ENG 4761-001: Creative Nonfiction Writing

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English 4761-001: Creative Nonfiction Writing

Dr. Miho Nonaka
Time: 9-9:50 a.m. MWF   Class Location: Coleman 3159
Office: Coleman 3821   Mail Box: Coleman 3155   Phone: 581-6972   Email: mnonaka@eiu.edu
Office Hours: MW 1-2 p.m., 3-3:30 p.m., F 1-2 p.m., and by appointment

Course Description:
This course is an advanced nonfiction workshop. We will read a selection of contemporary nonfiction, ranging from memoirs to essays that are less obviously autobiographical in their focus. These pieces may serve as jumping-off points for your own writing. We will examine how each writer sets the scene and creates a structure with a dramatic arc; we will also discuss such stylistic aspects as tone and voice. The major part of this course will be devoted to critiquing the works of your classmates in a supportive atmosphere, identifying each writer's particular strengths, interests, and places for improvement. You will be encouraged to experiment with language, pushing your sense of what an “essay” is into the border territories of nonfiction with both fiction and poetry.

Texts:
Gornick, Vivian, The Situation & the Story
Grealy, Lucy, Autobiography of a Face
Kuusisto, Stephen, Planet of the Blind
Xeroxed handouts and electronic resources

Policies:
* Your attendance is important for everyone, but especially for you. If you miss more than 3 classes, I will lower your final grade by a letter. If you miss 5 or more classes, you will either drop the course or accept an F for the semester. As outlined in the student catalogue, I will consider an absence excused only for “reasons of illness, emergency, or university activity.” Unexcused absences are pretty much all others—oversleeping, hangovers, finishing papers for other classes, out-of-town trips, etc..

* I expect you to arrive ready to participate in discussion. Since the format of this class is primarily a workshop, participation is crucial. If you have great attendance but rarely speak up in class, it will be difficult to get an A or B for your participation grade. Your written comments on your peers' works will also constitute an important part of the grade. You must print your type-written comment on each person's work on an individual sheet of paper (in other words, don't print your comments on several essays on the same sheet), so that I can pass your comment to the person who wrote the essay. Include your name, the title of the piece and its author. I will collect your typed comments at the end of each workshop.

* If you are absent, you are still responsible for knowing the material and for turning in any assignments for that day. I recommend getting several classmates' phone numbers and email addresses so that you can keep up.

* All assignments are due on the dates specified. You must also turn in your typed comments on your peers' works on the day they are workshopped. Lateness will result in a lower grade. I will not accept assignments via email.

* All work you hand in must be new, written expressly for this course.
* You are responsible for saving copies of any work turned in for grading. You must include the earlier version of each essay (with my comments still attached) in your final portfolio, along with the revised version, in order for me to evaluate the progress you have made.

* Cell phones must be turned off before coming to class and kept out of sight in our classroom at all times.

Requirements:
* Read the assigned material by the assigned date and participate in class discussions and occasional in-class writing exercises.

* Participate in workshops: submit at least 2 essays for class critique; critique your peers' works in a rigorous and constructive manner (both in the actual workshops and in your typed comments).

* Give a well-prepared presentation (about 20 minutes, including class discussion) on a published essay of your choice. You must select an essay or a part of memoir and distribute the copies to the rest of the class well in advance. We will read it for the day of your report. You will be responsible for leading class discussion. Be as creative as you like (the format is up to you). It's important to leave us with some worthwhile information, insight, or perspective relevant to what we have read.

* Submit a portfolio at the end of the semester. The portfolio will be a minimum of 30 typed (double-spaced) pages, and will include all of your revised assignments with previous drafts, as well as any in-class writing exercises you choose to submit. I will not assign a grade to each essay assignment; you will instead receive one grade for your final portfolio. You may rewrite your essays as many times as you like. The big part of your grade will be determined by how thoughtfully you incorporate others' suggestions as well as how well you develop your own inner writing critic. Final drafts must also be free of grammatical and mechanical errors.

Workshops:
* You are responsible for providing copies of your essays for workshop discussion. When you hand in an essay for workshop, provide one copy for me, and one each for everyone else in class. The first essay will go into workshop automatically. For the second round of workshop, you will decide whether to submit your second or third essay. When you hand in an essay that will not be in workshop, one copy for me will do.

* We will start by having you read a part of your assignment out loud. While your peers discuss your work, you must 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.

* We will begin our critique with a 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 will then move on to more specific/editorial comments. Example: "There's a lot of repetition of the word 'faint' in paragraph four." Or: "You have a tendency to overuse commas."

* Make an extra effort to define what an essay is doing well; at the same time, address problems
honestly and unapologetically. False praise does not help the writer but hinders his or her progress. Never give or take criticism personally. When taking criticism, be open-minded, but remember that what you revise is ultimately your decision. Listen carefully to your peers' remarks and use what resonates most clearly for you.

Grading:
Participation (attendance, having assignments ready for the workshops, which means having enough copies for everyone in class, spoken and typed comments on your peers' work, and the discussion of the assigned readings): 30%
Writing assignments (include in-class exercises): 10%
Presentation: 10%
Portfolio: 50%

I reserve the right to depart somewhat from these percentages.
There will be no final exam.

Plagiarism:
Plagiarism is a serious academic offense and will not be tolerated. I will follow the English Department policy on plagiarism:

“Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism—‘The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and/or thoughts of another author, and representation of them as one’s own original work’ (Random House Dictionary of the English Language)—has the right and the responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including a grade of “F” for the course, and to report the incident to the Judicial Affairs Office. Respect for the work of others should encompass all formats, including print, electronic, and oral sources.”

Students with Disabilities:
If you have a documented disability and wish to receive academic accommodations, please contact the Coordinator of the Office of Disability Services (581-6583) as soon as possible.

Course Calendar
This is a tentative schedule, which will evolve as the class progresses. Changes will be announced in class. The date on the calendar is the date the readings are due to be discussed in class.

Week 1
M Aug 20: Introduction
In-class writing exercise
F Aug 24: Revise/finish and turn in writing exercise Last day to ADD courses
Hazlitt, "On the Pleasure of Hating"

Week 2
M Aug 27: Gornick, The Situation & the Story (pp. 3-26) and Simic, "New York Days, 1958-1964"
W Aug 29: Didion, "Goodbye to All That"
F Aug 31: Zinsser, "Writing About Yourself: The Memoir" Last day to DROP a course
In-class writing exercise
Week 3
M Sep 3: No class; Labor Day
W Sep 5: Turn in writing exercise
    Grealy, *Autobiography of a Face*
F Sep 7: Grealy, *Autobiography of a Face*

Week 4
M Sep 10: Grealy, *Autobiography of a Face*
W Sep 12: Grealy, *Autobiography of a Face*
    In-class writing exercise
F Sep 14: Turn in writing exercise
    Borges, “Blindness”

Week 5
M Sep 17: Discuss writing exercise    *Last day to Withdraw*
    Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son”
W Sep 19: **First Essay due**
    Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son”
F Sep 21: Workshop

Week 6
M Sep 24: Workshop
W Sep 26: Workshop
F Sep 28: Workshop

Week 7
M Oct 1: Workshop
W Oct 3: Workshop
F Oct 5: Workshop; sign up for conferences

Week 8
M Oct 8: Workshop
W Oct 10: **Second Essay Due; workshop**
F Oct 12: No class; Fall Break

Week 9
M Oct 15: Conferences
W Oct 17: Conferences
F Oct 19: Conferences
Week 10
M Oct 22: Workshop (Essay #2)
W Oct 24: Workshop
F Oct 26: Workshop

Week 11
M Oct 29: Workshop
W Oct 31: Third Essay due; workshop
F Nov 2: Workshop (Essay #3)  Last Day for W for Course Withdrawal

Week 12
M Nov 5: Workshop
W Nov 7: Workshop
F Nov 9: Workshop

Week 13
M Nov 12: Presentation
W Nov 14: Presentation
F Nov 16: Presentation

Week 14
M Nov 19: No class; Thanksgiving
W Nov 21: No class; Thanksgiving
F Nov 23: No class; Thanksgiving

Week 15
M Nov 26: Presentation
W Nov 28: Presentation
F Nov 30: Presentation

Week 16
M Dec 3: Presentation
W Dec 5: TBA
F Dec 7: Last class day