

English 2268: Writing Creative Nonfiction I

Fall Semester 2012

- T/R - 2:20-3:40 - Derby 0062 -

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- Mailbox: 421 Denney Hall
- Office hours: Mondays, 3:30-5:00 or by appt. – Terra Byte Café, Science & Eng. Library

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Let the world burn through you. Throw the prism light, white hot, on paper. -Ray Bradbury

"...good writing is about telling the truth. We are a species that needs and wants to understand who we are. ... Don't worry about doing it well yet, though. Just start getting it down." - Anne Lamott

"The 'creative' aspect of writing nonfiction simply refers to the art, not the act of make-believe. It means that we heighten our use of language and shape our story; we impose a narrative of meaning that represents our individual emotional truths. That truth varies from person to person." -Kim Barnes.

"Find a subject you care about and which you in your heart feel others should care about. It is this genuine caring, not your games with language, which will be most the compelling and seductive element in your style." – Kurt Vonnegut

The ordeal is part of the commitment. Phillip Roth

English 2268 is an introductory course in reading and writing creative nonfiction. We will examine our own work and others' from a critical perspective, looking carefully at issues of style, content, and relevance. We will also be acquainting ourselves with various subgenres of creative nonfiction—including but not limited to personal essay, memoir, literary journalism, humor writing, the lyric essay, cultural criticism, etc.

We'll discuss many of the central questions that nonfiction writers ask along the way: What is creative nonfiction exactly? What does it mean to privilege truth, and what does that require of us as writers? How does one account for memory's notorious unreliability? How do we avoid sentimentality? While exploring such issues, we will push ourselves to sharpen our thinking about writing technique—about the choices we

make on the page and the effects of these choices on the reader. We will read closely, with an eye toward how certain authors make art out of the facts and materials of their world. And we will strive to measure up to their artistic standards, producing work that is original, vibrant and of course, true to life.

In addition to studying great creative nonfiction works, we will examine process. By this I mean we'll address this question: How did the writer create this? Each writer develops his or her own process, something that may change over time. By examining other writers' methods, we hope to develop our own. 2

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

I. Readings:

Readings will be posted on Carmen. You are required to print readings and bring them to class on the day in which they are being discussed.

II. Assignments:

- Attendance and Participation **25%**
- Workshop Critiques **15%**
- Writing Exercises **20%**
- Full-length essay for workshop **20%**
- Final Revision **20%**

Attendance and Participation (25%): This is a creative writing course and that makes all of you a writing community. You will be dependent on one another for feedback and conversation. So attendance is crucial. Everyone in this class suffers if you do not show up. Each unexcused absence will result in the lowering of your final grade by a third of a grade. Excused absences, such as those for documented illness, family tragedy, religious observance, or travel for inter-collegiate athletics, will not affect your grade. **It is program policy that five unexcused absences will automatically result in failure for the course.**

The first step is making it to class. The second step is participation, which is a must for this course. Class discussions and in-class exercises make up a significant portion of each class session. Your sensitive and constructive comments are encouraged and expected, as is the fulfillment of any reading or writing assignments due that day. In order for the workshop format to be productive, respect and consideration must be employed throughout. Especially in creative nonfiction, where writers may be sharing personal and intimate details of their own lives, this atmosphere of respect is paramount.

You are responsible for attending at least one evening public reading by a visiting author, OSU professor or graduate student. I will provide you with the calendar of events and remind you of coming readings. You will sign up to attend at least reading and upload to Carmen a one-paragraph reaction to your experience within one week of the event.

Finally, toward the end of the semester we will hold two days of readings in which you

will read a five-minute excerpt from any of the exercises or the full-length essay you have composed this semester.

Writing Exercises (20%): Towards the exploration of form and the strengthening of craft skills, written assignments will be due throughout the semester. Word max: 600 words. Due dates will be discussed as they arise.

Workshop Critiques (15%): During the workshop portion of this class, students are required to respond to their classmates' work in a constructive, written form. You will mark up and make notes on the manuscript itself, which will be returned to the writer at the end of his or her workshop. Attached will be a written response, no less than one page, single-spaced. You will also upload to Carmen a copy of each critique by 11:59 p.m. the night before each workshop.

Writing Portfolio (40%): You will write one long essay this semester: 10-15 pages in length double-spaced. It will be workshopped in class. Additionally, a thorough revision will be due at the end of the semester. We will discuss revision strategies as the semester progresses, but this second draft must be understood as a solid re-visioning, a "seeing-again," of the original piece—in terms of structure, scene-making, tone, etc. The portfolio will also include a **revision statement**, no less than one page, single-spaced, that concerns the decisions made in the revision process and the reshaping of the piece.

When I evaluate your essays, I will be looking for artistry, intellectual and emotional curiosity, honesty and original thinking. I will not put grades on your early work, preferring to wait until the end of the semester when I can judge how your work has progressed. If you become worried at any time about your performance in the class and would like some sort of sense of how you are doing, please do not hesitate to talk to me.

COURSE POLICIES

Tardiness is disruptive to the classroom environment and prevents you from fully participating and assimilating the information and materials discussed in class. Excessive tardiness will lower your participation grade.

Cell Phones: Texting, Beeping, Tweeting or Chirping during class hours is disruptive and disrespectful. If you are texting during class, you are more or less not there, and will be counted as absent for the day.

Plagiarism is the unauthorized use of the words or ideas of another person. It is a serious academic offense that can result in referral to the Committee on Academic Misconduct and failure for the course. Please remember that at no point during the writing process should the work of others be presented as your own. Note also that that plagiarism via the internet is not only dishonest, it's also liable to be caught. In creative writing, plagiarism not only undermines the academic environment, it also destroys the writer's artistic integrity.

Disabilities: Any student with a documented disability who may require special accommodations should identify him or herself to the instructor as early in the semester as possible to receive effective and timely accommodations. You may also wish to contact the Office for Disability Services (150 Pomerene Hall, 292-3307)

Class Cancellation Policy: In the unlikely event due to emergency, I will contact you via email and request that a note on department letterhead be placed on the door. In addition, I will contact you as soon as possible following the cancellation to let you know what will be expected of you for our next class meeting.

Term Schedule:

Week 1: The Situation and the Story

Th. 8/23. Introduction to course; The difference between story and Story; in class readings (Dinty Moore: “The Writer’s Mind”; Ira Sukrungruang: “Chop Suey”); writing exercise

Week 2: Scene vs. Exposition: The World in a Small Thing

Tu. 8/28:

For discussion - Michael Steinberg, “Finding the Inner Story in Memoirs and Personal Essays”; Dinty Moore, “On a Regular Writing Routine”; Ryan Van Meter, “First”

Th. 8/30:

For discussion - Dinty Moore, “The Woolf and the Moth”; Virginia Woolf, “The Death of the Moth”

Week 3: Voice

Tu. 9/4:

For discussion - Philip Lopate, “On the Necessity of Turning Oneself into a Character”; Rebecca McClanahan, “Loving Bald Men”; Hope Edelman, “Bruce Springsteen and the Story of Us”; Joann Beard, “Behind the Screen”

Thu. 9/6:

For discussion - Laura Nathan, “Narrating Childhood”; Joann Beard, “Bulldozing the Baby”

Week 4: Building Character

Tu. 9/11:

For discussion - Maxine Hong Kingston, “No Name Woman”; Joanna McNaney, “Clean Slate”

Th. 9/13:

For discussion - Paisley Rekdal, “The Night my Mother Met Bruce Lee”
Student Workshop 1

Week 5: Crafting Memoir

Tu. 9/18:

For discussion - Patricia Hampl, "Memory and Imagination"; Lee Martin, "Never Thirteen"

Student Workshop 2

Th. 9/20:

For discussion: Dinty Moore, "Writing the Memoir Essay"; Tobias Wolff, "Thanksgiving Special"

Student Workshop 3

Week 6: Crafting the Personal Essay

Tu. 9/25:

For discussion - Dinty Moore, "The Personal (Not Private) Essay"; Philip Gerard, "What They Don't Tell You About Hurricanes"

Student Workshop 4

Th. 9/27:

For discussion – Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola, "The Personal Essay"; Ann Fademan, "Coffee;" E. B. White, "The Ring of Time"

Student Workshop 5

Week 7: Shaping the Hard Stuff

Tu. 10/2:

For discussion – Brenda Miller "A Case against Courage"; Joann Beard, "The Fourth State of Matter"

Student Workshop 6

Th. 10/4:

For discussion – David Sedaris, "Memory Laps"

Student Workshop 7

Week 8: Brevity

Tu. 10/9:

For discussion: Bernard Cooper, "The Fine Art of Sighing"; Brenda Miller, "Swerve"

Student Workshop 8

Th. 10/11:

For discussion – Jill Christman, "The Sloth"; Thao Thai, "Counting Bats"

Student Workshop 9

Week 9: Humor

Tu. 10/16:

For discussion - David Sedaris, "Old Faithful"

Student Workshop 10

Th. 10/18: For discussion: Readings TBA
Student Workshop 11

Week 10: The Hermit Crab Essay

Tu. 10/23:

For discussion - Kristen Radtke, "Fragments of Teenage Magazines;" Lorrie Moore, "How to Become a Writer"

Student Workshop 12

Th. 10/25:

For discussion - Brenda Brueggemann, "Posting Mabel"

Student Workshop 13

Week 11: Appropriated Text

Tu. 10/30:

For discussion - David Shields' *Reality Hunger* (excerpts)

Student Workshop 14

Th. 11/1:

For discussion – David Shields, "Life Story"

Student Workshop 15

Week 12: Crafting the Lyric Essay

Tu. 11/6:

For discussion - Brenda Miller, "A Braided Heart: Shaping the Lyric Essay"; Sherry Simpson, "Fidelity"; Thao Thai, "Speechless"

Student Workshop 16

Th. 11/8:

For discussion – Robert Root, "Beyond Linearity: Writing the Segmented Essay;" Eula Biss, "The Pain Scale"

Student Workshop 17

Week 13: Literary Journalism/ Ethnography

Tu. 11/13:

For discussion – Dinty Moore, "Write What You Wish You Knew"; Clifford Geertz, "Notes from a Balinese Cock Fight"

Student Workshop 18

Th. 11/15:

For discussion – V.S. Naipaul, "A Turn in the South"

Student Workshop 19

Week 14: Travel

Tu. 11/20:

For discussion - Jenny Diski, *Stranger on a Train* (excerpt); David Foster Wallace, "Shipping Out"
Student Workshop 20

Th. 11/22: No class in honor of Thanksgiving

Week 15: Cultural Criticism

Tu. 11/27:

For Discussion - Margaret Atwood, "The Female Body"; Amitav Ghosh, "Four Corners";
Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola, "The Writing Process and Revision"
Student Readings Day One

Th. 11/29:

For discussion – James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel"; Dinty Moore, "On
Becoming an Excellent Rewriter"
Student Readings Day Two

Week 16: Nature Writing

Tu. 12/4: Last day of class

For discussion - Dinty Moore, "Writing the Nature Essay"; Diane Ackerman, "How to
Watch a Hummingbird"; Annie Dillard, "Living with Weasels"

Final Essay Revision: Due today, at 11:59 p.m. in Carmen Dropbox