

# WRITING MATTERS

VOL. 8 NO. 2

Winter 2008

## SPECIAL EVENTS ON CAMPUS



Alex Kotlowitz

**A Public Conversation: Radio Diaries--How Ordinary Peoples' Stories Become Extraordinary, with Alex Kotlowitz and Joe Richman**

*Tuesday*

*March 4, 2008*

*5:15-6:15 p.m.*

*Harris Hall, Room 108*

*1881 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL*



Joe Richman

Alex Kotlowitz is the Winter Quarter 2008 Visiting Writer in Residence at the Center for the Writing Arts, teaching the Art of Nonfiction: Telling Stories. He is the award-winning author of *There Are No Children Here*, *The Other Side of the River*, and *Never a City So Real*. Contributor to *The New York Times Magazine* and public radio's *This American Life*.

Joe Richman is an award-winning independent producer and reporter for public radio, and the founder of *Radio Diaries*. Joe has also worked on the National Public Radio programs *All Things Considered*, *Weekend Edition Saturday*, *Car Talk* and *Heat*.



William Paden

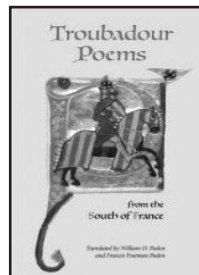
**Reading and Discussion of Troubadour Poems from the South of France with William Paden and Frances Freeman Paden**

*Monday*

*January 28, 2008*

*4-6 p.m.*

*University Hall, Hagstrum Room 201*



The poetry of the troubadours was famous throughout the middle ages, but the difficulty and diversity of the original languages have been obstacles to its appreciation by a wider audience. This collection presents English verse translations in contemporary idiom and a highly readable form. Genres include love songs, satires, invectives, pastourelles, debates, laments, and religious songs.

**William D. Paden** is a Professor of French and Italian at Northwestern University, and was recently named a Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques. **Frances Freeman Paden** is a Distinguished Senior Lecturer in The Writing Program and Gender Studies, at Northwestern University.



David Standish

Author, freelance writer, Medill School

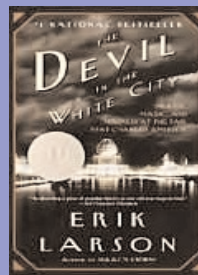
*Monday*

*February 4, 2008*

*12:30-1:30 p.m.*

*University Hall, Hagstrum Room 201*

Standish will read from his book, *Hollow Earth: The Long and Curious History of Imagining Strange Lands, Fantastical Creatures, Advanced Civilizations and Marvelous Machines Below the Earth's Surface*. The idea that another world exists below the surface of the Earth has captivated science fiction and fantasy writers since the days of Edgar Allan Poe and Jules Verne. As Standish reveals, the theory has also been promoted by serious scientists, beginning with the eminent Edmond Halley, who theorized that smaller concentric spheres were nested inside the Earth.



**Erik Larson**, author of *Devil in the White City* discusses: *Reporting on the Past: The Craft of Nonfiction*

*Monday*

*February 25, 2007*

*12 noon- 1p.m.*

*Fisk Hall, Room 111*

The best-selling author Erik Larson writes books that weave together multiple plots based on actual events. His best-known books are *Issac's Storm*, about Galveston's killer hurricane, and *The Devil in The White City*, about the architect who built Chicago's World's Fair and the serial killer who preyed on women drawn to that city. In his new book, *Thunderstruck*, Larson dives into the North London Cellar Murder, writing about a notorious crime just prior to World War I.

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**Alex Kotlowitz, Winter Quarter 2008 Visiting Writer in  
Residence, teaching the Art of Nonfiction: Telling  
Stories.**



Alex Kotlowitz is the award-winning author of *There Are No Children Here*, *The Other Side of the River*, and *Never a City So Real*. A contributor to *The New York Times Magazine* and public radio's *This American Life*, Alex Kotlowitz is renowned for his narratives of particular individuals whose concrete life experiences illuminate broad aspects of our nation's social and political landscape.

Some of Kotlowitz's most recent *New York Times Magazine* pieces include:

The cover story, "Our Town" and "Asylum for the World's Battered Women." Both can be found at the Center's website:

<http://www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/sites.html>

Some of his radio work (as well as interviews with him) can be found at these two sites:

[www.wbez.org](http://www.wbez.org)  
[www.thislife.org](http://www.thislife.org)

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

Just a reminder that the Center's biweekly e-mail announcement, *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) or call us at 847-467-4099.

The Center for the Writing Arts presents a variety of distinguished writers from both on and off campus. For future events and an archival listing visit:  
[www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/](http://www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/)

**WRITING MATTERS**

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Editor: STACY L. OLIVER

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## Angela Jackson

Excerpt from *"Angels and Tricksters: Looking Back at the Black Arts Movement and Measuring Its Impact Now,"* lecture given Oct. 16, 2007 at the symposium on *The Black Arts Movement in the Broader Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement* organized by Ed Roberson, Visiting Writer in Residence, Center for the Writing Arts, Fall 2007

I arrived at Northwestern University's ivy-covered Willard Hall in June, 1968. It was three months after Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered in Memphis, and the same month that Robert Kennedy was murdered in Los Angeles.

Northwestern was whiter than Christmas on a snowy day. I was excited by the privilege of being there; I was overwhelmed by not only the beauty of the campus but the presence of so many White people. I had gone to an all Black elementary and high school. Our teachers were mostly White, but the student bodies Black. Northwestern was a shock to my system. NuCap, the program of Black and White students the university instituted to acclimate us to the White world and the university's mission only served to make me consciously Black. By mid-July I had washed my hair and my cousin, Willie Mae, cut it into a stylish Afro.

I had every intention of becoming a doctor. I do not know if I had

started writing in my blue-gray notebook of poems then as a carryover of the poems I had written in high school or not. I just know that by the spring of freshman year I had announced myself as a poet by reading a poem in public at an FMO (For Members Only)--the Black student organization--event. That poem appeared in the NU yearbook in 1969. It had been submitted by one of FMO's Central Committee.

The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965 and I was in the last generation to live under American apartheid, de jure segregation. The segregation that would follow would be as it had been Up North all along--de facto. De facto segregation.

I was one of the first large groups of African-American students to enter predominantly White universities. It is not that there were that many of us entering these zones of historical Whiteness and access, it was simply more than the one or two who had entered at a time, in days before we kicked the door in to integration. The mood was high in young Black America. Like Lorraine Hansberry we called ourselves "young, gifted, and Black."

In late September or early October, 1969, I, at the urging of my roommate Roella (Christine) Henderson, presented myself and my poetry to *Negro Digest/Black World* editor, Hoyt W. Fuller, Visiting Professor at NU. I remember walking him from his class in either University Hall or Kresge Centennial. He strode along with his umbrella in hand. He said that he was "inundated" with work. I thought he had a wonderful vocabulary. In the classroom after class, which I attended faithfully even

though I was not enrolled in it, he had invited me to OBAC, the Organization of Black American Culture Writers' Workshop, where I might be "judged" by my peers. I remember thinking, "Don Lee and them are not my peers. They're ten years older than me."

I did go to OBAC the third Wednesday of October, 1969. I found it the most important appointment I have ever kept with myself. OBAC was, in short, an organization of literary revolutionaries whose goal was the creation of a literature true to the African-American experience, without the constraints of White critics and audiences breathing down Black necks, asking us to re-invent our reality to suit them. "The writers of the Black Consciousness movement are rejecting even those black writers and critics who seek to impose upon black literature 'universal' standards of judgment, for universal in the American critical context is synonymous with 'white' (*Negro Digest*, Hoyt W. Fuller). For too long Black writers had been re-inventing themselves dishonestly to gain acceptance from Whites. "From the beginning black writers were discouraged from dealing honestly with their own experiences in the language and style which was natural to them. Even in the slave narratives which the missionaries and abolitionists encouraged as fuel for their campaigns, the writers were cautioned to tell their stories 'objectively' and without anger or excitement" (*New York Times*, obituary for Hoyt W. Fuller by Gerald C. Fraser, May 13, 1981).

We were in search of a Black Aesthetic, a Black style or styles as individual and innovative as Black

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## WHAT ARE YOU READING?

We asked 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 you hope to read (for work or pleasure)? 4) What do you wish all your students would read? 5) Has any book you've recently read changed your thinking about your own work? and how?



**John Rudnicki**

**Professor**

**Civil Engineering and Mechanical Engineering**

**Robert R. McCormick School of Engineering and Applied Sciences**

1. At the moment I am inching my way through a Department of Energy Report *Basic Research Needs for Geosciences: Facilitating 21st Century Energy Systems* while I eat my sandwich for lunch each day. Currently, I do not read much for work that does not cross my desk for review, unless I am in search of specific information. Mainly, I depend on meetings and discussions with colleagues at other universities to keep abreast of what is going on.
2. *A Long Strange Trip, The Inside History of the Grateful Dead* by Dennis McNally. This is latest of a series of books about the culture of the 60's that I have read over the last 6 months. It began with *Prime Green: Remembering the 60's* by Robert Stone (all of whose novels I have read several times), led to *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* by Tom Wolfe, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion*, Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *Searching for the Sound: My Life with the Grateful Dead* by Phil Lesh. This sometimes psychedelic trip was briefly interrupted by excursions to *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* by Gabriel García Márquez; *The Sins of the Fathers*, one of the Matthew Scudder series by Lawrence Sanders; and John LeCarré's first novel, *The Call for the Dead*.
3. Savoring the possibilities for the next book to read is almost as pleasurable for me as actually reading them. I have on my bedside bookcase *Nightlife* by Thomas Perry, *Wolves of Memory*, one of the Harpur and Isles mystery series by Bill James, and *How Doctors Think* by Jerome Groopman, which my daughter recommended to me. But any new crime novel by George Pelecanos, Elmore Leonard or James Crumley would send me scurrying to the bookstore. And as a bit of a Francophile, I am interested in *Paris: The Secret History* by Andrew Hussey, *Paris Noir: The Secret History of a City* by Jacques Yonnet and *The Discovery of France: A Historical Geography, from the Revolution to the First World War* by Graham Robb (whose biographies of Victor Hugo and Honoré Balzac I have enjoyed). So many possibilities.
4. Engineering students are so overloaded with labs, problem sets and required classes that I just hope that they have time to read anything. In my undergraduate classes I try to work in some excerpts or anecdotes, often from *The History of Strength of Materials* by Stephen Timoshenko. I use these to show that the concepts that I am trying to teach, often regarded as "elementary," actually occupied great physical scientists of the 18th and 19th centuries, who often did not get it right the first time.
5. My approach to my work was formed not by books, but largely by the excellent teachers that I was fortunate to have as an undergraduate and graduate student at Brown University. But books that have had an impact on my thinking more generally are *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard, *The Snow Leopard* by Peter Matthiesson, *The Maxims of La Rochefoucauld*, the *Tao Te Ching*, and the Frank Bascombe novels by Richard Ford: *The Sports Writer*, *Independence Day*, and most recently, *The Lay of the Land*.

### Center for the Writing Arts Mission Statement:

*The purpose of all CWA activities is to create, support and further undergraduate and graduate opportunities for the study of writing at Northwestern, both within CWA itself and across the university; to facilitate a continuing discussion in the university community about how best to situate writing as a crucial part of a university education; to help coordinate the university's multifarious courses and programs in writing, across departments, programs and schools; and also to welcome audiences from the metropolitan area to the rich array of public events on campus that are focused on writing.*

**NU'S CENTER FOR THE WRITING ARTS INTRODUCES  
2008 SPRING QUARTER VISITING WRITER IN RESIDENCE,  
MARY ANNE MOHANRAJ**

Mary Anne Mohanraj is the author of three collections of short stories: *Bodies in Motion*, *Silence and the Word* and *Torn Shapes of Desire*. She also has written a Sri Lankan cookbook, *A Taste of Serendith*, and was the recipient of a 2006 Illinois Arts Council Fellowship. She is the executive director of DesiLit, an Asian American literary festival, and of the Speculative Literature Foundation. In Spring Quarter 2008 she will teach a workshop for the Center focusing on the topic of writing about one's identity. Her second course will be offered through the English Department on Asian-American experiences.



MARY ANNE MOHANRAJ

**AN INTERVIEW**

*As the Spring Quarter 2008 Visiting Writer in Residence, what kind of fiction-workshop do you plan on teaching? How do you hope to open the world of fiction writing to your students?*

This spring, I'll be teaching a craft-focused workshop--we'll aim to develop skills in creating rich characters, building a detailed setting, writing realistic dialogue, handling varied points of view--as well as studying a host of other components that are part of telling a compelling story. We'll approach character-building especially through the lens of the students' own identities, examining the elements of identity in order to create strong, well-rounded characters.

*What do you enjoy most about teaching?*

To be honest, it depends a lot on what course I'm teaching. With creative writing, it's a tremendous delight to help other writers find the stories they passionately want to tell, and show them how they can develop the skills to tell their tales effectively. Whereas when I teach literature, probably the best part is just getting to share some of my favorite stories with my students, exploring their complexities together--every time I teach a novel, I end up learning more

about it, too, and loving it just a little more.

*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? Are there pitfalls they can try to avoid?*

It really is all about persistence. I've seen too many talented writers give up because publishing success didn't come as quickly as they expected. When I was an editor, I saw that consistently the writers we published most often were simply the ones who submitted material most often. They didn't let rejection discourage them--they just kept working on their stories, learning and improving, and in the end, they got published.

*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?*

As a teenager, I was a huge science fiction and fantasy fan, so writers like Ray Bradbury and Guy Gavriel Kay were some of my strongest influences--I still love their work today. In high school and college I was introduced to some tremendous stylists who also wrote thoughtful, heartfelt stories; Italo Calvino, Haruki Murakami, and William Faulkner come to mind. I found and was delighted by Willa Cather and Alice Munro and Dorothy

Allison. And then post-college, I started exploring South Asian literature, and fell in love with the work of Amitav Ghosh and Vikram Seth.

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

I have multiple books in progress right now. *Arbitrary Passions* is a non-fiction book, a combination of memoir and travelogue, centering on my 2005 month-long visit to Sri Lanka, and exploring ideas of home, nationalism, love, and arranged marriage. I'm also working on two novels, yet untitled -- one is a novel centering on Kamala (the daughter in the *Bodies in Motion* story, "Sins of the Father") and her family. As a teenager, Kamala ran away from home to join the Tamil Tigers; as an adult, she's a suburban mom in Chicago. And the other is a young adult fantasy novel (or possibly a series), featuring a sixteen-year-old Sri Lankan American girl from Chicago, who gets drawn into a magical world where a handsome prince (with tremendous power) awaits her.

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music. We were to make ourselves aware of Western traditions but be able to articulate the differences and similarities. For us to be universal (if that had been our aim) was to do what University of Chicago professor and OBAC associate Dr. George Kent said Gwendolyn Brooks did: she went down deep into the Black particular to arrive at the universal! (*Black World*)

The Committee for the Arts out of which OBAC would develop was founded in 1966 to find a solution to Black powerlessness. It was the Committee's belief that the arts psychically empower people, so they conceived of an arts organization with a socio-political end in mind: to so transform and charge Black people that we would seize our destinies. OBAC was born out of the idea that we were and are engaged in a Black/White war of images. OBAC's founders believed that Black people must "control their own images." Hoyt Fuller explained the urgency of this need: "Black Americans grow up in a world where white people have projected white images everywhere, leaving black people with what Mrs. Gerald calls 'a zero image' of themselves. The black child growing into adulthood through a series of weekend movies, seeing white protagonists constantly before him projecting the whole gamut of human experience, is, in extreme cases, persuaded that he too must be white, or (what is more likely) he experiences manhood by proxy and in someone else's image. He sees, in other words, a zero image of himself. If there are black people on the screen, they are subservient to, uncomfortably different from, or busy emulating the larger, all-inclusive white culture. In that case, our young person sees a negative image of himself" (Hoyt W. Fuller, "The New Black Literature," *The Black Aesthetic*).

The OBAC Writers Workshop would begin meeting at the Southside Community Arts Center in spring, 1967. Its founding members included Don L.

Lee (Haki R. Madhubuti), Carolyn Rodgers, Johari Amini, Ronda Davis, Cecil Brown, Ronald Fair, Walter Bradford, and Randson Boykin. Its membership soon grew to include Sterling Plumpp, Sam Greenlee, E. Van Higgs and others. The Writers Workshop was free and open to the entire Black community. And the entire Black community came. At least twenty people were at each meeting. Visitors included students from area campuses (including Northwestern and the University of Chicago), high school students, bus drivers, workers, unemployed people. When OBAC moved in 1969 to a storefront at 77 East 35th Street, it was even more accessible to the community. Once a woman wandered into OBAC seeking assistance. She thought we were a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous! I still remember how kindly she was treated and welcomed to stay and sit with us in that storefront filled with comfortable old sofas and folding chairs and posters of Black events and people on the walls.

OBAC's welcoming meetings were heated with debates, fast paced and well run. Each month a different Workshop member would serve as Chair of those Wednesday meetings from 7 - 9 or 9:30 p.m. The order of events ran as follows: visitors who wished to read (present work) would read first. Their reading would be followed by questions, comments, criticisms from those gathered. The reader would be commended then another reader would present his or her work. Often comments or criticisms would lead to debates over a pertinent issue. I have been told that in its earliest days OBAC members would attempt to ascertain if a piece was "Black." By the time of my arrival such assessments were a bit more subtle. We

questioned whether or not a work sounded real or true or authentically Black. We differentiated between work that was Eurocentric and work that was innovative as in Afrocentric (a term we did not then use). Because OBAC's membership and visitors were so broadbased, the work that came out of the workshop was broad-based and diverse, embracing the richness of the Black Experience.

During the week that these vibrant artists were here they visited Black cultural institutions in the city--the Southside Community Arts Center (the OBAC Writers Workshop's first home, as well as home to the Inez Starks Boulton Workshop of the 1930s and 1940s that included, among others, Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker Alexander, Margaret Burroughs), and the OBAC Writers Workshop on East 35th Street. On campus we listened to the avant-garde jazz of the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians).

When I asked Dr. Ann Smith who was present at the Conference on the Functional Aspects of Black Art she said, "Everybody was there! Sterling Brown [legendary poet from the Harlem Renaissance] was there. I remember he was sitting in the Orrington Hotel telling us stories. It was a part of the idea of bringing together the old and the new." These activities at CONFABA as well as OBAC's original structure underscore for me the interdisciplinary nature of the Black Arts Movement. "Everything is everything," we used to say, and it certainly was.

You can view this talk in its entirety and the whole symposium at our website

<http://www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/sites.html>

Scroll down to the Symposia section.

**Mary Anne Mohanraj also took the time to answer the questions in the section "What Are You Reading?" (see page 4)**

1. At the moment, my scholarly research is focused on contemporary S. Asian writers, both in the homelands and in the diasporas. Many of those authors don't have work available in English print publications, so I spend a lot of time reading their work online. Most recently, I've been reading the fiction, poetry, and nonfiction in the latest issue of *DesiLit Magazine* ([www.desilit.org/magazine](http://www.desilit.org/magazine)). In print, I just read and loved Amitav Ghosh's *Incendiary Circumstances*, a collection of tremendously thought-provoking essays centering on literature and politics in the modern world. Ghosh is a beautiful writer, and I highly recommend both his novels and his nonfiction. His work can be troubling, but in a good way.
  2. Since I'm working on a Young Adult fantasy novel at the moment myself, I've been reading a lot in that genre. A series I've just finished is Megan Whalen Turner's Attolia trilogy (starting with *The Thief*). The books surprised me over and over, which is a rare pleasure, and they had a really sharp edge to them that's uncommon in much young adult literature. I also appreciated that they were based in part on Greek culture, since I've been trying to incorporate Sri Lankan cultural elements into my own book.
  3. I have two -- one is *Blood Engines* an urban fantasy novel with an ass-kicking female protagonist; it's written by T.A. Pratt, who happens to be a friend of mine--one of the mixed blessings of being a writer is that you get to know a lot of other writers, who are constantly writing good books; it can be hard to keep up! I really enjoyed Pratt's last book, so I'm looking forward to reading this one over the holidays. The other is *Riding the Iron Rooster*, by Paul Theroux, a travelogue. Theroux is smart and funny, though his perspective is sometimes uncomfortably Western--almost Orientalizing. Since I'm also working on a nonfiction travel book, it's fascinating for me to see how other writers handle this kind of material.
  4. Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, so that we could discuss Nabokov's tremendous accomplishment in creating a complex protagonist who does terrible things, whom you are nonetheless forced to understand and empathize with, at least a little. And in a similar vein, Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*. I like moral complexity in my literature.
  5. Various authors have been helping me understand what's possible/wise within the realm of YA literature, especially when you're writing about teens and sex. Since I started writing in the erotica genre, I'm comfortable writing about sex, and I think I adapted reasonably well with my last book, which was general literary fiction, but now that I'm working on a young adult novel, I'm not always certain where it's appropriate to draw the line. Authors like Scott Westerfeld, Francesca Lia Block, Justine Larbalestier and Megan Whalen Turner have helped delineate the current boundaries for me, shaping the way the sexual threads in my current book play out (and determining how explicitly they're discussed).
- And on another note entirely, to go back to Ghosh, the other book I'm working on is a nonfiction travelogue/memoir that has a strong political thread, which has frankly scared me to write; I'm very afraid of getting something wrong in such a highly-charged arena. Amitav Ghosh helps me have the courage to go ahead and write what I think, about the Sri Lankan civil war and about nationalism in general; he leads by very good example.



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Mission: To promote literary quality in speculative fiction, by encouraging promising new writers, assisting established writers, facilitating the work of quality magazines and small presses in the genre, and developing a greater public appreciation of speculative fiction.

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Writing 301  
Spring Quarter 2008

**THE ART OF FICTION: WRITING  
YOUR INDENTITY**  
with Visiting Writer in Residence  
**Mary Anne Mohanraj**  
Mondays & Wednesdays  
2:00-3:20 pm

*This undergraduate course is open  
by application only*

Discussions of identity politics are often framed around questions of minority authenticity--can the straight white male, for example, write about the queer brown woman? How should he go about it? What must he be careful about? While such discussions can be fruitful, what is often obscured in that framing is the

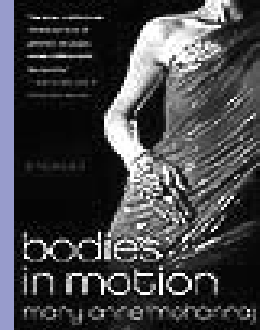
fact that each and every one of us, including the straight white male, possesses complex identities of our own--identities that offer rich material for a writer's fiction. In this course, you'll be encouraged to examine a variety of elements of your own identity: race, age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, nationality, political orientation, and much much more--all through the lens of fiction. We'll be aiming to avoid polemic and create powerful stories with rich and compelling characters, while also exploring the basic elements of fiction writing: plot, dialogue, point of view, setting, structure, and more.

**APPLICATION DEADLINE IS:  
THURSDAY, JANUARY 30th by 5 PM**

Applications are available at:  
The Center for the Writing Arts  
Kresge 4-315, Evanston Campus  
OR

Email: [words@northwestern.edu](mailto:words@northwestern.edu)  
You can also find the application  
online at:

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



**In Our Next Issue:**

An interview with Sefi Atta, our Fall 2008 Visiting Writer in Residence. This talented Nigerian writer will be teaching Writing 301-The Art of Fiction.

**WRITING MATTERS**  
NEWSLETTER OF THE CENTER  
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