

CRWR 517 – Graduate Workshop—Nonfiction—Winter 2014

Professor Rachel Toor

Time: Tuesdays 5:30-10PM

Email: racheltoor@gmail.com

Office Hours: Tuesdays and Wednesdays 4:30-5:30pm and by appointment

Purpose of the Course:

We will be reading and writing fact-, thought-, and observation-based essays that use the techniques of fiction to tell compelling and true narratives. Throughout the semester we will discuss issues of craft: how to create an effective narrative arc; how to develop a sense of urgency or tension using sentence structure, syntax, and/or organization; how to use dialogue, description, and the telling detail; ultimately, we will focus on how to keep the reader engaged. We will study each other's work as writers, looking at the decisions the creators of each piece have made and asking questions about how well those choices work; we will read the work of published writers to search for moves and tricks that we can steal and use in our own writing. We will discuss the inevitable ethical issues that arise from writing about living people, explore strategies for maintaining standards of accuracy and fairness, and dwell on the obvious and important issue of the all-too-human ways in which memory works and often fails.

In the writing workshop we are attempting to simulate an editorial meeting, at which editors discuss the writer's work in his or her absence, and where interested but dispassionate readers evaluate the strengths of the work, point out weaknesses, and wonder about possible ways to solve problems in the text. The writer will remain silent. She will have an opportunity, at the end of the discussion, to ask clarifying questions, but not to defend or explain anything. We work from the text.

I expect you to take every piece of writing seriously, and on its own terms. The best editors are those who see where the writer is trying to go and help her get there. We will start each discussion by articulating what we think the writer's goals are—what is this piece about? Why does it matter? Why should we care? Only after we have talked about the strengths in the piece will we move onto a discussion of where it might benefit from further consideration on the part of the writer. Some pieces of writing may not be to your taste. You need to put aside personal predilections and instead focus on art and craft.

Requirements:

At the beginning of the semester, students will sign up for time slots when their work will be discussed. Students must bring enough copies for everyone in the class the week before their work is scheduled to be discussed. No work will be accepted late; being able to meet deadlines is an essential part of making a living as a writer. Please bring no more than 5000 words (20 pages) to workshop at one time.

For each piece, students will prepare a set of comments of no fewer than 250 words. These should take the form of reader's reports. Please do not address the writer directly; focus on the piece. Begin by providing an objective description of the work: What is it? What is it about? Then summarize the strengths and weaknesses: How is it working? What questions are you left with? What confuses you? I ask that you don't say

“I want” in reference to someone else’s writing. It’s not about what you want; it’s about what the piece is trying to accomplish.

Please bring one copy of your comments to class for the writer. On the day after class (Wednesday), please post these same comments on Canvas. Please do not post them before class (I don’t want to shape the discussion, and it’s okay if, after class, you no longer agree with what you wrote). You may also want to annotate your manuscript copy and give that to the writer as well; good line-editing is something we should all appreciate. I expect the writer to listen carefully during the workshop and read over all the comments. I am available to meet with you afterward to discuss revision strategies.

I will also be assigning published essays for us to discuss. They will be available on Canvas under Files.

Grades:

Your grade will be based on your participation, on how seriously you take the process of writing and how closely and carefully you critique the work of your peers. A missed workshop cannot be made up. For each late critique your final grade will be lowered by 0.5. For any critique not completed, your final grade will be lowered by 1.0 You have until June 3 to submit critiques.

Privacy

Please consider the workshop equivalent to publication in terms of privacy. In other words, if you are uncomfortable having people—either within or outside of the class—see something you’ve written, don’t submit it.