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Columnist encourages writers to question status quo

Author implores audience to explore, 'poke holes in other people's certainty'

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Author and columnist Ron Rosenbaum said bad ideas can be the root of evil and urged an audience of about 60 professors and students in a speech Monday to question concepts that, if unchecked, can shape everything from culture to public beliefs to self image.

"Your muse is uncertainty," Rosenbaum said. "You need to poke holes in other people's certainty, add uncertainty and conflict, and show other sides and aspects of an issue by writing about the debate."

Rosenbaum, who pens a column for the New York Observer, discussed "the journalism of ideas," a style of writing that investigates and questions accepted philosophies, as part of the Literature of Fact lecture series.

Journalism Prof. David Abrahamson, director of the Center for the Writing Arts, invited Rosenbaum to speak because of his prominence in the world of literary journalism.

"Rather than giving the reader an answer, he shows the reader that there isn't an answer," Abrahamson said. "He celebrates uncertainty."

When Rosenbaum began researching for his book, "Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil," he said he found many theories, ranging from psychoanalytic theories tracing back to childhood abuse to an application of the Freudian-like "missing testicle theory."

To shock readers, Rosenbaum put a baby picture of Hitler on the cover of the book. This picture of a normal-looking baby, Rosenbaum said, is threatening because it implies normality.

"If we think of Hitler as a pervert, it's comforting," Rosenbaum said. "It's more frightening to think of Hitler as normal, as like us."

Rosenbaum said his writing is therapeutic.

"I read something that gets me mad," Rosenbaum said. "Then I get to the bottom of it."

When he read about the work of scientist W.H. Sheldon, who thought that human nature could be reduced to

nude spinal measurements, Rosenbaum had to know the truth. Rosenbaum's story, "The Great Ivy League Nude Posture Photo Scandal," ran in The New York Times Magazine and challenged Sheldon's theory.

Medill freshman Danielle Carlson said she was excited to hear Rosenbaum speak after reading his investigation into Ivy League secret societies.

"He brought up issues and new perspectives on investigative journalism," Carlson said. "He has a different style of writing; it's well-researched and has his own commentary throughout."

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