



Instructor Spotlight: Gene Beiriger

“A hero is a man who is afraid to run away.” – English proverb

We often hear, in popular media, about “heroes”—the *everyday* heroes, the *extraordinary* heroes, the *superheroes*. For instance, it is commonplace for us to hear news reporters refer to soldiers as heroes; so commonplace that it often doesn’t entirely pierce our consciousness. But, this has an effect; it serves to focus our attention on the individual story, while ignoring the larger stories – of war, violence, death. Is this purposeful? It might allow us to accept these larger stories as “given,” without questioning *why*. It might even provide us with an anodyne to our personal losses.

The notion of heroism is complex. While it can obfuscate important issues by oversimplifying them and reducing them to trite and overused rhetoric, it also reveals a good deal about how we utilize language and how we receive language. The notion also poses larger questions – *to what extent is heroism an intrinsic quality, either inherent to individuals or to specific positions? to what extent is heroism a social construct? if it is a social construct, to what use is it put? why?* As a twenty-first century historian,

I am especially interested in the latter questions.

I teach a Focal Point Seminar on *Heroes and “the Heroic” in Fiction and Fact*, which attempts to grapple with notions of “the heroic” in literature and history, with additional material gleaned from the arts, the humanities, and popular culture. The topic allows for a good deal of variety in the selection of course material. Recently, my students and I explored some war-related literature, including Bernard Shaw’s *Arms and the Man*, Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and selected first world war poets. Shaw offers some blistering satirical commentary about heroism, but the works from the first world war are mainly from soldiers themselves. The students were particularly insightful—in their discussion and papers—about these latter works, with many of them asserting that the soldiers eschewed this label and, especially, the reasons why society chose to use this label to describe them.

More recently, we turned to heroism



of conscience. We read *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the letters and speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In these works, we grappled with less obvious constructs of heroism. This is not to suggest that we don’t recognize Atticus or Dr. King as “heroes”; but it does require us to ask, *why* these particular individuals? *what* are the underlying sources of their heroism? *what* does society, when it constructs these notions of heroism, wish to laud? *why? what* lessons are we to learn?

I enjoy teaching this course in the First-Year Program. Students have already been exposed to notions of the heroic in high school or through the media. They are really interested in the underlying complexities of the concept and ready to explore their nuances. I also hope they generalize some of our discussions to other commonly-used words—and the ideas and purposes which underlie them—to discern intentionality when appropriate and to become more careful consumers of our language and culture.

– Gene Beiriger
Associate Professor of History

From the Director

Our 52 Spring Focal Point Seminars are now underway, along with two Explore Chicago classes. Many first-year students will soon be signing up for Sophomore Seminar classes; hopefully their seminar training in Focal Point will prepare them well for this next step. Be sure to reiterate to your students that improving critical thinking and seminar discussion skills are a major part of the Focal Point Seminar.

For those of you teaching Chicago Quarter this coming fall, please mark your calendars for this year’s big Chicago Quarter Best Practices conference, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Friday, May 31, in Student Center 120. You will soon be receiving an official invitation over email. Before that, you will have been notified about your Student Mentor and, in the case of Discover classes (and some Explore classes), your Staff

Professional. This year we’re asking you, as the Teaching Team leader, to call the Spring Quarter meeting with your teaching team. You can chat with them about the academic part of the class and brainstorm ways elements of Common Hour can link to it. You can also make plans to communicate throughout the summer as you develop your syllabi.

Many of you are planning to attend Jim Montgomery’s “Chicago: City on the Lake” Discover Chicago lakefront bus tour for Chicago Quarter faculty and staff on Friday, April 26. The reservation deadline for this free opportunity is Wednesday, April 17. To reserve, contact Jim at jmontgom@depaul.edu. We hope to do more of these throughout the coming years.

– Doug Long

Important dates!

- First-Year Writing Showcase: **May 15th**
- Chicago Quarter Best Practices: **May 31st**