Write 399: Creative Non-Fiction Writing: The Arts and Craft of Travel Writing

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Like all creative prose, travel writing uses storytelling techniques – but it focuses on articulating the clashes and incongruences travellers encounter: clashes between their own expectations and the reality that greets them, between cultures, between locals and the visitors passing through who peek into but never fully understand nuances of local life, between assumptions of personal space (vast in Alberta, minimal in crowded Rome). Travel writers must write from the vantage point of the outsider experiencing emotional jolts and disconnects and exclusion, of the one who records without fully understanding nuance in the surrounding culture, the one who above all must resist easy stereotypes and reductive characterizations**.**

The UAlberta Cortona campus is set in a country whose historical travellers (like Christopher Columbus) altered the European understanding of the world, and whose storytelling traditions significantly impacted Western literature. Cortona’s history dates back through times of war and freethinking and fascism and plague to the Roman Empire. It’s a small town, both ancient and modern, located on the top of a hill in Tuscany, world-renowned for its agrarian charm and rural-ness, but a short train ride from Rome and Florence, some of the mostly densely populated urban areas in Europe. In this rich and complex setting, we will seek out story-worthy experiences and practise the craft of travel writing.

We’ll study short texts/excerpts from historical (Christopher Columbus, Elizabeth Robins Pennell) and contemporary travel writers (Nikki Gemmell, Sophie Cunningham)*.* But the texts upon which we will focus are the texts that students produce. This is a workshop course; its purpose is to develop *craft*. We’ll spend half of class time workshopping student writing in small groups, and the other half considering published texts and craft: how exactly do you make a reader feel like s/he’s on the train with you? How do you sandwich into a narrative the necessary travel details without making the piece feel like a tourist advertisement or guidebook? How do you avoid the type of misrepresentation of history and art for which *The DaVinci Code* became famous? How do you write about cultural difference without “othering” the culture through which you’re travelling?

The bulk of the course time – 8 hours/week – will be spent actively travelling and collecting the primary materials and physical sensations necessary for effective travel writing. The three trips, less about sightseeing than about travel itself, are chosen for the contrasting experiences and sensations they offer for the page and for the ways they consider death (and therefore life). On the first trip, to ease into travel, we will explore Cortona and surrounding Tuscany on foot, figuring out how to describe it in ways specific to the region and yet not clichéd, paying as much attention to our sore feet as to the sights. The second trip takes us to crowded Rome and down into the catacombs. Here, in intimate underground passages dedicated to preservation of death, we’ll consider cultural practices in terms of contradictory meanings and rituals surrounding death, and draw on this setting for developing the surprisingly difficult skill of creating a creepy, yet respectful, atmosphere on the page. The third trip will focus on movement and awkwardness of train travel and the contradictions laid into the narrow cobbled paths of Old City Florence, stopping in at such places as Museo Casa di Dante (Dante’s home and chapel), the Cappelle Medicee (the Medici mausoleum and chapels). And, since our purpose is the consideration of sensation and contrast, we’ll naturally have to compare the goods of at least two gelateries.

Students will be required to hand in two short non-fiction stories (approximately 750 words) each week. One of these stories will be revised, polished, and handed in again for a final project. Like all Write courses, this course has a very high participation grade. There will be no final exam. Texts to be announced.