

# THE ART OF TRUE CRIME: READINGS IN CREATIVE NONFICTION

Eng 2308:008

Tues/Thur 12:30-1:50

ENG 360

Sarah Viren

Office Hours: Tues & Thur 11-12:30 & by appointment (ENG 476)

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**COURSE DESCRIPTION:** As a culture, we are saturated with true crime stories, most of which follow a predictable narrative arc: there is a victim, an investigation, and the satisfaction at the end that justice has been done. Occasionally, however, writers use stories of crimes and criminals as a means of exploring the philosophical, metaphysical, spiritual, and existential questions of daily life. Work by authors such as these will be the focus of our course, with nonfiction readings spanning in form from the memoir to the documentary and exploring such crimes as rape, murder, drunk driving, and orchid theft. This course fulfills TTU's Core Curriculum Humanities requirement.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENTS:** This course is designed to introduce students to the genre of creative nonfiction and hone their critical reading and writing skills. By the end of this course, students should be able to identify the defining characteristics of the creative nonfiction genre and articulate analytical arguments regarding the stylistic and literary qualities of a nonfiction text. By honing these skills, students will improve their ability to evaluate events, ideas, and artistic expressions in terms of multiple cultural contexts and value systems. These outcomes will be assessed through reading assignments and regular evaluation of class readings, class participation, critical and creative writing assignments, and an evaluative final paper.

**COMPETENCY STATEMENT:** Students graduating from Texas Tech University should be able to think critically and demonstrate an understanding of the possibility of multiple interpretations, cultural contexts, and values.

## REQUIRED TEXTS

All texts except for the course anthology are available at the Campus Bookstore in the SUB. You are also welcome to purchase them used at Hester's Books (if there) or online. The Course Anthology must be purchased at the Copy Mail Center in the Sub (Suite 100)

*In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote (978-0679745587)

*The Orchid Thief: A True Story of Beauty and Obsession* by Susan Orlean (978-0449003718)

*The Other Side: A Memoir* by Lacy Johnson (978-1935639831)

*Course Anthology*

## COURSE POLICIES

#### BE CONSIDERATE

Though I have tried a variety of readings as far as both style and subject, the nature of the course (true crime) means that many of the texts we read may include sensitive or upsetting material or deal with potentially controversial topics. As we move our way through the course, I will encourage you to state your mind and, if needed, disagree with your peers and/or with me. However, it is pertinent that we all treat each other kindly, be compassionate, and listen and disagree respectfully. This classroom will be a safe place for all of us, regardless of our race, ethnicity, age, religion, social class, gender, or sexual preference. Please bring any breach of this standard to my attention immediately.

In addition, disruptive behavior of any kind will not be tolerated. This includes talking out of turn, using electronic devices not previously approved by me, working on homework for another class, reading the paper, sleeping, etc. Disruptive students will be asked to leave the class and will receive an absence for that day. Habitually disruptive students will be invited to drop the course.

#### ATTENDANCE

We don't have much time—less than three hours per week—and we need all of it. So when we have class, be here and be here on time. This course relies heavily on in-class discussion; therefore, attendance is key. Each student will be allowed THREE absences. Every unexcused absence beyond that will lower your final grade in the course by FIVE percentage points. If you exceed SIX absences, you will automatically fail the course. I also track of excessive tardiness; five tardies equals one unexcused absence.

Please remember that illness is not an excused absence. The only excused absences are for: 1) an official university activity you are required to attend, 2) a religious holiday, 3) a prolonged or serious illness or/accident, 4) a family emergency or 5) a military training drill. To excuse an absence, I will need documentation within two weeks of the missed class period. If the documentation is not submitted within two weeks, the absence stands.

#### LATE ASSIGNMENTS

If you know you're going to be absent when an assignment is due, you must turn it beforehand if you want credit. Any major paper turned in late will be marked off one letter grade if turned in late, but on the same day that the assignment is due, and an additional letter grade for every day after the assignment was due. Late work will not be accepted for daily class assignments (Quotes & Notes, In-Class quizzes) except in case of sudden illness or an emergency.

#### ELECTRONICS

All electronic devices are prohibited, unless I grant you special permission (yes, this includes your cell phone).

#### PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism is passing off someone else's work as your own, either intentionally or unintentionally. It is the same as stealing and I will not tolerate it in any form. If you are found to have plagiarized someone else's work, you will fail that assignment, and you may be reported to your dean. Two or more cases of plagiarism and you fail the entire course.

#### STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities will find numerous programs designated to coordinate academic accommodations and promote access to every phase of university life. Such programming is

coordinated through Student Disability Services. SDS personnel oversee and coordinate programs to ensure accessibility on an individual basis to students with disabilities. Any student who, because of a disability, may require special arrangements in order to meet the course requirements should contact the instructor as soon as possible to make any necessary arrangements. Students should present appropriate verification from Student Disability Services during the instructor's office hours, preferably within the first three weeks of class. Please note instructors are not allowed to provide classroom accommodations to a student until appropriate verification from Student Disability Services has been provided. For additional information, you may contact the Student Disability Services office in 335 West Hall or 806-742-2405.

#### TTU RESOURCES FOR A SAFE CAMPUS

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### COMPONENTS OF ASSESSMENT

#### READING EVALUATION ASSIGNMENTS:

Quizzes: While we are reading the three assigned books for this class (*In Cold Blood*, *The Orchid Thief*, and *The Other Side*), we will start out each class with a small in-class quiz. This quiz will be used as a means of assuring that everyone is reading but also may help shape that day's class discussion.

Quotes and Notes: When we are not reading on of the three book listed above (i.e. when we are reading essays assigned from the *Course Anthology*), you will be asked to find one significant quote from each assigned reading and writing a short description (two to three sentences) explaining why that quote is significant within the context of the work itself. Quotes & Notes will be due via Blackboard an hour before your scheduled class time (i.e. 11:30 a.m.). I will periodically call on students and ask them to share their Quotes & Notes. For that reason, please also underline the quotes you've chosen for that day's reading.

PARTICIPATION: Class participation is crucial to any literature class. Almost all of our classes will be discussion oriented and require feedback from everyone. Active participation, which means more than just offering one perfunctory contribution per class, is required to receive an A or B in participation. A midterm participation grade will be posted on Blackboard so that you can gauge your success in this area before it's too late. If you are extremely shy or otherwise disinclined to speak up in class for a specific reason, please come talk to me within the first three weeks of class so we can discuss your needs and some possible solutions.

CRITICAL AND CREATIVE ESSAYS: Over the course of the semester you will be asked to write three essays: one critical paper, one short book review, and one creative work. Individual assignment sheets explaining each of these assignments will be handed out in class and available on Blackboard under the assignments tab.

FINAL EVALUATIVE ESSAY: In lieu of a final exam, you will turn in a final essay in which you evaluate the field of true crime writing as it has been presented in this course. This essay will ask you to take a stance on the literary and culture value of true crime writing and address at least some of the questions we've been discussing in class. To do so, you'll be asked to use at least four texts from the class as examples. An assignment sheet outlining the specific requirements of this assignment will be handed out at least two weeks before the start of exam week.

### GRADING

A=90-100    B=80-89    C=70-79    D=60-69    F=0-59

Quizzes and Quotes & Notes: 20%  
Participation: 20%  
Critical Essay: 20%  
Book Review: 10%  
Creative Essay: 20%  
Final Exam (evaluative essay): 10%

### CALENDAR

#### Week 1

T 8/25: Introductions, explanation of syllabus, etc

Th 8/27: "Introduction" by Scott Russell Sanders; "Sleazy, bloody and surprisingly smart: In defense of true crime" by Laura Miller; and "During the Farm Show Parade" by Gary Fincke

#### Week 2

T 9/1: *In Cold Blood* pp. 1-38

Th 9/3 *In Cold Blood* pp. 38-74

#### Week 3

T 9/8 *In Cold Blood* pp. 77-123

Th 9/10 *In Cold Blood* pp. 123-155

#### Week 4

T 9/15 *In Cold Blood* pp. 159-203

Th 9/17 *In Cold Blood* pp. 203-248

#### Week 5

T 9/22 *In Cold Blood* pp. 251-308

Th 9/24 *In Cold Blood* pp. 309-343

#### Week 6

T 9/29: "Leviathan" by David McGlynn; "Physical Evidence" by Kelly Grey Carlisle; "The Fourth State of Matter" by Jo Ann Beard

TH 10/1: "Time and Distance Overcome" by Eula Biss; "Transgender Day of Remembrance: A Found Essay" by Torrey Peters; "Leap" by Brian Doyle

Week 7

T: 10/6: “The Innocent Man,” Parts 1 and 2 by Pam Colloff

TH: 10/8: **CRITICAL ESSAY DUE**

Episode One, *Serial* Podcast (link on Blackboard)

Week 8

T 10/13: *The Orchid Thief* pp. 1-41

TH 10/15: *The Orchid Thief* pp. 42-87

Week 9

T 10/20: *The Orchid Thief* pp. 87-152

TH 10/22: *The Orchid Thief* pp. 152-202

Week 10:

T 10/27: *The Orchid Thief* pp. 203-284

TH: 10/29: NO CLASS, **BOOK REVIEW DUE BY 5 P.M.** on Blackboard

Week 11

T 11/3: *The Other Side* ch 1-3

TH 11/5: *The Other Side* ch 4-6

Week 12

T 11/10: *The Other Side* ch 7-10

TH 11/12: *The Other Side* cha 10-13

Week 13

T 11/17: “Apology” by John Nosco; “The World’s Greatest Con Artist” by Wells Tower

TH 11/19: “Girl, Fighting” by Laurie Lynn Drummond; “My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant” by Jose Antonio Vargas

Week 14

T 11/24: OPTIONAL CLASS. Watch *The Smartest Guys in the Room* on your own (or during in-class screening)

TH 11/26: NO CLASS, THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week 15

T 12/1: Class wrap-up **CREATIVE ESSAY DUE at NOON** via Blackboard

Final Exam Week

12/8 at NOON: **EVALUATIVE ESSAY DUE** via Blackboard (in lieu of final exam)

## WRITING WORKSHOP: THE LITERARY ESSAY

Eng 5370  
Class time  
Class number

Sarah Viren  
Office Hours: TBA  
sarah.viren@ttu.edu

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The essay is either one of the oldest literary forms or one of the newest, depending on whom you ask. It's also notoriously to define. Ralph Waldo Emerson called the essay "an entertaining soliloquy on every random topic that comes into his head," while the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset characterized it as "science, minus the explicit proof." The essay anthologist John D'Agata has often called the essay "the mind on the page," which feels appropriate, even if it's not all that helpful in distinguishing one work of writing from the next. The poet and essayist Rachel Blau DuPlessis perhaps gets the closest when she calls the essay "the genre of making, the genre showing how 'making' itself engages discourse as part of the medium." But, of course, that's just my opinion.

In this workshop, we'll struggle with the question of the essay by writing, reading, and analyzing our own and others. This means we'll talk a lot about things like medium, form, genre, and voice. How important is "truth" when defining the essay? What about line breaks? Do they automatically make an essay a poem? You'll be encouraged to push the boundaries of the form, but you'll also be expected to be able to defend your creative choices both ethically and aesthetically.

**Learning outcomes:** The goal of this course is for you to not only create a body of three publishable works, but also for you to be able to talk intelligently about those essays and the aesthetic and ethical choices you made in crafting them. In other words, I'll expect you to be able to both write and talk like an essayist by the end of this course—even if you normally consider yourself a poet, short story writer, translator or just some dude who writes.

**Readings:** *Course Anthology* available at copy center / *White Girls* by Hilton Als / *Once I was Cool* by Megan Stielstra

### Some simple rules

**ATTENDANCE** This is a graduate course, so I expect you to attend all classes. You may miss one class, but after that your grade will suffer. Of course, please come talk to me if medical or other emergencies, religious holidays, military duty, etc requires you to be out of the class more than the once during the semester.

**LATE WORK** In general I don't accept late work, especially if it's your workshop essay. You are always welcome to change workshop dates with a classmate, but I expect your work to be turned in on time.

ELECTRONICS: please no computers or other devices. I know it can be a pain to print things out, but it shows respect for your classmates and for me if you take the time to make notes on their work beforehand, show up on time, and bring a copy of that work. Same thing goes for the outside texts we'll be reading for that day.

PLAGIARISM: If you use other's work without attribution (or without the creative stealing being made obvious via the text—think David Shield's *Reality Hunger* or a Girl Talk mashup song), you'll receive an F in the class.

### **Assessment:**

CREATIVE WORK: You'll turn in three essays over the course of the semester. These essays may be in any medium (video or audio essays, comics, or traditional word-based essays) and any length up to 15 pages. I expect them to be polished drafts, though not necessarily publication-ready. 30% of grade

CLASS PARTICIPATION, IN-CLASS WRITING ASSIGNMENTS, SMALL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS, ETC: Everyone needs to talk in class and comment on both the readings and on your peers' work. If for some reason you don't feel comfortable talking in class, please come talk to me during the first two weeks of the semester. I'll also occasionally assign small in-class or out-of-class writing assignments, which we will then share in class. 20% of grade

WRITTEN FEEDBACK: The most important part of a workshop is learning to hone your inner editor and the best way to do this is to critique others' work and to pay close attention to the critiques you get from others. To that end, I'm serious about ensuring that everyone gives written feedback to their peers. In addition to writing marginal notes, please also type up at least a half a page of written notes for each person being workshopped that day. Email me a copy of those comments and also print or email your notes to that author. 20%

FINAL PORTFOLIO: Revision is hard, but it's also key to learning how to grow as a writer. For your final portfolio, choose two essays from the three you wrote for class and revise them. Please also include a cover letter in your portfolio that explains your revision process, what texts or readings most influenced your thinking on the essay during the semester, and a revised definition of the essay. 30%

### **Other important things:**

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### CALENDAR

#### Week 1

T: Introductions, explanation of syllabus, etc

#### Week 2

T: Share essay definitions

Read from *Anthology* essays by Michel de Montaigne, Sei Shonogan, Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, James Baldwin, Joan Didion, and essay definitions

#### Week 3

T: *White Girls* by Hilton Als

#### Week 4

T: workshop

#### Week 5

T: workshop

#### Week 6

T: workshop

#### Week 7

Read from Anthology essays by Amy Leach, Eula Biss, James Agee, Joy Williams, Zadie Smith, and George Saunders

#### Week 8

T: *Once I was Cool* by Megan Steilstra

#### Week 9

T: Workshop

#### Week 10:



T: Workshop

Week 11

T: Workshop

Week 12

T: Read from *Anthology* essays by Anne Carson, Eduardo Galeano, Fernando Pessoa, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, T. Clutch Fleischmann; read comics/visual essays by Alison Bechdal and Anna Joy Springer; and watch online video essays by Kristen Radke and John Bresland

Week 13

T: Workshop

Week 14

T: Workshop

Week 15

T: Workshop

Final Exam Week

12/8 at NOON: **Final Portfolio Due**