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ENG 4761-600: Advanced Nonfiction Writing

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Writing 4761 / 4761Z: Advanced Creative Nonfiction

Online Summer 2021

Colleen Abel

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Virtual office hours (via Microsoft Teams

Office: CH 3811 (remote for Summer 2021)

Mon and Tues. 11:00-noon and

Thursdays from 5 to 6 p.m.)

Required Texts

Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction

Wang, Esme Weijun Wang. *The Collected Schizophrenias*.

Miscellaneous readings (D2L)

Course Description

We all have a story to tell: This advanced course will provide students with an in-depth look of the styles and techniques of contemporary creative nonfiction in the service of helping develop their unique voice and style. We will read memoirs and essay collections to break down their structures and techniques, and students will workshop and revise their own writing in the service of transforming life into art.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, you should be able to

- Develop advanced ability and a repertoire of artistic strategies in the writing of literary nonfiction prose.
- Deepen your understanding of creative nonfiction and its subgenres through intensive readings of contemporary authors.
- Hone critical reading skills.

- Evaluate, constructively, the works-in-progress of your peers
- Reflect upon your own creative processes and practices

Instructional Philosophy

The course is divided into what I consider the two most important activities in learning to become a better writer: reading and writing. We will spend a great deal of time learning terminology and reading examples of essays that exemplify the techniques we are exploring. As the following writing advice attests, the way one learns craft is first by reading, then by writing.

“Read, read, read. Read everything -- trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read! You'll absorb it. Then write. If it's good, you'll find out. If it's not, throw it out of the window.” -William Faulkner

Then, you will also be asked to synthesize all that you have learned by writing your own work. You will continue reading, though the emphasis will be on your classmates' essays, and your task will turn from explicating / discussing to critiquing via workshop.

Course Delivery Method

This course will be delivered online through our learning management system, D2L Brightspace, <http://www.eiu.edu/d2l>. As far as I can tell every single one of you has used D2L for this class already to turn in assignments. However, if you need help: Contact ITS User Services for technical support issues.

Email: support@eiu.edu

Phone: (217) 581-4357

Support Hours: 7:00 AM - 4:30 PM, Monday-Friday with your EIU NetID account or password, contact Campus Technology Support at (217) 581-4357 or support@eiu.edu.

Grade Breakdown

Writing Prompts: 100 points

Three Essays: 300 points

Discussion Boards Posts: 200 points

Workshop Feedback: 300 points

Final Reflection: 100 points

1000 points total

Note: Students taking this course for graduate credit will have slightly different requirements.

Creative Exercises: Most weeks, we will be doing a creative exercise to generate new works. You should not treat these as demands for full drafts; these are designed to get you on the track toward something you may want to develop further. You will be posting these to a special forum on the discussion board, but if you'd rather the piece remain private, you do have the option to email me your exercise by the due date.

Three Essays: Over the course of the semester, you will be asked to write and workshop three essays of varying lengths. The instructions for each will be available on Dropbox.

Workshop Participation: Each of you will be workshopped three times over the semester. Because of the nature of a summer class, we will conduct these as small-group workshops. Your workshop grade breaks down as follows:

- Your workshop feedback
- Posting your own work for workshop on time
- Your revision plan

You must turn in your piece by noon on Monday of the workshop week. **I do not accept late work** because it's unfair to your peers, who need ample time to give feedback.

What does good feedback look like? Good feedback gives the reader a sense of your response to the piece as an audience member. Over many years of teaching I've found that students most appreciate:

- A description of what you think their piece is about, what you think it's trying to achieve, and what the main idea or theme seems to be.
Sometimes this means stating things that seem obvious, but often this is something people see differently, so it helps to have many perspectives
- Things that you respond to with excitement or surprise. Everyone loves hearing where their piece really took off and flew. This is helpful, too, because authors want to try to preserve in revision those things that the audience is responding well to (usually!)
- Questions that you have. Is there anything confusing? Are you especially curious about why the author did or did not make a particular choice?
- Ideas you have about what they could do in revision to experiment with different directions. This isn't quite the same as saying you didn't like something or that an element wasn't "working. These are "constructive possibilities": what if this were shorter? Longer? Included research? What might that do for the piece?

All of this will probably take a generous paragraph to achieve.

Discussion Board Posts: See "Learner Participation Guidelines" below for more about discussion board posts.

Final Reflective Essay: For your final reflective essay, I would like you to turn in an essay (500 minimum) reflecting on your work as a writer. Use the following questions as a guide:

- How were your workshop experiences? How will you go about revising your workshop pieces? How did you sort through all of the advice to figure

out what your piece needed? What advice was most valuable? What will your pieces do now that they did not before?

- What was your writing process like? How did you generate new work? How did you stick with it?
- Your experience with the course texts. What texts did you find most helpful to your writing? What elements did they help you understand as being relevant to your work?
- Your experience with your classmates' work. What did you learn from them? How do they help you think about your writing?

Late work

Explications will be docked two points for every day they are late. Late portfolios will not be accepted. Late workshop posts will not be accepted. If you need an extension, please let me know as far in advance as you're able.

Instructor Response Time

For emails, please allow me up to 24 hours to respond to your message. For grades, please allow a week for me to get back to you for large assignments, though it will likely take less time than this. For discussion board posts, I will grade all posts and responses the week they are completed. Please note that I read and grade all discussion board posts, responses, and exercises, though I may not necessarily respond to each one, as the discussion board is a space that is designed to be student-centered, just as our classroom would be.

Learner Participation Guidelines

This class is asynchronous, which means "not happening at the same time." This means that we aren't going to be meeting at a specific time all together. Instead, most of our "meetings" will take place on the discussion board throughout each week. When it comes to the discussion board questions and the creative exercises, you can think of this

as our class meetings. These cover activities we would otherwise be doing in face-to-face meetings. They are attendance, participation and in-class writings all rolled into one.

My expectation is that each week you have a discussion board question due, you can write your response by the due date. I'll be looking for about 250 words in your response; the more specific, the better. The second part of the discussion board will be responses to two of your classmates. These responses should be at least 75 words, and should be more than simply saying "Good point!" or "I agree!" If you respond to their discussion question, you should be adding to what they say, not merely echoing what they say. If you'd like, you can also respond to someone's creative exercise, as well, which would count as one of your two responses. In this case, I would ask that you remember that your goal is not to critique their exercise, but to perhaps reflect on where they could take things next.

Specific instructions will be given each week for the discussion board expectations for the week to come, but the above guidelines should give you a general sense of what to expect.

Classroom (N)etiquette

Perhaps the most important classroom policy of all concerns our learning environment. A successful learning community is one in which we can learn from people whose perspectives we might not necessarily share and I ask everyone to be constructive and mindful. Speaking our minds is a fantastic privilege of this environment, but doing so in an aggressive or hostile way helps no one. There is a separate document on D2L in the Workshops module giving you some thoughts about how to be a successful workshop citizen.

***DISCLAIMER: One question that students often ask: is it okay if I write about ...? Usually, they want to know if I will be upset if their work contains profanity, violence, sexuality, drug use, etc. The short answer is no. What I care most about is the quality of your writing. That being said, *please do consider your audience* before you workshop a piece. Is it worth it to you to spend one of your valuable workshop slots writing a piece

that will almost certainly be offensive? You may also want to consider putting content warnings on pieces that contain graphic violence, depictions of abuse, etc. This is up to you, but I have found many of your peers appreciate it.

EIU Policies

- Students are expected to maintain principles of academic integrity and conduct as defined in EIU's Code of Conduct (<http://www.eiu.edu/judicial/studentconductcode.php>). Violations will be reported to the Office of Student Standards.
- Students who are having difficulty achieving their academic goals are encouraged to contact the Student Success Center (www.eiu.edu/~success) for assistance with time management, note taking, avoiding procrastination, setting goals, and other skills to support academic achievement. The Student Success Center provides individualized consultations. To make an appointment, call 217-581-6696, or go to 9th Street Hall, Room 1302.
- If you are a student with a documented disability in need of accommodations to fully participate in this class, please contact the Office of Student Disability Services (OSDS). All accommodations must be approved through OSDS. Please stop by Ninth Street Hall, Room 2006, or call 217-581-6583 to make an appointment.

Course Schedule

*specific times and due dates will always be available in the content modules on the D2L site

Week One: June 14: Introductions. Flash nonfiction.

Read: Brian Doyle, "Leap" (TACCN)

Read: Randon Billings Noble, "The Heart as a Torn Muscle" (D2L)

Read: Deesha Philyaw: "Milk for Free" (D2L)

Read: Pages 1-58 of Esme Weijun Wang (TCS)

Week Two: June 21: Literary Journalism

Read: David Foster Wallace, "Consider the Lobster" (TACCN)

Read: Joan Didion, "The White Album" (D2L)

Read: Pages 59-94, TCS
Small-Group Workshop 1

Week Three: June 28: Memoir

Read: Joann Beard, "The Fourth State of Matter" (TACCN)
Read: Lucy Grealey, "Mirrorings" (TACCN)
Read: Pages 95-133, TCS

Week Four: July 6: Personal Essay

_____ Read: Lia Purpura, "Autopsy Report" (TACCN)
_____ Read: Zadie Smith, "Joy" (D2L)
_____ Read: 133-171, TCS
Small-Group Workshop 2

Week Five: July 12: Lyric Essays & Experimental Nonfiction

Read: Eula Biss, "The Pain Scale" (TACCN)
Read: Anne Carson, "The Glass Essay" (TACCN)
Read: Dinty Moore, "Son of Mr. Green Jeans" (TACCN)
Read: 171 to end, TCS

Week Six: July 19

_____ Discussion of *The Collected Schizophrenias*
Small-Group Workshop 3

A Note on Workshop

Sharing creative work is an exciting, but vulnerable process. There are things to remember if you are the artist, as well as if you are the audience. Here are a couple of foundational principles that successful workshops are based on.

1. This is a semi-public space. If you don't believe that audience matters—in other words, if you write only for the purposes of self-expression—this may not be the right environment for you. Dismissing what a roomful of people think about your work because you are only "writing for yourself" places your audience in an uncomfortable position. Self-expression is private and requires no external input. Art is dialogic: it requires both a creator and a receptor (audience) to make it come alive.

2. Revision is the most important part of writing. If you are interested in others' opinions, but not open to changing your work based on feedback, this may not be the right environment for you.
3. You must trust that a roomful of people have valuable things to say about your work. The people here are smart and generous; they care about literature and about reading. If you are frustrated if they seem to be "not getting it" perhaps this is a sign that something in your work needs to be clarified. This is not a sign that we didn't read it carefully ahead of time. It means that we're working through our questions and individual interpretations, and that is often the most useful part of workshop, if you are listening with an open mind to your audience.
4. All of the above may be summed up as: be open-hearted and open-minded.