

Carleton University
Fall 2013
Department of English
ENGL2915A Creative Nonfiction Workshop
Schedule: Tuesday, 18:05 – 20:55
Location *Please confirm on Carleton Central*
Prerequisite: Permission of the Instructor

Instructor: Richard Taylor
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www.taylorwave.ca

APPLYING TO THE COURSE:

To gain entry into the workshop, you must submit a 10 page double-spaced portfolio before the term begins. It must include a brief biographical sketch about who you are and why you want to take the workshop. You can include any of the following examples of your nonfiction writing: postcard stories, blogs, magazine pieces, personal essays, (see Globe & Mail Facts & Arguments daily essay) feature articles, human interest pieces, literary/narrative journalism, memoir, humour, or fact-based narrative travel/sports/nature/science/ history/biographical writing and so on. You can submit self-contained portions from longer pieces, but describe how the excerpt relates to the longer piece.

Your portfolio should be emailed to me at taylorwave@gmail.com. The deadline for submission is the second week of August. Please include a cover page with your name, Carleton student number, Carleton email address and telephone number.

Those selected will be contacted via email by the end of August. Students are advised to make an alternative course selection until those accepted are contacted by the English Dept. Because of the large number of enthusiastic applicants, it's advisable to apply early. **Please do not hesitate to email me if you are interested in taking the course.**

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The Creative Nonfiction Workshop is new to the English Department. It has been said the boundaries of Creative nonfiction will always be as fluid as water. In addition to poetry, drama and fiction, creative nonfiction has often been called the fourth genre. It brings together literature, creative writing, fact, imagination, essay writing and storytelling. Annie Dillard claims there's nothing you can't do with it. No subject matter is forbidden, no structure is proscribed. You get to make up your own form every time. Creative Nonfiction is on the rise and growing in leaps and bounds, connecting many genres and subject matter.

Though this mysterious, exciting genre has been around for a long time, it seems to be always reinventing itself and defending itself from detractors. It has been known as

literary nonfiction, narrative nonfiction, new journalism, factual fiction and documentary narrative. Many writers prefer the term literary nonfiction because creative nonfiction might lead to the notion that writers can make things up, straying from the truth. Writers of creative nonfiction often make use of fictional devices such as narrative arc, dialogue, plot, character development, scene-setting, action sequences, interior monologue, poetic impulses and so on. But you have to work with facts. The writer is able to research, delve, inquire, question, or explore any subject within a narrative. For example there have been nonfiction narratives written about the history of salt, oak, the city of New York or the River Thames. In some cases, but not always, creative nonfiction encourages the writer to become part of the story. Cold hard facts are dramatized in scenes using the five senses. The writing is based on fact or what really happened in the real world, and not invented, yet it is creative in the way the subject is structured and delivered in a narrative. Often the writer's act of writing becomes a personal quest of self-discovery as they research what they are writing about.

In the 5th Century St. Augustine wrote his autobiographical *Confessions*; in the 16th Century Montaigne wrote personal essays, actively cultivating self-exploration, digressions, meditations, reflections on any number of topics. In the early 20th century Virginia Woolf's memoir/literary criticism/feminist credo *A Room Of One's Own* is creative nonfiction as is Ernest Hemingway's book about bullfighting, *Death in the Afternoon*, and his posthumous memoir of Paris in the 1920s, *A Moveable Feast*. Other examples of creative nonfiction are Robert Persig's 60's cult classic, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and Hunter S. Thompson's, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Recently all of Bill Bryson's travel memoirs and David Sedaris's humorous autobiographical books are creative nonfiction.

We live in an autobiographical age, the age of voyeurism, confession, reality TV, blogs, tweets and an expanding new world of social media. In this workshop you will read, discuss, critique and write many types of creative nonfiction. We'll learn to look for and write about what I call the hidden connections among things.

PLEASE TAKE NOTE

The Creative Nonfiction Workshop offers instruction, readings, in class writing exercises and specific writing assignments. Each participant must be prepared to submit committed work and to further the group's on-going dialogue on the pieces submitted. Early workshops will consist of a series of writing exercises. Participants are expected to use these prompts for warm up purposes and to hone their skills and explore new territory.

I will set the assignment schedule. Every week several writers will submit a manuscript to be workshopped and critiqued for the next class. These works in progress can be from your portfolio and or new work generated from the workshop, and in some cases, something you are working on outside of the workshop. Up to half a dozen writers will submit a manuscript each week for the other students to take home, read with a pen or pencil and be prepared to discuss the following week. Your fellow workshopppers and I will provide oral and written editorial comments on your work.

There is no text required but it is the responsibility of each student to reproduce sufficient copies of their work and to hand them out the week preceding the workshop. If you are scheduled to submit or present a manuscript and cannot, please give me notice. In some cases we will not workshop the material you brought in the previous week because we have too many manuscripts, but your work will be workshopped the following week.

Every manuscript submission must be numbered, typed, double spaced and double sided in ordinary typeface.

Every week I'll hand out photocopied material and discuss various aspects about reading, writing, editing, revision and where and how to get published.

EVALUATION:

There are no tests and no final exam. Because the workshop is based on live interaction between writers, attendance is mandatory. Students are expected to contribute enthusiastic, constructive, thoughtful comments on each manuscript and during our open workshop discussions. Respect and an open mindedness for your peers and their work are critical. You will be exposed to many types of writing styles and perspectives.

There will be 4 writing assignments. I will offer published examples as templates for each assignment to help you understand what I'm looking for. Everyone will do the first 3 assignments:

- 1) Write a short compelling nonfiction narrative using a photograph. This can be a famous photograph, a family photo, any photo. (750 words or less)**
- 2) Write a Globe & Mail Facts & Arguments style memoir/personal essay 900 words or less. (Or you may write a Brevity Piece - a brief nonfiction 750 words or less.)**
- 3) Write a Personal Essay/Memoir 2000 words or less. (Or write a Researched Personal Essay 2000 words or less.)**

4) Choose one of the following Optional Assignments:

Travel piece 1000 words or less

Lyric Essay 1000 words or less

Meditative/Nature Essay 1000 words or less

Short Humorous piece 1000 words or less.

There will be more details and discussion about these assignments later. The class will be broken down into groups of 3 for peer editing. Your final grade will be based on the following factors:

(60%) Quality and originality of your writing.

(30%) Quality of your oral and written editorial comments about your peer's work and your discussion contribution. The energy, depth and enthusiasm with which you contribute to the collective process.

(10%) ATTENDANCE)

You must be willing to come to every class, and to deal with forthright analysis of your work in a select but public forum. Your text at first will have to speak for you; the discussion in one form or another will go around the table of workshopppers; you will listen; I will listen; then perhaps sum up and sometimes interject, or occasionally take the discussion in a new direction. Sometimes I may have to play referee. Later, you will have a chance to enter the discussion. The sessions will be lively, resembling at various times an encounter group session, or a debating society meeting. There will also be quiet moments of communication, and probably as much person to person with the instructors and others in the group as you would wish. We should be trying to understand something of the complexity and mystery of storytelling and writing, wherever it occurs.

PLAGIARISM: See the statement on Instructional Offences in the Undergraduate Calendar.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: Register with the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities.

CREATIVE NONFICTION WORKSHOP WEEKLY SCHEDULE: Fall 2013 (Subject to Improvisational Changes)

“All good writing is swimming underwater and holding your breath.” F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Week 1 (Sept 10)

Introduction with Australian Byron Bay Maddog Surfboard.

Creative nonfiction – writing that is at once factual and literary.

The Meandering River: An Overview of the Subgenres of Creative Nonfiction.

Reading examples of the genre – reading other writers to figure out how they do it, and absorbing techniques.

The Hidden Connections Among Things

Unfolding and withholding.

Writing exercises and prompts.

Shitty First Drafts by Anne Lamott.

First Assignment:

Every photo has a secret. Using a family photo or famous photograph, craft a compelling nonfiction narrative. Use a little memory, imagination and perhaps research and reporting. According to writer Paul Hendrikson, a photograph represents time stopped in a box. A kind of freeze frame of eternity, stopped motion in which the clock has seemed to hold its breath. Often the stories inside of photographs turn out to be at surprising odds with what we otherwise thought, felt, imagined. Whether the figure in the photo is someone you know or someone famous, or someone alive or deceased, you are now going to try with all your writing and reporting might to walk back in. Almost literally. You are going to achieve a story about this moment, with a beginning, middle and end. Write a short piece of creative nonfiction in less than 500 words.

Class broken into groups of 3 students for peer editing.

Week 2 (Sept. 17)

Memoir

Famous writers' notions: All memory is fiction. Any story told twice is fiction. All life, once lived, is fiction. Memory has its own story to tell. Instead of thinking, fiction or nonfiction, think narrative. We write what we don't know we know.

Second Assignment:

Everyone has a story to tell ...

Write a short multilayered Globe & Mail Facts & Arguments style memoir/personal essay, 900 words or less.

Or Write a Brevity piece – brief nonfiction 750 words or less.

(Assign manuscript schedule. We will generally deal with up to 5 per evening.)

Things to consider when critiquing a piece of writing.

Workshop manuscripts

Week 3 (Sept. 24)

Personal Essay/Memoir

Creative wrong memory

My Friend Jamie: A Personal History of Friendship, Rock & Roll, the 60's Generation, and a Lawn Mower.

Third Assignment A: Write a personal essay or memoir about something that happened in the past with a friend or family. 2000 words or less.

Workshop manuscripts.

Week 4 (Oct. 1)

Researched personal essay, long form narrative journalism, literary journalism, new journalism and feature articles.

Driving Mr. Albert: A Trip Across America With Einstein's Brain by Michael Paterniti

Thirds Assignment B: Write a narrative nonfiction essay that uses immersion – research or reporting - something outside yourself. Use a reportorial style to capture the story but also includes your own presence as a character. Take advantage of literary devices while respecting the factuality of journalism. Write a personal essay about a topic, issue or anything that grabs your curiosity and interest. For example, you could write an essay titled On Water or On Beauty or On Sex or On Pencils or On Dogs or On Apples or On Finding God at 30,000 Feet... Fill in the blank yourself and use the title as a way to explore anything, a person, a place, an abstract concept, topic, incident or process and write about it in a personal and concrete way. All of us have questions, reflections, curiosities, fears, obsessions we would secretly love to write about... 2000 words or less.

Workshop manuscripts

Week 5 (Oct. 8)

Travel Writing (Map that route vs. Winging it.)

When the Best Minds Wander. The Road to There. The Road to Laos, On the Road with Kerouac. All writers are travellers, even if they never leave their desks.

Murdered Ottawa filmmaker/traveller/surfer/friend - Frank Cole: *Death of a Filmmaker, Saltwater Road to the Sahara. Life Without Death: The Cinema of Frank Cole.*

Optional Assignment: Write a travel piece 1,000 words or less about something that happened while you were travelling. It does not have to be something dramatic, but you need to come up with a story. (I'll bring in many published examples by my former writing students.)

Workshop manuscripts.

Week 6 (Oct.15)

Lyric Essay is not constrained by a narrative or action and is more related to poetry.

Meditative Essay is more a narrative of images or ideas over the action.

Optional Assignment: Write a lyric essay 1000 words or less.

Optional Assignment: Write a meditative essay/nature essay 1000 words or less.

Workshop manuscripts.

Week 7 (Oct.22)

Humour

Brett Popplewell (Feathertale Review), David Sedaris, Steve Martin, Bill Bryson, Margaret Atwood and other funny writers

Optional Assignment: Write a humorous autobiographical story/memoir/essay 1000 words or less.

Workshop manuscripts.

(FALL BREAK - No Classes Oct. 28- Nov. 1)

Week 8 (Nov. 5)

The following is a partial list of previous visiting writers to my workshop:

2002 Novelist/filmmaker/TV Anchor Kim Brunhuber and his novel Kameleon Man.

2003 Award winning memoir/ short story writer Isabel Huggan and Belonging.

2004 Ted Bishop, Governor General Award Finalist, travel memoir, Riding With Rilke: Reflections on Motorcycles and Books.

2005 Carleton student writers reading from literary magazines.

2006 Readings by poet/memoirist Michelle Desbarats and other former student writers.

2007 Filmmaker Korbett Matthews screening his film, The Man Who Crossed The Sahara which is about my murdered Ottawa filmmaker friend Frank Cole.

2008 Novelist/poet/memoirist Mark Frutkin reading from his novel Fabrizio's Return.

2009 Writers readings from various social networks.

2010 Feathertale Review editor/writer/reporter/Carleton Journalism graduate and former member of my Carleton writing workshop, Brett Popplewell.

2011 Journalist/columnist/writer Peter Zimonjic, creative nonfiction book about the London bombings, Into the Darkness: An Account of 7/7.

2012 Former writing workshopers reading their prize winning stories: Tom McMillan (Toronto Star Story winner who beat 1,980 other writers) Sima Qadeer and Mason Hanrahan, winners of the Carleton Short Story Contest

2013 Visiting writer:

Workshop manuscripts.

Week 9 (Nov.12)

Revision is the essence of the writing process

Opening up your story.

Stress Worry Angst The Void

Expose your manuscript to improve it.

Hypertext, Hypermedia and Web base writing. Writing online and social media.

Write a short piece of Twitterature, 140 characters or less.

From Blog to Book

Where are books, publishing and writing going?

Workshop manuscripts.

Week 10 (Nov. 19)

HOW TO BECOME A WRITER: READ WRITE PUSH

General Advice on how to Avoid Shark attack.

You can't. Even metaphorically, Sharks Happen.

Finding the write (right) market (place) for your work.

Workshop manuscripts.

Week 11 (Nov. 26)

Catch up.

Workshop manuscripts.

Week 12 (Dec. 3)

Final class and celebration.

How to continue reading and writing

live, write and read as though each

precious day were your very last

follow your obsessions

try to have fun

take chances

take care

aloha

INSTRUCTOR:

Richard Taylor has been at Carleton since 1995 when he was Carleton Writer-Residence. He has taught writing in Hong Kong, Australia, Tuscany and over 100 workshops in Ottawa. For the last 8 years he's offered a summer writer's retreat, Write by the Lake in Val des Monts Quebec near a waterfall at his beautiful lake house Monet Bay. He has published a novel, *Cartoon Woods*, a collection of short stories, *Tender Only To One*, an Australian Travel memoir, *House Inside The Waves: Domesticity, Art and the Surfing Life*, and many feature magazine articles. While surfing and open water swimming around the world, he is working on an unusual book about swimming with writers, *Water and Desire*.