

ENG 343: Creative Nonfiction Workshop

Spring 2018

Saint Joseph's University

Dr. Jenny Spinner

Office: Merion Hall 114

E-mail: jspinner@sju.edu

Office Hours: T 1:45–2:45 p.m.,

TH 1:45– 2:45 p.m., F 1– 3 p.m.



Objectives

The primary objective of this course is to immerse you in the world of creative nonfiction, a genre with limitless possibilities in terms of **style, technique, and form**. We'll begin with a **history of the genre** and a **study of its various labels and subgenres** that often leave many readers (and even its practitioners) confused about basic definitions of the form, all the while acknowledging that these very labels are themselves fluid. What we'll learn, however, is that no matter what you call it, there really are only two non-negotiable requirements for creative nonfiction: that it be good and that it be **true** (enough?). Not all creative writing is good writing, yet ultimately the goal for most of us is to write pieces that touch others with their language, experiences, connections and/or thoughts. What, then, we will ask of our readings and writings for this class, constitutes **good creative nonfiction**? And how can we, as writers, get there? Then there's truth, so slippery that even though creative nonfiction is rooted in fact (whose fact? to what degree?), much is left up for debate among writers and readers of the genre. Again, through our readings and your writing, we will explore that debate, as well as other ethical issues inherent in a genre of true (how true? whose truth?) stories. We will also investigate and experiment with technical devices—**character, dialogue, scene, tone, voice, structure**—that are as important to creative nonfiction as they are to fiction. We'll talk about the importance of, and the intricacies of, **research** in creative nonfiction, and you'll learn how to conduct research for your own creative endeavors. Your **reading and writing** of the creative nonfiction genre this semester is not meant to be exhaustive, but it will be intensive. By the end of the semester, we will have read a number of **contemporary writers of the form** as well as examined some of the common **places where creative nonfiction is published**, read, promoted, and debated. Finally, you will continue to refine your experiences as a participant—both as a reader and as a writer—in the writing workshop, and we will discuss ways to offer effective critiques of our peers' work as well as to incorporate critique, external and internal, in **revisions** of your work.

Required Materials

Brevity website (free)

The Lifespan of a Fact, John D'Agata and Jim Fingal

The Best American Essays 2017, ed. Leslie Jamison

Access to our course Canvas site

Course Requirements

Major Writing Assignments: You'll write three short works of creative nonfiction (two Instagram essays at 400 words or less; one Brevity-style essay at 750 words or less) and one longer one (12–15 pages) this semester. We will formally workshop in class the Brevity-style short and the longer essays as well as the final Instagram essay. Of note regarding the second Instagram Essay.

Journal Nearly every class period, you will be given in-class writing prompts meant to generate material for essays, practice craft elements that we discuss in class, or respond to readings. You will not be graded on the quality of this work, but you do need to complete each entry in order to get full credit for the journal. If you miss class, it is up to you to seek out the in-class writing assignments that you missed. Please create a Google doc for this journal and share it with me at jspinner@sju.edu. (I do recognize that some of you may prefer old-school pen-and-paper writing, but for the ease of classroom management, I prefer that you do this journal electronically.)

Workshops & Critiques: Because this class is a writing workshop, peer review is an integral part of the writing process. We will have a workshop for the one of the shorts and both longer pieces. For the longer essays, drafts of your work are due the class period prior to the scheduled workshop. Failure to submit a draft of your work on time may mean that you forfeit the opportunity for a critique. Each class member is required to prepare a written critique of the drafts we discuss during a workshop. Prior to the first workshop, we will discuss the content and format of these critiques.

CNF in the Community Activity/Review: You are required to attend one creative nonfiction event in the community this semester, write a reflection of the experience, and talk to the class about highlights. Recommended events are listed in the course schedule, but you may propose, and receive permission to count, an alternative event that you come upon.

Participation: It goes without saying (though I'll say it anyway!) that you can't check out of a writing workshop without your absence being felt by the writing community and in the quality of the work that you submit. We're going to be doing a lot of reading and writing this semester—there's no other way to do this course without diving in. We can't write without reading creative nonfiction, all sorts of creative nonfiction, and a great deal of it. And you can't grow as writers without writing, a lot. Please be prepared for each class by doing the required reading. Be prepared for workshops by submitting drafts that have been worked over enough to make our attention to them worthwhile. Be a responsible and attentive member of this writing community by giving your all to your fellow students: offering them helpful and respectful feedback in your written critiques of their work as well as during the workshops themselves.

Grading Breakdown

5%	Instagram Essay #1
10%	Instagram Essay #2
15%	CNF Short
30%	CNF Long
10%	CNF in the Community Reflection and informal presentation
15%	Journal
10%	Critiques/Participation

Please keep in mind that when I grade your work, I'm not grading you as a writer (or your life story or you as a person). I'm grading the art you have crafted from your life, and I'm evaluating its potential as a literary work based on my experience as a creative nonfiction writer, editor, scholar, and teacher.

Here is a general rubric to help you understand my grading process (with a nod to my colleague Tenaya Darlington for some of the language):

A: You've done significant drafting and the essay feels complete—not much tweaking is necessary. It reads smoothly, has few or no typographical errors, and clearly demonstrates a skillful handling of the subject matter as well as excellence in style and form.

B: Your story needs *at least* one more significant draft. It's got a lot of potential in terms of the substance of the essay and in terms of style and form, but it's clear the essay needs more incubation time.

C: This essay fulfills the assignment, but it's uninspired or it doesn't feel fully thought out. There may be significant craft issues that need to be addressed as well. A "C" essay is *at least* two significantly revised drafts away from an A essay

Grades Lower Than C: Students in an upper-level creative nonfiction workshop should be able and willing to turn in work that earns at least a C. If that is not the case, I

will not put a letter grade on your work. Instead, I will return it to you for revision. Before accepting a revision of any subpar work, I will need to meet with you. If you do not turn in a revision of the work before the end of the semester, your grade will revert to an “F.”

Finally, your participation grade rests heavily on your willingness to participate in classroom discussion and the quality of the workshop critiques you compose for your peers. Also, please note that you must complete all assignments in order to receive a passing grade in this course.

Course Policies

Attendance

In a course that also constitutes a writing community, regular attendance and participation is essential. If for some reason you must miss class, I ask that you notify me as far in advance as possible to let me know that you will not be there. Email notification is fine. Students who miss more than four classes will receive an “FA” (“Failure due to Absence”) on their transcripts. Please note that workshop days are essential days for you to be in class. Missing workshop days—either as a writer or as a participant in a critique—counts as two absences.

Submitting Essays

All essays must be typed, one-sided, double-spaced, with one-inch margins. Do not include a title page; rather, put relevant information in the upper left-hand corner of the page.

Emily A. Dunlap
Essay #1—Rough Draft
ENG 343: Creative Nonfiction Workshop
March 13, 2018

Also, remember to put your last name and page numbers on subsequent pages. When you submit a final draft of an essay, I ask that you do so in a folder and that you include other significant drafts as well as any workshop critiques in that folder. You will also write, in class, a self-evaluation that you will include in the folder.

Academic Honesty Policy

Passing off work that is not your own in any manner is considered plagiarism and is grounds for failure of the course as well as dismissal from the Writing Studies program.

Additional Resources

For those students who have or think that they may have a disability (learning, physical

or psychological), contact Services for Students with Disabilities, Room 113, Science Center, 610-660-1774 or 610-660-1620 as early as possible in the semester. Please note the following: 1) Accommodations can only be provided to students with current (within three years) documentation. 2) Students are encouraged to discuss their instructional and accommodation needs (“reasonable academic adjustments”) with their professors early in the semester.

Writing Center

Many strong writers/creative writers believe that there is nothing that anyone at the Writing Center can do to assist them with their creative work. Not so! The Writing Center is staffed with fabulous writers from all disciplines who, while they may not all have significant experience in creative writing, are generally savvy readers of creative work and can offer helpful feedback and conversation about a draft. Please consider making an appointment in the Writing Center for your assignments. You will receive extra credit for doing so, but more importantly, I believe strongly that you/your writing will benefit from the experience. For more information or to make an appointment, visit the Writing Center website at sju.edu/writingcenter.

Schedule

- Jan. 16 Introduction to Course.
- Jan. 18 Read: [“What Is Creative Nonfiction?”](#) (Borich), [“A Genre by Any Other Name?”](#) (Moore) and [“Literary Non-fiction: The Facts”](#) (Guardian)
- Set up your Journal for the semester (via Google Docs) and share the link with me. Your first entry: Write a sentence with just one independent clause that expresses a truth about you that you would like us to know---and that is written in a style and phrasing that communicates who you are as a writer.
- Jan. 23 Read: “On Miniatures” (Purpura) and [“Wanted: Instagram Micro Essays”](#) (CNF) and [“How to Tell Powerful Narratives on Instagram”](#) (Shea)
- Insta Essay #1 Assigned.
- Jan. 25 Read: [Brevity, Issue 57](#) (first eight essays).
- Jan. 30 Read: [Brevity, Issue 57](#) (next seven essays) and [“Writing Brief”](#) (Norlen)
- Skype Interview: Dinty Moore, Editor, Brevity
- Feb. 01 Instagram Essay Due.

Feb. 06 Workshop CNF Short [Students 1,2,3,4,5]

Feb. 05 **The Moth StorySlam: Love Hurts, WorldCafe Live, 7:30 p.m.**

Feb. 08 Workshop CNF Short [Students 6,7,8,9,10]

Feb. 13 Workshop CNF Short [Students 11, 12,13,14,15,]

Feb. 15 Read: Lifespan of a Fact, Chapters 1-4

Feb. 20 Lifespan of a Fact, Chapters 5-9

Feb. 22 CNF Short Due. In Class: Multimedia Essays.

Feb. 27 BAE Selections and Craft Essay.

Mar. 01 BAE Selections and Craft Essay.

Mar. 06 CNF Documentary: 51 Birch Street

Mar. 08 CNF Documentary: 51 Birch Street, cont.

Mar. 13 No Class. Spring Break.

Mar. 15 No Class. Spring Break.

Mar. 20 BAE Selections and Craft Essay and journal

Mar. 20 First Person Arts Story Slam: Parches, FringeArts, 8 p.m.

Mar. 22 BAE Selections and Craft Essay and journal

Mar. 27 Video

Mar. 27 Bill Roorbach Reading, 6:30 p.m., 5th Floor McShain

Mar. 29 Video

Apr. 03 No Class. Monday Schedule.

Apr. 05 Workshop A

Apr. 10 Workshop B

Apr. 12 Workshop C

Apr. 17 Workshop D Essays Due A

Apr. 19 Read: Leslie Jamison and Ariel Levy Essays Due B

Apr. 23 Leslie Jamison Reading, 7:30 p.m., Philadelphia Free Library

Apr. 24 Profile Essay Essay Due C

April 24 Ariel Levy Reading, 7 p.m., Villanova University Library

Apr. 26 Profile Essays Due D

May 01 Profile Essay Workshop

Insta Essay #2 and CNF in the Community Response due by 5 p.m. on May 4 (in lieu of final exam)