

University of Iowa Dublin Summer Writing Workshop 2024

The Resurrectionists

Instructor

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Example Course Days/Time

M-W 9 a.m. to 11 a.m.

Course Description

The ancient Celts believed that the landscape of Ireland was hummocked with “thin places,” locations where boundaries between the living and the dead disappeared, where the corporeal and the spiritual, the eternal present and the never-ending past, could co-exist. “We are the Dead, the Dead, the Dead,” a very much living Dylan Thomas chanted daily to the Irish moorlands while on his own six-week writing retreat to the country, back in the summer of 1935. It is a potent metaphor for any artist: to find a place where time is unbound, where the past is never past, where, to borrow from James Joyce, there is never a single moment that does not encompass, with a beautiful and terrible simultaneity, all the living and the dead.

As a journalist and a memoirist, I am especially interested in such “thin-place” settings, where, from our position in the present, we are able to access and inhabit the lives of the “the dead,” while still working within what we’ll call the reality of “documentary” constraints. Together, as we explore Dublin and its surrounding areas, I will show you how to do this kind of nonfiction necromancy. You’ll learn tried-and-true practical techniques that draw from journalism and archival research to resurrect long-buried experiences and re-create pasts that we personally could never have witnessed. No prior journalism or archival experience necessary! Through immersive site-visits that will take us to such locations as Francis Bacon’s Studio at the Dublin City Gallery, and the Bog Bodies of the National Museum of Ireland, we’ll practice how to look for the kind of tangible artifacts and traces of the past that allow writers to conduct the equivalent of nonfiction seances on the pages. Then I’ll introduce you to a variety of generative exercises that will reveal to you how to transform the “raw” documentary material you gather into vibrant, transfixing prose.

Examples of Possible Texts

We’ll be looking to other writers, skilled “resurrectionists” in their own right, for inspiration and for guidance. Among our possible precursors: “Thin Places” by Kerri ní Dochartaig; “Memory of Fire” by Eduardo Galeano; “The Book of the Dead,” by Muriel Rukeyser; “Say Nothing” by Patrick Radden

Keefe; Luis Urrea; Sharifa Rhodes Pitts; Zora Neale Hurston; Elena Poniatowska; Svetlana Alexievich; M. Nourbese Philip; and Joe Sacco.

Sample Week Structure

M: Immersive site visits + generative writing

T: Discussion of assigned reading + breakdown of craft and research strategies

W: Workshop --- “Casual” and “Extended”

Some general words on course expectations and the kinds of assignments you’ll be called to do...

In this course, I will be placing emphasis on exploration, risk, trying new things, being generative and creative – in both your writing AND your explorations of various forms of resurrection-worthy research. That means committing to the process, showing up for all classes, barring an emergency or illness, being enthusiastic, curious, and open to setting aside how you’ve previously done things to make room for new breakthroughs. As we work toward personal revelations in our writing, and in thinking about research, we’re also going to be conscious of what we are contributing to our literary community. Courses with workshop at their core require interdependence; we are all learning with and from each other. So, a willingness to engage thoughtfully and fully with your colleagues’ writing, and to identify how you personally can contribute to amplifying the quality of group discussion—to help support the emergence of excellence in those around you—is vital. This is what I mean when I speak of participation, and that will be part of your final grade for the class, alongside the opportunities to share your engagement with the process and resulting breakthroughs with me and with your colleagues, which are listed below.

Generative Prompts: These are on-the-spot creative assignments that are inspired by the present moment, things we have seen or discussed that allow you to isolate and practice some aspect of the work of the resurrectionist. You will not have to turn in these generative prompts in any formal way, but you will be given opportunities to share them aloud in more casual, early workshops. These prompts are also designed to help you generate possible inspiration for your extended workshop essays.

Extended Workshop: Everyone will have the opportunity to have an extended workshop of a sincere draft of an attempt at a resurrection. These extended workshops will begin toward the end of our session, allowing you to take advantage of the opportunity to receive feedback you can incorporate in your final submission to me. These workshops are also a chance for you to practice various forms of sincere engagement with your colleagues’ work and demonstrate participation.

Final Resurrection: An eight-page creative resurrection with a cover letter reflecting on problems and lessons in research, as well as an articulation of what you are doing now that you were not doing before, and what that might inspire you to do in the future—a way to bring together all the threads of what you have done over the last six weeks, due to me by the course’s end.