



Creative Nonfiction

engl 215, winter 2011

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Winter Office Hours:
M 1-3, Tu 10-12, Th 10-12
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TA's Robin Greenwood & Rachel Dallman

*"With writing as with teaching as with love, we don't know how
the sentence will begin and, rarely ever, how it will end."*

Nancy Sommers, "I Stand Here Writing"

Welcome to the so-called "fourth genre"—there's poetry, and fiction, and drama, and then there's this, the genre nobody can define. And yet it's the place where the real excitement, controversy, and energy in the literary world have collected for the past few decades.

Basically, creative nonfiction is nonfictional writing that embraces a personal perspective. That is, the shaping eye/I is always present, always acknowledged. There's no pretense of authorial nonexistence. It's nonfiction that uses some of the techniques of other genres—dialogue, scene, character development, metaphor—but always remains faithful to a notion of Truth: what really happened.

Our course this winter will cover some of the subgenres of creative nonfiction, starting with memoir and moving outward from the self to the world—writing about nature and place; personal essay that is not about personal experience; the blurry borderline between personal and critical essay. We will also grapple with some of the provocative issues this genre raises: truth versus fact; the ethical and moral obligations of writing about other people; the trickiness of memory. You'll find that this genre asks a lot of you as a writer: courage and honesty that are sometimes daunting. The rewards, though, are proportionately great.

In the process of reading, talking, and writing, I hope you will find that creative nonfiction offers amazing possibilities. Start the sentence with "I," and let's see how it ends.

Required Texts, etc.

Lex Williford and Michael Martone, *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*

Diana Joseph, *I'm Sorry You Feel That Way*

Coursepack, available at the bookstore

A full-sized notebook or pad exclusively for use in our class and to record writing ideas outside of class.

Goals for this Course

- The class should move quickly toward becoming a supportive, challenging reading/writing community, with respect for all members and commitment to our common development as writers;
- every student should gain a clear understanding of what creative nonfiction can be, what distinguishes it from other genres, and how it achieves its powerful effects;
- every student should have experience writing in a variety of forms of nonfiction, with the freedom to experiment, to risk, and to discover;
- every student should give and receive the kind of response to writing that both helps the writer improve the work and helps the reader sharpen his/her critical skills;
- every student should become familiar with several contemporary writers of creative nonfiction and capable of discussing their work critically and productively;
- every student's ability to analyze how a piece of writing works should improve;
- every student's voice should become stronger—on paper, in workshop, in class discussions.

How We Roll

Tuesdays:

- Weekly writing due: hard copies brought to class, please; no emails. **Please do not expect to do your copying in the library before class.** Distribute copies to workshop members and to Gail. (If you turn in more than one piece, you choose which piece gets workshopped.)
- In-class writing exercises
- Discussion of assigned readings
- Assignments distributed for the following week

Thursdays: Workshop days. Early workshops will be very focused; later ones will run themselves according to established standards.

Grading

- 25% **Midterm critical essay**, in which you will explore an issue in the genre of nonfiction that is of interest to you, using your own writing and that of others. Along with this essay you'll submit **one substantially revised piece** from our first five weeks.
- 50% **Final portfolio** including all your work from the course, plus **a 2-page, double-spaced critical introduction. Revision** will mean a lot in my evaluation of these portfolios.
- 25% **Participation.** At midterm I will issue a grade which I'll adjust at the end of the course. In a writing workshop, I base participation grades on the following elements. Most of them boil down to two basics, Attitude and Energy:

1. Consistency of participation (are you a regular part of discussions, without being asked?)
2. Quality of participation (thoughtful, helpful, responsive to others?)
3. Punctuality
4. Preparedness for class, in terms of obvious, detailed knowledge of the readings, specific questions, etc.
5. Cooperation and energy in in-class exercises
6. Listening skill: responsiveness to others' statements and viewpoints, attentiveness to other speakers, class discussion, announcements, etc.
7. Respect for others (teacher, students, authors), as expressed in listening, responding, and critiquing.

The Arc of the Course

<u>Week</u>	<u>Focus</u>
1	Memory
2	Scene, exposition, dialogue
3	Memoir
4	Memoir—goal: 5-page continuous narrative
5	Innovative Forms (short, braided, mosaic, etc.)
6	Diana Joseph's visit Monday, Feb 14 th , 7 pm: D. Joseph Reading in Olmsted Room REQUIRED Friday, Feb. 18, 4 pm: Midterm Essay due along with one substantially revised piece
7	hybrid memoir / personal essay
8	hybrid memoir / personal essay
9	Personal essay
10	Revision Class Reading
11	Wednesday, March 16, 4 pm: Portfolios due at Gail's office

Course Policies

Format for written work:

- 12-point font, one-inch margins
- double-spaced for Gail; single-spaced for workshop members
- double-sided if possible
- stapled if more than one page
- paginated if more than two pages
- Name in upper right on first page

Attendance: See above, under “Requirements.”

Punctuality: Habitual lateness erodes community, undermines structure, and communicates disrespect and disengagement. So multiple late arrivals will equal an absence. If you’re late, you should apologize, and later, explain why.

Deadlines: Your written work is due, with copies, in class on Tuesdays. If it gets to your readers later than that, it will count against your final grade.

Cell phones and computers . . . are not permitted to be used in class. Period.

Leaving class: We will have one break in every class period. Otherwise, no one should leave the room for anything other than a genuine medical emergency.

Print Credits: If you run out of print credits, you’ll be expected to buy more. Consider this a “materials fee” comparable to such fees in other arts courses. I will not accept email submissions.

Disabilities: It’s my obligation and my desire to make this course accessible and manageable for all students. If you have a physical or learning disability that may affect your performance in or enjoyment of the course, I should be notified by the Dean of Students’ office. I’m happy to make arrangements to help you do your best.

Grammar, spelling, format, and punctuation: To say they are irrelevant to “creative” writing is to say that nails are irrelevant to carpentry. Please. They WILL count in your grade. Pieces submitted to me with persistent, serious errors of grammar, punctuation, or spelling will be returned to the author without comment. Note: a short punctuation guide is included with this syllabus. Use it, please.

Academic Integrity: Writing involves all kinds of issues of integrity. Creative nonfiction writers almost invariably run up against particular issues of “fidelity to fact” and responsibility to other people. These integrity issues we will discuss in class. In terms of more convention issues of academic integrity (i.e., use and citation of sources), I obligate myself to make clear when and how sources are to be used and cited; you are obligated to abide by these guidelines and to consult with me if you are in any confusion or doubt.

Assignments for Thursday, Week 1

Reading:

- Read the syllabus carefully; make sure you understand requirements.
- In Williford & Martone anthology: Scott Russell Sanders, “Introduction,” xv; Jo Ann Beard, “The Fourth State of Matter,” 1.

Some reading questions for the Beard essay—please make notes on these be prepared to address them in class:

- Chart your own responses as you move through this essay—where do your feelings change, and why?
- When the essay gets dramatic, what happens to the sentence structure, diction and tone? Mark places to discuss in class
- What unifies this essay?
- Mark places where detail reveals character—for instance, of Christopher, Caroline, the ex-husband.
- Notice where Beard creates a scene and where she uses exposition. Where and why does she use dialogue?
- What parts of this essay could Beard not possibly have known about? Do you think this use of imagination is legit?

Writing: We’ll have a brief workshop on Thursday, just to warm up our muscles. Bring six copies, single-spaced, of the following:

Imagine yourself as a kid—elementary school preferably; no older than middle-school. Then answer the question, “Who was he/she?” by writing a small scene from that time in your life, NOT using first person, only second or third. Do not explain or describe your feelings: just recreate a slice of your daily life as a scene. Dialogue is optional. The scene might be very dramatic and symbolic or quite ordinary. To give the writing an edge, think about scenes where you were confused, or hurt, or scared—those are juicy emotions. Don’t explain a lot; let yourself emerge in the details and the dialogue. A single page is fine.

Assignment for Tuesday, week 2

Reading

From anthology: Blew, “The Unwanted Child,” 43; Cooper, “Burl’s,” 132

From coursepack: Raeburn, “Vessels,” 23

In EACH of the pieces of nonfiction you read this week, make notes on the following, to be used in class:

- Identify a place where the author has created a scene and another where s/he has used exposition, and be able to explain each choice.
- In any of the essays, mark a place where you are made strongly aware of the “framing ‘I,’” the subjective perspective controlling the reader’s view.
- Mark another place or two where you can distinguish between the “I” who is narrating and the “I” who is a character in the narration.
- Pick a physical detail—a sensory image—that you think is used in a powerful, suggestive way, not as decoration but as substance and meaning.
- How do these writers handle moments of “drama”? Strong feeling? What lessons do you take from them about how to do this effectively?

Writing: For workshop, write one of the following:

- A story from the past in which something important changed, in which there is at least one extended scene. (The whole piece may be one scene if it works.) The change might be very dramatic or very subtle. Think about what backstory exposition you’ll need to set the scene or to clarify moments in the scene. Use dialogue, description, and narrative as much as possible to communicate the change, rather than “explanation.” (I.e., show rather than tell.)
- Choose a memory about which there’s some dispute: family members or friends remember it differently or challenge your account of it. Tell it your way first and then let other perspectives take over, critiquing your memory. If you want, write this piece TO one of these other people, defending your version (or not). Keep in mind the question of why there are different accounts of what happened, and try to see everybody as believing in their truth.

Bring to class 6 single-spaced copies and 1 double-spaced copy; please check format requirements in syllabus. The focus this week is on using detail and knowing the difference between exposition and scene.

COLONS

General rule #1: a colon always follows an independent clause (i.e., could be a sentence).

General rule #2: a colon points forward, to something that will clarify or exemplify what's just been said.

- before specifying or identifying something previously mentioned:

His work was characterized by two features: strong opinion and extensive evidence.

Jefferson was quite explicit in the Declaration: when he said that all men were created equal, he meant just that.

- before an example or a piece of evidence, including a quotation:

The article kept repeating itself: it told us three times what time President Lincoln died.

They had a history of car trouble: dropped transmissions, flat tires, muffler blowouts, etc.

Her attitude toward marriage is hardly optimistic: "It should probably be regarded as a kind of endurance contest" (43).

DASH vs. HYPHEN

A hyphen is typed like this: -

A dash is typed like this: --

- Hyphens combine
 - *separate words into compound words*: ten-year-old boy absent-minded professor gang-related crimes
 - *words with prefixes*: self-respect cross-cultural ex-president
- Dashes are longer and they separate. Sometimes they work like stronger commas or like parentheses.

My point—and believe it or not, I do have one—is that it is time for change.

Your thesis—at least insofar as I can understand it, given my lack of background in the subject—seems very persuasive.

APOSTROPHES

- indicate possession:

<u>singular</u>	<u>plural</u>
<i>my parent's views</i>	<i>my parents' views</i>
<i>a woman's perspective</i>	<i>women's perspectives</i>
<i>society's restrictions</i>	<i>many societies' restrictions</i>
- replace omitted letters in contractions: *can't, wouldn't, I'm, you're*
- exception: used with "it's" only as a contraction: *"It's great that the company rewards its employees with big bonuses."*

Fill Me In

Your Name: _____ Year and major, if declared: _____

Previous creative writing courses at the college level, along with instructor's name:

What do you want most from this course?

What worries or anxieties, if any, do you have about it?

Is there anyone in the course you really hope to avoid in a workshop? (This should be for serious reasons. If you'd rather speak privately than write here, please let me know TODAY after class.)

What else would you like me to know about you? (Use the reverse if necessary)