College Guild
PO Box 6448, Brunswick ME 04011

JOURNALISM CLUB

Unit 5 of 6
Reviews and Travel Writing

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In Unit 4, we talked about expressing opinions in both writing and cartoons. Unit 5 will get into some special types of opinion writing, including different types of reviews and travel pieces.

Food Criticism

Everyone has different tastes. But some preferences are given much more weight than others. Food critics, especially those at big newspapers, have the power to boost a restaurant's business or turn potential customers away.

They have so much power that restaurant owners in places like New York City make recognizing critics a top priority. As a reaction, critics have to disguise their identities so that they will be treated like everyone else. For New Yorkers, the New York Times restaurant critic is the most important person to impress. One restaurant owner promised employees a $500 reward if they recognized this critic, posting a big photo of her in the back. Another restaurant owner admitted to keeping notes on this critic, from the fake names he'd used to who he often dined with.

Because top critics are very aware that people are keeping an eye out for them, they have to be careful not to get caught taking notes or calling too much attention to themselves. They wear wigs and clothing that makes them unrecognizable. They hold credit cards under fake names. They want to be treated like everyone else so that they can write an honest review of the restaurant.

Most critics will visit a restaurant a few times before writing a review, sampling as many dishes as possible. They realize that they hold peoples' livelihoods in their hands and take their jobs seriously.

1. **If you were an undercover food critic, what might tip you off that you had been recognized?**
2. **Write a diary entry from the point of view of a food critic.**

As of 2018, Pete Wells is the restaurant critic for The New York Times and has done this job since 2011. Below are some snippets from his reviews:

Like every pie I've eaten at Razza, these two had been put together with exquisite sensitivity to the needs of the dough. The crust had no soggy or underbaked patches, and the bottom surface was crisp all the way from the puffy outer lip to the inner tip, which would jut straight out, or nearly straight, when I picked up a slice. When I tore open the outer rim, the crust crackled and the white interior steamed, soft, somewhat springy, with a slow-building, many-layered, lively flavor underlined by sea salt.

The exterior of Taqueria Tlaxcalli (pronounced TLOSH-collie), with a neon Corona sign under an awning in a shade of pink that looks like lipstick at the end of a long night, tells you to move on. The interior, with mango-colored walls, lime-green ceramic pitchers and marbled blue pendant lights, tells you to stay.

The moment-to-moment joys of eating one mouthful of sushi after another can merge into a blur of fish bliss. But almost everything Mr. Nakazawa cups in his hands and places in front of you is an event on its own. A piece of his sushi grabs control of your senses, and when it's gone, you wish you could have it again. These little events carve themselves into your memory. So does the meal, 21 pieces or so over about two hours.

3. **If you owned your own restaurant, what would you call it and what type of food would you serve? What would the atmosphere be like?**
4. **You are a food critic visiting the restaurant you described in the previous question. Write a review of that restaurant. Include a catchy headline, and in addition to describing at least one entrée, appetizer and dessert, evaluate the service and the atmosphere of the restaurant.**

You don't have to be a professional critic to put your opinions out there. A website called "Yelp" allows people to share their own restaurant reviews. Below is one such review of "Razza", the same pizza place that Pete Wells reviewed.

*Guys, it's really just overpriced bread. Sure, it's really good bread. But to call it pizza is a stretch. I remember coming here when they first opened and thinking the same thing and not feeling compelled to go back. But after the stellar NY Time*s *review, I figured maybe it changed, I'll give it another shot. Nope. I understand that it's the whole thin crust, wood fire oven style, but I think a little more than a teaspoon of tomato sauce and 2 specks of cheese would make it worth $17. Was the NY Times reviewer a friend of the owner? Because there's no reason there should be a line to get in before they open on a Monday night. The cocktails also just were not good, way too sugary. Service was great and the place itself is cute, but the hype is way over hyped.* -Katie F.

5. **Would you be more likely to trust a professional critic or an ordinary customer when choosing a place to eat? Explain your answer.**

Movie and Book Reviews

Other journalists specialize in writing reviews of movies or books. These reviews often include some plot summary but do not give away the ending. They also dig deeper, discussing how key themes played out in the story and where the work is similar to or different from other pieces from the same author, director or studio. They discuss the implications for the work's genre (e.g. comedy, science fiction, superhero, drama) and offer an opinion of whether or not they think it's work watching or reading.

Below is an excerpt from the New York Times review of Coco, an animated children's movie.

The New York Times*:* "Review: 'Coco' Brings the Pixar Touch to Death"
By A.O. Scott | Nov. 21, 2017

One of the pleasures of a new Pixar feature is the chance to be amazed by what animation can do. Sometimes you witness a big, bold breakthrough, like the computer-assisted rendering of fur in "Monsters,

Inc.," of water in "Finding Nemo," or of metal in "Cars." The innovations in "Coco" are no less satisfying for being of a more subtle kind. The grain of leather and the rusted folds of corrugated metal have a rough, almost tactile quality. Human bones, hairless dogs and orange flower petals look uncannily (but not too uncannily) real. There are moments of cinematic rigor — when the animators mimic the movements and focal effects of an old-fashioned camera in actual physical space — that will warm any film-geek's heart. Not to mention the Frida Kahlo-inspired musical number with dancing papaya seeds.

"Coco" is also one of those Pixar movies that attempt a conceptual breakthrough, an application of the bright colors and open emotionalism of modern, mainstream animation to an unlikely zone of experience. From the very start, the studio has explored the inner lives of inanimate objects like lamps and toys with a tenderness we now take for granted. It has also summoned the post-human future ("Wall-E") and the human unconscious ("Inside/Out") with breathtaking ingenuity. And now it has set out to make a family-friendly cartoon about death.

Don't let that scare you or your children away. There is a murder (revealed in the third act) and a fatal church-bell-related accident (witnessed in the first), but the afterlife in "Coco" is a warm and hectic place, more comical than creepy. The story takes place during the Day of the Dead, when according to Mexican tradition (at least as interpreted by Lee Unkrich and Adrian Molina, who directed the screenplay written by Mr. Molina and Matthew Aldrich), the border controls between life and death relax and the departed are allowed temporary passage to the land of the living. A young boy named Miguel (voiced by Anthony Gonzalez) makes the trip in reverse, which is not to say that he dies, but rather that his living self, through one of several metaphysical loopholes that the movie explains as it goes along, is transported into a fantastical world of specters and skeletons, who hold fabulous parties and raucous outdoor concerts.

Nearly as enchanting as that magical realm is the Mexican village of Santa Cecilia, Miguel's hometown, where he is part of a prosperous clan of shoemakers. The cultural vibe of "Coco" is inclusive rather than exoticizing, pre-empting inevitable concerns about authenticity and appropriation with the mixture of charm and sensitivity that has become something of a 21st-century Disney hallmark. Here, the importance of family — the multigenerational household that sustains and constrains the hero — is both specific and universal. It's what explains the particular beats of Miguel's story and what connects him to viewers regardless of background….

Coco is the name of Miguel's great-grandmother, who turns out to be the heart of the story. Her mother, Imelda (Alanna Noël Ubach), is a furious matriarch on the other side of the grave, while Coco's daughter, Miguel's Abuelita (Renée Victor), is a no-nonsense flesh-and-blood autocrat. Their determination to silence Miguel's guitar arises from heartbreak, and from the instrument's association with the waywardness of men.

"Coco" avoids the darker tones associated with this theme, in the way that old murder ballads are sometimes reconceived as children's songs. It's reassuring rather than haunting, which is a shrewd and successful commercial compromise, but a compromise all the same.

6. **Write a one-sentence summary of this journalist's opinion of the movie <u>Coco</u>.**
7. **Movies like <u>Coco</u> can speak to both children and adults. How might a child react differently to this movie than an adult?**
8. **Many children's movies deal with dark themes like death. What purpose do you think this serves? Explain.**

Book reviews are very similar to movie reviews. Below is a review of Little Fires Everywhere, a novel by Celeste Ng.

The New York Times: "In a Quiet Ohio Town, Who Started the Fire, and Why?"
By Eleanor Henderson | Sept. 25, 2017

Readers of Celeste Ng's second novel, "Little Fires Everywhere," will recognize a few elements from her acclaimed debut, "Everything I Never Told You." There are the simmering racial tensions and incendiary family dynamics beneath the surface of a quiet Ohio town. There are the appeal and impossibility of assimilation, the all-consuming force of motherhood and the secret lives of teenagers and their parents, each unknowable to the other.

And there's a familiar frame, too: At each novel's opening, we know at least part of the tragedy that will befall the characters — the mystery lies in figuring out how they got there. In "Little Fires Everywhere," we begin not with a death but a house fire, and new questions: Who set it, and why?

The house belongs to Elena and Bill Richardson, a wealthy white couple who epitomize success in picture-perfect, late-'90s Shaker Heights, and their four teenage children, including girl-next-door Lexie and the troubled prankster Izzy, who is suspected of arson. "The firemen said there were little fires everywhere," Lexie says. "Multiple points of origin. Possible use of accelerant. Not an accident." But Izzy isn't the only one who seems to have fled the scene. Mia Warren and her 15-year-old daughter, Pearl, have also disappeared, vacating the small house they rented from the Richardsons. And so Ng again returns to the past for answers.

It's Mia and Pearl's arrival in town 11 months earlier that ignites the story. Mia is an alluring Hester Prynne, a misfit nomad whose scarlet A might stand for Artist. She and Pearl have traveled the country in their VW Rabbit with little more than Mia's camera, living in dozens of towns before settling in Shaker Heights, where Mia promises her daughter they will stay. Pearl, longing to belong, quickly becomes a fixture in the Richardsons' home, entangling her mother along with her.

Witnessing these two families as they commingle and clash is an utterly engrossing, often heartbreaking, deeply empathetic experience, not unlike watching a neighbor's house burn. And the spectacle doesn't stop with the Richardsons and Warrens. Ng also introduces a custody battle that becomes the center of the town's attention — a 1-year-old girl who is wanted by both her Chinese immigrant mother and the white couple who has raised the baby.

It's this vast and complex network of moral affiliations — and the nuanced omniscient voice that Ng employs to navigate it — that make this novel even more ambitious and accomplished than her debut. If occasionally the story strains beneath this undertaking — if we hear the squeaky creak of a plot twist or if a character is too conveniently introduced — we hardly mind, for our trusty narrator is as powerful and persuasive and delightfully clever as the narrator in a Victorian novel. As soon as we meet our matriarch — "Mrs. Richardson stood on the tree lawn, clutching the neck of her pale blue robe closed" — we have the sneaky sense that our well-mannered narrator is speaking from both within and above the order-obsessed neighborhood.

But as Mrs. Richardson — rarely "Elena" — struggles to keep her household in order, the narrator begins to shapeshift, surprising us with the expansion of her powers. Ng doesn't miss an opportunity to linger over a minor character, even those we meet for only a moment (the neighbor, the doorman, the bailiff) whose voices might otherwise be rendered in parentheses. At the same time, she offers a nuanced and sympathetic portrait of those terrified of losing power. It is a thrillingly democratic use of omniscience, and, for a novel about class, race, family and the dangers of the status quo, brilliantly apt.

Mrs. Richardson's vision of a suburban utopia might strike some as a quaint fantasy, but this is the '90s, after all. Post-9/11, post-Obama, in the age of Trump and Black Lives Matter, we may know better, but Ng reminds us that 20 years ago, in the age of AltaVista, pagers and Sir Mix-a-Lot, some who voted for another Clinton claimed to have within their sight a post-racial America. "I mean, we're lucky," says the blond Lexie, whose boyfriend is black. "No one sees race here."

The magic of this novel lies in its power to implicate all of its characters — and likely many of its readers — in that innocent delusion. Who set the little fires everywhere? We keep reading to find out, even as we suspect that it could be us with ash on our hands.

9. **What do you suppose Henderson means when she says that readers could have "ash on our hands"?**
10. **What are some ways movie reviews and book reviews may differ, besides the fact that one is about a movie and one is about a book?**
11. **Write a review of the book or movie of your choice. The movie or book can be real or you can make one up.**

Travel Writing

Another category of journalism that might fit in the category of reviews is travel writing. Travel pieces may include the history of an area, ideas for things to do in the area and restaurant recommendations. They are often written in the first person and tell the journalists' traveling stories. They can include humor, facts and analysis.

12. **People read travel articles even if they aren't planning a trip. Come up with 2 other reasons why people might read travel articles.**

Jada Yuan was chosen by The New York Times from over 13,000 applicants to spend 2018 visiting every place on their "52 Places to Go in 2018" list. For each place she visits, she writes an article for the paper's travel section.

13. **If you were on the hiring committee for this job, what top 3 qualities would you look for in an applicant and why?**

The excerpt below comes from Yuan's piece about the Rogue River in Oregon.

The New York Times*:* "Place 13 of 52: On the Water, and Off, the Rogue River in Oregon Charms"
By Jada Yuan | May 22, 2018

"They say the river has eyes, and it does," said my guide, Howard Binney, a 59-year-old retired firefighter who started fishing Southern Oregon's Rogue River "system," as he calls it, with his grandfather when he

was 12. "I've seen bear cross the river, mountain lions in the trees. I've seen eagles and osprey pull fish out of the water. It's a beautiful, mysterious place."

It was early April and the temperature would hit 74, but the water was still too cold to get in without a wet suit. So instead, we floated down a tranquil section of the Rogue in Mr. Binney's flat-bottomed aluminum fishing boat. The Rogue, which runs for about 215 miles from the High Cascades to the Pacific, was one of the original eight waterways designated for federal protection under the 1968 National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Mr. Binney, who wore waterproof black overalls and a tan cap with a sun-protective flap that hung over his neck like a fabric mullet, manned two wooden oars. The roe he used to bait his hooks came from salmon he had caught, and then cured at home.

In the several hours that we had been on the water, I'd seen Canada geese, flocks of resident (as opposed to migratory) ducks, a single osprey and wild horses grazing along the bank. The trout and salmon we had come seeking, though, seemed to be nowhere around.

Even the "bank fishermen" we passed wading waist-deep just offshore in rubber overalls (including a Marine from Florida with huge biceps and a backward baseball cap) weren't getting any bites. "Slow day, huh?" said Mr. Binney, in commiseration.

Not too long ago, lack of fish was a real ecological cause for concern. But the reason I'd come to the Rogue is precisely because it's thriving. Over the past 10 years, environmentalists have fought to remove nearly every dam on the river and its tributaries that had been blocking the paths of salmon and steelhead trying to migrate to their spawning grounds. Nature has regained control. It's a remarkable thing to behold, a river flowing free.

14. **Choose a place—it can be a place you've called home or travelled to, a place you've never been before or an imaginary place. Finish the sentences below, imagining that you are in that place:**
    a. **I see…**
    b. **I smell…**
    c. **I feel…**
    d. **I taste…**
    e. **I hear…**
15. **Now, using the sensory descriptions you just brainstormed as inspiration, write a travel article about your chosen place for someone who has never been there before. What should they know before they visit? Be sure to include a headline.**

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes

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Sources:
http://www.cnn.com/2009/LIVING/10/18/restaurant.critics.exposed/
https://www.nytimes.com