

DIARY WRITING: A SHORT COURSE

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A short course in diary writing

This is a course in creative writing as well as in creative and reflective reading. You will keep a diary, and you will also read extracts from diaries and reflections on diary writing. Some of the readings invite you to reflect on the solitude that is a necessary condition for diary writing. Finally, there are also readings drawn from a body of plague literature that may or may not invite comparison with your current circumstances.

What is a diary? Is it different from a journal?

The word ‘diary’ comes from the Latin words for “daily allowance”, and “day”. The word ‘journal’ comes from the same root (*diurnus*, “of the day” and dies, meaning “day”) and the two words are used interchangeably. A diary is an account kept by one person who notes down his or her experiences and observations daily or occasionally, apparently without thought of publication.

Why write a diary? Why keep a journal?

To describe each day is to give that day value and significance, and to preserve it in one’s memory. Sometimes it’s hard to know how you’re feeling or what you’ve been through until you read the words you’ve written about those feelings and experiences. Diaries remind you that you have lived, that you are alive. They immortalise passing days. They assuage pain by standing in as a non-judgemental listener. They help you to understand yourself, to see patterns. They bring out the poetry of the everyday.

A diary can be particularly useful in a time of personal or national crisis, a way of bearing witness. You may not be aware of great changes that are being enacted right under your nose, but a diary records the miniscule alterations and adaptations that lead to profound changes that will one day be part of ‘history’. It may not seem so, but what you are recording is important.

Diary-writing during times of upheaval and isolation can be intensely rewarding. Narrow, limited circumstances and surroundings provide ideal conditions for self-reflection and the quiet discipline of noting down everyday observations.

Finally, it is no coincidence that many of the most famous writers in the world kept a diary. Diary-writing can act as a ‘warm-up’ exercise. It draws on and strengthens the habits that good writing depends on – routine, constant observation, finding precise words to describe vague thoughts, feelings, and sensory experience. Because diaries are usually not intended for publication, we tend to let our minds roam more freely in them; we are less inhibited. It’s this unleashed state that gives rise to flashes of genius. In this course you’ll see how published writers have used their daily entries as rich source material, as a way of loosening their mental processes in preparation for other writing, or as a place to set down their writerly doubts and fears.

How will this course work?

The course lasts ten days (you decide which day to start). It consists of:

- writing a diary entry each day for ten days;
- reading three extracts each day, many from or about diaries;
- watching three narrated PowerPoints that support the readings; and
- preparing an assignment to be submitted by email to finuala.dowling@uct.ac.za on or before 31st July.

More on the PowerPoints

The first PowerPoint introduces the course and draws from the readings to give an overview of the value of diary writing.

The second PowerPoint, 'Inside the Hold-All', draws from the readings to give an overview of the range of material found in diaries.

The third PowerPoint, 'Responding to Solitude and Plague', reflects on what we can take away from the readings that deal specifically with solitude and plague.

More on the readings

The readings provide insights into famous diaries as well as different approaches to diary writing. You'll develop a sense of why people – and writers in particular – have kept diaries.

Included in each day's set of readings is an excerpt related either to plagues and plague writing, or to solitude, since solitariness is associated both with quarantine and with diary writing.

Questions invite you to reflect on the readings. Ignore these if they are not helpful. As you read, underline quotations you like, disagree with or in any way find remarkable. This may help you when it comes to submitting the assignment.

Timing and duration

You may start this course any day in June. Once you have started, try to keep your diary going for ten consecutive days, but don't worry if there are lapses. Submit your assignment after you have completed ten diary entries.

The assignment

Once you have completed ten diary entries, you should prepare an assignment for submission. Choose any one of the following:

- The diary entries you have written (in full or with excisions);
- A reflective essay on the experience of keeping a diary, with or without selected quotations from your diary;
- A reflective essay on one or more of the readings provided in this course;
- An essay that reflects both on your own diary and the readings that struck you during the course;
- A collection of no more than ten poems written during or after your ten days of reading and writing;
- A short story written in a diary format.

Submission guidelines

The deadline for written assignments is Friday 31st July 2020.

The assignment should be submitted in the form of a Word document attached to an email. (If you have kept a handwritten diary and wish to submit it, please type it up.)

Essays should be between 500 and 1000 words long.

Day One

Today you'll start writing your diary. Put down the date and try to write at least 100 words, but there is no limit. Use abbreviations if you wish. You don't have to write in full sentences. Don't worry about whether your sentences are connected to each other. There are no restrictions about *how* you write.

What do people write in their diaries? Almost anything, is the answer. What they've done, eaten, seen, heard, thought about, remembered, delighted in, raged over – or things merely noted in the last twenty-four hours. Gossip, money worries, world events, deep reflections, health concerns. There are no restrictions as to *what* you put in your diary.

There is, however, discipline involved in sitting down and capturing moments you lived through a day ago, or even the very moment you're living right now. If you're not sure how to begin, skim the diary extracts in this guide to see the huge variety of ways in which others have approached the problem. You could use the extract from May Sarton's diary (Day Eight) as a guide. Its first sentence is simply: 'Begin here.'

Readings

1) From Anaïs Nin's 1946 lecture on writing:

It was while writing a Diary that I discovered how to capture the living moments. Keeping a diary all my life helped me to discover some basic elements essential to the vitality of writing.

When I speak of the relationship between my diary and writing I do not intend to generalize as to the value of keeping a diary, or to advise anyone to do so, but merely to extract from this habit certain discoveries which can be easily transposed to other kinds of writing.

Of these the most important is naturalness and spontaneity. These elements sprung, I observed, from my freedom of selection: in the Diary I only wrote of what interested me genuinely, what I felt most *strongly* at the moment, and I found this fervour, this enthusiasm produced a vividness which often withered in the formal work. Improvisation, free association, obedience to mood, impulse, brought forth countless images, portraits, descriptions, impressionistic sketches, symphonic experiments, [into] which I could dip at any time for material.

ANAÏS NIN
(1903-1977)

Anaïs Nin was a French novelist who was more famous for the eight volumes of her diary and the love affairs recounted in them. The first volume was published in the 1960s, bringing her a level of success that her fiction had not enjoyed.

Reflection

What words and phrases in this extract constitute the ‘basic elements essential to the vitality of writing’ that Anais Nin refers to?

2) From Georgia O’Keefe’s December 1915 letter to her friend Anita Pollitzer:

Anyone with any degree of mental toughness ought to be able to exist without the things they like most for a few months at least. Still ... I sometimes think it’s almost a sin to refuse to satisfy yourself.

Reflection

In the letter excerpt above, Georgia O’Keefe is referring to privation experienced in a time of financial hardship. What about other kinds of privation, such as that experienced in quarantine? What do you think about the way she contradicts herself?

GEORGIA
O’KEEFE
(1887-1996)

Georgia O’Keefe was an American artist known for her paintings of New York skyscrapers as well as her big and surprising depictions of flowers. Her diary-like letters have a similar vividness and spontaneity. Her letters to her husband and mentor are collected in *My Faraway One: Selected Letters of Georgia O’Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz; 1915-1933*.

3) From the journal of Eugène Delacroix:

Wednesday, 7th April 1824

Wednesday again! I am not progressing. But time is, and very fast too. This morning Hélène came. Oh shameful ... I could do nothing. Am I going the same way as my brother?

Worked at the little *Don Quixote*. In the evening, Leblond. I tried my hand at lithography. Some splendid ideas for this process. [...]

I have hurriedly re-read the whole of my Journal. I regret the gaps. I feel as though I were still master of the days I have recorded, even though they are past, whereas those not mentioned in these pages are as though they had never been.

How low have I fallen? Am I then so weak that those flimsy pages will be the only record of my life remaining to me? The future is all blackness. The past, where I have not recorded it, is the same. I grumble at having to perform this task, but why always be indignant at my weakness? Can I spend a single day without food or sleep? So much for my body. But my mind and the evolution of my soul are to be destroyed because I do not want to owe what is left of them to the necessity of writing. On the contrary, nothing is better than having some small task to perform every day.

Even one task fulfilled at regular intervals in a man's life can bring order into his life as a whole; everything else hinges upon it. By keeping a record of my experiences I live my life twice over. The past returns to me. The future is always with me.

I must begin to make drawings of some of the men of my own times. Also many medals containing nude figures.

Thursday, 8th April 1824

I am going to be short of money. I must work hard. Worked on the *Don Quixote*.

Friday, 9th April 1824

Instead of a fairly large picture, I should like to do several small ones, but enjoy myself painting them.

I still have about 240 francs left. Pierret owes me 20 francs.

Today: lunch, eggs and bread	0 fr. 30
Bergini	3 fr.
Belot, paints.....	1 fr.50
Dinner.....	1 fr.20

	6 fr.

The Journal of Eugene Delacroix. London: Phaidon Press, 1951, pp.28-9

Reflection

'By keeping a record of my experiences I live my life twice over.' Take a moment to reflect on this assertion.

**EUGÈNE
DELACROIX
(1798-1863)**

Eugène Delacroix was a French painter of historic and contemporary events, including *Liberty Leading the People*. His journals are prized for their insights into the creative process.

Day Two

Write your diary entry before or after doing the readings.

Readings

1) **On diary writing by Virginia Woolf, from her entry for January 20th, 1919:**

One hour's writing daily is my allowance for the next few weeks; and having hoarded it this morning I may spend part of it now, since L. is out and I am much behindhand with the month of January. I note however that this diary writing does not count as writing, since I have just re-read my year's diary and am much struck by the rapid haphazard gallop at which it swings along, sometimes indeed jerking almost intolerably over the cobbles. Still if it were not written rather faster than the fastest type-writing, if I stopped and took thought, it would never be written at all; and the advantage of the method is that it sweeps up accidentally several stray matters which I should exclude if I hesitated, but which are the diamonds of the dustheap.

A Writer's Diary, Being extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf. 2012. London: Persephone, p.178.

Reflection

As with many diarists, Virginia Woolf contradicts herself or permits ambiguities in her diary entries. What contradictions or ambiguities can you detect here?

2) **From Albert Camus' novel *The Plague*:**

It came to this: not only had the town ceased to be in touch with the rest of the world by normal means of communication, but also – according to a second notification – all correspondence was forbidden, to obviate the risk of letters' carrying infection outside the town. In the early days a favoured few managed to persuade the sentries at the gates to allow them to get messages through to the outside world. But that was only at the beginning of the epidemic, when the sentries found it natural to obey their feelings of humanity. Later on, when these same sentries had had the gravity of the situation drummed into them, they flatly refused to take responsibilities whose possible after-effects they could not foresee. At first, telephone calls to other towns were allowed, but this led to such crowding of the telephone booths and delays on the lines that for some

VIRGINIA WOOLF
(1882-1941)

Virginia Woolf pioneered the interior monologue technique in novels such as *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. She kept a diary – though not always consistently -- from the age of fourteen until four days before her suicide in 1941.

days they also were prohibited, and thereafter limited to what were called “urgent cases,” such as deaths, marriages, and births. So we had to fall back on telegrams. People linked together by friendship, affection, or physical love found themselves reduced to hunting for tokens of their past communion within the compass of a ten-word telegram. And since, in practice, the phrases one can use in a telegram are quickly exhausted, long lives passed side by side, or passionate yearnings, soon declined to the exchange of such trite formulas as: “Am well. Always thinking of you. Love.” [...]

Thus the first thing that plague brought to our town was exile. And the narrator is convinced that he can set down here, as holding good for all, the feeling he personally had and to which many of his friends confessed. It was undoubtedly the feeling of exile – that sensation of a void within which never left us, that irrational longing to hark back to the past or else to speed up the march of time, and those keen shafts of memory that stung like fire. Sometimes we toyed with our imagination, composing ourselves to wait for a ring at the bell announcing somebody’s return, or for the sound of a familiar footstep on the stairs; but, though we might deliberately stay at home at the hour when a traveller coming by the evening train would normally have arrived, and though we might contrive to forget for the moment that no trains were running, that game of make-believe, for obvious reasons, could not last. Always a moment came when we had to face the fact that no trains were coming in. And then we realized that the separation was destined to continue, we had no choice but to come to terms with the days ahead. In short, we returned to our prison-house, we had nothing left us but the past, and even if some were tempted to live in the future, they had speedily to abandon the idea – anyhow, as soon as could be – once they felt the wounds that the imagination inflicts on those who yield themselves to it.

Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert. 1948. New York: Modern Library College Editions. Available online: https://archive.org/stream/plague02camu/plague02camu_djvu.txt

Reflection

Have you experienced the type of ‘exile’ Camus describes in this extract?

ALBERT CAMUS (1913–1960)

Albert Camus was born in Algeria. A journalist, novelist and political essayist and activist, he summed up the absurdity of our human fate in the image of Sisyphus endlessly pushing his rock up the mountain and then having to repeat the task when the rock rolled back down. His essay on the subject begins: “There is only one really serious philosophical question, and that is suicide”. In 1957 he won the Nobel Prize for literature. He died in a (some say mysterious) car accident three years later at the age of 46.

Camus’ second novel, *La Peste* (1947), is about an epidemic in Oran. It can be read both literally and as an allegory about the Third Reich. The novel contradicted the never-again euphoria of the post-war moment and asserted instead that the next plague “would rouse up its rats again”.

3) **From Siegfried Sassoon's diary written at
No.25 Stationary Hospital Rouen**

February 22nd 1917

My fifth night in this squalid little compound. Four of my 6 fellow patients play cards all day, their talk is the dulllest obscenity. The other two are good enough – the one a rather charming little Scot in the gunners.

There are miles of pine woods on one side of the camp; I went [on] a walk among the quiet stems yesterday. The silence & the clean air did me good. It seemed easier to think clearly, a sore need now. My brain is so pitifully confused by the war and my own single part in it. All those people I have left in England have talked me nearly to death.

The people I have seen out here so far have made me feel that there is no hope for the race of men. All that is nice and tender in them is hidden by the obsession of war. They strut & shout & guzzle & try to forget their distress in dreary gabble about England (&the war!). It is all dull & hopeless & ugly & small. And while I lie awake staring at the darkness of the tent my own terrors get hold of me & I long only for life & comfort & the weeks before me seem horrible & agonizing. I haven't the physical health to face hardship & nerve strain. Nothing seems to matter but a speedy release from the hell that awaits me. Yet I should loathe the very idea of returning to England without having been scarred and tortured once more.

The Sassoon Diaries are online in manuscript form at

<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/sassoon/1>

Reflection

How does the presence of the other men in the ward help Sassoon focus on his own thoughts and feelings? Does your diary express secretly held irritation?

**SIEGFRIED
SASSOON
(1886-1967)**

Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) was an English poet. He is best known for his poems about World War I. On the battlefield he earned the nickname 'Mad Jack' for his suicidal actions. He won the Military Cross for his heroism but was nearly court-martialled for an open letter of protest he wrote refusing to fight any more. His friend Robert Graves came to the rescue by convincing the board that Sassoon was suffering from shell shock. He was sent to Craiglockhart War hospital where he met Wilfred Owen and read an early version of 'Dulce et Decorum Est'. Sassoon promoted Owen's poetry and reputation after his death.

Day Three

Write your diary entry for today.

Readings

- 1) **From Fernando Pêsoa's diary fragments written under the heteronym Bernardo Soares, published posthumously as *The Book of Disquiet*:**

I envy—but I'm not sure that envy is the right word—those people about whom one could write a biography, or who could write their autobiography. Through these deliberately unconnected impressions, I am the indifferent narrator of my autobiography without events, of my history without a life. These are my Confessions, and if I say nothing in them, it's because I have nothing to say.

What could anyone confess that would be worth anything or serve any useful purpose? What has happened to us has either happened to everyone or to us alone; if the former, it has no novelty value and if the latter it will be incomprehensible. I write down what I feel in order to lower the fever of feeling. What I confess is of no importance because nothing is of any importance. I make landscapes out of what I feel. I make a holiday of sensation. I understand women who embroider out of grief and those who crochet because life is what it is. My old aunt passed the infinite evenings playing patience. These confessions of my feelings are my game of patience. I don't interpret them, the way some read cards to know the future. I don't scrutinize them, because in games of patience the cards have no value in themselves. I unwind myself like a length of multicoloured yarn, or make cats cradles out of myself, like the ones children weave around stiff fingers and pass from one to the other. Taking care that my thumb doesn't miss the vital loop I turn it over to reveal a different pattern. Then I start again.

Living is like crocheting patterns to someone else's design. But while one works, one's thoughts are free and, as the ivory hook dives in and out amongst the wool, all the enchanted princes that ever existed are free to stroll through their parks. The crochet of things ... a pause ... Nothing...

Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*. 2010. London: Serpent's Tail, pp.24–25.

FERNANDO
PÊSSOA
(1888-1935)

Fernando Pêsoa was an enigmatic poet who pretended to be many different personalities (which he called 'heteronyms') and who wrote poems under these multiple identities. Born in Lisbon, Portugal, he completed his primary education in Durban when his widowed mother's new husband took up a post as a consul in South Africa. He composed *The Book of Disquiet* under the heteronym Bernardo Soares. This diary-like work of poetic fragments occupied Pessoa in the last two decades of his life but remained unfinished at his death. Its publication in 1982 and brought him posthumous fame.

Reflection

Why do you think Bernardo Soares/ Fernando Pêsoa writes a diary if he cannot see its purpose?

2) From Barbara Tuchman's book, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*.

Rumors of a terrible plague supposedly arising in China and spreading through Tartary (Central Asia) to India and Persia, Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, and all of Asia Minor had reached Europe in 1346. They told of a death toll so devastating that all of India was said to be depopulated, whole territories covered by dead bodies, other areas with no one left alive. As added up by Pope Clement VI at Avignon, the total of reported dead reached 23,840,000. In the absence of a concept of contagion, no serious alarm was felt in Europe until the trading ships brought their black burden of pestilence into Messina while other infected ships from the Levant carried it to Genoa and Venice. By January 1348 it penetrated France via Marseille, and North Africa via Tunis. Shipborne along coasts and navigable rivers, it spread westward from Marseille through the ports of Languedoc to Spain and northward up the Rhône to Avignon, where it arrived in March.... Between June and August it reached Bordeaux, Lyon, and Paris, spread to Burgundy and Normandy, and crossed the Channel from Normandy into southern England. From Italy during the same summer it crossed the Alps into Switzerland and reached eastward to Hungary. ... Leaving a strange pocket of immunity in Bohemia, and Russia unattacked until 1351, it had passed from most of Europe by mid-1350. Although the mortality rate was erratic, ranging from one fifth in some places to nine tenths or almost total elimination in others, the overall estimate of modern demographers has settled—for the area extending from India to Iceland—around the same figure expressed in Froissart's casual words: "a third of the world died." ...

Emotional response, dulled by horrors, underwent a kind of atrophy epitomized by the chronicler who wrote, "And in these days was burying without sorrowe and wedding without friendschippe." In Siena, where more than half the inhabitants died of the plague, work was abandoned on the great cathedral, planned to be the largest in the world, and never resumed, owing to loss of workers and master masons and "the melancholy and grief" of the survivors. The cathedral's truncated transept still stands in permanent witness to the sweep of death's scythe. Agnolo di Tura, a chronicler of Siena, recorded the fear of contagion that froze every other instinct. "Father abandoned child, wife husband, one brother another," he wrote, "for this plague seemed to strike through the breath and sight. And so they died. And no one could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship.... And I, Angolo di Tura, called the Fat, buried my five children with my own hands, and so did many others likewise."

Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*. 1978. New York: Ballantine Books.

Reflection

The subtitle of Tuchman's book is 'a distant mirror'. If you had to isolate just one aspect of the world's current predicament that you see mirrored in this extract, what would it be?

HAROLD
NICHOLSON
(1886-1968)

3) **From Harold Nicholson's diary:**

23rd August 1944

I am working on my notes for The Congress of Vienna and have just reached the point where the Allies enter Paris. I look up and see that it is already 1 pm. And I dash up to Viti's bedroom to listen to the news. It takes some time before the current gets through, and so I come into the middle of the first sentence: '... fifty thousand armed men with the assistance of many thousands of the unarmed population. By noon yesterday all official buildings were in the hands of the Resistance. Paris is free.' I am so excited that I scarcely notice that we have also taken Grenoble.

Viti rushes across to share the excitement. Mrs Staples says, 'How glad I am that they did it themselves', which is characteristic of our deep spirit of generosity. All of us have a glass of gin and toast the future of France.

Harold Nicholson was a British diplomat and author. He was married to Vita Sackville-West. Together they worked on the famous gardens of Sissinghurst Castle. Their unconventional marriage was depicted in *Portrait of a Marriage*, a biography written by their son, Nigel.

Harold Nicholson's Diaries and Letters 1939-1945. 1967. London: Collins (pp.394-5)

Reflection

Have you lived through a great historic moment? Are you living through one now?

Day Four

Write your diary entry for today.

Readings

- 1) From Susan Sontag, *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947-1963*:

31st December 1957

On Keeping a journal

Superficial to understand the journal as just a receptacle for one's private, secret thoughts—like a confidante who is deaf, dumb, and illiterate. In the journal I do not just express myself more openly than I could do to any person; I create myself. The journal is a vehicle for my sense of selfhood. It represents me as emotionally and spiritually independent. Therefore (alas) it does not simply record my actual, daily life but rather — in many cases — offers an alternative to it.

There is often a contradiction between the meaning of our actions toward a person and what we say we feel toward that person in a journal. But this does not mean that what we do is shallow, and only what we confess to ourselves is deep. Confessions, I mean sincere confessions of course, can be more shallow than actions. I am thinking now of what I read today (when I went up to 122 Boulevard Saint-Germain to check for her mail) in H's [Sontag's lover] journal about me — that curt, unfair, uncharitable assessment of me which concludes by her saying that she really doesn't like me but my passion for her is acceptable and opportune. God knows it hurts, and I feel indignant.

SUSAN SONTAG
(1933-2004)

Susan Sontag was an aesthete and essayist, part of a brilliant circle of women based in New York. Born Susan Rosenblatt, she took her stepfather's surname. She kept her nearly one hundred journals and notebooks in a walk-in closet in her bedroom. After her death at age seventy-one, her son David Rieff began editing them for publication. They include *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947-1963* and *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals And Notebooks, 1964-1980s*. The diaries revealed the same-sex love affairs she had largely kept hidden.

2008. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Reflection

'I create myself' says Sontag of her journal. In what way, do you think, does a journal make self-creation possible?

2) From Pico Iyer's book, *Falling off the Map: Some Lonely Places of the World*:

When people think of lonely places, they tend to think of moody outcrops off the coast of Scotland, or washed-up atolls adrift in the Pacific. They may even think of the place where I am writing this, a silent hermitage above the sea along the unpeopled coast of California. But lonely places are not just isolate places, for loneliness is a state of mind. The hut where I am sitting now is utterly alone. For days on end, I do not hear a single voice; and from where I write I cannot see a trace of human habitation. Yet, in a deeper sense, the place is packed. I am companioned – by rabbits, stars, and wisps of cloud – in worlds far richer than any capital. The air is charged with presences, and every inch of hillside stirs. I watch for the skittering of a fox on my terrace, listen to the crickets chattering in the dusk, catch a bluejay's wings against the light. Birds sing throughout the day, and the ocean's colours shift. Everything is a jubilee of blue and gold, and at night, walking along the hills, I feel as if I am walking towards a starlit Temple of Apollo. A Lonely Place in principle, perhaps, but not in spirit.

PICO IYER (1957-)

Pico Iyer is a travel writer, novelist and inspirational speaker (on the subject of stillness) whose new memoir, *A Beginner's Guide to Japan: Observations and Provocations*, pays homage to his adopted home.

Pico Iyer, *Falling off the Map: Some Lonely Places of the World*. 1994. London: Vintage.

Reflection

If being alone isn't loneliness, as Pico Iyer seems to be saying, then what is? And have you experienced it?

3) From Sylvia Plath's diaries

Tuesday afternoon, March 6th 1956

Oh someone, I run through names, thinking someone: hear me, take me to your heart, be warm and let me cry and cry and cry. And help me be strong: oh Sue, oh Mr Fisher, oh Ruth Beuscher, oh, mother. My god. I shall probably write Elly.

Sunday, November 1st 1959

I wonder about the poems I am doing. They seem moving, interesting, but I wonder how deep they are. The absence of a tightly reasoned and rhythmized logic bothers me. Yet frees me...

Feel unlike writing anything today. A horror that I am really at bottom uninterested in people: the reason I don't write stories. ... What an inertia has overcome me: a sense of fatality...

Wednesday, November 4th 1959

Paralysis again. How I waste my days. I feel a terrific blocking and chilling go through me like anesthesia. I wonder, will I ever be rid Of Johnny Panic? Ten years from my successful seventeen, and a cold voice says: What have you done? What have you done?

Wednesday, November 11th 1959

I only write here when I am at wits' end, in a cul-de-sac. Never when I am happy. As I am today.

Saturday, November 14th 1959

Wrote an exercise on mushrooms yesterday which Ted likes. And I do too. My absolute lack of judgement when I've written something: whether it's trash or genius.

SYLVIA PLATH
(1932-1963)

A lifelong diary writer, Sylvia Plath used her daily entries as a sourcebook for her poems and stories. The two bound journals she wrote during the last three years of her life are not included in the volume referred to on the left. One of them disappeared, and the other was destroyed by her husband Ted Hughes. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, he explained: 'What I actually destroyed was one journal that covered maybe two or three months, the last months. And it was just sad. I just didn't want her children to see it, no. Particularly her last days.'

The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962. 2000. London: Faber

Reflection

Is there an entry among these selections you particularly identify with? Why?

Day Five

Write your daily diary entry.

JOHN FOWLES
(1926–2005)

Readings

1) From John Fowles' journal:

28 April 1958

'What a diary must preserve - the attitudes and nature of the diarist. Therefore, all excision, amendment, clarification, cleaning; one must think. The language can be cleaned, perhaps; but every change from the written word is a lie. In my case, if I ever revised, I should want to hide the self-excusing, the priggishness.'

The Journals Volume I: 1949-1965. 2005: Knopf

Reflection

In your case, what would you like to 'hide' if your diary were to be revised for publication?

The success of John Fowles' first novel, *The Collector*, which was based on his experiences in Greece, allowed him to give up school teaching. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) brought further success and turned Lime Regis into even more of a tourist attraction. Fowles' diaries are very revealing and occasionally hurtful, but he did not believe in censoring them.

2) From James Gleick's biography of Isaac Newton:

He built bookshelves and made a small study for himself. He opened the nearly blank thousand-page commonplace book he had and named it his Waste Book. He began filling it with reading notes. These mutated seamlessly into original research. He set himself problems; considered them obsessively; calculated answers, and asked new questions. He pushed past the frontier of knowledge (though he did not know this). The plague year was his transfiguration. Solitary and almost incommunicado, he became the world's paramount mathematician.

James Gleick, 2004. *Isaac Newton*. London: Vintage.

Reflection

What do you think of Isaac Newton's decision to call his notebook his 'Waste Book'?

3) From the journal of Jules Renard:

March 1905

I live like an old man. I read the papers a little, a few pieces out of books, I set down a few notes, I keep warm, and, often, I nap.

I am no longer capable of dying young.

In the taste of life, there is something of a fine liqueur.

Little Joseph, Phillippe's young son, died last night. There was another one who didn't give a damn about immortality!

'The sparrow says of us: 'They build houses so that we can build our nests in their walls.'

Yes, what death does is interesting, but it repeats itself too much....

I suddenly abolished a number of things I was very fond of: poetry, fishing, hunting, swimming. When will I abolish prose, literature? When, life?

Nights without sleep, long nights in which the brain lights up like a big city.

The Journal of Jules Renard. 2008. New York: The House Books. (pp214-215)

Reflection

How old does Jules Renard sound to you in this extract?

JULES RENARD (1864-1910)

Jules Renard was a French author best known for his autobiographical novel, *Poil de carotte* (*Carrot Top*, 1894) about an unloved redheaded child. His widely admired journal contains delightful epigrams such as 'Laziness is nothing more than the habit of resting before you get tired'.

Day Six

Write your diary entry for today.

Readings

1) From Allen Ginsberg's 'Meditations on Record Keeping by Poet':

I saw all that [was] at stake and thought best to keep a record: in my own writing but also just sort of an archive. So after I milked the notebooks for poems, I just kept hold of the notebooks for whatever I had in it, though I didn't keep like a historical record of conversations ... the best I thought I could do was just keep a record of my own changes of self-nature and perceptions – you know, intermittent perceptions, spots of time. So my notebook is thoughts, epiphanies, vivid moments of haiku, poems, but not a continuous diary of conversations like Virginia Woolf, or Anais Nin, or Boswell.

Journals: Mid-Fifties, 1954-1958. 1995. New York: HarperCollins

Reflection

What word(s) does Ginsberg himself use to denote the books that were later published under the title *Journals*?

ALLEN GINSBERG
(1926–1997)

A highly admired poet of the Beat movement, Allen Ginsberg's poem 'Howl', was an expression of rage against his times. In life and writing he was spontaneous. When he heard that he had liver cancer, Ginsberg immediately wrote twelve brief poems. He died two days later.

2) From Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*:

What I am about to tell you now is a marvellous thing to hear; and if I and others had not seen it with our own eyes I would not dare to write it, however much I was willing to believe and whatever the good faith of the person from whom I heard it. So violent was the malignancy of this plague that it was communicated, not only from one man to another, but from the garments of a sick or dead man to animals of another species, which caught the disease in that way and very quickly died of it. One day among other occasions I saw with my own eyes (as I said just now) the rags left lying in the street of a poor man who had died of the plague; two pigs came along and, as their habit is, turned the clothes over with their snouts and then munched at them, with the result that they both fell dead almost at once on the rags, as if they had been poisoned.

From these and similar or greater occurrences, such fear and fanciful notions took possession of the living that almost all of them adopted the same cruel policy, which was entirely to avoid the sick and everything belonging to them. By so doing, each one thought he would secure his own safety.

Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* trans. Richard Aldington. 1957. London: Elek Books, p.3

**GIOVANNI
BOCCACCIO**
(1313-1375)

Alongside Petrarch and Dante, Giovanni Boccaccio is one of Italy's most revered writers. His most well-known work is the *Decameron* a collection of tales told by characters who have escaped the plague in Florence by going into the countryside. The stories are told over a ten-day period, hence the title.

Reflection

Seven centuries on, what are your thoughts? Does your experience of COVID-19 share anything in common with that of Boccaccio's narrator?

3) From the journal of Dorothy Wordsworth:

Thursday 15th April 1802. It was a threatening misty morning—but mild. We set off after dinner from Eusemere. Mrs Clarkson went a short way with us but turned back. The wind was furious and we thought we must have returned. We first rested in the large Boat-house, then under a furze Bush opposite Mr Clarkson's. Saw the plough going in the field. The wind seized our breath the Lake was rough. There was a Boat by itself floating in the middle of the Bay below Water Millock. We rested again in the Water Millock Lane. The hawthorns are black and green, the birches here and there greenish but there is yet more of purple to be seen on the Twigs. We got over into a field to avoid some cows—people working, a few primroses by the roadside, woodsorrel flower, the anemone, scentless violets, strawberries,

and that starry yellow flower which Mrs C. calls pile wort. When we were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow park we saw a few daffodils close to the water side. We fancied that the lake had floated the seeds ashore and that the little colony had so sprung up. But as we went along there were more and yet more and at last under the boughs of the trees, we saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, about the breadth of a country turnpike road. I never saw daffodils so beautiful they grew among the mossy stones about and about them, some rested their heads upon these stones as on a pillow for weariness and the rest tossed and reeled and danced and seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind that blew upon them over the lake, they looked so gay ever glancing ever changing. This wind blew directly over the lake to them. There was here and there a little knot and a few stragglers a few yards higher up but they were so few as not to disturb the simplicity and unity and life of that one busy highway. We rested again and again. The Bays were stormy, and we heard the waves at different distances and in the middle of the water like the sea. Rain came on—we were wet when we reached Luffs but we called in. Luckily all was cheerless and gloomy so we faced the storm—we *must* have been wet if we had waited—put on dry clothes at Dobson's. I was very kindly treated by a young woman, the Landlady looked sour but it is her way. She gave us a goodish supper. Excellent ham and potatoes. We paid 7/ when we came away. William was sitting by a bright fire when I came downstairs. He soon made his way to the Library piled up in a corner of the window. He brought out a volume of Enfield's *Speaker*, another miscellany, and an odd volume of Congreve's plays. We had a glass of warm rum and water. We enjoyed ourselves and wished for Mary. It rained and blew when we went to bed. N.B. Deer in Gowbarrow park like skeletons.

Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth ed. Mary Moorman. 1971. New York: Oxford UP, pp109-110.

Reflection

Can you remember the poem William Wordsworth wrote about this windy walk?

DOROTHY WORDSWORTH (1771-1855)

Dorothy Wordsworth began a new journal when she and her brother William moved to Dove Cottage, Grasmere, in the Lake District. William was the journal's intended audience and he drew on it for inspiration and as an aid to memory when writing his poems. All Dorothy's journal entries contain multiple afterthoughts, deletions and corrections which are only evident in the manuscript versions. They show how intent she was on precision. Modern readers do not agree with her first editor, William Knight, who opined that 'all the Journals contain numerous trivial details, which bear ample witness to the "plain living and high thinking" of the Wordsworth household...but there is no need to record all the cases in which the sister wrote, "To-day I mended William's shirts," or "William gathered sticks," or "I went in search of eggs," etc. etc.'

Day Seven

Remember to write your diary entry.

Readings

1) From John Steinbeck's *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters*:

Monday March 26, 1951. I wonder why, on such a day as this, when the story is particularly clear in my head, I have a kind of virginal reluctance to get to it. I seem to want to think about it and moon about it for a very long time before I actually get down to it. Today, I think I know one of the main reasons. Today's work is so important that I am afraid of it. It requires the use of the most subtle rhythms both of speech and thought. And I use that last advisedly because thought has its rhythms and qualities just as poetry has. I think that the two are very closely related. Thus after a couple of days off, I think I write in this page almost like a pitcher warming up to pitch—getting my mental arm in shape to pitch a good game. And the pitcher is not a bad symbol since he must have smoothness and coordination and rhythm all together.

John Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters*. Penguin Modern Classics Kindle Edition.

JOHN STEINBECK
(1902-1968)

John Steinbeck won the 1962 Nobel Prize for Literature. While working on *The Grapes of Wrath* he kept a journal which he said should be made available to his two sons after his death so they could 'look behind the myth and hearsay and flattery and slander'. He kept a similar journal as he wrote *East of Eden*. While Virginia Woolf wrote her diary after tea, when the day's work was done, Steinbeck liked to begin the day with his journal entry.

Reflection

What do you think the relationship is between the 'virginal reluctance' Steinbeck refers to at the beginning of this entry and the image of 'a pitcher warming up to pitch' at the end?

2) From the diary of Samuel Pepys:

April 30th 1665 Great fears of the Sickenesses here in the City, it being said that two or three houses are already shut up.

June 7th 1665 This day, much against my Will, I did in Drury-lane see two or three houses marked with a red cross upon the doors, and 'Lord have mercy upon us' writ there – which was a sad sight to me, being the first of that kind that ... I ever saw. It put me into an ill conception of myself and my smell, so that I was forced to buy some roll tobacco to smell to and chaw – which took away the apprehension.

June 10th 1665 In the evening home to supper, and there to my great trouble hear that the plague is come into the City ... To the office to finish my letters, and then home to bed - being troubled at the sickness, and my head filled also with ... how to put my things and estate in order, in case it should please God to call me away - which God dispose of to his own glory. [...]

August 16th 1665 It was dark before I could get home; and so land at church-yard stairs, where to my great trouble I met a dead Corps, of the plague, in the narrow ally, just bringing down a little pair of stairs - but I thank God I was not much disturbed at it. However, I shall beware of being late abroad again.

August 28th 1665 ... But now, how few people I see, and those walking like people that have taken leave of the world....

December 31st 1665 ... Thus ends this year, to my great joy, in this manner: – I have raised my estate from 1300l in this year to 4400l. I have got myself greater interest, I think, by my diligence; and my employments encreased ... It is true we have gone through great melancholy because of the great plague, and I put to great charges by it, by keeping my family long at Woolwich, and myself and another part of my family, my clerks, at my charge at Greenwich, and a maid at London. But I hope the King will give us some satisfaction for that. But now the plague is abated almost to nothing... I have never lived so merrily (besides that I never got so much) as I have done this plague-time...

January 3rd 1666 ... with great joy I received the good news of the decrease of the plague this week ...

January 16th 1666 ... So home late at my letters, and so to bed, being mightily troubled at the newes of the plague's being encreased, and was much the saddest news that the plague hath brought me from the beginning of it; because of the lateness of the year, and the fear, we may with reason have, of its continuing with us the next summer. ...

January 30th 1666 ... This is the first time I have been in this church since I left London for the plague, and it frightened me ... to see so [many] graves lie so high upon the churchyards where people have been buried of the plague. I was much troubled at it, and do not think to go through it again a good while.

SAMUEL PEPYS (1633-1703)

Samuel Pepys, a civil servant in London, kept a decade-long diary from 1659 ranging in content from intensely personal revelations to accounts of the big events of his time, including the plague, the Great Fire, and the coronation of Charles II.

Reflection

Would you describe Pepys as unpleasantly self-absorbed or authentically human?

3) From the diary of Henry David Thoreau:

April 13 1852. A driving snow-storm in the night and still raging; five or six inches deep on a level at 7 A.M. All birds are turned into snowbirds. Trees and houses have put on the aspect of winter. The traveller's carriage wheels, the farmer's wagon, are converted into white disks of snow through which the spokes hardly appear. But it is good now to stay in the house and read and write. We do not now go wandering all abroad and dissipated, but the imprisoning storm condenses our thoughts. I can hear the clock tick as not in pleasant weather. My life is enriched. I love to hear the wind howl. I have a fancy for sitting with my book or paper in some mean and apparently unfavorable place, in the kitchen, for instance, where the work is going on, rather a little cold than comfortable.

The Complete Works of Henry David Thoreau: Thoreau's Journals.

2017. Hastings: Delphi Classics.

HENRY DAVID
THOREAU
(1817-1862),

Henry David Thoreau's journal – amounting to over 2 million words at his death – was for him a way of recording both scientifically and poetically the nature he observed in his daily walks near his home in Concord, Massachusetts.

Reflection

Have you had a similar experience to the one Thoreau describes when he refers to the way 'the imprisoning storm condenses our thoughts'?

Day Eight

Write your diary entry for today.

Readings

1) From the diary of Virginia Woolf

Easter Sunday, April 20th 1919

In the idleness which succeeds any long article ... I got out this diary and read, as one always does read one's own writing, with a kind of guilty intensity. I confess that the rough and random style of it, often so ungrammatical, and crying for a word altered, afflicted me somewhat. I am trying to tell whichever self it is that reads this hereafter that I can write very much better; and take no time over this; and forbid her to let the eye of man behold it. And now I may add my little compliment to the effect that it has a slapdash and vigour and sometimes hits an unexpected bull's eye. But what is more to the point is my belief that the habit of writing thus for my own eye only is good practice. It loosens the ligaments. Never mind the misses and the stumbles. Going at such a pace as I do I must make the most direct and instant shots at my object, and thus have to lay hands on words, choose them and shoot them with no more pause than is needed to put my pen in the ink. I believe that during the past year I can trace some increase of ease in my professional writing which I attribute to my casual half hours after tea. Moreover there looms ahead of me the shadow of some kind of form which a diary might attain to. I might in the course of time learn what it is that one can make of this loose, drifting material of life; finding another use for it than the use I put it to, so much more consciously and scrupulously, in fiction. What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something loose knit and yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace anything, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind. I should like it to resemble some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all, in which one flings a mass of odds and ends without looking them through. I should like to come back, after a year or two, and find that the collection had sorted itself and refined itself and coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do, into a mould, transparent enough to reflect the light of our life, and yet steady, tranquil compounds with the aloofness of a work of art. The main requisite, I think on re-reading my old volumes, is not to play the part of censor, but to write as the mood comes or of anything whatever; since I was curious to find how I went for things put in haphazard, and found the significance to lie where I never saw it at the time.

A Writer's Diary, Being extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf. 1981. London: Harvest.

Reflection

In your diary entries so far, have you been able to write 'as the mood comes or of anything whatever? Have you gone back and read those entries 'with a kind of guilty intensity'?

2) From the conclusion of Mark Harrison’s book *Contagion*, written in the aftermath of the 2009 H1N1 influenza that may have killed over 200 000 people:

In recent years, a great deal of thought has also gone into devising ‘early warning systems’ and into ensuring that governments and private organizations make contingency plans. We may or may not feel reassured by these measures but the recent history of responses to influenza suggests that governments will probably aggravate the economic damage that inevitably results from a pandemic.

Mark Harrison, *Contagion*. 2012. Yale University Press, pp.278-279.

3) From Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, which refers to a plague in Athens in 430BC that killed over 100 000 people:

So great a plague and mortality of men was never remembered to have happened in any place before. For at first neither were the physicians able to cure it through ignorance of what it was but died fastest themselves, as being the men that most approached the sick, nor any other art of man availed whatsoever. All supplications to the gods and inquiries of oracles and whatsoever other means they used of that kind proved all unprofitable; insomuch as subdued with the greatness of the evil, they gave them all over.

THUCYDIDES
c460 BC–c400 BC

Thucydides, an Athenian historian, believed that history repeats itself. His *History of the Peloponnesian War* is prefaced: “To hear this history rehearsed, for that there be inserted in it no fables, shall be perhaps not delightful. But he that desires to look into the truth of things done, and which (according to the condition of humanity) may be done again, or at least their like, shall find enough herein to make him think it profitable.”

Reflection

Do these two commentaries, written centuries apart, have anything in common with each other or with your own experience? What comes to mind when you read that ‘governments will probably aggravate the economic damage that inevitably results from a pandemic’?

MAY SARTON
(1912-1995)

4) From May Sarton's *Journal of a Solitude*:

September 15, 1972

Begin here. It is raining. I look out on the maple, where a few leaves have turned yellow, and listen to Punch, the parrot, talking to himself and to the rain ticking gently against the windows. I am here alone for the first time in weeks, to take up my "real" life again at last. That is what is strange—that friends, even passionate love, are not my real life unless there is time alone in which to explore and to discover what is happening or has happened. Without the interruptions, nourishing and maddening, this life would become arid. Yet I taste it fully only when I am alone here and "the house and I resume old conversations."

Journals of May Sarton, Kindle edition.

A prolific writer of poetry and novels, May Sarton reached her widest audience through her published journals. They reflect on the creative solitude of her life in New England.

Reflection

Do you have a 'real life' that you only experience when you're alone? Do any animals share that life with you? Are you aware of having conversations with your house?

Day Nine

Write your diary entry for today.

Readings

- 1) From Steve Schalchlin's online diary, 'Living in the bonus round':

Wednesday, December 11, 1996

Unlike a novel, the writer of a diary doesn't always know what's happening in his head. The reader has to pick up clues and figure it out. [I]n Book One of this diary ... I was actually dying right before your eyes and yet never really knew it until the very (almost) end. It's like a real life serial being played out before your eyes with the author making it up as he goes along. Was this ever even possible before the internet? Are we talking about this being a new artform altogether?

<http://www.bonusround.com/dec96.html>

STEVE
SCHALCHLIN
(1953–)

A composer who often said that music kept him alive, Steve Schalchlin began his online diary (weblog or 'blog') in 1996 when he believed he was dying from HIV/AIDS.

Reflection

Are there aspects of 'a real life serial' emerging in your diary??

2) From *In a Time of Plague: Memories of the 'Spanish' Flu Epidemic of 1918 in South Africa*:

The so-called 'Spanish' influenza epidemic which ravaged South Africa in September-October 1918 – contemporaries called the period 'Black October' – was the most lethal runaway disease outbreak in the country's history. In the space of six weeks some 300,000–350,000 people (or 6% of the entire population) died ... of the virulent disease and its complications. (p.x)

'The main thing that was used in those days, as far as I can remember, was garlic, garlic and brandy' (p.24)

'That flu came ... at the end of the 1914 war, in October. That Sea Point, that's where it began. The first to die were n Sea Point – whites ... And from that Sea Point it came so slowly... And it went through the whole Cape. I don't know how far it went. But when it was in the Cape, it was tragic ... There were plenty of people in the street, but they were in the street to remove the dead.' (p.34)

IN A TIME OF PLAGUE

In a Time of Plague: Memories of the 'Spanish' Flu Epidemic of 1918 in South Africa, edited by historian Howard Phillips, is based on interviews with survivors of the pandemic recorded in the 1970s, as well as letters received from survivors after a public appeal.

Howard Phillips, *In a Time of Plague: Memories of the 'Spanish' Flu Epidemic of 1918 in South Africa*. 2018. Cape Town: VRS/VRV

Reflection

Do you have any family stories related to the 1918 flu epidemic?

3) From the diary of Katherine Mansfield:

January 3 1919

A load of wood. Sent review. Cold day. Miss K.S. called – deadly dull. Her yawn and recovery. Storm of wind and rain. I had a nightmare about Jack. He and I ‘separate’. Miss K.S. talked about tulips, but she makes all sound so fussy: the threads of her soul all unravelled.

January 4 1919

Cold, wet, windy, terrible weather. Fought it all day. Horribly depressed. Dickenson came to tea; but it was no good. Worked. Two wires from J. According to promise. I cannot write. The jonquils are out, weak and pale. Black clouds pull over.

Immediately the sun goes in I am overcome – again the black fit takes me. I *hate* the *sea*. There is naught to do but WORK. But how can I work when this awful weakness makes even the pen like a walking-stick?

KATHERINE
MANSFIELD
1888–1923

Short story writer
Katherine Mansfield left New Zealand at the age of nineteen and joined London’s literary circles. She recorded her short, tempestuous life in her diary. Her husband John Middleton Murry’s edition of her *Journal*, first published in 1927, effectively censored her, though with apparently good intentions. Ironically, in 1919, his last year of work at the War Office, he had been made ‘chief censor.’

Katherine Mansfield, *Letters and Journals*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp.163-4

Reflection

‘But how can I work when this awful weakness makes even the pen like a walking-stick?’ If you had to explain Katherine Mansfield’s metaphor in this sentence to a class of teenagers, what would you say?

Day Ten

Write your final diary entry (for the purposes of this course).

Readings

1) From "How Do Diaries End?" by Philippe Lejeune and Victoria Lodewick:

My research, and the preparation of the exhibit, have shown me the extreme diversity of diary forms and functions, and above all, the transient and scattered nature of diary writing practices throughout a lifetime. People who remain faithful unto death to one and the same diary are rare. You keep a journal for a week, six months, a year, for one reason; fifteen years later, for another reason, you stop and start up again with a very different kind of journal, and so on. These are relationships, passing fancies. There are periods with a diary and periods without. Keeping a journal is often an activity for periods of crisis: discontinuity is typical. Discontinuity, for that matter, is part and parcel of the diary's rhythm. There are two schools of diary-writers. There are those who write each day out of discipline or habit, who suffer when they skip a day and "catch up" when they're behind, filling in omissions. And there are those who write, more or less regularly, when they need to. In the latter case, the most common one, how do you know if a journal is 'finished'? Suppose I haven't written in three months. I pick up my pen and in a few seconds the continuity of writing sews up the hole. Or I don't, but I think about it, sometimes composing journal entries in my head that I never write down—everything is left in suspense. Or else I completely neglect my journal, and it's when I suddenly find it again that I realize it's 'finished.' For example, Roger Martin du Gard wrote in 1949, one month after his wife's death: *For the past month I have been watching myself think, act, suffer, and continue to live in a kind of stupid astonishment. I am trying to understand what has happened to me, what am feeling. I am living in a kind of lucid stupor. The fact that I have not been tempted even once to open this diary, to record the most serious event of my entire life, surely proves that this is finished, that it no longer responds to my needs.*

In *Biography* Vol.24, No.1, Winter 2001, pp.99-112.

ROGER MARTIN
DU GARD
(1881-1958)

Although Roger Martin du Gard (quoted by Lejeune and Lodewick) won the 1937 Nobel Prize for Literature and was a friend of André Gide's, he is little known in the English-speaking world. He kept a diary, and also portrayed his characters through their diaries, notably Antoine Thibault in *Les Thibault*. It's interesting to read his 1949 diary entry in the light of a letter he once wrote to his wife: "The truth is that you have a taste for manual tasks which has become a kind of mania. You are an old ant, unrepentant and stubborn, and I will be obliged to live in the attic to escape your feather duster".

Reflection

Do you think you will continue writing a diary now that you've started?

2) From Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*.

The contagion despised all medicine; death raged in every corner; and had it gone on as it did then, a few weeks more would have cleared the town of all, and everything that had a soul. Men everywhere began to despair; every heart failed them for fear; people were made desperate through the anguish of their souls, and the terrors of death sat in the very faces and countenances of the people.

In that very moment when we might very well say, 'Vain was the help of man',—I say, in that very moment it pleased God, with a most agreeable surprise, to cause the fury of it to abate, even of itself; and the malignity declining, as I have said, though infinite numbers were sick, yet fewer died, and the very first weeks' bill decreased 1843; a vast number indeed!

It is impossible to express the change that appeared in the very countenances of the people that Thursday morning when the weekly bill came out. It might have been perceived in their countenances that a secret surprise and smile of joy sat on everybody's face. They shook one another by the hands in the streets, who would hardly go on the same side of the way with one another before. Where the streets were not too broad they would open their windows and call from one house to another, and ask how they did, and if they had heard the good news that the plague was abated. Some would return, when they said good news, and ask, 'What good news?' and when they answered that the plague was abated and the bills decreased almost two thousand, they would cry out, 'God be praised!' and would weep aloud for joy, telling them they had heard nothing of it; and such was the joy of the people that it was, as it were, life to them from the grave. I could almost set down as many extravagant things done in the excess of their joy as of their grief; but that would be to lessen the value of it...

I can go no farther here. I should be counted censorious, and perhaps unjust, if I should enter into the unpleasing work of reflecting, whatever cause there was for it, upon the unthankfulness and return of all manner of wickedness among us, which I was so much an eye-witness of myself. I shall conclude the account of this calamitous year therefore with a coarse but sincere stanza of my own, which I placed at the end of my ordinary memorandums the same year they were written:

A dreadful plague in London was
In the year sixty-five,
Which swept an hundred thousand souls
Away; yet I alive!

DANIEL DEFOE (1660–1731)

Daniel Defoe's business ventures often failed, sending him to debtor's prison, an experience he used later in his novel *Moll Flanders*. Although well-known as a journalist and pamphleteer, he only turned to novel writing in his late fifties, achieving acclaim for *Robinson Crusoe*. Classifying his oeuvre has caused headaches in literary circles: some wonder if *A Journal of the Plague Year* should not rather be filed under 'history' because it is based on real events.

Reflection

Defoe's narrator describes the moment London's inhabitants realize the plague has ended. Can you imagine a similar moment arriving in the current plague?

3) From the last journal entry by André Gide, written six days before his death:

NO! I cannot admit that with the end of this notebook, everything will be over; that it will be done. Maybe I will want to still add something more. Add I don't know what. Just add. Maybe. At the last minute, add still something more.... I'm tired, it's true. But I don't want to sleep. It seems that I could be even more tired. I have no idea what time of night, or day, it is.... Do I still have anything to say? Something more to say I don't know what.

My own place in the sky, in relation to the sun, mustn't make dawn seem any less beautiful.

ANDRÉ GIDE
(1869-1951)

André Gide was a French novelist and critic who won the 1947 Nobel prize for literature. Many of his novels read like journals or were drawn in part from his journal.

André Gide, *Ainsi soit-il*, in *Journal*. Paris: Gallimard: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, tome II, p.199.

Reflection

'Do I still have anything to say?' asks Gide. Do you?

Submit your assignment

Now it's time to submit your assignment. Attach it to an email to [Finuala Dowling](#). The closing date is 31 July 2020. You can choose to send any one of the following:

- The diary entries you have written (in full or with excisions).
- A reflective essay on the experience of keeping a diary, with or without selected quotations from your diary.
- A reflective essay on one or more of the readings provided in this course.
- An essay that reflects both on your own diary and the readings that struck you during the course.
- A collection of no more than ten poems written during or after your ten days of reading and writing.
- A short story written in a diary format.

Submission guidelines

Give your assignment a title.

Make sure your name is on the assignment.

The assignment should be submitted in the form of a Word document attached to an email. (If you have kept a handwritten diary and wish to submit it, please type it up.)

Essays should be between 500 and 2000 words long.