

**CREATIVE NONFICTION WRITING
SPRING 2014 SEMESTER
MWF 9-9:50AM/208 BIDDLE
MWF 10-10:50AM/222 BIDDLE**

PROFESSOR MARISSA LANDRIGAN
MKL18@PITT.EDU
PROFESSORMARISSA.WORDPRESS.COM
OFFICE: 233B BIDDLE
OFFICE HOURS: MWF 11AM-1PM & TH 1-2PM

Overview

Maybe every essay automatically is in some way experimental—less an outline traveling toward a foregone conclusion than an unmapped quest that has sprung from the word question.
~John D'Agata

Creative nonfiction is a shape-shifter of a genre, an inherently hybrid form whose lofty goal is to weave truth (nonfiction) and beauty (creative). Trying to get our hands around such a wild and strange animal will be difficult, requiring lots of close reading and the struggles of critical thinking. It will also be incredibly fun, weirder and more confusing and much more hilarious than you would've thought possible. For the purposes of this course, we'll focus on short-form creative nonfiction essays. But this ain't your composition professor's essay, I assure you.

The creative nonfiction essay, as we examine it, will take on many forms, some of which may not even be recognizable as essays. We will read lyric experiments in the form of Google maps and literary journalism about Monopoly and braided narratives that transcend the personal to reflect on quantum physics. We will weep together as we grapple with crafting imagery to convey emotional depth. We will laugh hysterically as we work to develop our subjective identities into a compelling, honest writer's voice. We will ask difficult questions about the ethics of truth-telling in public.

The course will function partly as a seminar in creative nonfiction and partly as a workshop. This means we will read a lot, and we will write a lot. For part of each unit, we read and discuss important works of contemporary creative nonfiction in an effort to formulate an understanding of the genre. Most of these readings will be followed by in-class writing prompts designed to jumpstart your own mind-engines. These prompts will lead us into writing three proto-essays, which will be shared and critiqued by your peers. After extensive practice in giving and receiving critical response, the semester will culminate in revision, expansion and development of those proto-essays into three full-grown essays capable of driving cars, paying bills, and moving out of their parents' basements. Your final portfolio is your artifact of the semester, your own Cheshire-grinning version of what it means to tell the truth, but tell it slant.

Perhaps, given D'Agata's hypothesis above, even this syllabus is an essay?

Learning Objectives

- Develop observation and research skills that enable you, the writer, to move through the world with a heightened awareness of the potentials of reality.
- Familiarize yourself with contemporary narrative techniques in creative nonfiction and understand the essay's past, present and future.
- Participate in substantive and respectful workshops whose goal is an appreciation of complex literature and artful language, and a deeper understanding of how to provide and accept critique.

- Apply feedback from workshops to revision of your own work.
- Understand the basics of imaginative writing in any genre, including character, voice, plot, tension, imagery, detail, setting, dialogue, and subtext.

What You'll Need

Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: Work from 1970 to the Present, edited by Lex Williford and Michael Martone (TA)

A dedicated folder/notebook for writing in the classroom. I will collect this several times throughout the semester to see that you are keeping up with writing prompts and research exercises as homework. Access to a reliable printer for other reading materials (PM) and your essays.

Stuff You Should Do to Get On My Good Side:

1. **Attend classes.** Come to class. Just do. As often as possible. Class can and will be fun if you join in. Most of what we do in a creative writing/discussion-based classroom can't be replicated in notes or emails. You get three freebies – absences for whatever you want. Save them for when you are genuinely sick/swamped. If you blow those three freebies on hangovers early in the semester and then have a quarter-life crisis involving days of weeping in front of an NCIS marathon while you eat Ben & Jerry's straight from the carton, you'll regret it. When you do have to miss class, check with me and/or your classmates to see what (not IF) you missed. Miss more than three absences and your final grade goes down one letter grade per additional absence. Miss nine or more and you automatically fail the class.
2. **Listen and talk.** A workshop class is a collaborative project, in which we all need to participate in order to maximize our learning. It's no hippie hokey-pokey to say that I learn from you as much as you from me. You'll all see things in the readings I'd never dreamed of, and your imaginative work affords us even more possibilities for experimentation and exploration. Initiate discussion. Ask questions. Challenge me and each other. Be kind. You'll learn more if you participate, I guarantee it. Plus, I'll be so warm and fuzzy I'll love you all forever, and isn't that the attitude you want to cultivate in the person doling out the grades?
3. **Do the work.** Blog posts are how I know you're reading and ready to participate. Writing essays is how you demonstrate your learning. Hence, not completing all major assignments results in an automatic failure of the class. Late assignments will be accepted by me, penalized at one letter grade per day late, but will not be workshoped by your peers. If you have any extenuating circumstances that will conflict with the deadlines for these major assignments, you must speak with me *in advance* of the conflict to make other arrangements. There's always a way to work around a conflict, rather than hand in an assignment late. No late workshop commentaries, blogs, or final portfolios will be accepted.
4. **Challenge yourself.** In-depth critical reading, thoughtful commentary, and ambitious essays are so much more captivating than safe, easy ones. Stretch yourself and I'll be impressed, even if you don't always pull it off. I promise, no one will be a bigger cheerleader for your success this semester than I will be – as long as I know you're working hard.

Office Hours

...are the most underused resource available to college students. Come to me with specific questions about your essays at **any stage** of the writing process. Run your ideas by me, use me as a sounding board, ask me about a hitch in your draft you can't see your way around. I'll gladly schedule special

appointments if my regular hours conflict with your other commitments.

Office visits are opportunities for one-on-one instruction; they are not editing sessions where I merely correct your work. Whenever you want to work with me on an essay draft, it is helpful if you bring two copies. You should make any handwritten changes to your own draft. I will not serve as your proofreader. I don't believe you will learn anything from having me merely edit your work. Do not come to my office and ask me to look over a paper "in general." If I am to help you develop as a writer, you must come to me with specific questions, and you must learn to recognize the areas in which you need help.

Asking me for help on an essay does not guarantee that you will receive a high grade. Use my advice along with your own knowledge and skill to revise and edit carefully. I will help you, but you are ultimately responsible for the quality of your essay.

You need to participate in all draft workshops in order to be eligible for individual help. Giving individual assistance to those students who missed workshops would, I fear, provide an incentive for absence on workshop days.

Assignments

Your grade in this class will be determined by a combination of your own original writing, your participation in workshops, and your active participation in reading and discussion as detailed below:

1. A personal narrative essay for peer workshop (15%)
2. A lyric essay for peer workshop (15%)
3. A research-driven essay for peer workshop (15%)
4. Your writer's journal, (20%), which is a cumulative grade that includes the following:
 - Weekly analytical blog posts. One per week for every *reading* week of the semester (excepting workshop weeks, see below). You may blog on any one (or more) essay for the week, but your blog post is due *by class time* on the day we will be discussing that essay. That is, you can't come to class, listen to the discussion, and then blog about that essay.
 - Workshop responses. During workshop weeks, you will be required to write one blog post in response to one of your peers' essays. The essay to which you respond will be assigned.
 - Writing exercises. Throughout the semester, both in class and for homework, I will ask you to complete upwards of 15 writing exercises designed to help you brainstorm for your essays. I will collect these in a notebook or folder twice a semester to check that you are keeping up with your idea germination.
5. An individual presentation/discussion jumpstart (5%)
 - Over the course of the semester, each student will be responsible for introducing and leading the class in discussion of one author. You're not entirely on your own here – I will still have plenty of discussion material. But the idea is that you will come to class prepared to introduce us to the author, give us some relevant biographical information, and a few questions about the essay we will all have read. I want to see both that you can write creative nonfiction, and that you can clearly articulate critical analysis of an essay. Only one student per author, and they are first-come, first-served, so, as soon as possible, look over the syllabus and claim the author/essay/date you want for discussion.
6. A final portfolio consisting of revised and expanded versions of all three previous essays (30%)
 - **Save all your graded/marked-up workshop copies of essays. Save your notes. Save everything. You'll want them for this!**

Classroom Respect & Coursework Ethics

Imaginative writing is a form of art, not an excuse to shock people. Dark subjects and taboo topics are par for the course in the world of artistic exploration; we will certainly read “dark” and/or “edgy” published work in class and you may choose subject matters that deal with sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Foul language is fine if it is in the context of the story and consistent with the character’s way of speaking. If this makes you nervous/uncomfortable, good. It ought to. We’re not here to be comfortable and complacent—we’re here to stretch and challenge ourselves, to blow each other’s minds. Be prepared to read tough stuff and learn to respond with empathy and sensitivity.

However, I do not accept essays or exercises that rely on excessive shock value: inappropriately graphic violence, blatant pornography, and/or hate speech masquerading as art are not acceptable. These are weak. These are boring. These do not blow my mind. Students whose creative work is deemed to be a direct or indirect threat to other students or instructors will be taken seriously and dealt with by, among other things, verbal flogging.

Workshop discussions are a chance for us all to practice our critique and learn both as a reader and writer of nonfiction. This requires we all hold ourselves to rigorous standards of clarity and respect in sharing our opinions in workshop. Please keep in mind that everyone’s emotional connection to his or her story is different and requires consideration, and that critique is not the same as criticism. That being said, writers should not submit pieces for workshop that deal with subjects about which they are not ready to receive critique.

In addition, a creative writing class is a chance for you to showcase your brilliant originality, the depth of your own experience and your emotional truths. You are so cool. Why fake it with someone else’s words or ideas? Plagiarism, aside from being a poor choice academically, is a waste of everyone’s time. Such work will be dealt with in accordance with university policy.

UPJ does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, age, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, sex, marital status, or disability. An effective learning environment values and supports diversity. Our classroom should be a place of lively discussion and all opinions are welcome. Intolerance and hateful statements of any kind are not welcome, and anyone making the classroom environment uncomfortable for shared learning will be asked to leave.

Course Schedule

Please note this schedule is tentative and subject to change.

Week	Day	In Class	To Do for Today
1	M, Jan 6	What is creative writing? What is creative nonfiction?	Show up!
	W, Jan 8	Syllabus review Blogging/reading	Read syllabus. Access Courseweb and Professor Marissa (PM) websites.
	F, Jan 10	Getting personal (narratively) Prompt: I Would Never...	Read: Didion, “On Keeping a Notebook” (PM) Write: blog post in response
2	M, Jan 13	Picturing the personal essay Structure and subjectivity	Read: Beard, “The Fourth State of Matter” (TA)
	W, Jan 17	Narrative as empathy Grief and Love	Read: Strayed, “The Love Of My Life” (TA)
	F, Jan 19	On Nodding Terms...	Read: Monticello, “I Know Who You

		Prompt: Scars	Are” (PM)
3	M, Jan 20	MLK Day – NO CLASS.	Write: Photo <i>or</i> meal prompt.
	W, Jan 22	You Are Not Alone: the ethics of writing about others’ lives	Read: Franzen, “Farther Away” (PM)
	F, Jan 24	Humor and Voice Yes, you can be funny in CNF!	Read: Sedaris, “Repeat After Me,” (TA) and Klosterman, “Everybody Knows This is Somewhere” (PM)
4	M, Jan 27	Exaggeration and subjectivity There’s more to the truth than just what happened.	Read: Slater, “Black Swans” (TA) Write: Music or place prompt
	W, Jan 29	Imagination and Hypotheticals Is it true if it hasn’t happened yet?	Read: Prentiss, “Buying a House” (PM) Write: OMG haven’t you started your personal essay yet?!
	F, Jan 31	How to Workshop an Essay	Essay #1 Due today Please bring ___ copies of your essay to exchange with your group.
5	M, Feb 3	Workshop Group #1	In advance of your workshop group meeting, you should: read and mark up all group members’ drafts; write and post to Courseweb detailed response to your assigned essay.
	W, Feb 5	Workshop Group #2	In advance of your workshop group meeting, you should: read and mark up all group members’ drafts; write and post to Courseweb detailed response to your assigned essay.
	F, Feb 7	Workshop Group #3	In advance of your workshop group meeting, you should: read and mark up all group members’ drafts; write and post to Courseweb detailed response to your assigned essay.
6	M, Feb 10	Getting’ lyrical: language as song Prompt: memory index	Read: Monson, “Essay as Hack” (PM)
	W, Feb 12	A pinprick, a lightning bolt: flash nonfiction or micro-essays Prompt: Random object memory	Read: Dillard, “Living Like Weasels” and Doyle, “Leap” (TA)
	F, Feb 14	The steps along the way Prompt: Brainstorming numbered sequences	Read: Atwood, “The Female Body,” and Martin, “All Those Fathers That Night” (PM)
7	M, Feb 17	Segmentation and tangents	Read: Biss, “The Pain Scale” (TA) and Lethem, “13, 1975, 21” (PM)

	W, Feb 19	Hermit crabs: empathy in exchanged perspectives Prompt: hermit crab brainstorming	Read: Clift, "The Breaking-Up Game" (PM)
	F, Feb 21	Hermit crabs: dialogue and bridging the connective gap	Read: Dear Sugar advice columns (PM)
8	M, Feb 24	Structuring Abstractions Prompt: poetry epigraphs	Read: Talbot, "The Professor of Longing" (PM)
	W, Feb 26	When the medium is (part of) the message	Read: Moore, "Mr. Plimpton's Revenge," and Wilks, "Fitting the Pattern" (PM)
	F, Feb 28	Draft exchange	Essay #2 Due today Please bring ___ copies of your essay to exchange with your group.
9	M, Mar 3	Workshop Group #1	In advance of your workshop group meeting, you should: read and mark up all group members' drafts; write and post to Courseweb detailed response to your assigned essay.
	W, Mar 5	Workshop Group #2	In advance of your workshop group meeting, you should: read and mark up all group members' drafts; write and post to Courseweb detailed response to your assigned essay.
	F, Mar 7	Workshop Group #3	In advance of your workshop group meeting, you should: read and mark up all group members' drafts; write and post to Courseweb detailed response to your assigned essay.
10	M, Mar 10	Spring Break	
	W, Mar 12	Spring Break	
	F, Mar 13	Spring Break	
11	M, Mar 17	Searching & researching The Didion/Gutkind Spectrum Looking behind...	Read: Foster Wallace, "Consider the Lobster" (TA)
	W, Mar 19	Investigating Family Backdropping with news	Read: "Carlisle," "Physical Evidence"
	F, Mar 21	Extending the Personal Narrative reliability Prompt: Annotating for Facts	Read: Tempest Williams, "The Clan of One-Breasted Women" (PM) Bring with you to class a copy of each of your first two essays
12	M, Mar 24	Curiosities & Obsessions	Read: Purpura, "Autopsy Report" (TA)

		Prompt: Question brainstorming	
	W, Mar 26	Inside the Everyday	Read: McPhee, "The Search for Marvin Gardens" (TA)
	F, Mar 28	Interrogating Cultural Phenomena	Read Sullivan, "Getting Down to What Is Really Real" (PM)
13	M, Mar 31	Immersion & Narrative Presence Prompt: Immersion brainstorming	Read: Laskas, "Hecho en America" (PM)
	W, Apr 2	FIELD DAY – Get out there and do the thing!	Work on research essay
	F, Apr 4	Draft exchange	Essay #3 Due today Please bring ___ copies of your essay to exchange with your group.
14	M, Apr 7	Workshop Group #1	In advance of your workshop group meeting, you should: read and mark up all group members' drafts; write and post to Courseweb detailed response to your assigned essay.
	W, Apr 9	Workshop Group #2	In advance of your workshop group meeting, you should: read and mark up all group members' drafts; write and post to Courseweb detailed response to your assigned essay.
	F, Apr 11	Workshop Group #3	In advance of your workshop group meeting, you should: read and mark up all group members' drafts; write and post to Courseweb detailed response to your assigned essay.
15	M, Apr 14	Hunting & gathering: the final portfolio and the art of re-vision	Bring with you to class all three of your previous essays (ideally, graded and/or marked-up versions)
	W, Apr 16	Activities in structural revision	Bring your most troubling essay
	F, Apr 18	Activities in language-level revision	Bring an essay-in-progress
16	Final Exam	Final portfolio due by Wed. 4/23 at 5pm to Marissa's office and/or mailbox (233B Biddle)	