

Writers in New York: Creative Nonfiction Craft Class
CRWRI-UA TK
Syllabus, Summer 2019
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Schedule: Tuesdays & Thursday, 2:30-5:00 PM
Location: TK

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*

This creative nonfiction craft class will be a combination of writing, reading and analysis. It will be conducted seminar style, with in-class 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 will 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 ourselves as characters and our lives 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 that of 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 several short original prose pieces composed over the course of the term, based on parameters that I will assign. The emphasis here is on *original*, i.e., these pieces will be created expressly for our class; they won’t be 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 employs storytelling elements which can 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 edits 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.

Reading Schedule

(Class 1, Tuesday, June 4) No assigned reading.

(Class 2, Thursday, June 6) *Looking for Johnny* by A.M. Homes. *A Lesson in Injustice* by Prajwal Parajuly. *The Glass Castle* (excerpt) by Jeannette Walls.

(Class 3, Tuesday, June 11) *Half a Life* (excerpt) by Darin Strauss. *How Memoirists Mold the Truth* by André Aciman. *Hamilton* (excerpt) by Lin-Manuel Miranda.

(Class 4, Thursday, June 13) *Notes of a Native Son* by James Baldwin. *Omission* by John McPhee. *The Hot One* (excerpt) by Carolyn Murnick.

(Class 5, Tuesday, June 18) *Under the Table* by J.E. Buntin. *Does Recovery Kill Great Writing* by Leslie Jamison. *That Crafty Feeling* by Zadie Smith.

(Class 6, Thursday, June 20) *What Jewish Children Learned from Charlottesville* by Nathan Englander. *A Christian in Union Square* by Eunice Pak. *When You Write a Memoir, Readers Think They Know You Better Than They Do* by Dani Shapiro.

(Class 7, Tuesday, June 25) *'Get Home Safe,' My Rapist Said* by Alisson Wood. *Letters to a Young Writer* by Colum McCann. *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* by ZZ Packer.

(Class 8, Thursday, June 27) *Something Nice* by Mary Gaitskill. *To Show and To Tell* by Philip Lopate. *Not Here to Make Friends* by Roxane Gay.

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 Copy Center, 252 Greene St. 212-420-9198.*

Office hours:

By appointment only.

Grades:

Workshop instructors assign the final grade for *both* classes with input from craft instructors.

Class participation and attendance 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).

Timely completion of your craft stories, 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. College 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 twice a week for only 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.

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 class 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 several *original prose* pieces over the course of the term based on parameters that I assign. Each piece counts as an equal percentage of the craft writing portion of your grade. You will email your submissions 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 is each student's responsibility to make sure that they have received that week's 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 date 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.

7. *Writing format*: 12 pt. Times or Helvetica. Double spaced. Page numbers.

8. *Line edits and comments*: Prior to class, you will make edits, comments and suggestions directly on your classmates' story and turn the marked up manuscript into me at the end of the class.

9. *Editorial notes*: You will also be typing up an editorial letter for your classmate of 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*.

10. *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.

11. *Electronics*: No cellphones. No laptops. No tablets. Turn everything off before coming into the classroom. Use of electronics will lower your grade by at least half a letter.

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

13. *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 each week 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.
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 your story in 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 **creative writing** is graded

1. This is a *Draft 3* craft class, which means that the stories 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 prose that is clean and carefully considered, and b.) follow **all** the assigned story parameters, and c.) have minimal typos, and d.) 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 b.) have missed **one or more** of the assigned story parameters, or c.) 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.