

Explorations in Nonfiction Writing
ENG 209
CRN: 1070, Winter 2018
MW 1:30—3:20, TA 226

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“Non-fiction, and in particular the literary memoir, the stylized recollection of personal experience, is often as much about character and story and emotion as fiction is.”—
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

“What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to make of what happened.”—*Vivian Gornick*

Course Description (per catalog): Focuses on reading and analysis of texts organized around a specific topic, with an emphasis on the literary work in its social and cultural context. Topics vary. Repeat credit is allowed for different topics. Approved for University Studies. (Explorations Strand E–Humanities).

Course Introduction

Goals and Outcomes

This course has two main objectives: to teach you how to become careful readers of literary texts and explore writing about those texts in a variety of ways. Making you a better reader, thinker, and writer is the primary goal. We will analyze texts not only for their ideas but for the artful ways that their authors convey those ideas. That said, everything we read will be about creative nonfiction to one degree or another.

Writing assignments will vary. Some will be analytic, others creative. Thus, it is both a close reading and an intensive writing course. You will be introduced to all forms of nonfiction writing: memoir, personal essay, lyric essay, travel writing, hybrid nonfiction, literary journalism, and flash nonfiction. Each week we will read celebrated nonfiction authors such as James Baldwin, David Sedaris, and Joan Didion in order to inspire us, in addition to lesser-known contemporary essayists like Jo Ann Beard, Sue William Silverman, and Eula Biss. Along the way, we will pay special attention to plot, scene, dialogue, imagery, setting, characterization, point of view/persona, research, syntax, and figurative language. We will also be reading a true crime memoir, which is a popular genre of current contemporary nonfiction.

Class Format

Class will be run primarily by discussion. I will come to each class with questions to help facilitate discussion. I encourage students to also come to class with questions for the class. Students will share answers and observations. Students will sign-up to lead one discussion during the course of the term with another student. The approach to discussion can be diverse and

creative. I will also integrate music, art, video essays, podcasts, and film into our classroom activities to expand our learning about nonfiction writing.

In this class, we will embark on creating a learning community. I encourage you to share with me any learning you do outside of class relevant to our class. You are encouraged to share with me links of videos, programs, websites, songs, questions, observations etc. You can send these to my email: matthewm2@sou.edu. Once I have read or viewed what you have sent me, I will post your information on Moodle for the rest of the class to see. We can discuss or reference your item in class and learn from it.

There will be times when I give mini-lectures to the class in order to more effectively convey information. Students are required familiarity with Moodle as all assignments and course materials will be posted there.

Course Objectives

- Students will be able to articulate the differences between the various forms of creative nonfiction.
- Students will learn close reading techniques in order to become careful readers of literary texts.
- Students will gain an appreciation of the various forms of creative nonfiction.
- Students will learn how to structure effective short analytic papers.
- Students will experiment with various styles of creative writing.

Required Texts

- *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: Works from 1970 to Present*, Edited by Lex Williford and Michael Martone (Available in SOU Bookstore)
- *The Fact of a Body: A Murder and A Memoir*, Alexandria Marzano-Lesnevich (Available in SOU Bookstore)
- Additional readings will be posted on Moodle.

Assignments

- 4 Short-Response Papers (a mix of creative/academic)=50 points each
- Proposal for Final Paper=15 points
- Annotated bibliography for Final Paper=25 points
- Brevity Magazine presentation=50 points
- Worksheets, quizzes, brief in-class writings = approx. 50-75 points
- Final paper (two options)=100 points. Due on finals week.
 - We will discuss this assignment in some detail during class time, but either of the two options will see you writing a 2000-word paper (5-6 pages) drawing on a minimum of four texts. More detail will be provided in class and on Moodle, but basically you have two options, one of which is itself a capacious category:
 1. a relatively traditional research paper, focused on one of the semester's texts, writers, or theoretical concerns, or
 2. a piece of creative nonfiction. This could be a memoir, a personal essay, a piece of travel writing, or other piece of creative nonfiction scholarship as approved by the professor.

Attendance policy

Attendance is required and will be taken each class day. You may be dropped from the course for excessive absences. Your regular attendance and participation adds to the class dynamic, creates a tighter community, and makes the course much more fun and engaging. Your success in the course relies heavily on your being here. In addition, participation is part of your grade for the course and remember that assignments must be turned in during class or they will not be accepted. Finally, some writing about the reading (as a quiz) will be required in-class, so please be on time to each class in order to participate in these writings.

SOU Academic Support/Disability Resources

To support students with disabilities in acquiring accessible books and materials, and in planning their study and time management strategies, SOU requires all professors to include a statement on Academic Support and Disability Resources on course syllabi. It is the policy of Southern Oregon University that no otherwise qualified person shall, solely by reason of disability, be denied access to, participation in, or benefits of any service, program, or activity operated by the University. Qualified persons shall receive reasonable accommodation/modification needed to ensure equal access to employment, educational opportunities, programs, and activities in the most appropriate, integrated setting, except when such accommodation creates undue hardship on the part of the provider. These policies are in compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and other applicable federal and state regulations that prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability.

If you are in need of support because of a documented disability (whether it be learning, mobility, psychiatric, health-related, or sensory) you may be eligible for academic or other accommodations through Disability Resources. Call Academic Support Programs at **(541) 552-6213** to schedule an appointment with Disability Resources. The Academic Support Programs office is located in the Stevenson Union, lower level. See the Disability Resources webpage at www.sou.edu/dr for more information. If you are already working with Disability Resources,

make sure to request your accommodations through them for this course as quickly as possible to ensure that you have the best possible access.

Academic Honesty Statement and Code of Student Conduct

Students are expected to maintain academic integrity and honesty in completion of all work for this class. According to SOU's Student Code of Conduct: "Acts of academic misconduct involve the use or attempted use of any method that enables a student to misrepresent the quality or integrity of his or her academic work and are prohibited".

Such acts include, but are not limited to: copying from the work of another, and/or allowing another student to copy from one's own work; unauthorized use of materials during exams; intentional or unintentional failure to acknowledge the ideas or words of another that have been taken from any published or unpublished source; placing one's name on papers, reports, or other documents that are the work of another individual; submission of work resulting from inappropriate collaboration or assistance; submission of the same paper or project for separate courses without prior authorization by faculty members; and/or knowingly aiding in or inciting the academic dishonesty of another.

Any incident of academic dishonesty will be subject to disciplinary action(s) as outlined in SOU's Code of Student Conduct:

http://arcweb.sos.state.or.us/pages/rules/oars_500/oar_573/573_076.html

In case of loss, theft, destruction or dispute over authorship, always retain a copy of any work you produce and submit for grades. Retain all written work that has been graded and handed back to you.

SOU Cares

SOU has a wide range of resources to help you succeed. Our faculty, staff, and administration are dedicated to providing you with the best possible support. The SOU Cares Report allows us to connect you with staff members who can assist with concerns, including financial, health, mental health, wellbeing, legal concerns, family concerns, harassment, assault, study skills, time management, etc. You are also welcome to use the SOU Cares Report to share concerns about yourself, a friend, or a classmate at <http://www.sou.edu/ssi>. These concerns can include reports related to academic integrity, harassment, bias, or assault. Reports related to sexual misconduct or sexual assault can be made anonymously or confidentially. Student Support and Intervention provides recourse for students through the Student Code of Conduct, Title IX, Affirmative Action, and other applicable policies, regulations, and laws.

Statement on Title IX and Mandatory Reporting

Federal law requires that employees of institutions of higher learning (faculty, staff and administrators) report to a Title IX officer any time they become aware that a student is a victim or perpetrator of gender-based bias, sexual harassment, sexual assault, domestic violence, or stalking. Further, Oregon law requires a mandatory report to law enforcement of any physical or emotional abuse of a child or other protected person, including elders and people with disabilities, *or* when a child or other protected person is perceived to be in danger of physical or emotional abuse. If you are the victim of sexual or physical abuse and wish to make a confidential disclosure please use the confidential advising available at

<http://www.sou.edu/ssi/confidential-advisors.html>, or use Southern Oregon University's Anonymous Harassment, Violence, and Interpersonal Misconduct Reporting Form https://jfe.qualtrics.com/form/SV_7R7CCBciGNL473L

Disclaimer

We reserve the right to amend or modify this syllabus throughout the term to best serve the learning objectives of the course and the pace of the class.

Some Essential Questions to Guide Our Reading and Writing

[taken from the *Tell It Slant* website: <http://www.mhprofessional.com/sites/tellitlant/>]

1. What is “creative” about “creative nonfiction?”
2. When does the “creative” part become fiction?
3. What are the ethical considerations writers must take into account?
4. What writerly techniques are most effective in this genre?
5. How do writers effectively structure pieces in this genre?
6. How do we characterize a strong “voice” in this genre?
7. How do we overcome inhibition while writing in this genre?
8. What about writing other people’s stories? Who “owns” the story?
9. How does a writer gain access to memory? How can this memory be represented both accurately and aesthetically?
10. How do writers incorporate research in creative nonfiction?
11. Why are personal stories interesting to others? What makes them “universal?”

What are your particular questions about creative nonfiction?

Tentative Course Schedule (Subject to Change)

Week One **January 8:** Introductions. Syllabus. Learning goals and objectives/creating a learning community. Interest Inventory. Lynda Barry interview.

[**Read** “Introduction” by Scott Russell Sanders in *Touchstone Anthology* & “*What is Creative Nonfiction?*” by Barrie Jean Borich.] Links provided on Moodle. Underline any passages that to you either explain the genre well and/or bring up more questions. Come prepared to discuss these passages in class.

Bring: Type up a passage from a book or magazine or blog (or something else) that to you seems to fit into the category of creative nonfiction (one-paragraph or so). After typing up the passage, write a paragraph that explains *why* you chose this passage, what it means to you, where you first encountered it, and what makes it strong or memorable. **Bring a copy to class to use for discussion and to turn into me.**

January 10: In-Class Writing. Discussion of creative nonfiction as a genre. Introduce Brevity Magazine presentation assignment & sign-ups. Discussion leader sign-ups. Video, “On Being Wrong”

[**Read** in the *Touchstone* anthology “Fourth State of Matter” Jo Ann Beard; “If You Knew Then What I Know Now” Ryan Van Meter & “Burl’s” Bernard Cooper]

Week Two **January 15:** Voice & Creating a Narrative. Discussion and in-class writing. Introduce creative writing assignment #1.

[**Read** in *Touchstone* “Interstellar” Rebecca McClanahan]

January 17: Truth in Nonfiction. Discussion. In-class writing.

[**Read** “Goodbye to All That” Joan Didion (link on Moodle); “Notes of a Native Son” James Baldwin (link on Moodle); “The Pain Scale” Eula Biss in *Touchstone*]

Week Three **January 22:** Personal Essay. Brevity presentation/s. Discussion. In-class writing.

[**Read** in *Touchstone* “Repeat After Me” David Sedaris]

Bring: First creative writing assignment due as a hard copy in-class on January 24th.

January 24: Video Essays. Brevity presentation/s. Discussion. In-class writing.

[**Read** in *Touchstone* “Living Like Weasels” Annie Dillard; “A Small Place” Jamaica Kincaid; “High Tide in Tucson” Barbara Kingsolver]

Bring: Bring a physical object to class that, to you, represents a particular place.

Week Four **January 29**: Place & Setting in Nonfiction. Brevity presentation/s. Discussion. In-class writing. Introduce literary response assignment #2.

[**Read** in *Touchstone* “Reading History to My Mother” Robin Hemley]

Bring: Bring a family photo to class (digital is fine).

January 31: Writing about Family. Brevity presentation/s. Discussion. In-class writing.

[**Read** Prologue & Chapters 1—9 in *The Fact of a Body*, pp. 1—72.]

Week Five **February 5**: True Crime Memoir. Brevity presentation/s. Discussion. In-class writing.

[**Read** in *Touchstone* “This is Not Who We Are” Naomi Shihab Nye; “Leap” Brian Doyle]

Bring: Next literary response due Wednesday, February 7.

February 7: Film “Stories We Tell.” Flash Nonfiction. Brevity presentation/s. Discussion. In-class writing.

[**Read** Chapters 10—15 in *The Fact of a Body*, pp. 73—129]

Week Six **February 12**: Audio Nonfiction. Brevity presentation/s. Discussion. In-class writing. Introduce creative writing assignment #3. Introduce final paper & proposal.

[**Read** in *Touchstone* “Kissing” Anthony Farrington & “Son of Mr. Green Jeans” Dinty Moore]

February 14: Lyric Essay. Brevity presentation/s. Discussion. In-class writing.

[**Read** Chapters 15—20 in *The Fact of a Body*, pp. 122—172]

Bring: Write one-paragraph paper proposal based on final paper guidelines introduced in class. Due Monday, February 19th.

Week Seven **February 19**: Research in Nonfiction. Brevity presentation/s. Discussion. In-class writing.

[Read in *Touchstone* “The Love of My Life” Cheryl Strayed]

Bring: Creative writing assignment due Wednesday, February 21st.

February 21: Memoir. Brevity presentation/s. Discussion. In-class writing. Introduce Annotated Bibliography assignment for Final Paper.

[**Read** Chapters 21—26 in *The Fact of a Body*, pp. 173—223.]

Week Eight **February 26**: Brevity presentation/s. Discussion. In-class writing. Introduce literary response assignment #4.

[**Read** in *Touchstone* “Return to Sender” Mark Doty]

February 28: Brevity presentation/s. Discussion. In-class writing.

[**Read** Chapters 27—33 in *The Fact of a Body*, pp. 224—269]

Bring: Annotated Bibliography with minimum five references. Due Monday, March 5th.

Week Nine **March 5**: Brevity presentation/s. Discussion. In-class writing.

[**Read** in *Touchstone* “The Pat Boone Fan Club” Sue William Silverman; “Hateful Things” Sei Shonagon (Link provided on Moodle)].

Bring: Last literary response due on March 7th.

March 7: Brevity presentation/s. Discussion. In-class writing.

[**Read** Chapters 34—40 in *The Fact of a Body*, pp. 270—309]

Week Ten **March 12**: TBD

March 14: TBD

Final papers due as hard copy to my office by Tuesday, March 20th at 5:00 p.m. No exceptions!