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JRNL 494.01: Pollner Seminar - Adapt, Survive & Thrive - Storytelling in Modern Journalism

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"Ain't no room on board for the insincere." — Warren Zevon

ADAPT, SURVIVE & THRIVE: STORYTELLING IN MODERN JOURNALISM

JRNL 494/Fall 2015 Pollner Seminar:

Class meets: Mondays & Wednesdays / 12:10 – 1:30 / DAH 210

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Office hours: Tues & Thursday, 2-4 p.m. or by appointment. I'll be spending a lot of time in the Kaimin offices, so if you can't find me, drop by the Kaimin.

The Course:

The purpose of this course is to study storytelling techniques that have been successful in the past, and learn to apply those to your own work in a modern media environment. Journalistic versatility is essential in this era, and the fastest way to be successful (and find job security) is be good (even great) at a lot of things. The medium is changing rapidly, but great reporting is timeless. Having an eye for where to find great stories is timeless. Good writing, whether it's for a newspaper, a magazine, a blog or even in a series of tweets, is timeless. I want you to take a big swing at a lot of different kinds of storytelling in this class, and if you crash and burn, that's ok. We'll learn from it, and we'll re-write and take another swing. In my class, we'll take to heart what Richard Hoffer once wrote about Mickey

Mantle: "Anything can happen to anybody in this country, so long as they're daring in their defeats and outsized in victory. Failure is forgiven of the big swingers, in whom even foolishness is flamboyant. The world belongs to those who swing from the heels."

What I Expect:

I expect you to care. This class, and this school, means a great deal to me, and I hope they'll mean a great deal to you if they don't already. I'm the first Pollner Professor who knew Anthony Pollner, the student for whom this fellowship is named after. Anthony was my classmate, my friend, my co-worker at the Kaimin, and he was a constant source of inspiration. He cared. He wasn't interested in journalism as a career, and I suspect many of you will find other fields wherein you ultimately choose to make a living, but he loved journalism. He loved storytelling. He craved knowledge. I know some of you will feel occasionally overwhelmed by the amount of

stuff I'm asking you to read, but you are the best and the brightest the journalism school has to offer. You are incredibly lucky, not because I'm your professor, but because I know a lot of great journalists, and many of them will be visiting class or Skyping into class. We're going to read, discuss and debate some of the best examples of nonfiction writing in the last 50 years, and then we'll use it to write great sentences, scenes and stories. I hope you'll embrace the challenge.

Required texts:

I'm not interested in assigning you a text book for this course. I find it far too restrictive for what we need to learn to be modern storytellers, and a wasted expense. We're blessed, because almost everything I want you to read is available on the World Wide Web, and a link to it is included in this syllabus. In rare cases, like New Yorker articles, the pieces might be subscription only. In those instances, I'll hand out copies the class before we discuss them. You can read these pieces however you like: on your phone, on your laptop, on your iPad or Kindle. But the way to get the most out of them, in my opinion, is to print them out, turn off all electronics, and make notes in the margins or highlight things you love, you hate, you can't understand, or things that have meaning for you. If you don't like some of the readings we do, don't be afraid to voice that opinion.

Some rules:

As you already know, academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty, potentially sending you on a journey to the darkness of the university's disciplinary sanctions. By now you should have read and understood the University of Montana's [Student Code of Conduct](#). Live it. Be mindful of the obligation all journalists have to never, ever plagiarize or make up facts.

• **Reusing work from previous classes, etc.:** You may not submit any assignment for this class that you've written for any prior class or publication (the Kaimin, internships, etc.). This is school policy. But you are free – and even encouraged – to publish the work you write for this class anywhere you can, once you've met the class deadline. If you have any question about this rule, or believe that you have already written the story that is the exception to this rule, you can ask me. Do not turn in recycled material.

• **Deadlines:** Late is late, but if you're crashing-and-burning on deadline, please come see me or call me ASAP. (There is a very short list of allowable excuses for a late assignment, and almost all of them have to do with death and disease, so try not to go there.) In plainest terms: I don't have a lot of sympathy for this because in my job at ESPN, if I blow a deadline, I could get fired. So keep that in mind.

• **Accessibility and Accommodations for Students with Disabilities:**

The university is committed to making this course accessible to otherwise qualified students with disabilities. Please see me to request reasonable program

modifications. The [Disability Services for Students](#) office can help us with this process.

- **Phones, iPads, etc.:** We'll silence them and put them in a pile at the beginning of class. I know, I know, this will feel like torture. But as someone who worries about phone addiction in his own life, we'll all be better for it.

- **Be respectful of unpopular opinions:** We're going to read stuff, and write stuff, that some of you loathe even though others love it. That's ok! Debating the merits and flaws in a specific piece of journalism is healthy. You won't earn my respect by belittling anyone for voicing a dissenting opinion. There are classic pieces of journalism that I strongly dislike, so don't assume just because I've assigned something I expect you to love it. I might want to talk about how you would have improved it.

- **Sleeping in Class:** One of my pet peeves is students who sleep in class. Don't do it, please. I don't think it's cute, or funny. I think it's disrespectful. I understand you're juggling a lot, and I'm asking a lot. But I've been in your shoes. I used to pull all-nighters at the Kaimin, work on homework during the morning, and play football for the Griz in the afternoon. (I was bad at football, but pretty good at the Kaimin!) If you're that tired and you feel like you're falling behind, come see me during office hours. I'll buy coffee and we'll figure out a plan.

Grades: 30 percent of your final grade will be based on class participation, and by that I mean: Attending class (10 percent), participating in discussions (10 percent), and doing the readings (10 percent). If we read something for class, I want 200 words responding to it. Hated it, loved it, indifferent, that's up to you. If you don't turn in those 200 words, I'll assume you didn't do the reading.

The other 70 percent is based on the work you turn in. There will be nine assignments over the course of the semester.

- Two 300-word narratives (5 percent)
- 800-word reported scene piece (5 Percent)
- 800-word review/criticism (5 percent)
- 1000-word essay on something you love (5 percent)
- 1000-word essay on something you hate (5 percent)
- 300-word pitch for your final project (5 percent)
- 2-minute video essay (5 percent)
- 800 words on deadline (5 percent)
- Your final project, length to be determined by you and me (30 percent)

CLASS SCHEDULE OF TOPICS (Subject to change)

Monday, Aug. 31: QUESTION AUTHORITY — Meet your professor; The Art of Interviewing. How do I ask the kind of questions that get great answers?

Reading assignment for next class:

[In Pursuit of a Dream](#) by Molly Knight

[After the Sky Fell](#) by Brady Dennis, plus his other [300-word narratives](#)

Wednesday, Sept. 2: IT MATTERS TO ME — Bring a piece of journalism to class that matters to you, and 300 of your own, original words (printed out) explaining why. You'll also need to have read all of Brady Dennis' 300-word narratives, but pay special attention to "Before The Fall." We'll discuss them, and you'll get your first writing assignment.

Reading assignment for next class:

[The Final Moments of Wesley Eugene Baker](#) by Jennifer McMenamin

Monday, Sept. 7: NO CLASS, LABOR DAY.

Wednesday, Sept. 9: IT'S ALL ABOUT THE SCENES, MAN — Bring your two you 300-word narratives to class (with pics). Be prepared to read one aloud. We'll have a guest speaker, Jennifer McMenamin, in class.

Reading assignments for next class:

[Split Image](#) by Kate Fagan.

[The Falling Man](#) by Tom Junod.

Monday, Sept. 14: We'll discuss Kate's story and Tom's story and you'll hand in your 200-word reactions. How can pictures and social media be a tool in your reporting? In your storytelling? What makes Tom's story a classic piece of magazine journalism, widely regarded as one of the best in the last 50 years?

Reading assignments for next class:

[A Rape on Campus](#) by Sabrina Rubin Erdley

[How To Tell A True War Story](#) by Tim O'Brien

[The Art of Fact Checking](#) by Hannah Goldfield

Wednesday, Sept. 16: WHAT IS TRUTH? — We'll discuss the Rolling Stone piece, the fallout and the controversy, and you'll hand in your 200-word reactions. I also want to hear your thoughts on Hannah's piece, and Tim O'Brien's short story, because they present very different views on the nature of truth. All three are favorites of mine.

Reading assignments for next class:

[Snakes Alive!](#) by Jeff MacGregor
[Lost in the Waves](#) by Justin Heckert

Monday, Sept. 21: DETAILS, DETAILS, DETAILS — I want 200 words on “Snakes Alive” and 200 words on “Lost in the Waves” and then we’re going to talk about why these stories give you a sense of place. MacGregor and Heckert are incredible at finding the right details that bring a story to life; how do they find them? Now it’s your turn. You need to give me 800-1000 words on a place, and the people there. Where that place is, well, that’s up to you. Could be a Missoula bar; could be a small Montana town; could be a church; could be a hospital waiting room. It’s due Oct. 19

Reading assignment for next class:

[Mindy Kailing on the roles for women in film](#)
[Wesley Morris reviews Ted 2](#)
[Molly Lambert tackles Eminem at 40](#)
[Mark Harris on how Selma got smeared](#)

Wednesday, Sept. 23: SOMETIMES IT IS THE CRITIC WHO COUNTS — Each of these pieces represents a great piece of cultural criticism. Each is about art, but they’re also able to do what great criticism does best, step back and say something about the world. I want you to write about a movie, a song, a book or a TV show that has some larger cultural significance, in your mind. Keep it to 800 words, and it’s due Oct. 5.

Listening assignment for next class:

[“Elephant”](#) by Jason Isbell
[“Dress Blues”](#) by Jason Isbell

Monday, Sept. 28: WHAT TO LEAVE IN, WHAT TO LEAVE OUT — We’re going to talk about Elephant and Dress Blues, and why the details in them make for such vivid storytelling. Both are based on real events in Jason’s life, so he’s not entirely making stuff up here. What’s an example of a song in your library that shows a great eye for detail or structure? Bring it to class and we’ll listen to it.

Reading assignment for next class:

[Miss Teen America Finds Freedom](#), For A Day by Lane Degregory
[A Team Playing From The Rough](#) by Kurt Streeter

Wednesday, Sept. 30: “HEY, DOES THIS SOUND LIKE DIALOG?” — You’ll hand in your 200-word reactions to Lane’s piece on Miss Teen America, 200 words on Kurt’s golf story, then we’ll talk about the difference between quotes and dialog. You’re about to turn in a scene piece. Will you be able to incorporate some dialog into it? I’ll talk about writing a serial narrative about high school football in West Baltimore, and what I learned about dialog.

Reading assignments for next class:

Joe Posnanski on [The Promise](#)

Nick Hornby on [Thunder Road](#)

Monday, Oct. 5: ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE — Your scene pieces are due. We'll also talk about Posnanski and Hornby writing about Springsteen, and how much he mattered to their lives. Posnanski, a good friend, is one of the best people I know at writing with heart. You've heard me talk about Elephant, one of my favorite pieces of art. Now it's your turn. I want 800-1,000 words about something you love, something that *matters* to you the way those two songs matter to Posnanski and Hornby. Due by Oct. 12.

Reading assignments for next class:

Lindy West on [Sex and The City 2](#)

[Bono is an Asswipe](#) by Albert Burneko

Hunter S. Thompson on [Richard Nixon's death](#)

Wednesday, Oct. 7: LET THE HATRED FLOW FROM WITHIN — We'll turn in our pieces about stuff we love, then flip the script. Let's talk about stuff we hate. I'd like 800-1000 words on something that makes your blood boil. Due Oct. 12

Reading assignments for next class:

[Roger Federer As Religious Experience](#) by David Foster Wallace

[Michael Jordan Has Not Left The Building](#) by Wright Thompson

[A View From Within](#) by Seth Wickersham

Monday, Oct. 12: RARE AIR — You might never get the chance to write about one of the biggest celebrities on the planet, but what if you *do* get that chance? I want 200 words on DFW on Federer and 200 words on WWT on Jordan. These are two of the best magazine profiles to run in the last 20 years. What makes them work? I also want you to start thinking about what you'd like to pitch as your final project. Your story pitches will be due Oct. 19.

Reading assignments for next class:

3 stories by Don Van Natta Jr.:

[London tabloids' phone hacking piece for the NYT Magazine on Sept. 2010](#)

[The Match Maker, Aug. 2013, about Bobby Riggs throwing the Battle of the Sexes to erase mob gambling debts](#)

[Jerry Football, the Jerry Jones profile from Aug. 2014](#)

Wednesday, Oct. 14: BE A FEARLESS INVESTIGATOR — With any luck, we'll have Don in class to talk about what it's like to be an aggressive investigative reporter, and how you get people to talk when they don't want to talk, or they've been told not to talk. Don won two Pulitzer prizes for his investigative work with the New York Times, and he and I worked together on the story about the Ravens and the

NFL misleading people on the Ray Rice scandal. You don't have to write 200 words reacting to each of his pieces, but each of you need to come to class with two questions to ask him.

Reading assignments for next class:

[The Unkillable Demon](#) King by Mina Kimes

[You Can't Quit Cold Turkey](#) by Tommy Tomlinson

Monday, Oct. 19: A SUBJECT CLOSE TO MY HEART — You'll hand in your 200 words on Mina's profile of Faker, and 200 words on Tommy's profile of Jared Lorenzen, then we'll talk about them. Authors are often drawn to subjects who offer small mirrors into their own lives. In this case, Mina is Korean. Tommy grew up in the South and is open about his struggle with his own weight. How does a writer's personal experience help illuminate the story?

Reading assignments for next class:

[The Hit King](#) by Scott Rabb

["Gimme a Kiss"](#) by Claire Hoffmann

Wednesday, Oct. 26: WHAT IF MY SUBJECT IS A JERK? — You'll hand in 200 words on Rabb's piece on Pete Rose and 200 words on Hoffman's profile of Joe Francis, the founder of Girls Gone Wild. Once again, both these profiles have first person in them. How does the tension enhance the piece?

Also: ***YOUR PITCHES FOR YOUR FINAL PROJECT ARE DUE.*** I want, in writing, a rough outline of what you're going to attempt. Is it a major profile? A narrative? A travel piece? After I get your pitches, I'm going to schedule some office time with you so we can talk about it. Once we both agree on the focus, and talk a bit about how you might structure the piece, I want you to dive right into the reporting. Don't look at the calendar and think: "I've got plenty of time." Trust me, that time will pass quickly. Depending on what your project is, I may have to skip ahead and read one of the stories that I think might help you. But you should have a good sense of what you want to attempt by now.

Viewing assignment:

[Nolan on Ray Rice & the NFL](#) (Fox Sports)

[Nolan on Clay Travis and How To Land A Husband at the Masters](#)

[Keith Olbermann calls for Roger Goodell to resign](#)

Wednesday, Oct. 28: POINT THE CAMERA THIS WAY, I'M GONNA TEE SOMEBODY UP — We've spent a lot of time this semester on writing, but being a great writer isn't enough in this multi-media world. How can you apply those skills in different formats? Katie Nolan is a great example of someone who applies great writing with great charisma on camera. We'll talk about what she does well, and then it will be your turn. Come up with an idea, write a script, turn your phone around, and fire off a take.

Reading assignments for next class:

[Tom Brady In A Postgame Daze of Disappointment](#) by Dan Whetzel
[Death of Racehorse](#) by W.C. Heinz

Monday, Nov. 2: THE MAIN EVENT! — You'll hand in 200 words on Whetzel's Brady piece, and 200 words on Death of a Racehorse. Both of these pieces were written on deadline. Over the next month, you're going to need to write me a deadline piece. What you write about is up to you — a football game, a trial, a city council meeting, a basketball game, etc. — but you'll pitch an idea, we'll discuss it, you'll go cover it. Also: In addition to writing 800-1000 words on deadline, you need to tell this story as it's happening in a series of tweets that you Storify and turn in as well. How good are you at telling stories in real time, like 140-character chapters of a book?

Reading assignments for next class:

[Into the Lonely Quiet](#) by Eli Saslow

Wednesday, Nov. 4: EMPATHY — We'll talk about Saslow's Into the Lonely Quiet. Hopefully we'll have Eli, a Pollner alum, in class. How does he get people to share their most intimate details? How is he able to come to each story without judgment or bias?

Reading assignments for next class:

[Jason Werth and Betsy, A Glove Story](#) by Adam Kilgore
[Why No One Will Ever Replace Richard Petty as the King of NASCAR](#)
by Jeff MacGregor

Monday, Nov. 9: PROFILING AN OBJECT — You'll give me 200 words on Kilgore's short profile of Jason Werth's glove, or 200 words on Jeff's story about Petty's car. I want you focusing on your final project at this point, so we won't be writing our own profile of an object, but think about these as you go forward. How do I bring an object to life using only my words?

Reading assignment for next class:

[The Things That Carried Him](#) by Chris Jones

Wednesday, Nov. 11: NO CLASSES, VETERANS DAY

Monday, Nov. 16: THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST — We'll have Chris in class to talk about The Things That Carried Him, which won a National Magazine Award and was named one of the 25 best magazine stories of all time. Chris, a Pollner alum, poured his heart into this story like nothing before or since. The result is a reporting masterpiece.

Reading assignment for next class:

[The Peekaboo Paradox](#) by Gene Weingarten

[The Most Amazing Bowling Story Ever Told](#) by Michael Mooney

Wednesday, Nov. 18: HOW TO STRUCTURE A STORY LIKE A MYSTERY — We'll discuss Gene's story and Michael's story in class, then ask the question: Why do all the best stories unfold like you're watching a movie? Because great writers know how to hold something back, and use it as the narrative engine that pulls you through. You don't give everything away in the beginning. These are two of my favorites, and we're mostly reading them for inspirational purposes, but I still need 200 words on each.

Reading assignments for next class:

[The American Male at Age 10](#) by Susan Orlean

[The Trophy Son](#) by Randall Patterson

Monday, Nov. 23: HOW TO CAPTURE A SUBJECT'S VOICE — Two very different pieces, both of which nail how the subject speaks and thinks, in very different ways. We'll talk about both, touch base on how your final projects are going, and make sure you've either turned in your deadline piece, or lined up something soon.

Reading assignments for next class:

Greg Howard on [Obama's Amazing Grace](#)

[A November Farwell](#) by Mike Royko

[Katie The Prefect](#) by Joe Posnanski

Tuesday, Nov. 24: YOUR FIRST DRAFT OF YOUR FINAL PROJECT IS DUE. Before you depart for Thanksgiving, you'll need to swing by my office and hand it in. I'll have them marked up and kicked back to you by the time we meet again, after the holiday.

Wednesday, Nov. 25: NO CLASSES, THANKSGIVING TRAVEL DAY

Monday, Nov. 30: PERSONAL ESSAY — Few things in journalism can feel as moving as when the writer gets personal. We touched on some of this earlier with Joe Posnanski's piece about The Promise, and Joe makes a second appearance here. Royko's piece, though, is one of my all-time favorites. What makes it work?

Reading assignment for next class:

[The Marriage Cure](#) by Katherine Boo

[TAKEN](#) by Sarah Stillman

Wednesday, Dec. 2: JOURNALISM ABOUT SOCIAL POLICY — The semester is winding down, and I'm sure we're all weary and freezing, but there are still a few great stories left to read. We'll talk about these two wonderful New Yorker pieces, and how they did something extremely powerful: Put a face to government policy.

I'll cut you a break on the 200 words responding to them, but we'll go around the room and talk about what we liked or disliked.

Reading assignments for next class:

[The Oreo Cookie Stacking Contest](#) by Lisa Pollak

[A Woman Disappeared and Never Left Her Home](#) by Michael Kruse

Monday, Dec. 7: HOW DO YOU FIND GREAT STORIES? — The best storytellers learn to look in places where others aren't looking. Pollack got a boring press release, the kind you get hundreds of every week as a reporter, about a Oreo stacking contest. She turned it into something magic. Kruse saw stories about woman who died inside her garage, and wasn't found for 16 months, and set out to tell the real story of who she was.

Reading assignments for next class:

[Get That Life: How I Founded Jezebel and Became an NYT Columnist](#)

by Anna Holmes

Dave Eggers, [An Interview with the Harvard Advocate](#)

Wednesday, Dec. 9: WHAT NOW? — Read our last two pieces and come to class open to talking about what you want to do one day. What kind of writer would you like to be?

Monday, Dec. 14: THIS IS THE END, BEAUTIFUL FRIEND — Your final projects are due. Come to class, hand it in, and we'll talk about the semester. What you liked, what you hated, what your hopes and dreams are for the future.