

English S247: Travel Writing

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

There are only two plots in all of literature, claimed the late John Gardner: the story of a journey, and of a stranger coming to town. Most travel literature is both: the story of a journey as well as a tale of a stranger, stepping into an alien land. This course examines a broad canon of literary travel writing, focusing on the techniques by which writers capture the essential qualities of a place. In analyzing the place-centric works of itinerant writers like Ryszard Kapuscinski, Jan Morris, Jamaica Kincaid, William Least Heat-Moon, Anne Carson, and James Baldwin, we'll pay close attention to how a voyage can lend a writer structure: a natural beginning, middle, and end.

Travel writers leave the comforts of home and so will students in this course. The course location is Auvillar, France, a small town in Southwestern France known as a waystation for pilgrims en route to Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Students draw from Auvillar's distinctly French ecosystem to generate more than a dozen short writing assignments, as well as four longer essays. Students make a commitment to being fully offline during the course, in order to immerse in their foreign surroundings as fully as possible, and to bring attention of the highest quality to it.

Founded on the creative principle that "constraints bear fruit," this course demands that students employ specific writing prompts—creative directives designed to develop skill in rendering the myriad dimensions of place in evocative and singular ways. Editing is also a major component of the course, as students are paired with a different "writing partner" every week and charged with responding to that writer's work with rigor and insight. Students have the option of bringing a multimedia component into their final assignment (a photo-essay, an audio/video piece, an illustrated essay). Finally, within one week of the course's conclusion, every student will submit an article pitch or fully-realized essay to a publication of their choice.

TEXTS

- Course Packet: exemplar essays in the place-writing genre
- Course Workbook: a collection of quotes and excerpts relevant to rendering place

Students must bring all of these materials in physical (or physical and digital form) to France.

Note: given the heft of the Course Packet, it may be wise to splice it into four-week segments and print a spiral-bound copy of each separately. A spiral-bound version of the Workbook is also highly recommended, as students will be carrying it to class on a regular basis.

JOURNEYS

We begin with a market journey in Valence d'Agen, with the guidance of a local chef and knowledgeable gourmand. The second major excursion is along the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage trail: a roughly ten-mile hike through the farmlands and hamlets of southwestern France. As this program puts an emphasis on pilgrimage and "literary walks," travel by foot will be an experience to which we grant significant attention. The program also features a long weekend in Bordeaux, with a focus on urban ambiance and literary portraits of great cities. Additionally, we will explore the nearby city of Albi, honing in on the artwork of Toulouse-Lautrec showcased there. Participants do all of this with a notebook ever in hand.

SEMINAR. 11-1 (Mon, Tues); 11-12 (Wed); TBD (Friday). Four times a week, we'll come together to delve into the major readings and to do impromptu writing exercises for the purpose of:

1. developing varied techniques for rendering place with specificity and force;
2. generating ideas and fodder for student essays;
3. deepening our analysis of exemplar texts via creative experimentation.

Most weekends (typically on Friday, sometimes on Saturday), we will also hold one seminar "on the road." This might mean dialoguing in a field mid-pilgrimage, or coming together for a breakfast seminar in a Bordeaux hotel. Students are expected to be nimble—that is, ready to delve into course content in non-traditional contexts, and while in motion.

CONFERENCES. *Wednesday & Thursdays.*

Once a week, each student will meet for a 20/25-minute conversation with the course instructor, in which the instructor will survey and critique the writing submitted by the student in the preceding week—both the short, daily essays and a draft of that week's major essay assignment.

WRITING PARTNERS

Every week, students are assigned a "writing partner": a fellow student whose writing they must respond to throughout the week. These daily critiques serve as supplements to the feedback of the course instructor and also function to develop the editing faculties of each student. The challenge is to point fellow writers in the direction of higher potential for every work they author, by underscoring what's effective in a first draft and also articulating possibilities for betterment of each piece. Students will be informed of their writing partner for each week in the very beginning of the course and are expected to develop a daily schedule with this person for "swaps"—a schedule tailored to both of their writing practices and daily rhythms.

WRITING PRACTICE

Students are granted weekday mornings to focus on their writing and urged to keep this space sacred and as uncluttered as possible. Plan well with writing partners, so that the partners are intersecting at an optimal time: once they've fully tapped their creativity and need outside input in order to push their ideas and stories further.

MICRO ESSAYS

Four days a week (Mon-Thurs), students will author and submit an essay of 400-600 words, due right before group dinner. Each essay will respond to one of the writing prompts for that particular week. Essays should not exceed one page (any spacing or font size is fine, so long as students keep within the word count and single-page limit). At the top of the page, students should identify which prompt their essay is in response to, and also include a word count. All micro-essays are expected to be highly polished and free of spelling and grammar errors. If a student wishes to push the parameters of a given prompt, the student must make their case to the instructor in person, either before or after class, and garner permission to depart from the terms of the prompt. Students are allowed to take one "day off" from writing a micro-essay, and required to inform the instructor, on the day of their break, that they won't be submitting an essay.

MACRO-ESSAYS: “DRAFTS” & “FINALS”

While referred to as “draft,” the essay each writer submits midweek (in advance of conferences with the instructor) should be *as developed and polished as possible*. Writers who turn in undeveloped and unrealized work will inevitably get less nuanced and sophisticated feedback in response to their work. The most ideal scenario is one in which:

- 1) the writer evolves their essay to the greatest extent possible;
- 2) the writer receives, metabolizes and applies the feedback of their writing partner;
- 3) the writer submits a highly developed draft of their essay;
- 4) the instructor administers a critique to catalyze final revision insights;
- 5) the student puts their draft through a rigorous revision in the final weekday of our editorial cycle, and submits a highly polished and evolved essay by Friday.

FEEDBACK

Students will receive grades for their four macro-essay assignments, whereas the micro-essays are appraised and graded as a portfolio at the end of the course. While the quality of the writing (aptness of form, thrust of narrative, strength of voice, success of style, degree of clarity) is the main basis of the grade, the writer’s willingness to experiment and revise their work in radical and fearless ways are also taken into consideration. Furthermore, overall improvement (which encompasses developing wide range as a writer, as opposed to “playing to one’s strength”) is noted, valued and considered in the grading of the micro-essay portfolio. Students are asked not to approach the professor with questions about grades, but rather to treat this course as an intensive creative training, and to focus all questions instead on how to improve their *writing*.

GRADES

30%: class participation (seminar, weekend writing exercises, writing partner input); 35%: major essay assignments; 35%: micro-essays.

INTERNET POLICY

This program demands a month away from the internet (email, social media, Skype use, web-browsing—all of it) as well as phone use (texting, making calls), except in case of emergencies. All are required to sign a contract in which they commit to being fully offline for the duration of the course. There will be no wireless access, neither at the *gîte* nor in the classroom. This program is designed for immersion in a foreign environment and demands that participants bring their full attention to the unfamiliar ecosystem around them.

Students must prepare for this hiatus accordingly, for example by informing friends and family of the course strictures and handling all online tasks (such as job applications or online payments) before arrival. A Sunday email penned by the course assistant will go out to families of the students who volunteer their addresses, informing them of everyone’s well-being and travels. To limit temptation, students are encouraged to turn in their smartphones upon arrival in France.

Alumni of this course recommend handling this shift in daily living by bringing a watch, camera, and/or music playing device. Furthermore, it’s wise to research this region of France prior to

arrival, and to gather any information they may want on hand. Students do have the option of turning in their SIM cards in place of their phones, though they must be ready to present their reasons for retaining their smart-phone and to acknowledge that they understand that this means that the onus is on them to guard against wireless signals which may be available when we travel.

Students will not be policed but rather expected to uphold the terms of the contract they each signed. If they violate the terms of said contract, they're expected to inform the instructor and complete an additional assignment, as stipulated in the contract: an essay involving web research, to be submitted within a week of the course's end date.

ADDITIONAL ASPECTS OF THE COURSE

As in immersive course, English S-247 contains many dimensions that a standard Yale course does not, all of which are intended to deepen the student's experience and observation of France, and to generate a bastion of material from which they can draw as writers. *Note:* The list below is subject to change, depending on many unpredictable variables from year to year.

- Once a week, we will gather in the private home of a local chef for a cooking class followed by a dinner on-site.
- Occasionally, an English-speaking member of the community will join us for dinner and avail themselves for student questions.
- Occasionally, there will be a designated "French table" at dinner for the students interested in practicing their French.
- An extracurricular photography lesson will be offered by guest illustrator/photographer Owen Murray for those interested in photo-documentation of place
- A sketching module covering the fundamentals of drawing, taught during our pilgrimage journey by guest illustrator/photographer Owen Murray.
- Throughout the course, students will have the chance to interact with artists-in-residence at the VCCA residency, which hosts our program and provides classroom space.
- Upon arrival, students will receive a list of "roles" relating to household duties and group planning, and select one. Living in community is a facet of this immersive experience, and so is rising into a specific role within it.
- At the end of the course, a (self-selected) portion of the students will have the chance to read aloud their work at a public reading, attended by members of the local community.
- Students will hold their own private reading, for all to read a short essay of their choice.
- In the final week of the course, students will submit an essay for the course anthology

PUBLICATION REQUIREMENT

Within a week of the completion of the course, students must submit either an article pitch or a completed essay to a publication of their choosing. The publication does not have to be a "travel publication" per se, but the work itself needs to somehow exemplify place writing. In order to show proof of this pitch or essay submission, students are required to either bcc their instructor on the email submission, or forward a receipt of electronic submission.

FINAL PORTFOLIO

All micro-essays (15 total); all first and final drafts of macro-essays (8 total).

READINGS – TRAVEL WRITING – SUMMER 2018

Mon. Seminar 1.1: **The Art of Noticing**

- Dorothy Allison, "Place," *The Writer's Notebook*
- Joan Didion, "On Keeping a Notebook," *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*
- Monte Reel, "How to Explore Like a Real Victorian Adventurer," *The Believer*
- Ilan Stevens & Josh Ellison, from *Reclaiming Travel* (Ch. 2 & 3)

Tues. Seminar 1.2: **Interrogating the Genre**

- Andrea Lee, "Notes on the Exotic," *The New Yorker*
- Jamaica Kincaid, from *A Small Place*
- Oindrila Mukherjee, "How to Survive a Visit to India: The Ethics of Representation," *The Essay Daily*

Wed. Seminar 1.3: **The Opening Move** (*excerpts from Workbook*)

- Sarah Menkedick, from "The Beaten Track" (Kindle Single)
- Susan Orlean, from "All Mixed Up," *The New Yorker*
- Bruce Chatwin, from *The Songlines*
- Mary McCarthy, from *Stones of Florence*
- Beryl Markham, from *West With the Night*
- Audre Lorde, from "Notes from a Trip to Russia," *Sister Outsider*
- JJ Sullivan, from "Upon This Rock," *Pulphead*
- Sara Wheeler, from "No, No, Nanook," *Access All Areas*
- Elizabeth Kolbert, from *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*
- Eula Biss, from "Goodbye to All That," *20-Something Essays by 20-Something Writers*

Fri. Seminar 1.4: **The Pilgrim's Yearning**

- Gideon Lewis-Kraus, from *A Sense of Direction* (thru p.64)
- Anne Carson, from "Kinds of Water," *Plainwater*

Week Two

Mon. Seminar 2.1: **Involving the Self**

- Ariel Levy, "Thanksgiving in Mongolia," *The New Yorker*
- Mary Morris, from *Nothing to Declare*
- Lawrence Durrell, "A Landmark Gone," *Spirit of Place*
- Geoff Dyer, "Miss Cambodia," *Yoga For People Who Can't be Bothered to Do It*

Tues. Seminar 2.2: **Inhabiting Otherness**

- James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," *Notes of a Native Son*
- Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, "The Weight of James Arthur Baldwin," *Best American Essays 2017*
- Noo Sara-Wiwa, from *Looking for Transwonderland*
- Suketu Mehta, "Personal Geography," from *Maximum City: Bombay Lost & Found*

Wed. Seminar 2.3: **The Taste of Place**

- Calvin Trillin, "Three Chopsticks," *The New Yorker*
- Geeta Kothari, "If You Are What You Eat, Then What Am I?" *The Kenyon Review*
- Pete Wells, "As Not Seen on TV," *The New York Times*

Friday. Seminar 2.4: **Extreme Climes**

- Gretel Ehrlich, "From a Shepherd's Notebook: Three Days," from *The Solace of Open Spaces*
- Nikki Gemmel, "Into Unknown Climes," *Better Than Fiction*
- Jake Rubin, "From on High," *N+1*
- Mark Strand, "The View," *The Best American Poetry 1998*

Week Three

Mon. Seminar 3.1 : **Portrait of a City**

- Italo Calvino, excerpt from *Invisible Cities*
- Colson Whitehead, excerpts from *The Colossus*
- Vivian Gornick, "On the Street," *Approaching Eye Level*
- Ian Frazier, "Antipodes," *The New Yorker*
- Federico Garcia Lorca, "The Dawn," *Elsewhere* (translations 1 & 2)

Tues. Seminar 3.2: **Humor & Satire**

- Binyavanga Wainaina, "How to Write About Africa," *Granta*
- David Foster Wallace, "Shipping Out," *Harper's*
- Horace Miner, "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema," *American Anthropologist*
- Nora Ephron, "Dear Frequent Traveller," *The New Yorker*

Wed. Seminar 3.3: **Packaging the Quest** (See Workbook, Pitch Section)

- Magazine Pitches: 1). Havana, Cuba; 2). Wales; 3). Minsk, Belarus; 4). Salemi, Italy; 5). Falkland Islands; 6). Rio San Juan, Nicaragua.

Friday. Seminar 3.4: **Experiment**

- Susan Sontag, "Project for a Trip to China," *The Atlantic Monthly*
- Jess Walter, "Statistical Abstract for My Hometown, Spokane, Washington," *McSweeney's*
- Rebecca Solnit, excerpt from *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas* (book available in Auvillar)

Week Four

Mon. Seminar 4.1 : **Activating History**

- Ryszard Kapuscinski, "A Cooling Hell," *The Shadow of the Sun*
- John McPhee, "The Search for Marvin Gardens," *The New Yorker*
- EB White, from *Here is New York*

Tues. Seminar 4.2 : **Decoding Culture**

- Peter Hessler, "Wheels of Fortune," *The New Yorker*
- William Least Heat Moon, "Nameless, Tennessee," *Blue Highways*
- Susan Orlean, "The Place to Disappear," *My Kind of Place*

Wed: Seminar 4.3: **You, Reader**

- Jan Morris, from "In Ruritania; Cetinje, Yugoslavia," *Journeys*
- Leslie Jamison, "Indigenous to the Hood," *The Empathy Exams*
- Letter to a Stranger, *Off Assignment*
 - Meron Hadero, "To the Man Who Sold Me Shoddy Film"
 - Sheba Karim, "To the Servant Girl Who Shared My Toys"
 - Anjali Sachdeva, "To the Father Paused Under the Tree"

Friday: Seminar 4.4: **Closing Moves; Student Selections**

- 3 Course Packet Picks
- "Ithaka," Constantine Cavafy