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Author gives tips on nature of writing

Sports Illustrated and Time magazine scribe tells students to 'do what is right'

Katie Jacobson

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Nature author and magazine writer Bil Gilbert doled out advice on how to be a good journalist Monday to about 40 students, faculty and local residents in Fisk Hall 211.

Gilbert has written for Sports Illustrated and Time magazines and also authored "Westering Man: The Life of Joseph Walker," "How Animals Communicate" and "Our Nature."

"When I talk, I talk like a butterfly," he said. "I do a series of regressions. I write that way."

Gilbert drew on the experiences of a journalism career that has spanned more than 60 years.

"If you're going to be a writer, if you're real, if you're serious, listen long enough (to your critics so) that you understand it," he said. "Do what you think is right."

Sponsored by the Center for the Writing Arts, Medill School of Journalism, Communications Residential College and the Northwestern Alumni Association, Gilbert's talk was part of the center's literary journalism seminar.

Journalism Prof. David Abrahamson, who directs the writing center, said Gilbert was brought to speak because he is an extraordinary writer.

"Every writer approaches writing differently," Abrahamson said.

"Gilbert's approach relies on his belief that 'writing precedes perception,' which is remarkable given how beautifully structured all of his writing is."

Gilbert noted the changes in the field of journalism since he started out at age 14, when he said journalists often were considered outlaws.

"Journalists in Washington are now becoming part of the establishment," he said. "There are easier ways to get there than being a journalist. You don't have to take so many bribes."

Journalism students worry too much about their future careers, Gilbert said.

"You're too concerned with what's going to happen next," he said. "Once you've had breakfast, you better do something other than going down the road looking for lunch."

Gilbert also said journalists are like exhibitionists in print.

"I think that writers are actors who don't have guts to get on the stage," he said.

Students said they enjoyed Gilbert's animated anecdotes and agreed with the fact that he said luck played an important role in his career.

"Lots of people can write really well," said Medill sophomore Mark Brandau. "Even more people never get any lucky breaks."

Medill senior Dave Garbe thought Gilbert offered a unique vision of the profession.

"It's interesting to get a a different perspective and to see how things have changed," Garbe said.

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