SYLLABUS, SUMMER 2019
WRITERS IN NEW YORK: CREATIVE NONFICTION (CRAFT SEMINAR)
CRWRI-UA #CRWRI-UA 835-001 (2838)
Professor: Saïd Sayrafiezadeh
Time: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 2:30-5:00 PM
Location: 45 W. 4th St, Room B01

Course Description
“The real is imagined and the imagined is real.”
—Colum McCann (paraphrasing someone else)

“Ultimately, the primary goal of the creative nonfiction writer is to communicate information, just like a reporter, but to shape it in a way that reads like fiction.”
—Lee Gutkind

“A memoir is a tale taken from life—that is, from actual, not imagined, occurrences—related by a first-person narrator who is undeniably the writer. Beyond these bare requirements it has the same responsibility as the novel or the short story: to shape a piece of experience so that it moves from a tale of private interest to one with meaning for the disinterested reader.”
—Vivian Gornick

“Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.”
—Edgar Degas

This creative nonfiction craft class will be a combination of writing, reading and analysis. It will be conducted seminar style with discussion as its primary component. One of the essential questions of the course will be to ask—but maybe not answer!—what exactly constitutes creative nonfiction? Case in point, we’ll explore that essential intersection between fiction and nonfiction. “Fiction”, in this instance, does not imply mendacity, but rather traditional storytelling elements. In other words, what elements can we appropriate from the art of fiction when crafting our own nonfiction, and what, if anything, must we discard? By reading, discussing and analyzing short stories, novel excerpts, memoir, personal essays, we’ll practice exercising the creative muscle that sees real people as “characters” and real events as “tales” worthy of being told. The goal is for us to become aware of the audience when we write, so that the experience of documenting reality begins to resemble a “performance” crafted onto paper. We’ll examine how writers shape raw material, how they choose to end a true story, how they employ dialogue, how they create drama, how tone and voice can enhance or distract from a story, how the difference between exaggeration and creative license is handled—or mishandled. We’ll also focus on traditional storytelling elements like character development, arc, pace, climax. Our discoveries will be infused into our own writing, by way of one short original prose piece, based on parameters that I will assign. The emphasis here is on original, i.e., these will be created expressly for our class, and not cobbled together using previous stories, journal entries, poems, screenplays, letters, etc. (The emphasis is also on prose narrative.) Our class discussions will include fundamental writerly concerns regarding process, discipline and distraction, as well as how to be published, how and why to find an agent, and how to deal with an editor. There will be some in-class analysis of other art forms,
including poetry, screenwriting, film, and anything else that that employs storytelling elements which may help inform how to tell stories—even if our own stories are being drawn from real life.

**Objectives for the course**
1. Achieve an understanding of nonfiction storytelling methods and techniques.
2. Establish an artistic discipline.
3. Demonstrate an ability to give and receive criticism in realtime.
4. Form and articulate confident opinions on a wide variety of stories.
5. Gain insight into the publishing industry and what steps to take toward a writing career.
6. Show an awareness of narrative techniques in other artistic mediums and how to employ them in creative nonfiction.

**Other essential information**

*Course reader:* Includes short stories, personal essays and other assorted literary items. The course reader is not needed for the first class, but bring it for all subsequent classes. It can be purchased at *Unique Print, 252 Greene St. 212-420-9198.*

*Office hours:* By appointment only.

*Grades:* Class participation will count for 50% of your grade, this includes contributing to discussion on a *consistent and constructive basis,* coming to class on time with the necessary supplies and avoiding the use of electronic devices (see page 4 for further grading breakdown on participation). Workshop instructors assign one final grade for the semester with input from craft instructors.

Timely completion of your craft story, adherence to the narrative parameters that I assign, and *polished writing that appears to have been carefully considered,* will count for the other 50% (see page 5 for further grading breakdown on writing).

**The evaluation of your grade will be based on:**
1. *Class participation.* This is a seminar class, so consistent participation is required.

2. *Class attendance:* Come on time for class, come back from break on time, and stay for the duration of class. Try to avoid taking unscheduled breaks during class. University policy is that students are expected to attend all class sessions for courses in which they are enrolled. Please email me in *advance* of missing class. Since this course meets only twice a week for four weeks, more than one absence will lower your grade by half a letter. Absences in excess of two weeks require withdrawal from the course. Please note: attendance does not raise your grade and that three occurrences of being late for class equals one absence.

   2 absences = .5 letter
   3 absences = 1 letter
   4 absences = 1.5 letters
   5 absences = withdrawal from course
3. **Course reader:** You will be reading and discussing short works by published and unpublished authors—provided in your course reader. (Plus some additional writing that I’ll occasionally distribute in class.) Bring your course reader to every class with notes written down, prepared to discuss. Not having the course reader will lower your grade by at least half a letter.

4. **Outside assignments:** There will be several assignments in addition to the craft writing. These assignments will not raise your grade, but failure to complete them on time will lower it by at least half a letter.

5. **Craft Writing:** This is the crux of the class. You will be writing *original prose* pieces based on parameters that I assign. You’ll email your submission to your classmates (and professor) no later than 11:59 PM on the day it’s due (we’ll figure out the schedule on the first class). It’s each student’s responsibility to make sure that they’ve received the submissions, so be sure to check your spam folder. Print your classmates’ stories and bring them to class; we’ll be looking at specific words, lines, paragraphs. And be sure to print out your *own* story and bring it to class. Having these stories in front of you counts as part of your class participation. Be aware that your craft dates cannot be rescheduled, so if your submission comes in late you run the risk of not having your work discussed. Editorial comments and suggestions are only given for work that has been submitted on time. Late work is not guaranteed feedback.

6. **Late work:** There will be plenty of time to complete your assignments, so extensions are not given. Late work will lower your grade by at least half a letter.


8. **Craft notes:** You’ll be sending your classmate at least three hundred words of your overall thoughts, suggestions, impressions, compliments. Email this to the author (and cc me) by 2:29 PM the day of class.

9. **Paper:** We’ll only be handling paper in class. Every assignment should be *printed out* and brought to class. Laptops and tablets are not permitted under any circumstances.

10. **Electronics:** No cellphones. No laptops. No tablets. Turn everything off before coming into the classroom and put your Apple Watch on “do not disturb”. Use of electronics will lower your grade by at least half a letter.

11. **Plagiarism:** NYU takes plagiarism very seriously. I’m required to report any case of suspected plagiarism.

12. **Disclaimer:** The literature we read for class may sometimes describe in graphic and/or unapologetic detail misogyny, racism, homophobia, sexual abuse, drug abuse, xenophobia, violence, among others. If you’d rather not read or discuss certain subjects, please consider whether this is the right class for you.

*This syllabus may be modified as deemed appropriate. Any changes will be announced in class.*
16 things you always wanted to know about how **class participation** is graded

1. This class is a seminar, which means…

2. …we will be engaged in round-table discussion.

3. Among other things, discussion is how I am able to help you shape and clarify your thoughts…

4. …and it’s how your classmates will learn from you in real time…

5. and it’s how I will be able to determine how deeply you’ve done the week’s readings.

6. No, you do not have to have something to say about every single topic, but…

7. Grades of **A** for class participation are given to students who participate consistently and constructively.

8. Grades of **B** are for students who participate, but less frequently and/or not constructively.

9. Grades of **C** are for students whose participation is sporadic.

10. Grades of **D** are for students who generally do not participate.

11. Attendance will not raise your participation grade, i.e., showing up for class is not enough, but paradoxically…

12. …absences will lower your grade.

13. Failing to turn in your craft piece on time will lower your grade.

14. Class participation counts as **50%** of your grade, and this includes bringing your course reader and printed stories to every class…

15. …and not using electronics.

16. Keep in mind, a low grade in participation is *not an indication of your talent as a writer.*
8 things you always wanted to know about how your **craft writing** is graded

1. This is a *Draft 3* craft class, which means that the pieces turned in for class should be on their third draft, i.e., very polished writing.

2. The grade of **A** is given to stories that a.) have exceptionally strong content and storytelling, and b.) have prose that is clean and carefully considered, and c.) follow **all** the assigned story parameters, and d.) have minimal typos, and e.) have been turned in on time.

3. The grade of **B** is given to stories that a.) are still a draft or more away from possibly being submitted to a publisher, or b.) have prose that is frequently sloppy, or c.) have missed **one** of the assigned story parameters, or d.) have more than their fair share of typos, and e.) have been turned in on time.

4. The grade of **C** is given to stories that a.) have missed **two or more** of the assigned story parameters, or b.) have very sloppy prose, or c.) have been turned in late.

5. The grade of **D** is given to stories that a.) have been turned in late, and have either missed **one or more** of the assigned story parameters or have very sloppy prose.

6. Keep in mind that late stories will run the risk of not being discussed, which means…

7. …a missed story gets no higher than a **C**, no matter how well it’s been written.

8. All story grades are final and the sum of them will count as **50%** of your grade.