Advanced Writing Course: **Ripped From the Headlines: Current Events in Fiction**
Gallatin — Fall 2011
Course # K30.1339001
Waverly Bldg, 570, Mondays, 6:20pm-9:00pm

Instructor: Taylor Antrim, lthantrim@gmail.com
Office Hours: Gallatin Bldg, 429, Tuesdays, 6:15pm-8pm or by appointment

**Course Description:**

In 1961 Philip Roth wrote: "the American writer...has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make credible much of the American reality." Is he right? Can a literary imagination encompass its social and political moment? Does it thereby lose its hold on universal truths? Or is there a perspective on and insight into current events only fiction can offer? We'll consider these and other questions through readings of novels and short stories that depict their contemporary political and cultural events. We'll pay particular attention to the ways these writers borrow, subvert, or reinvent journalistic (or "new" journalistic) techniques. Students will be expected to produce several written exercises, as well as two longer fictional pieces (short stories or novel chapters) that take current events as a starting point for narrative. These will be discussed through in-class workshops. Readings may include John Updike's *Rabbit Redux*, Joan Didion's *Democracy*, Don Delillo's *Mao II*, and Brett Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero*, as well as short stories by Wells Tower, Alicia Erian and Nuruddin Farah.

**Required Texts**

*The Armies of the Night* by Norman Mailer  
*Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* by Tom Wolfe  
*Rabbit Redux* by John Updike  
*Democracy* by Joan Didion  
*Less Than Zero* by Bret Easton Ellis  
*Mao II* by Don Delillo

Stories and essays will be available on Blackboard. **Note:** You must bring printed copies of all Blackboard readings to class.

**Writing Assignments**

Several in-class writing assignments
Two 1000-word take-home exercises
Two longer creative pieces (stories or novel chapters)
Final revision due 12/16

Attendance

As this course meets only once a week, I expect perfect attendance. I’ll allow one unexcused absence. Any subsequent absences will count against your participation grade—though they can be excused due to illness with a doctor’s note. **Miss more than three classes and you will receive a failing grade for the semester. There will be no exception to this policy.** If you do miss a class it is your responsibility to gather all reading (including student stories) for the subsequent class.

Class Preparation

*Participation:*

Speak up! Class participation is a major (30%) part of your grade. To ensure that everyone is involved in discussion, please come to class prepared with a comment or question on the week’s reading. Your prepared comment/question should be a thoughtful critique of a particular sentence or paragraph, a broader insight on the topicality of a novel or story under discussion, or a point of confusion in the reading. Best of all is an insight into the *craft* of the novel or story, how a character is drawn or an emotional effect is made on the reader. **Preparing this comment or question before you get to class is a requirement of the course.** You will be called on to deliver your comment/question aloud.

*Workshops:*

Each student will have two creative pieces workshopped. Double-spaced, paginated, stapled paper copies of your story or chapter will be due in class the week prior to the date of your workshop. **Emailed work is not acceptable.** Students will be expected to read each story twice and comment upon the piece in advance of workshop. **Line edits and written summary notes are required.** These marked-up copies will be returned to the writer at the end of the workshop. Workshop should be an active, constructive, and candid discussion of a particular piece of writing. The idea here is not to render a final verdict on the merits of story or chapter but to suggest strategies for revision.

*Presentations:*

Each student will be required to give a 10-minute mini-presentation on the historical/political/cultural context of the week’s reading. These must be accompanied by a handout—an outline or summary notes—that can be distributed to the rest of class.

*Conferences:*
Each student will be required to meet with me for a short conference after his or her creative work has been through a workshop critique. These conferences will be held during office hours or by appointment.

**Grading**

Your grade will be based on the quality of your written work and on effort. What does effort mean? Attendance, class participation, thorough and thoughtful critiques of your fellow students’ stories and on-time delivery of assignments. A half grade will be deducted from each assignment each day it is turned in late.

Final grades will be composed as follows:
- Current events exercises: 25%
- Longer creative pieces: 40%
- Attendance/Participation: 30%
- Presentations: 5%

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**CLASS SCHEDULE**

**Week 1**
Sept 12:
- Introduction
- Assign research projects
- In-class writing exercise
- Hand out Take-Home Assignment #1

**Week 2**
Sept 19:
- 2000-2010s
  - Reading:
    - Alicia Erian, “The Winning Side” (from *Politically Inspired*, McAdam Cage, 2003) - **BB**
- Assign workshop slots
- Presentation: Muhammad Atta
- **DUE**: Take-Home Assignment #1 (News story)
Week 3
Sept 26: 1960s: Roth and Mailer
Reading:
Philip Roth, “Writing American Fiction” and letters (Commentary, 1961) -BB
Norman Mailer, The Armies of the Night (1968) pp. 3-131 only
Presentation: March on Pentagon 1967
Revision Exercise
Hand out Take-Home Assignment #2

Week 4
Oct 3: 1960s: Tom Wolfe
Reading:
Tom Wolfe, Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers (1970) pp. 1-82 only
Tom Wolfe, “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast” (Harper's, Nov. 1989) -BB
Presentation: The Black Panthers
DUE: Take-Home Assignment #2 (Reporting)

Week 5
Oct 17: 1960s: John Updike
Reading:
John Updike, Rabbit Redux (1971) pp 1-178 (parts I-II)
Presentation: America 1968; 1969
Revision Exercise

Week 6
Oct 24: Updike cont.
Reading:
Updike, Rabbit Redux cont. pp. 178-end (parts III-IV)
Presentation: America in the ‘70s; End of Vietnam
Workshop (2)

Week 7
Reading:
Ann Beattie, “Shifting” (The New Yorker, February 21, 1977) -BB
Ann Beattie, “Colorado” (The New Yorker, March 15, 1976) -BB
Workshop (3)

Week 8
Nov 7: 1970s: Joan Didion
Reading:
Workshop (3)

Week 9

Nov 14: 1980s: Brett Easton Ellis
Reading:
Presentation: MTV
Workshop (2)

Week 10

Nov 21: 1980s: Don Delillo
Reading:
Workshop (2)
Presentation: Moonies/Lebanese Hostage Crisis

Week 11

Nov 28: Delillo cont.
Reading:
Delillo, *Mao II* cont. pp. 103-end (Part 2-epilogue)
Workshop (3)

—Thanksgiving Break—

Week 12

Dec 5: 1990s: Jonathan Franzen
Reading:
Workshop (4)

Week 13

Dec 12: 2010s
Reading:
Wells Tower, “The Landlord” (*The New Yorker, September 13, 2010*) -BB
Workshop (4-5)

Dec 14: Workshop (6)

FINAL REVISION DUE Dec. 16, 2011