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ENG 4761 001: Advanced Nonfiction Writing

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ENGLISH 4761, Fall 2017

Creative Writing: Advanced Creative Nonfiction

Monday 3:00 to 5:30, Coleman Hall 3159

Dr. Daiva Markelis/348-9230/dmmarkelis@eiu.edu

Office: Coleman Hall 3375

Office Hours:

Mondays 12:30 to 2:00

Tuesdays 12:30 to 2:00

Thursdays 12:30 to 2:00

and by appointment

Purpose of the Course

This course is designed to help students craft non-fiction essays such as personal reminiscences and descriptive narratives. This class encourages writers to discover what they want to express, to develop the focus of their material, to organize their work effectively, and to manage stylistic aspects such as tone and voice.

Catalog Description of the Course

Advanced practice in the writing and revising of creative nonfiction, with an emphasis on the development of the student's individual style. May be repeated once with permission of the Department Chairperson. Three credit hours.

Objectives of the Course

Students will develop advanced ability and a repertoire of artistic strategies in the writing of literary nonfiction prose.

Students will deepen their understanding of creative nonfiction and its subgenres through intensive readings of contemporary authors.

Students will develop critical reading skills through intensive study of classic and contemporary writings in the genre.

Students will confront the various issues inherent in the practice of creative nonfiction, such as the tension between differing prose styles, the stance of personal voice and vision, and the importance of meditative/artistic approaches to experience.

Students will develop interpersonal skills and intellectual rigor through vigorous workshop participation.

Books

Writing True by Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz

Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction by Lex Wilford and Michael Martone

Requirements

1. Write four essays on a variety of topics.
2. Read the assigned material by the assigned date and participate in class discussions and occasional in-class writing exercises. **YOU MUST BRING YOUR BOOK TO CLASS THE DAY WE'RE DISCUSSING STORIES.** Failure to do so may result in lower participation grades. There may also be a few homework assignments.
3. Participate in workshops: 1) Submit three essays for class critique; 2) critique the work of classmates in an insightful and constructive manner, both orally and in writing.

4. Submit a portfolio of creative work at the end of the semester. The portfolio will include your essays, including revisions. Your portfolio may also include in-class writing you've revised and typed up.

Additional Requirement for Graduate Students

Graduate students must write an additional essay OR significantly add to an existing essay in order to produce a piece that is ready to be sent out for publication.

Grade Breakdown

Writing Portfolio, including revisions of stories: 60%

Written critique of other people's stories: 20%

Effectiveness at in-class discussion: 10%

Attendance: 10%

Writing Portfolio

In creative writing courses, grading is a necessary evil. Writers develop at their own pace, and teachers may be partial to certain styles or genres. I have found through experience that a specific grade on every written piece of work sometimes discourages writers. Often they look at the grade and skip the comments. Or, if their grade is a B, they ask themselves, "Why not an A?" However, students also have the right to know what they might expect at the end of the semester, grade-wise. I'll give you the option of having your individual essays graded, with the understanding that you can rewrite pieces to include in the final portfolio. Part of your grade will be determined by how thoughtfully you incorporate the suggestions of others as well as how well you develop your own inner writing critic. Final drafts of essays included in the portfolio must be free of grammatical and mechanical errors. Please visit the Writing Center if you need help with verb tense, sentence structure, comma use, etc.

Participation

Participation includes not only actively discussing the readings, but also making insightful and constructive comments on the writing of your peers. You must submit 2-3 typed paragraphs for every essay we workshop. **You may email these to the author, or you may attach them to your copy of the story after the workshop. You must also send the same typed critique to me. I must get the critique before the beginning of class. No exceptions. You may, of course, hand me the TYPED critiques during the class period.**

Attendance

Since the format of this class is primarily workshop, participation is extremely important. In addition, many of the ideas used in your essays will be generated in class discussions or in-class writing. I do allow for excused absences if they are properly documented. These include approved university activities and illness. Unexcused absences are pretty much all others—oversleeping, hangovers, finishing papers for other classes, out-of-town trips "because I'm homesick." More than one unexcused absence will lower your attendance grade by one grade.

Tardiness and Cell Phone/Computer Use

I expect you to be in class on time. Excessive tardiness may result in lower attendance grade.

No cell phone use in class other than in emergencies.

Computers to be used ONLY for class purposes—writing or reading others' stories. No checking social media, no emailing, no Googling.

University Policies

(1) Academic integrity - 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.

(2) Students with disabilities - 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.

(3) The Student Success Center - 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, test taking, 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.

Workshopping Procedure

A large part of this course will be devoted to the workshop, a popular method of critiquing creative writing. This is how it works: You make a copy of your piece for all class members and submit it to them the class period before workshopping. **You may email the essay if you like, but it must be mailed out at least two days in advance. So, if your piece is workshopped on a Tuesday, you must email essays out by Sunday evening at the latest. I realize that emergencies do arise. In such a case, email or phone me to let me know your piece will be late. Even in emergency situations, however, no essays can be mailed to the class later than 8pm on the day before we workshop—we will simply do something else in class that day and your grade for workshopping (a requirement in this course) will go down.** In class you read the first 2-3 paragraphs of your story out loud. Class members discuss strengths and weaknesses while you remain silent. At the end of discussion you respond to the critique and have the option of asking for more feedback on specific sections that the class may have overlooked. Feel free to take notes on what is said in order to help you revise. **NOTE: You MUST have a paper copy of your own piece. No reading the story from your phone. No asking your neighbor to borrow his/her copy.**

The idea of class critique makes some people nervous. You may feel uncomfortable at first. Over the course of the semester, however, you will begin to find the comments and suggestions of the class and the instructor invaluable.

Guidelines/policies for criticism:

- 1) We'll begin with a more general opinion of the work. Example: "My sense is that you're trying for a tone of ironic humor throughout the piece. I think that, for the most part, you've succeeded, though the ending seems too flippant." Or: "I like this piece, especially the dialogue, but feel that it's too long."

We'll then move on to more specific comments. Example: "There's a lot of repetition of the word 'interesting' in paragraph three." Or: "You have a tendency to overuse commas."

- 2) Be honest. False praise does not help the writer in any way and compromises your role as critic.

- 3) Criticism should not be mean-spirited or vengeful. And it goes without saying that sexist, racist, homophobic or otherwise inappropriate comments will not be tolerated.
- 4) When it comes to taking criticism, be open-minded, but remember that what you revise—what you leave in, add, leave out—is ultimately your decision. Some remarks will resonate more clearly than others for you.

CLASS SCHEDULE

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| #1 | August 21 | Introduction/In-class writing
HOMEWORK for August 28: Look through the Touchstone Anthology and choose three essays whose subject matter and/or writing style intrigue you. Read the essays, then write a brief essay (1-2 typed pages) discussing your choices and what they say about you as a writer.
Read Chapters 1 and 3 in <i>Writing True</i>
Read <i>The Date</i> by Brenda Miller (381 in the Touchstone Anthology) |
| #2 | August 28 | Discussion of chosen stories from the Touchstone Anthology
Discussion of Chapters 1 and 3 in <i>Writing True</i>
Discussion of <i>The Date</i>
In-class writing
Introduction to Essay #1
HOMEWORK for September 11: Selected Readings from <i>Writing True</i> |
| #3 | September 4 | Labor Day NO CLASS |
| #4 | September 11 | Workshops (there will be a sign up sheet for this—we'll have 6 or 7 people workshop.)
Discuss readings from <i>Writing True</i>
HOMEWORK for September 18:
Read David Sedaris, "Let it Snow" (208),
Charles Simic, "Dinner with Uncle Boris" (271) in <i>Writing True</i> ,
and Mary Clearman Blew in the <i>Touchstone Anthology</i> |
| #5 | September 18 | Finishing up workshops (the rest of the class)
Introduction to Essay #2: The Family Essay
Discuss David Sedaris, Charles Simic, and Mary Clearman Blew |
| #6 | September 25 | Workshops |
| #7 | October 2 | Finishing Up Workshops
In-class Writing
HOMEWORK for October 9: Read Alice Walker, "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self" (210) in <i>Writing True</i>
Read Floyd Skloot, "A Measure of Acceptance" (473) in TA (Touchstone Anthology)
Read Phillip Lopate, "Portrait of My Body" (299) in TA
Read Erin McGraw, "Bad Eyes" (360) in TA |

- #8 October 9 **Introduction to Essay #3: The Body Essay**
Discussion of Walker, Skloot, Lopate, and McGraw
In-class writing
- #9 October 16 Workshops
- #10 October 23 Workshops
Introduction to Essay #4
HOMEWORK for October 30: read Dinty Moore, “Son of Mr. Green Jeans” (389),
Ann Carson, “The Glass Essay” (97), and John McPhee, “The Search for Marvin
Gardens” (370) All in Touchstone Anthology
- #11 October 30 **Introduction to Essay #4: Writer’s Choice**
Discuss Moore, Caron, and McPhee
Free Writing
- #12 November 6 Workshops
- #13 November 13 Workshops

THANKSGIVING BREAK WEEK

- #14 November 27 Workshops (Make-up workshops)
- #15 December 4 Workshops (Make-up workshops)

NOTE: I may make minor changes to this syllabus in order to suit the needs of the class.
Changes will always be announced in advance.

FINAL PORTFOLIOS DUE on Thursday, December 14^h at 5PM
Earlier submitter portfolios are welcome

NO FINAL EXAM in this class