

CRW 7145—Creative Nonfiction

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Spring 2010
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Required Texts:

Dinty W. Moore, *The Truth of the Matter: Art and Craft in Creative Nonfiction*. 2007. ISBN: 0321277619.

Magazine subscription, TBA.

Learning Objectives:

Students will analyze published examples of creative nonfiction for structure, narrative style, emotional impact and overall effectiveness. Students will also present and lead a group discussion of one of these example essays.

Students will study an example of a literary journal publication, write a 3-4 page response paper on the editorial style and content of the journal's nonfiction section, and generate questions to ask the editor of the journal. Students will then participate in a virtual or in-class discussion with the editor.

Students will complete three brief (2-4 page) exercises focused on the building blocks of creative nonfiction (character, scene, dialogue, intimate point of view, description, and discovery).

Students will produce a 6-10 page essay based on each of the three basic forms of creative nonfiction (memoir, literary journalism, personal essay).

At the end of the semester, students will compose a 3-4 page reflective paper on creative nonfiction as a genre, a form of expression, and/or a tool for exploring truth, reality, memory, etc.

Students will complete a 15-20 page final portfolio consisting of two revised essays and one 3-5 page critical introduction providing a self-analysis of the process of creating, composing, and revising the portfolio.

Students will post critical responses of essay readings and fellow students' exercises on an online discussion board.

Course Schedule:

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| January 21 | Introduction & welcome |
| January 28 | What the &#%*\$&^ Is Creative Nonfiction, Anyway? (Re)Creating Dialogue and Scene. Reading: <i>TOTM</i> , Chapters 1, 2, and 4 (pp. 3-17, 29-40); Brett Lott, "Toward a Definition of Creative Nonfiction" (pp.279-285); Lori Jakiela, "You'll Love the Way We Fly" (pp. 105-106); Naomi Shahib Nye, "Three Pokes of a Thistle" (pp. 220-223). Writing: complete exercise A (see below) and bring copies to class. |
| February 4 | Reflective Surfaces. Reading: <i>TOTM</i> , Chapters 3 and 5 (pp. 21-28, 42-52); Jamaica Kincaid, "Biography of a Dress" (pp. 200-208). Writing: complete exercise B (see below) and bring copies to class. |
| February 11 | Seas of Information. Reading: <i>TOTM</i> , Chapters 6 and 10 (pp. 54-62, 93-98); Philip Gerard, "What They Don't Tell You About Hurricanes" (pp. 151-156); David Shields, |

- “42 Tattoos” (pp. 243-251). Writing: complete exercise C (see below) and bring copies to class.
- February 18 Writing and Publishing: the World of the Lit Mag. Reading: essays in journal issue (TBA). Writing: complete exercise D (see below) and bring copies to class.
- February 25 The Literary Journalism Essay. Reading: *TOTM*, Chapter 8 (74-83); Pico Iyer, “Where Worlds Collide” (pp. 189-199). Writing: Literary Journalism workshop.
- March 4 Literary Journalism cont’d. Reading: Lee Gutkind, “Difficult Decisions” (167-173). Writing: Literary Journalism workshop.
- March 11 The Memoir. Reading: *TOTM*, Chapter 7 (pp. 65-72); Mimi Schwartz, “Memoir? Fiction? Where’s the Line?” (pp. 286-291); Lucy Grealy, “Mirrorings” (pp. 156-166). Writing: Memoir workshop.
- March 18 Memoir cont’d. Reading: David Sedaris, “The Drama Bug” (pp. 229-235). Writing: Memoir workshop.
- March 25 The Personal Essay. Reading: *TOTM*, Chapter 9 (pp. 84-91). Reading: Deborah Tall, “The Stories Tell the Land” (pp. 109-110); Annie Dillard, “Living Like Weasels” (140-150). Writing: Personal essay workshop.
- April 1 **EASTER BREAK—NO CLASS!!**
- April 8 Personal Essay cont’d. Reading: James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son” (pp. 111-126). Writing: Personal essay workshop.
- April 15 Personal Essay cont’d. Reading: Terry Tempest Williams, “The Clan of One-Breasted Women” (pp. 257-262). Writing: Personal essay workshop.
- April 22 Wrap-up discussion of creative nonfiction. Writing: complete exercise E (see below) and bring copies to class.
LAST DAY OF CLASSES
- May 5 **FINAL PORTFOLIO DUE** via email

Course objectives:

Creative nonfiction is one of the most exciting emerging fields of writing in contemporary literature. Sometimes called the “fourth genre,” this form dates back hundreds of years—from the works of Roman philosophers and the *Confessions* of St. Augustine to Michel de Montaigne, originator of the term “essay” (from the French *essais*, “to attempt”)—yet it remains a somewhat nebulous category, still lacking a hard-and-fast definition and often confusing to those who see “creative” and “nonfiction” as two completely opposed concepts. How can one take creative license with a piece of nonfiction, which by definition is supposed to document real events? Doesn’t “creative” imply that you’re making things up as you go along?

Perhaps the best way to explain creative nonfiction would be: a way of writing about true experiences using techniques borrowed from fiction (dialogue, scene, experimental narrative structures, etc.) and poetry (attention to language and detail, meditative voice and tone, use of “word pictures,” etc.). Because there are so many styles and forms and methods of expression at the author’s disposal, creative nonfiction truly is a blank canvas where story and language can be invented and reinvented. The one and only rule that all works of creative nonfiction must abide by is that what appears on the page must be *true*, whether it’s factually true or only true in the eyes of the writer.

In this course, we will explore the craft of nonfiction, both in our own writing and in the works of published authors. Focusing on the three most common subgenres (memoir, literary journalism, and

personal essay), we will examine the practical aspects of the field—what techniques are being used, how a piece is put together, what narrative voice gives the piece an intimate quality and what sounds more like navel-gazing—as well as debate some of the gray areas that are bound to appear whenever any of us tries to put “the truth” into words.

Assignments:

The work for this course will consist of:

1) Three short informal exercises (2-4 pages each) that will focus on an aspect of craft important to writing creative nonfiction. These are intended to be warm-ups for the main part of our workshop but can also be used as starting points for a more substantial piece:

Exercise A: (Re)Creating dialogue and scene. For this exercise, spend a few days jotting down conversations or bits of conversations that you overhear in your house, at your office, in a restaurant or coffee shop, on the train, etc. Concentrate not just on what’s being said but also on the words people use, the intonation, whether or not people are talking over each other, and any other details that convey a sense of how the exchange unfolded. (You can also write down a one-way conversation—someone on a cell phone, for instance. This can be an added challenge but could turn out to be more fun and tantalizing than your average chat over biscotti.) Try to be as accurate as you can. Once you’ve got a good chunk of this raw material, write 2 to 4 pages recreating one or more of these conversations as you experienced them. Include specific details about the speaker(s) involved (body language, mannerisms, nervous tics, clothes) as well as details about where you were when the conversation(s) were overheard (if you were at a coffee shop, for instance: What was the décor like? The tables and chairs? Was it crowded? Only half-full? What were the other customers like? Was it sunny outside? Cold and rainy?). Again, be as accurate as your memory allows, but remember, too, that you’re trying to convey not just the facts but the essence of the experience.

Exercise B: “Reflective surfaces.” Choose a specific object, either from your past or one that you come into contact with on a day-to-day basis. Write 2 to 4 pages exploring the object itself, how it reflects your personality/sense of self/existence and, if possible, also how the object reflects the culture around you.

Exercise C: Seas of information. We’re all familiar with that well-worn mantra, “Write what you know.” That often leads to an inside-out sort of piece: something based on a memory or a job that we’ve held or a task that we’ve completed over and over again. This exercise is meant to be an outside-in composition—something along the lines of, “Write what you discover.” The first step is to search out pieces of information: set yourself loose in a library and start randomly poking around to find things that interest you, talk to people about their lives and what they know, search newspapers and magazines for interesting details that seem important somehow, surf the web for tidbits of information that may or may not be accurate. Then, once you’ve gathered a bunch of details, start combing through them looking for patterns in what captures your imagination, what you find important enough to tell someone about, what seems worthy of deeper exploration, etc. Take one or more of these patterns and write 2 or 4 pages weaving these bits of information into a meaningful whole.

In your finished exercise, try to include two or more of the following details:

1. quote from a dead philosopher
2. a bit of scientific information
3. a reference to a current newspaper story
4. information you get firsthand from an expert
5. some sort of reference to religion
6. something from an almanac
7. some sort of folklore
8. reference to a recent movie
9. a line or two of quoted poetry
10. some sort of demographic information
11. a description of a photo you see in some sort of publication

12. a definition of an interesting conceptual word
13. a reference to a historical period ("around the turn of the century...." for example)
14. something to do with health or manufactured objects

Think of this as an information scavenger hunt, with the finished product being a collage of knowledge and experience. You may also want to experiment with form in this exercise.

NOTE: On the day each exercise is due, please **bring enough copies for the entire class**. We will read and comment on as many as possible. Also, each of you will take home, reread, and **post a critical response** to your fellow writers' exercises on our online discussion board, no later than a week after the exercises have been discussed in class.

2) Two more short (3-4 page) response essays based on two special class discussions we'll be having this semester:

Exercise D: Writing and Publishing: the World of the Lit Mag. Read your copy of our example literary journal (title TBA), paying particular attention to the essay section(s). Consider not only the content, structure, and style of the essays themselves, but also how they're placed in the journal, how they resonate with other sections (like poetry or fiction), and what they say about editorial preferences, POV, philosophy/mission/purpose, audience, etc. Write a 3-4 page reflective paper based on these observations. You may also want to think about how nonfiction is presented by the publication (as a creative genre on its own? A vehicle for critical commentary or journalism? Something else?).

Exercise E: The Last Hurrah. By now, you've spent the past four months reading, writing, discussing, speculating about, picking apart and putting together works of creative nonfiction. Write a 3-4 page reflective paper on what your experience with the genre has been. How would you define creative nonfiction? How does "the fourth genre" measure up to the other, more traditional worlds of fiction, poetry, and drama? Are there certain topics, styles, storylines, or structures that work better (or worse) with creative nonfiction than other forms of writing? Where do you think your writing will be five years down the road? Do you think you'll still be writing creative nonfiction, and if so, what will it look like?

NOTE: Please bring copies of these papers to class, too!

3) Three pieces of creative nonfiction based on each of the three main subcategories of the genre—memoir, literary journalism, and personal essay. (We'll discuss more about these subgenres during class.) These essays should all be about 6-10 pages long and will be our major focus for the workshops in the second part of the semester. As I mentioned above, you *can* use the exercises as jumping-off points for a longer and more in-depth exploration of a topic, or you can strike out on your own and do something completely different. You can also explore different narrative styles, structures, voices, or ways of evoking character, place, time, and emotional tone. As long as you write one memoir, one piece of literary journalism, and one personal essay, the rest of the creative decisions are yours to make.

In the first two weeks of class, we'll have sign-up sheets passed around in order to schedule everyone for workshop time. The week before your essay is up for workshop, you need to **bring copies of your piece to class** so that we can all read it ahead of time and be prepared to critique it. (Also, remember as you read essays by your fellow writers, you should jot down your comments, so that the workshopped author can get both in-class and written feedback.)

4) Brief critical responses on the assigned essay readings for the second part of the semester (beginning with the first literary journalism class). Like the posts for the writing exercises, these responses should reflect your reactions to the pieces we read, with an eye to character, scene, narrative voice, story arc, narrative structure, and any of the other elements that go into creating a work of nonfiction. You can also ask any questions you have about the reading—if any aspect of the text is confusing, unclear, potentially offensive or controversial, etc. These should be posted to our online discussion board **no later than 8 pm. the night before** we discuss the essay in class.

5) One informal (5-7 minute) presentation on one of the assigned essay readings during the second part of the semester. This should be an extended meditation on the reading in question, going into specific strengths or weaknesses you find in the piece, which narrative techniques stand out and which are most/least effective, how the piece is representative (or not) of creative nonfiction or one of its subcategories, how you were affected on a personal level, and/or any other details you think ought to be considered when reading and discussing the piece. You'll also be leading class discussion on the essay, so be sure to read and think about the critical responses on the online board as you prepare to present. A sign-up sheet will be passed around for essay presentations; look for it at the same time we sign up for workshop dates.

5) A final portfolio, consisting of 2 revisions (that is, revisions of 2 out of the 3 main workshop essays) AND a 3-4 page critical introduction in which you discuss your thoughts on creative nonfiction as a genre, your overall approach to writing creative nonfiction, how you went about composing and reworking the 2 pieces in your portfolio (what your goals were, what you struggled with, what turned out better than expected, etc.), and any other commentary you think should inform how your work should be read. The final portfolios will be due via email on **May 5th**.

6) Class participation and attendance is essential. It is general policy in the Schools of Graduate and Professional Studies that all students are expected to attend all classes as scheduled. The faculty maintains attendance records and evaluates punctuality and attendance as part of course grades. If there arises a need to miss class, students should contact the instructor to arrange make-up work; this work will include additional written assignments. The first class absence will result in Student Services and the Program Director being contacted; the second, a meeting with the Program Director. Any additional absences will result in a student being asked to withdraw from the course. Lateness disrupts class discussion and is disrespectful to the class as a whole. As such, it is unacceptable. Chronic lateness will affect the student's grade.

Other Important Information:

Academic dishonesty. Academic integrity is vital to the intellectual well-being of any academic or professional community. Instances of academic dishonesty cannot be tolerated and may result in a failing course grade and/or academic dismissal. For additional details, students may refer to the Graduate Student Handbook, available online at the Rosemont College web site.

ADA accommodations. Students who may require accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act/Section 504 are required to meet with the Vice President/Dean of Students within two weeks of the start of classes. The VP/Dean of Students serves as the College's Section 504 Coordinator and will work with all appropriate parties to document and facilitate necessary accommodations.

Style guidelines. Students in graduate English programs are expected to use **MLA style** for in-text citations, reference formatting, and other aspects of paper writing. The *MLA Handbook* is readily available at most bookstores.