Northwestern University community and the Center for the Writing Arts will welcome one of the most celebrated writers of American literature: E.L. Doctorow. Author of numerous novels, including *Ragtime*, *Loon Lake*, *The Book of Daniel*, *Billy Bathgate* and *City of God*, Doctorow has received the National Book Award and twice, the National Book Critics Circle award. Readers celebrate his rich evocations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American life and several of his novels have been made into films. His novel, *Ragtime*, was adapted into a successful Broadway musical that

E. L. DOCTOROW

won a Tony Award under the direction of Frank Galati, one of NU's own faculty. Doctorow currently holds the Glucksman Chair in American Letters at New York University. His most recent book, a collection of short fiction entitled *Sweet Land Stories*, was recently published by Random House. Doctorow will be in residence from October 12 to October 14, visiting classes and offering a public reading. We look forward to his visit! ♦



WRITER-IN- RESIDENCE

In 1997 Arthur Golden

wowed a nation of readers and critics with the publication of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, a fictional account of the life of a Japanese woman in the 1930s. Told from the point of view of the female protagonist, the novel quickly established Golden as one to watch in the literary world. When Golden arrives in the spring of 2006 to serve as Northwestern University's Writer-in-Residence, we'll have a chance to see even more closely the mind of a budding master of the fictional form.

Golden earned a degree in Art History from Harvard College, spe-

cializing in Japanese art, as well as an M.A. in Japanese History from Columbia University and an M.A. in English from Boston University. He currently lives in Massachusetts where he is working on his next novel, rumored to be a biographical rendering of a Chicago meat-packing baron. We will eagerly await his arrival as well as that of his new book, certain to transport readers yet again to another time and era. ♦



MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA

CWA LAUNCHES NEW PROGRAM PAIRING STUDENTS & WRITERS

The Center for the Writing Arts has established a pilot program that pairs promising undergraduates



LOKA ASHWOOD

with prominent local authors to serve as interns/research assistants. Loka Ashwood, BSJ 07, reflects on her quarter working with author Alex Kotlowitz.

Alex Kotlowitz is one of those people talented enough to make you believe he has time to actually listen to what you have to say. But don't be fooled. After working with Alex this past quarter, I now realize his days are filled with meetings, interviews, travel and brainstorming.

My research with Alex began by testing the waters for a few unusual story ideas. Although he feared my work would become monotonous, every idea Alex wanted me to research is a relevant, yet commonly overlooked, trend or problem. Topics ranged from global issues to ones closer to home, but all had the potential to be a fantastic story. Some of the story ideas will have to wait, but in the mean time, readers look forward to his next book due out this July.

In anticipation of *Never a City So Real: A Walk in Chicago*, I helped Alex gather articles for a website dedicated to his past works. Articles that first appeared in *The Chicago Tribune Magazine* to *The New Yorker* will be available to read on Alex's website.

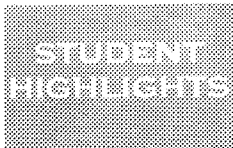
Working with Alex has opened my eyes to the sort of investigative journalism I've always envisioned. In an age where some claim in-depth reporting is dwindling, Alex is an inspiration for those who still have faith in investigative journalism. Overall working with Alex has been a pleasure and a brief glimpse at the man behind the genius. ♦

"PERMANENT INK: WHEN DAVID DIED"

A student in WIR Alex Kotlowitz's course in nonfiction looks to Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood to tell this story.

By Dorothy Kronick, WCAS 2006

"Telling Stories: The Art of Narrative Nonfiction" Winter Quarter 2004



One night in February, 18-year-old Noé Sanchez* decided it was time to tell his parents about his tattoo. The week prior he'd driven to Indiana, where the legal tattooing age is 18, and inked a 3-inch immortality symbol—a modified cross with a loop on top—into his right upper arm.

When, at 11:30 p.m., Sanchez arrived home from Lincoln Tech, where he is studying evenings to be a mechanic, he walked up the stairs past his grandmother's first-floor apartment. He walked past his sister's apartment on the second floor. In his parents' dimly lit kitchen, he found them conversing at the table.

"I have something to tell you guys," Sanchez said in his even, understated tone. "I got me a tattoo."

Sanchez's father was quiet.

"Why'd you do that?" his mother asked, her voice shaking.

"It represents David to me," Sanchez explained. Four years ago, Sanchez's older brother David was shot and killed by a rival gang member.

His mother paced the kitchen, wondering aloud what people would think, why her son would do such a thing, how he could cause her so much trouble. Her hysteria mounted. Finally she left the room in tears, and Sanchez's father spoke.

"If you're thinking about your brother," he said in quick, sharp

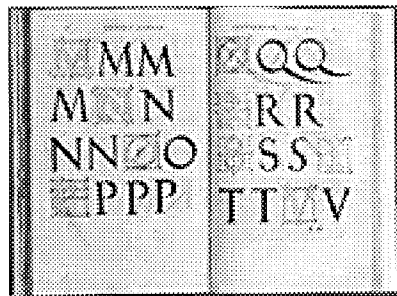
Spanish, "why don't you go to the cemetery?"

"My parents think I'm following in David's footsteps," Sanchez told me a week later. "They don't understand me. They just see what they want to see." He is handsome and fit, with sparse facial hair on his chin and cheeks. His fingernails are usually dark with car grease. We spoke at a table in the public library, taking shelter from punishing winds out-

HIS PARENTS WOULD
DISAPPROVE
OF THESE FASHION CHOICES
EVEN IF HIS
BROTHER WERE ALIVE.

side. Sanchez is not allowed to have female visitors, so we couldn't meet in his home.

When Sanchez got his ears and nipples pierced, his mother cried about the "craziness" she has to put up with. She had a similar reaction



when he shaved his head. Sanchez knew that his parents would disapprove of these fashion choices even if his brother were alive, but since David's death, their anger has been intensified by fear.

David and Noé were the middle children, sandwiched between three older siblings and a baby brother. The two spent time together every day, and the rest of the family, he says, saw them as a duo—"a pair of rotten apples." Though Sanchez has never been involved with a gang or with any criminal activity, his adoption of his brother's mannerisms and speech cadence were enough to associate him with David. Noé thinks this is why his mother sees David in his own insubordinate behavior.

The wind died down, and we walked the streets of Pilsen, a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago. Periodically Sanchez pointed out gang boundaries: south of 18th Street, Razas; around Loomis Street, Counts; along Cullerton Street, Ambros. When his baseball cap blew off, he turned it backwards, being careful not to incite gang hostility by placing the bill to one side or the other.

On a Saturday, two days after Sanchez clashed with his parents in the kitchen, his sister sat with him on her green velour couch. She told him that their mother had cried to her about the tattoo, and that she didn't want him living at home when she returned from a spring trip to Mexico.

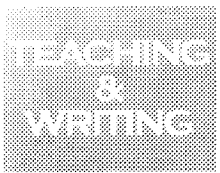
A few days later, Sanchez was dressing in his small bedroom when he realized he'd left his sweater in the living room. His father and little brother Manuel were watching TV; his mother was folding laundry. They still hadn't

Continued on page 6. . .

*To ensure privacy, all names have been changed.

NU PROFESSOR SARAH MAZA ON TWO GREAT LOVES: READING AND WRITING

Scholarship, self-discipline, experience: Essential qualities of a successful scholarly writer. Maza reminds us of another: Joy!



Sarah C. Maza (PhD Princeton, 1978) is the Northwestern Jane Long

Professor in the Humanities, specializing in the social and cultural history of eighteenth and nineteenth century France. She has published three books, most recently *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850* (2003). She shared her thoughts on writing via email with CWA assistant director, Jessica Belle Smith.

In what ways does scholarly writing about history differ from scholarly writing in other fields, such as literature?

When you write history you have to juggle lots of sources, and the trick is to document your work thoroughly without boring your reader to death or weighing down your work with multiple examples and citations. When you research a work of history you uncover a huge amount of material and it takes both self-discipline and quite a bit of experience to accept that a large part of what you found should never make it into your book, or only in the footnotes. The other challenge is that history as a discipline is both descriptive and analytical: the best history simultaneously brings the past back to life and explains why things happened, and those are two very different kinds of writing. Combining both is what takes skill. The ideal of the profession is that we should be in the best sense journalists dealing with the past.

To whom do you send students for an example(s) of "good writing"?

We often discuss the style as well as the content of the history books we read, and I point out to them the strengths of really good stylists in the field such as Robert Darnton. But just as often, I send them to each other by having them read an example of really good writing by a current or previous student at their level. It makes them understand that the standards are not unattainable.

You use a variety of written works in your courses—historical analysis, philosophy, fiction. How do these different modes of writing help you teach history and history writing?

I use works of history for obvious reasons, but works of fiction are very important to my classes and many of my colleagues' as well. Fiction written in the period you are teaching provides a different, unmediated access—it's a direct window onto the past. And it also varies the assignments and helps keep the students interested. Other useful tools are historical novels. If they are very well documented—like Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, or Charles Frazier's *Cold*



SARAH MAZA

Mountain—they are a different and often more enjoyable way of giving students access to important information. I sometimes also assign historical novels that seriously distort the history they represent—like Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*—and discuss how they depart from what we know and why the writer had the biases he did. More generally fiction, and also movies which serve the same purpose, balance out the analytical readings by reminding students that history is an imaginative pleasure as well.

What part of your own writing process do you find most gratifying? Most maddening?

I love writing. Very few activities in life are so completely absorbing and so gratifying. Sure there are frustrations, but since I am not currently writing anything I seem to have repressed them in favor of the rosy memories.

What do you enjoy reading? That is, do you read for pleasure (if you have time!) and if so, what do you like to read?

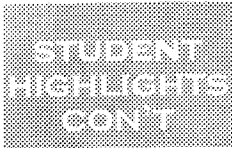
Fiction, lots of it and constantly. (I never read history for pleasure, it's my day job). My tastes run the gamut from long nineteenth-century classics to chick-lit and the occasional murder mystery. Among contemporary writers I most enjoy British, Irish, South African, Canadian and Indian novelists—the living writer I most admire is J.M. Coetzee. I like good historical novels as long as they have nothing to do with my specialty, French history. Right now I am reading Edward P. Jones's novel about American slavery, *The Known World*, which is excellent.

What one piece of writing advice do you find yourself repeating to your students?

Read your paper aloud! If it sounds awkward aloud, it will not read well. Try not to use in writing any word you would not use in speech. I mean, would you ever say: "He averred he would pick me up at seven"? ♦

STUDENT HIGHLIGHTS

Continued from page 4



seen his tattoo. Not wanting to walk through the apartment in his white tank top, he called to his brother to bring his sweater. Manuel didn't answer. Sanchez called again. The ten-year-old ignored him. Noé thought about how he would never have ignored a request from David. He remembered how David, a junior-high dropout, made him do homework before they hung out. Sanchez wondered whether he was as good a brother to Manuel. When Sanchez emerged from his bedroom to retrieve his sweater, tattoo visible, his mother left the room. Manuel and his father didn't look up.

Early the next week, Mrs. Sanchez canceled her trip to Mexico, and the threat of being kicked out of the house dissipated. Nothing more has

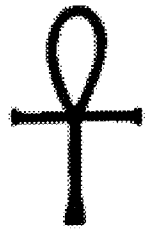
NOÉ THOUGHT ABOUT HOW HE WOULD NEVER HAVE IGNORED A REQUEST FROM DAVID.

been said about asking him to leave. Nevertheless, he plans to rent his own apartment by the end of the year. He'll graduate from Lincoln Tech in March, and will immediately begin working full-time as a mechanic.

When I asked whether he'll live with a roommate, he shook his head.

"I have friends, but they all have money problems," he explained.

Since David's death, Sanchez's oldest brother rarely sees the family. A second has shrunken farther into his natural shyness; Sanchez's sister has taken refuge with her boyfriend and baby. "I'm real independent," he assures me, tipping his chin. "I know how to be alone." ♦



Dorothy Kronick is a WCAS sophomore from San Diego, CA, pursuing an ad hoc major in Latin American Studies and a minor in Spanish. She is an intern at Crain's Chicago Business and her work has been published, most recently, in the Chicago Reader.

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NEWSLETTER OF THE CENTER
FOR THE WRITING ARTS
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