

Directed Reading in Nonfiction: First Essay Collections

English 550

Northwest Institute of Literary Arts

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

What makes an essay collection work? How closely linked do the individual essays tend to be in theme or subject? How similar in length and point of view? What qualities, if any, do first-time essayists share in common? How do new writers push the boundaries of the genre and/or how do shifting boundaries challenge the writer? We'll read ten contemporary first-time collections in search of answers to these and other craft questions. We'll also examine the venues where the books and the individual essays have been published to delve into differing reader expectations.

OBJECTIVES

To understand the various forms a contemporary essay collection can take

To analyze techniques (e.g. repetition, time manipulation, POV switches, and transitions) that may create energy and/or cohesion in a collection

To engage the question of what first essay collections have in common and what advantages and disadvantages an early-career writer might bring to a project

To determine which techniques and/or publishing strategies might work for you

BOOK LIST

Naked by David Sedaris

The Boys of my Youth by Jo Ann Beard

Riverwalking by Kathleen Dean Moore

I Was Told There'd Be Cake by Sloane Crossley

Notes from No Man's Land by Eula Biss

Teacher at Point Blank by Jo Scott Coe

If You Knew Then What I Know Now by Ryan Van Meter

Create Dangerously by Edwidge Danticat

Descanso for my Father by Harrison Canderleria Fletcher

Things That Are by Amy Leach

Let Me Clear My Throat by Elena Passarello

Note: You can skip reading and discussing any one book as long as you let us know by the Sunday we begin reading that book.

GRADE

50% Discussion/participation

20% Assignment #1

20% Assignment #2

10% Phone Call / Oral Exam

Discussion/Participation

For each book, you will answer one of the following questions in the weekly discussion thread with examples that include specific references (quotes with page numbers) to at least three essays in the collection. You can answer the same question as a classmate but may not use the same examples. So there's advantage to posting early in the week. You will also respond to at least two postings by classmates each week.

1. What characters, if any, recur in the book? How do they change over time? Choose one and describe the change(s)
2. What themes, if any, recur? Does the narrator's perception of these themes change? Does the reader's? Choose one theme and describe the change(s).
3. What words, phrases, or images repeat in the collection? How often? Where? Does there seem to be a pattern or purpose to the repetition?
4. How many different point of views (POVs) are used? (e.g. first person singular or plural, second person, third person limited, fly-on-the-wall, or omniscient?) What is the effect of each?
5. In what way, if any, does the essayist stretch the boundaries of the genre? Does he or she address new themes or approach them from new angles? Does he/she use techniques that seem original or even startling? Give specific examples.
6. Examine the transitions between the essays. How are they connected? By chronology? Character? Theme? Style? Analyze at least three transitions.

Assignment #1: Write a short review of an additional first essay collection (See list below) 300-500 words to post in our class space on Catalyst.

Be sure to address: the audience for each book, the most original aspect of the book, the most admirable aspect(s) and what—if anything—most seemed lacking.

Note who published it. Also, note where the individual essays were previously published and how long before book publication.

Assignment #2: Choose two or three collections to compare and contrast. (One of these can be the book you chose for #1 if you'd like.)

You may address any of the issues/techniques addressed in our weekly discussions (e.g. theme, characters, repetition, POV, transition).

You must also address at least one of the following issues in your paper:

1. What makes a linked collection work? What techniques or elements add most toward a sense of cohesion?

2. What characteristics seem to define a “new” essayist? What challenges does he/she face? What issues might an aspiring essayist consider if aiming to write or publish a collection?

Oral Exam:

List all the books we’ve read in order of most cohesive to least. Explain your reasoning.

First essay collections you might consider for your “one additional book.” You can choose another as long as it is the first essay collection an author published ... and you run it by the instructor.

Nature/Science

An Unspoken Hunger by Terry Tempest Williams (1995)
The Last Cheaters Waltz by Ellen Meloy (2000)
River Teeth by David James Duncan (1996)
The Small Heart of Things by Julian Hoffman (2013)
Dwellings by Linda Hogan (1995)

Humor

Fraud by David Rakoff (2002)
Operating Instructions by Anne Lamott (1993)
Hypocrite in a Pouffy White Dress by Susan Jane Gilman (2005)
Everybody Into the Pool by Beth Lisick (2006)

Politics / Cultural Criticism

Perfume Dreams by Andrew Lam (2005)
Complications by Atul Gawande (2003)

Lyric Essay / Experimental

Neck Deep and Other Predicaments by Ander Monson (2007)
On Looking by Lia Purpura (2006)
Halls of Fame by John D’Agata (2003)
Quench Your Thirst With Salt by Nicole Walker (2013)

Memoir

Season of the Body by Brenda Miller (2002)
Video Night in Kathmandu by Pico Iyer (1988)
Maps to Anywhere by Bernard Cooper (1990)
My Misspent Youth by Meghan Daum (2001)

Novelists-turned-essayists

How to Be Alone Jonathan Franzen (2003)
The Disappointment Artist by Jonathan Lethem (2006)

Changing My Mind by Zadie Smith (2010)
Manhood by Amateurs by Michael Chabon (2009)

Original first pub date: not before 1989
More recent = better