

**CRWR 539: True Passions: Nonfiction Authors  
On Their Favorite Things**  
Fall 2003, Natalie Kusz  
Thursday, 6-10 p.m., SPO 418

**Office: Spokane 408C**  
**Phone: 623-4218**  
**Office Hours: T,Th 4-5; W 2-4**  
**and by appt.**

## **TRUE PASSIONS: Nonfiction Authors on Their Favorite Things**

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

This course examines the characteristics of nonfiction in which the author addresses a personal passion, fixation, or obsession. In some of the literature we'll discuss, the passion in question is an author's signature literary subject – food, for instance, in the case of M.F.K. Fisher – while, in others, such as Hemingway's *Death In the Afternoon* (which regards bull fighting), it is a one-time nonfictive foray into an area about which, in his/her private life, the writer feels strongly. Our study will look into solitary passions, philosophical passions, and others, all the while illuminating the various voices, tones, and other craft matters which distinguish the passionate work from the *laissez faire*.

### **COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

- To examine various – even conflicting--ways in which literary writers elevate subjects of intense *personal* interest to levels of *public* and *artistic* significance.
- To differentiate, theoretically, between a passionate author who writes several works on a similar subject, and an author who is merely in a rut.
- To acquire an understanding of methods by which successful literature elevates itself above simple didacticism or merely lovely description and narration.
- To engage in minute examination of nonfictive writing methods.
- To develop skill in reading literature with writers', as opposed to critics', eyes.

### **TEXTS:**

- Fadiman, Anne. *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. ISBN: 0374527229.
- Finnegan, William. "Playing Doc's Games," handout.
- Fisher, M.F.K. *The Gastronomical Me*. New York: North Point, 1943. ISBN: 0865473927.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *Death in the Afternoon*. New York: Scribner, 1932. ISBN: 0684801450.
- Kerouac, Jack. *Visions of Cody*. New York: Penguin, 1960. ISBN: 0140179070.
- Nin, Anais. *Henry and June*. New York: Harvest Books, 1990. ISBN: 015640057X.
- Orlean, Susan. *My Kind of Place: Travel Stories from a Woman Who's Been Everywhere*. New York: Random House, 2004. ISBN: 0679462937.
- Orwell, George. *The Road to Wigan Pier*. New York: Harvest, 1973. ISBN: 0156767503.
- Seltzer, Richard. *The Exact Location of the Soul*. New York: Picador, 2002. ISBN: 0312263139.
- Other photocopied readings, as assigned.

### **GRADING:**

Grades will reflect absolute attention to deadlines, completion of all required coursework, the quality of your oral and written assignments, and the value and professionalism of your input. Because the course is quite short, there is no room for class tardiness or absence.

## METHODOLOGY:

- Each class period will begin with an orienting presentation by students in the seminar (see specific assignment description, below).
- Following the presentation, the bulk of our class time will involve discussion and dissection of the reading assignments, and may also include in-class writing exercises.
- A major craft paper, worked on throughout the term, will provide evidence of each student's grasp of literary thought and insight (see, also, below).

## ASSIGNMENTS:

- Oral presentation:  
Each of you will be responsible for part of a 10- to 15-minute orientation to one class period's reading. The purpose of these introductions is to provide your peers a sense of context for the work at hand, with the word "context" indicating any number of environments surrounding the text. If, for instance, the work is one of many its author wrote on a subject, its position in the author's body of work will be useful to know; similarly, if this is a one-time-only foray into a topic, the "place" of the text changes somewhat, and should be examined. In some, though not all, cases, necessary insight might arise from an examination of the literary world's response to the text (it should go without saying that your most vital sources here would be literary journals rather than mainstream newspapers; when possible, try to survey both scholarly criticism and substantive literary reviews. In cases where a work does not yet seem to have been covered by scholars – that is, when reviews rather than papers will have to provide the bulk of your material--do your best to locate well-respected reviewers from publications such as *The Threepenny Review*, *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, and others.) The work might be remarkable within other contexts, as well: socio-economic, political, intellectual, religious, and so on, and so on; the point, again, is to give your peers knowledge from *outside* these pages that can allow for a more informed reading of what's *on* these pages. We will schedule these introductions on the first day of class, and there will likely be at least two introducers per week. You may divide your week's material any way you wish, or you may present as a team.
- Final craft paper, 15-20 pages:  
A "craft essay" differs from a "critical essay" in that it treats literature from a perspective of "How does this work?" as opposed to one of "What does this mean?" (This distinction illustrates, essentially, the differences between the ways in which writers and scholars read.) For your craft paper, you may examine a specific point of craft, using examples from multiple authors, or you may study the work of one author and the specific technical characteristics of his or her work. The work(s) you address need not be from our reading list, but your thesis should arise from what you've studied in this course. Use MLA style. As this is a graduate course, papers containing errors in syntax, grammar, etc., will be deplored.

**SCHEDULE:**

**Sept. 22:** Introduction, Scheduling, Reading, Discussion.

**INTERIOR OR SOLITARY PASSIONS**

**Sept. 29: BOOKS**

INTRODUCERS: 1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_  
Anne Fadiman, *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*

**Oct. 6: FOOD**

INTRODUCERS: 1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_  
M.F.K. Fisher, *The Gastronomical Me*

**PHILOSOPHICAL PASSIONS**

**Oct. 13: SOCIAL CLASS**

INTRODUCERS: 1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_  
George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

**Oct 20: MEDICINE AND HEALING**

INTRODUCERS: 1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_  
Richard Selzer, *The Exact Location of the Soul*

**ACTIVE PASSIONS**

**Oct. 27: TRAVEL**

INTRODUCERS: 1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_  
Susan Orlean, *My Kind of Place: Travel Stories from a Woman Who's Been Everywhere*.

**Nov. 3: SURFING**

INTRODUCERS: 1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_  
William Finnegan, "Playing Doc's Games" (handout)

**CONTROVERSIAL PASSIONS**

**Nov. 10: BULL FIGHTING**

INTRODUCERS: 1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_  
Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*.

**Nov. 17: SEXUALITY**

INTRODUCERS: 1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_  
Anais Nin, *Henry and June*.

**Nov. 24:** Thanksgiving holiday; no class.

**Dec. 1: DRUG CULTURE**

INTRODUCERS: 1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_  
Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*.

**Dec. 5 (Monday): FINAL PAPER DUE IN MY MAILBOX BY NOON.**