

Hallowell teaches and practices environmental writing

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

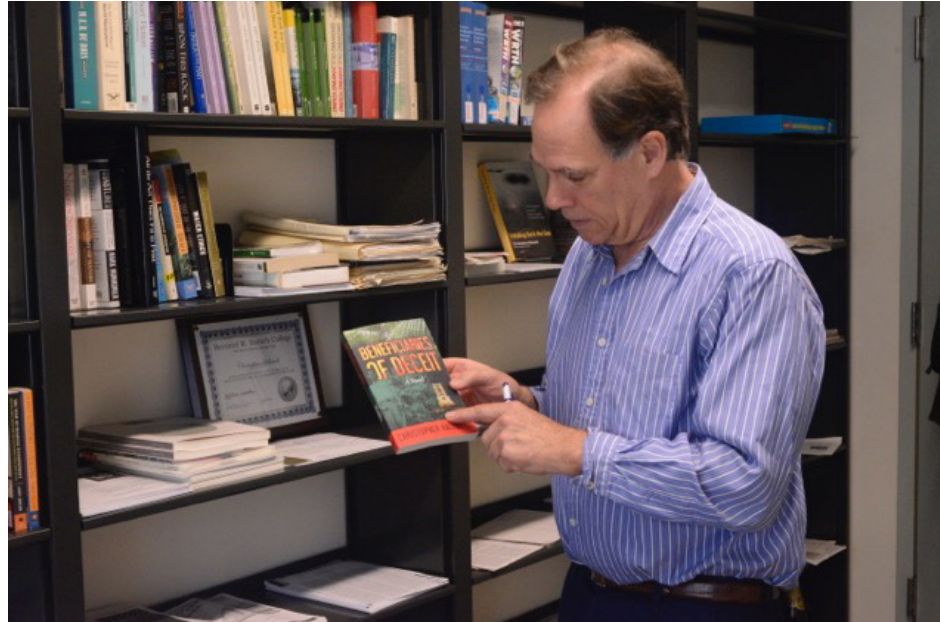
Over the last few decades, we have become increasingly aware of the environmental issues that we are facing, from pollution to the destruction of natural habitats, from species extinctions to climate change. A major player in creating this awareness has been the media, and someone who has practiced environmental journalism all of his professional life is Christopher Hallowell.

His interest in these issues can be traced back to his childhood. “As a kid, I spent a lot of time in the fields and woods and streams, and I became somehow very obsessed with how nature worked, so I took that with me to Harvard,” says Hallowell.

A native of Boston, Massachusetts, he obtained a master’s in journalism from Columbia University and majored in English at Harvard University. “I thought I’d continue my interest in the natural world, and subsequently I found myself doing a lot of editorial work in various magazines in New York City, and then I went on to books and then I decided, ‘Wow, I can teach this specialty that I’ve carved out for myself to students,’” said Hallowell.

Today, Hallowell is a professor in the Department of Journalism and the Writing Professions in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. “I find it very challenging. Baruch has a very, very urban student population, and students here, urban students, really don’t have to think about the environment because they’re on the sidewalk and in the subways. So one of my jobs in teaching environmental journalism is to awaken students to what is environment,” says Hallowell about the challenges of teaching environmental journalism in an urban setting.

His students’ lives are in sharp contrast to his own childhood. “I’m a country boy. I spent some of my life on a farm in the Berkshires, Massachusetts. My father was kind of a dirt farmer and had a herd of cows,” says Hallowell, who tries to provide his students with new experiences. “I take my students



Professor Hallowell with his latest book.

to as many venues as I can, sometimes Madison Square Park or the Newtown Creek Sewage Treatment Plant, which is kind of a big jump for them. They never think of that side of our lives—that what we produce has to go somewhere. They’re fascinated by the whole process, which is very much an environmental process.”

Among the things he teaches his students is how to get things right. “Sourcing material is probably the most important aspect of journalism these days, aside from communicating in a clear way, and I think all the journalism courses in our department include sourcing—Where did you get this material? How do you know it’s correct? How do you verify?” he explains.

In this world of “alternative facts,” telling like it isn’t always easy. “We can talk about global

warming; there are many, many people who believe in global warming; but there are the deniers, and they’re not going away too fast, especially now. I do teach students, ‘Not everyone is going to agree with you, and if you have the facts right and you believe in your facts, then you can argue that these are the facts.’ Now politics may get in the way; people will say, ‘No those aren’t the facts, we don’t believe it, the planet is not warming,’ and there is a bind there,” says Hallowell.

For him part of the problem is the lack of scientific literacy among most of the population. “Science is not very well taught at the high-school level. You have to get students interested in writing and writing about science. It doesn’t have to be complex science. If you can get students excited and get them to write about it, then in the process of writing and

the coaching that goes with teaching writing, you can get them to think in scientific terms, which is scientific literacy.”

Scientists themselves are, sometimes, part of the problem. “Scientists do find it hard to communicate to a lay audience. There is in our educational system a bias against learning how to communicate, because people are so busy learning medicine or learning physics or whatever that it’s not seen as important. It is seen as important in a professional field to be able to communicate to other professionals in that field in order to attend conferences and get published, but to communicate to a lay audience is not seen as important,” he says.

In addition to press articles, Hallowell has also published many books. “I decided to write a book titled *Holding Back the Sea*. It was about the efforts that New Orleans is making to try to combat what became inevitable, that the sea was going to inundate New Orleans. Then Hurricane Katrina came along and did exactly that. So that is a book that was hugely fun to write and really was an educational effort about the effects of global warming.”

He has always made incursions into fiction. “My latest book is based on some of the experiences I’ve had in the past in the Peruvian jungle and actually right here at Baruch. I had a sabbatical, and I decided that I had to get this out, so it’s a fictional account but based on real happenings, and I guess that’s part of journalism. There is a beautiful part of journalism that allows the writer to be him or herself.”

He is also concerned about the city where he works. “The city should be looking at 50 years, 100 years from now. The sea level is rising, and it’s frightening to look at the amount of melting going on in Greenland and Antarctica. This is happening very fast.”

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/198237973>

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