

COURSE TITLE: Somewhere I've Never Been: Travel Writing and Essays About Places

COURSE CODE: WSP 05

INSTRUCTOR NAME: Alec Scott

### GRADE OPTIONS AND REQUIREMENTS

NO GRADE REQUESTED: Just show up for class. There are three assignments that are recommended, to be completed in the two weeks between seminars – not mandatory, but doing them will increase the benefit to the student: reading of published pieces; writing about a visit to a local site; and a draft pitch letter. Students not requesting a grade may submit their written work for comment by the instructor, but are not required to do so.

CREDIT: Students taking the class for credit, will be expected to attend both classes, and complete two of three assignments, whichever two they prefer: brief analyses of the assigned readings; some writing regarding a visit to a local site; a draft pitch letter.

LETTER GRADE: Students taking the class for a letter grade, will be expected to attend, and participate in, both classes, and complete the three assignments: brief analyses of the readings; some writing regarding a visit to a local site; a draft pitch letter. The degree and quality of the participation, as well as the quality of the written work, will determine the grade.

### DAY ONE:

Where I've Been: An Introduction: Students will introduce themselves by describing briefly a memorable past trip. This can be a local jaunt or a voyage to a faraway place.

Overview: An introduction to travel writing's history, the current marketplace and the course's contents. A series of quick glances towards some of the acknowledged greats and the strong contemporary writers who'll be covered, sometimes cursorily, sometimes in depth, in the class. Some discussion of the genres of travel writing -- the spiritual odyssey, the extreme, And-I-Came-Back-Alive trek, the sporting vacation, the culinary adventure, the roots quest, the hotel review, the architectural digest, the local personality profile. With the perceptive, engaging Alain de Botton as a guide, we'll broach two of the larger questions: why travel, why write about it? I'll supply an annotated bibliography of some of the landmarks in this field.

Voice: Different writers employ radically different styles – some serve up spare, no-nonsense accounts (Joan Didion); others, when the moment is right, lard their sentences with lush adjectives, witty turns of phrase and imaginative metaphors (Olivia Stren). Some rely on humor to convey that stranger-in-a-strange land experience, and just to draw us along (Mark Twain); others are dead in earnest. Some are highly literary writers (the writing is its own destination, its own pleasure); others are more conversational – it's as if you're the first person they've spoken to on their return, and the piece is chatty, full of yarns (Jan Morris). Many writers put themselves in the foreground of a piece; some prefer to lurk further back.

Voice Exercise: On each day, students will read aloud selected passages from the likes of: Didion (on Miami), Bruce Chatwin (on Patagonia), Paul Theroux (on China), Pico Iyer (on

Iceland), Chris Colin (on Texas and Amsterdam), Noo Saro Wiwa (on Nigeria), Stren (on Morocco), Adam Gopnik (on Paris), Morris (on anywhere), Novella Carpenter (on West Oakland), Joseph Brodsky (on Venice), Andre Aciman (on Cairo), Gerald Durrell (on Corfu), Mark Twain (on Hawaii), E.B. White (on New York). With each, we'll discuss what makes the voice distinctive.

The Anatomy of a Strong Piece. We will speak of the skills involved in writing evocatively about places – skills which are often, but not always, similar to those used in other types of writing. An introduction to: beginnings (the lead), endings, the thesis statement, the conversational snippet and its uses, the thumbnail portrait, potted (but accurate) history, sensory writing. Although travel writing paints pictures with words and tries to convey how the other, non-visual senses are responding to an experience, it is also, at its best, writing inspired by ideas. By history, by politics, sometimes by controversy.

The Pitch/Somewhere I've Never Been: Pitching is an art-form in itself – increasingly, in so many lines of work, we're pitching. The travel article pitch serves to show off the writer's skills, should establish “moment”, and a “take” (often something counterintuitive or surprising – especially if the place is much-visited). It should demonstrate extensive knowledge of the publication in question and the competence to deliver the piece in question. It should speak to why *this* place, why *this* place *now* and why *this* writer.

Students will pair off to speak of a place they've never been but would like to visit, and why. Then they will pitch the idea to their partner, and get feedback – and then be pitched to and give feedback.

Travel Editor Visit: An experienced travel editor will speak to the making of a recent article (more goes on behind-the-scenes than many imagine) and what makes a compelling pitch – and what does not. Discussion of the nuts-and-bolts: assignment letters, expense claims, interviewing, photographs, fact-checking, copy-editing. Also: some thoughts about the ways the Internet is radically altering the state of play in this area. Students will have a chance to put questions about the market, and to float their idea for a piece to the editor. What sounds promising to the editor? What would the editor want to know before making the decision to assign or not?

## ASSIGNMENTS

There will be three assignments to be completed in the two weeks between classes:

- (1) To visit a local site – student's choice – and write descriptively about it – propose a lead, a thesis, write sensorily about it, quickly sketch in relevant aspects of its past. Several sites will be suggested. Ambitious students can write a full piece based on this visit, but that is not required.
- (2) Based on input from the travel editor, the discussion of pitching, and model pitches given out, students will write a compelling pitch letter about a place they'd like to visit, and the piece they'd like to write about it.
- (3) Students will read several, short published pieces and should come prepared to discuss them. Those taking the course for a letter grade or credit, should write short analyses of

the pieces in question.

## DAY TWO:

Anatomy II: We'll anatomize the assigned pieces to speak to what makes a strong travel piece or place-based essay. Why, precisely, are they working – or not – for the students? What are the strong (or weak) moments? Is this a beginning that draws a reader in? Does this ending satisfy? Why? Which sentences, which verbs, which adjectives are effective? What is the thesis? The moment? Students taking the class for credit and a letter grade will submit brief analyses of the assigned pieces for later comment; others are welcome to do so.

The Professionals: An experienced travel writer and radio reporter\*, will likely come in to speak about their place-based pieces, and take questions. Two of the writer's published pieces will form the backdrop of this discussion. The radio reporter will play aloud a place-based piece, and speak about the hurly-burly from which it emerged. (NB: It's always possible that an assignment will prevent one or both of them from attending.)

War Stories/A Local Piece in the Making: Each student will present an account of his or her site visit to the class, indulging in one of the travel writer's great pleasures: telling war stories of trips past. Northern California draws visitors from all over the world, and there is a strong market for pieces about this area. Some students will want to take their writing regarding this place, or another local site, further, and we'll discuss how best to do that. Those who have written a full piece or any bits of a possible piece can submit this for later comment – and those taking the class for a grade or credit are expected to do so.

Voice Exercise II: More readings from recognized writers, Didion et al., to speak to how they're using idiosyncratic voices to convey a sense of place.

The Pitch II: The draft pitch letters may be submitted by all students to the instructor for later comment. Students taking the class for credit or a grade will be expected to do so.

The Conclusion: We'll revisit some of the key points discussed in the two days.

### \*Guests

Travel writers, roving radio reporters and travel magazine editors often have to pick up and leave town on short notice. Two experienced, much-travelled local journalists have kindly agreed to come in to the class – with the usual caveat: unless a last-minute assignment arises. Two of them are: writer Chris Colin and radio reporter (and writer) Lisa Morehouse. (Brief bios below.) A seasoned travel editor (to be determined) will likely also come in to speak and take class questions.

Chris Colin is the author most recently of *Blindsight*, selected as one of Amazon's Best Books of 2011. He's written about chimp filmmakers, ethnic cleansing, solitary confinement and more for the [NewYorker.com](http://www.nytimes.com), *the New York Times Magazine*, *Wired*, *Smithsonian*, *Pop-Up Magazine* and *Afar*, where he's a contributing writer. His next book is called *What to Talk About*, and comes out in 2014. More info here: [www.chriscolin.com](http://www.chriscolin.com). We'll be paying particular attention to pieces he wrote for *Afar* on Amsterdam (<http://www.afar.com/magazine/going-dutch>) and on a village in the Texas Panhandle (<http://www.afar.com/magazine/a-lone-star>

[story](#)).

Lisa Morehouse is an award-winning independent public radio and print journalist, who's filed for KQED's *The California Report*, NPR's *Latino USA* and *All Things Considered*, *Edutopia* magazine and *McSweeney's*. Her reporting has taken her from Samoan traveling circuses to Mississippi Delta classrooms to the homes of Lao refugees in rural Iowa. She's currently working on *After The Gold Rush: The Future of Rural California*, an audio documentary website and radio series airing on *The California Report* and *Latino USA*. She'll play aloud, and speak about the making of, a place-oriented radio piece or two she has produced.

Texts:

Required: Kara Glowczewska, ed., *The Conde Nast Traveler Book of Unforgettable Journeys: Great Writers on Great Places*. New York: Penguin Group, 2007.

Recommended: Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel*. New York: Vintage, 2004.