

SYLLABUS, SUMMER 2021  
WRITERS IN NEW YORK: CREATIVE NONFICTION (CRAFT SEMINAR)  
CRWRI-UA 835-001 (2703)  
Professor: Saïd Sayrafiezadeh  
Time: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 2:30-5:00 PM

“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*

### **The Craft of the Personal Essay: From Opening Line to Publication**

This creative nonfiction craft class will cover some of the essential techniques of the personal essay. It will be a combination of writing, reading and analysis, and 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? We’ll examine ways to handle dialogue, information, tension, and details. Class material might also include film, songs, plays, poems, memoir, short story, newspaper articles and anything else that can inform us how storytelling works. We’ll put what we’re learning into practice by writing our own short personal essay, and seeing what elements are coming to life. And finally—perhaps most importantly—what should a writer do with an essay once it’s done? Does it stay inside a drawer or does it get published? In other words, how exactly does one end up in, say, *The New Yorker*? This class will be able to come up with a roadmap.

### **Course Objectives:**

1. Achieve an understanding of various storytelling techniques.
2. Establish an artistic discipline.
3. Form and articulate confident and authentic opinions on a wide variety of stories and genres.
4. Gain insight into the publishing industry and what steps to take toward a literary career.
6. Show an awareness of narrative techniques in other artistic mediums and how to employ them in creative writing.

### **Reading Schedule:**

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

(Class 2, Thursday, June 3) *The Two Kinds of Decay* (excerpt) by Sarah Manguso. Selected poems by Ocean Vuong.

(Class 3, Tuesday, June 8) *Half a Life* (excerpt) by Darin Strauss. *Persepolis* (excerpt) by Marjane Satrapi.

(Class 4, Thursday, June 10) *Hunger* (excerpt) by Roxane Gay. *My Parade* by Alexander Chee.

(Class 5, Tuesday, June 15) *Always be Optimizing* by Jia Tolentino. *That Crafty Feeling* by Zadie Smith.

(Class 6, Thursday, June 17) *Does Recovery Kill Great Writing?* by Leslie Jamison. *The Red Parts* (excerpt) by Maggie Nelson.

(Class 7, Tuesday, June 22) *A Simple Procedure* by Mai Tran. Selected poems by Gwendolyn Brooks.

(Class 8, Thursday, June 24) *Notes of a Native Son* by James Baldwin.

**Other essential information:**

1. Office hours: By appointment.

2. Class readings: Reading assignments will be emailed as PDFs after each class.

3. Grading: 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. (Workshop instructors assign one final grade for the semester with input from craft instructors.) Timely completion of your essay, adherence to the narrative parameters, and *polished writing that appears to have been carefully considered*, will count for the other **50%**.

4. Participation: This is a seminar, so consistent participation is required.

5. Attendance: Come on time for class, come back from break on time, and stay for the duration of class. NYU 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. Attendance does not raise your grade, but absences will lower your final grade by at least half a letter.

6. Craft writing: You will be writing an original prose piece (approximately 800 words) based on specific parameters. You'll email your submission to your classmates (and me) 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 they've received the craft 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.

7. 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) before 2:29 PM the day of class.

8. Late work: Extensions can't be given due to the limited semester schedule. Late work will lower your final grade by at least half a letter.

9. Extra credit disclaimer: Unfortunately, there aren't opportunities for extra credit, so be sure to submit your strongest work on all of the assignments.

10. Plagiarism: New York University takes plagiarism very seriously. I'm required to report any case of suspected plagiarism.

*This syllabus may be modified as deemed appropriate. Any changes will be announced in class.*