

WRITING MATTERS

VOL. 9 NO. 3

Spring 2009

SPECIAL EVENTS ON CAMPUS



Loren Ghiglione

Professor, Medill

A Media Critic Pounces on the Prose of the Press

Thursday

May 7, 2009

12:30-1:30 p.m.

University Hall 201, Hagstrum Room
1897 Sheridan Road, Evanston



SL Wisenberg

Co-Director of the MA/MFA in Creative Writing
School of Continuing Studies

From BLOG to RADIO to BOOK

Thursday

May 14, 2009

12:30-1:30 p.m.

(Pizza and refreshments will be served)
University Hall 201, Hagstrum Room



Dave Tolchinsky

Director of the MFA in Writing for the Screen and Stage,
Chair of the Department of Radio-TV-Film, School of Communication

Teen Murders, Psychotics, the Devil and Other Misfits

(excerpts from screenplays and video installations)

Monday

May 18, 2009

12:30-1:30 p.m.

University Hall 201, Hagstrum Room
1897 Sheridan Road, Evanston

Inside:

Page 3- Interview with [Chris Abani](#)

Pages 4 and 5- What Are You Reading: [Chris Abani](#), [Andrew Wachtel](#), [SL Wisenberg](#)

Pages 5 and 6- How the Kindle Changed My Reading Habits: [Dévora Grynspan](#)

Page 7- Writing Contests for NU Students

Page 8- New NuWrite Website

All events are FREE and
OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

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WRITING ARTS
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2008/2009

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Professor of English, Classics, and Spanish and Portuguese,
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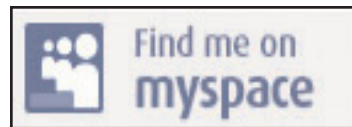
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Center for the Writing Arts Mission Statement:

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 foster and 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.



**You can read the latest
CWA blog posting
and find out about our
events on FACEBOOK
and MYSPACE now.**

**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 Events Digest*, please send an email to: words@northwestern.edu or call us at 847-467-4099.

WRITING MATTERS

Winter 2009 Vol. 9 No.2

Editor: STACY L. OLIVER

Newsletter of the Northwestern University Center for the Writing Arts.

Published three times during the school year at Northwestern University, 1860 Campus Drive, Crowe Hall 5-155, Evanston, IL 60208.

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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/

AN INTERVIEW

NU'S CENTER FOR THE WRITING ARTS INTRODUCES
2009 FALL QUARTER VISITING WRITER IN RESIDENCE,
CHRIS ABANI

A native of Nigeria, Abani is the author of *The Virgin of Flames*, *GraceLand*, *Masters of the Board* and *Becoming Abigail*, and four collections of poetry. He has received a 2009 Guggenheim Fellowship for fiction, the PEN USA Freedom-to-Write Award, the Prince Claus Award, a Lannan Literary Fellowship, a California Book Award, a Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, and the PEN Hemingway Book Prize.



CHRIS ABANI

As the Fall Quarter 2009 Visiting Writer in Residence what kind of fiction workshop do plan on teaching? How do you hope to open the world of fiction writing to your students?

As a teacher I tend to focus less on content and more on issues of structure and craft and I intend to bring that same rigor to my class at Northwestern. My workshops tend to find the path of least resistance to maximize understanding and as such involve exercises from architecture, design, robotics, computer programming, mythology and pop culture and a lot of reading. You could say over the years I have developed a system called The Chris Abani Method and will use it at Northwestern. It's a lot of fun and yet challenging in its own way. I guess that answers both questions.

What do you enjoy most about teaching? The interaction with smart young people who love books. It is always a symbiotic experience, I learn as much from my students as they do from me and I am always humbled by how many view points there are

in the world. It is exciting. Also, there is little that is more rewarding than seeing a student find the missing element from their process, and to feel part of that is wonderful.

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?

The advice is always the same – write, write, and then re-write. The writer's credo I live by is courage – to do the work, to give up on dead ends, to believe that you have something worth saying, to never judge your subject or characters, to always be open to the world, to mine the difficulty and to sit with frustration and ambiguity; and to always realize, the work is bigger than you.

I try to avoid the pitfall of thinking I am special in any way because I do this, to avoid taking myself seriously, while taking the work deadly serious, and to never forget that this is all joy.

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 and acclaimed writer who are your mentors now?

You know, I was as deeply influenced by the *Silver Surfer* comics as I was by *Crime and Punishment*. For me, all of it, everything we live with and around, is the stuff we work with and so I am in awe of it all. But I guess Baldwin and Dostoyevsky have been deeply influential. My mentors are the many generous writers who take the time to read and give me feedback on my work, peers and betters – Brad Kessler, Peter Orner, Wole Soyinka, Russell Banks, Percival Everett, Cristina García, Junot Díaz and on.

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

I am putting the finishing touches to a new poetry book due out next year from Copper Canyon Press called *Sanctificum* and working on a new novel about Nigerian circus freaks in Las Vegas.

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? How?



Chris Abani

CWA Visiting Writer in Residence, Fall Quarter 2009

Teaching the Art of Fiction

- 1) I should preface by saying, I am never reading just one book, but have several on the go at the same time. It is easier now with my Kindle to travel with hundreds of books. I am currently reading or re-reading *After Identity* by Georgia Warnke, *Segregation and Apartheid in South Africa* by Paul Dubow, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* by Derrida, *Experiments in Ethics* by Kwame Anthony Appiah.
- 2) Are you kidding? Every book I read is for pleasure. I am reading *The Secret Scripture* by Sebastian Barry, *Republic of Poetry* by Martín Espada, *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh and *Enchanted Night* by Steven Millhauser.
- 3) *The Man in my Basement* by Walter Mosley, *Divisadero* by Michael Ondaatje, *Africa After Gender* by Catherine M. Cole, Takiyawa Manuh and Stephen Miescher and many others.
- 4) *Elements of Style* by Strunk and White and any old myth--The Bible, The Mahabharata, The Bhagavad Gita, something. It would make the act of writing easier and the conceptual ideas around character, plot, structure, archetype, etc. easier to convey.
- 5) Everything I read does that, everything, from newspapers to advertising copy. Recently, Brad Kessler's *Birds In Fall* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* have unlocked a new tension between form and experimentation for me.



Andrew Wachtel

Dean, The Graduate School

Bertha and Max Dressler Professor in the Humanities

- 1) *Titostalgia: A Study of Nostalgia for Josip Broz* by Mitja Velikonja.
- 2) Just finished *The Defense and Last Days* by Borislav Pekic that I am going to recommend for my "Writings from an Unbound Europe" series.
- 3) *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid. My wife says it's great.
- 4) Any of the books from the "Unbound Europe" series. Incredibly talented writers from 20 countries, but not nearly enough readers.

continued on page 5

continued from page 4



SL Wisenberg

Co-Director of the Creative Writing Program
School of Continuing Studies

- 1) I just read *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide* from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University. I'm using it in my graduate creative nonfiction workshop. I just finished the early 20th-century best-selling novel *Joseph Vance: an Ill-written Autobiography*, by William De Morgan for a presentation I did at the MLA in San Francisco.
- 2) My CTA reading is Helene Cixous's *Theatre: Portrait de Dora* and *La prise de l'école de Madhubai*. I especially like to dip into it on my way to my weekly French (language) yoga class. On winter vacation I read A.M. Homes' *The Mistress' Daughter*. I got it for free from a bookcase outside the library in Port Reyes Station, California.
- 3) At my friend's in San Francisco I started reading Timothy Garton Ash's book *The File: a Personal History*, about his Stasi file kept when he was in East Germany. I'm planning to get the book so I can finish it. My husband just finished *Independent People* by Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness, and wants me to read it. It took him forever to read it so I'm not so sure. He says it's not like anything he's read before.
- 4) I wish all my students had read Phillip Lopate's anthology, *The Art of the Personal Essay*. It provides a good survey of the major nonfiction writers, such as Seneca, Montaigne, Virginia Woolf, Mary McCarthy, Joan Didion, James Baldwin. The introduction is quite informative, too.
- 5) The Nieman book made me think more about the lure of journalism. I don't do it much anymore but they made it sound exciting and worthwhile.

How the Kindle Changed My Reading Habits



by **Dévora Grynspar**

Assistant to the President for International Programs
Director, International Program Development

Which book should I take with me to China? It is a long trip, and I will want to read on the plane and after work in the evenings... I could easily read two books. Maybe Paretsky, Oates? *Pride and Prejudice* (OK, maybe not, I guess I do not need to read it again)? *Septembers of Shiraz*? *Paradise*? But do I want to carry them all the way to China and then back? I don't want to check my bag, either. I want to travel light and not have to deal with lost luggage and long waits by luggage carousels in airports around the world – Uganda, South Africa, France, China. What if I start reading the book and don't like it? Keep carrying it with me until I get

continued on page 6

home? Too heavy. And I can't bring myself to leave the book behind...Maybe I won't take any books. Maybe only the latest issues of *Newsweek* – I have no qualms about abandoning those in the plane or hotel.

This scene takes place in my library several times a year, with similar results. Which is a pity, because I love to buy books and I feel guilty every time I look at those shelves of unread books. There is no question that I have been reading less in the past few years. I am too tired at work, and too undecided to choose just the right books to take along on my travels. I often end up buying a book at the airport or abroad, adding to my collection but not making a dent on the forever expanding shelves of unread books back at home.

Until the Kindle. I knew the moment I read the ad from Amazon.com that my life would improve significantly. I would buy the Kindle and travel around the world with hundreds of books. I did not have to choose – they would all be right there, waiting for me to choose just the right book depending on my mood. I called Amazon.com immediately. A waiting list, they said, but the new magical reader arrived within days and I immediately started downloading books. I must confess I downloaded all of Jane Austen's collection first. And wouldn't you know it, there was something I had not read – *Lady Susan*. For a few weeks, I downloaded all kinds of books. Before my trip to Ireland, I downloaded William Trevor's *Cheating at Canasta* and Colm Toibin's *Mothers and Sons*. I intend to

finish the remaining stories in *Mothers and Sons*, maybe when I am feeling strong (or depressed) enough! I am happy to report that my experience of Ireland was much more upbeat than one would surmise from reading these authors. There is something about downloading a virtual book for a low fee – you don't feel as committed or guilty if you don't like it and abandon it, as it were. It's like walking out of a movie theatre (almost never) versus not watching a whole DVD at home (often). I wish the Kindle had a way of organizing books into categories, like the "did not quite finish reading it" category.

I have read all kinds of books on my travels in the past year, despite my state of permanent jet-lag: John le Carré, Junot Díaz, Patricia Cornwell, Philip Roth, William Trevor, P.D. James, Toni Morrison, Nora Ephron, Azar Nafisi, Naguib Mahfouz' *Cairo Trilogy* in preparation for my trip to Egypt (well, not quite finished with the latter!)

Kindle should pay me a commission. The moment I take it out of my purse people stare and ask me about it. What is that? How does it work? It is a great conversation starter. Can I see what you are reading? On second thought, maybe I should start hiding my Kindle so that people don't bother me and I can concentrate on my reading.

I have an idea – why don't I download those classics that I used to read in translation in Costa Rica? My mother, who loved to read, used to wait for me every day after school with one of the books she read in her

literature club... *Steppenwolf*, *Ulysses*, *Grapes of Wrath*... maybe too much for a 14-year-old? We would get comfortable in the living room chairs and read for hours, me still in my school uniform. I miss my mother, and if I could write I would write a book about her and her circle of women friends – they were together in the literature club, went to the movies, played cards, worked in community organizations, and generally created a rich intellectual and public service life independent of (despite?) their husbands. Most of them died of cancer in their 60s.

So, let me download those old books. I am sure they will be more meaningful when I read them in English and as an adult. Let's try this one – *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Wow! It is just as painful to read it in English as it was in Spanish. Maybe a comma here and there would help? A diagram? Maybe not the book to read while jet-lagged in Europe? What about *For Whom the Bell Tolls*? Mmm, maybe I'll read a mystery instead. Or maybe *Suite Francaise*? *Ulysses*? OK, maybe on the way to Qatar next week.

I wish the Kindle had a way of organizing books – an easier way to find unread books, for example. Maybe the new version of Kindle should allow for the organization of books into shelves: read, half read, unread.... And... I could take all those shelves of unread books with me. At least they're not heavy.

WRITING NEWS FROM AROUND CAMPUS

SHORT FICTION CONTEST

Northwestern magazine invites submissions of short fiction from Northwestern alumni and current students for the alumni magazine's 2010 writing contest. For more details, go to:

www.northwestern.edu/magazine/spring2009/feature/fictioncontest.html

The contest is open to current Northwestern students and alumni.
The submission deadline is July 31, 2009

The Department of English Announces its Annual Writing Competition!

Students from every department and school within Northwestern are encouraged participate.

Prizes are cash awards ranging from \$50-500.

Coversheets, eligibility and rules for submission can be found on the Department's website, or in University Hall 215.

<http://www.english.northwestern.edu/undergraduate/writing.html>

**Submissions are due Thursday, May 7, 2008 at 3:00 p.m.
in University Hall 215**



NuWrite

Northwestern
Resources for Writing

<http://nuwrite.at.northwestern.edu/>

This site for students and faculty provides resources, advice, and conversation about (a) core skills in writing, (b) writing in specific disciplines, and (c) teaching writing in a variety of courses.

WRITING MATTERS

NEWSLETTER OF THE CENTER FOR THE
WRITING ARTS

Stacy L. Oliver, Editor

Northwestern University

1860 Campus Drive, Crowe Hall 5-155

Evanston, IL 60208

