Writing course of interest to majors in div 3
1 message

Richard Millington <rmilling@smith.edu> Fri, Apr 5, 2013 at 5:01 PM
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Dear Colleagues in Div. III,

I’m writing to alert you to an exciting course that I think may interest your majors— but might not otherwise appear on their radar as they choose their courses for the fall. The course is one of the sections of English 290, Crafting Creative Nonfiction. Section 2 of the course has “Writing about Science” as its topic, and it will be taught by our new Jacobson Visiting Non-fiction Writer, Dava Sobel. Ms. Sobel is a wonderful writer, the author of several important, successful, and deeply interesting books, including Longitude and Galileo’s Daughter. Your students may read her course description on our website (www.smith.edu/english; they should follow the Course Offerings tab and scroll down to Intermediate and Advanced Writing Courses), and learn more about her via her website, www.davasobol.com.

Thanks for anything you might do to alert colleagues and students in your departments or programs to this great opportunity.

All best,

Rick

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This course invites students with an interest in science—and in writing—to learn skills for creatively communicating science news, concepts, and history. At the outset, class time will be devoted to discussions (call them dissections) of assigned readings, including books, articles, plays, poems, and blogs that treat scientific themes. We will compare and contrast the writing of practicing scientists with that of science writers, in the hope of appropriating the best elements of both. Class sessions later in the term will provide time and space for work-shopping and peer-editing. Students will write a book review, a profile (or obituary) of a scientist, and an article (3,000 – 4,000 words) about research in a field of personal interest.

Writing about science differs from other forms of creative non-fiction for a variety of obvious and subtle reasons. The science writer is expected to bring considerable background knowledge to an assignment, or to do heavy homework, or both. Interviews may be complicated by a source’s inability to explain his or her ideas in comprehensible terms. Fact-checking and quote-checking assume crucial importance. The question of audience preoccupies the science writer. (Must I rediscover the atom or redefine DNA at every mention of such terms? Who out there really cares about the Higgs boson?)

Science writers often encounter editorial prejudices. Perhaps the most prevalent of these concerns the use of mathematical equations (i.e. “Never insert one in your writing!”), even though an equation may be an idea’s most eloquent expression. Many readers profess—without embarrassment—a lack of interest in science or even a fear of it. Persistent popular but negative perceptions continue to paint scientists as “not like other people,” and to dismiss the scientific enterprise as a passionless pursuit of facts. Such attitudes could well discourage an aspiring science writer. Or they might inspire her to new heights of creativity. If you feel you fall in the latter category, please write me a letter to serve as a writing sample. Address it to ds23@optonline.net. Let it describe your writing experience, your preferred genre of expression, your scientific interests, and your reasons for wanting to take this class. Make it as long as it needs to be. The letter may be sent soon (during the registration period, or by the end of the semester); it must reach me by August 16th, the deadline for submissions for the English department’s creative writing courses.