

Carleton University
Department of English
Fall 2020
ENGL 2915A Creative Nonfiction Workshop
Monday 6-9 pm
Online Synchronous Meetings Via Zoom
Prerequisite: Permission of the Instructor
Instructor: Richard Taylor
E-mail: taylorwave@gmail.com

APPLYING TO THE COURSE:

Like all the writing workshops in the English Department, students are admitted to the Creative Nonfiction Workshop by permission of the instructor and the submission of a portfolio.

If you are considering taking the Online Creative Nonfiction Workshop, please email me beforehand for a chat at taylorwave@gmail.com.

Before the term begins you must submit a 5-10-page double-spaced portfolio. It must include a brief biographical sketch about who you are and why you want to take the workshop and if you have taken any other creative writing workshops. You can include any of the following examples of your writing: postcard stories, short stories, parts of novels, poetry, or creative nonfiction like blogs, magazine pieces, lyric essays, personal essays, memoir (see Globe and Mail First Person daily essay/memoir) feature articles, literary/narrative journalism, or humour. You can submit short self-contained pieces or excerpts from longer pieces but describe how the excerpt relates to the longer piece.

Portfolios should be emailed to the English Dept. at english@carleton.ca You will receive an acknowledgement of receipt from the English Dept. Please include a cover page with your name, Carleton student number, Carleton email address and telephone number. Students are advised to make an alternative course selection until those accepted are contacted by the English Dept.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

(Subject to Covid Considerations and Improvisational Changes.)

The Online Creative Nonfiction Workshop will be offered online with synchronous meetings via ZOOM 3 hours once a week. Participation in this course will require students to have reliable, high-speed internet access, a computer with a webcam and microphone. As much as possible I want our Online Creative Nonfiction Workshop to replicate my face-to-face Creative Nonfiction Workshop I've taught for many

years. (I recently finished teaching a 12-week Online Virtual Writing Workshop with 18 writers, and it went swimmingly.)

In 2013 I started offering the Creative Nonfiction Workshop, English 2915. One class of my Creative Nonfiction Workshop students produced a chapbook, *This Actually Happened: An Anthology of Creative Nonfiction*.

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, reporting, research, poetry, essay writing and storytelling. Lee Gutkind, the Godfather of Creative Nonfiction, defines the genre succinctly, and accurately as - true stories well told.

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, immersion journalism, memoir, personal essays, factual fiction, and documentary narrative. 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 must work with facts: “The narrative nonfiction writer is a novelist, except for the lying.” Writers are able to research, delve, inquire, question, or explore any subject within a narrative. Russell Freedman says the Creative Nonfiction writer strives to find the story, the narrative line that exists in nearly every subject, be it the life of a person or the life of a cell. 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, 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, and 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* was creative nonfiction as was Ernest Hemingway’s book about bullfighting, *Death in the Afternoon*, and his memoir of Paris in the 1920s, *A Moveable Feast*. Other innovative, contemporary examples of creative nonfiction are varied and exciting: Jamaica Kincaid’s autobiographical novels, memoirs and her brilliant look at colonialism and its effects in Antigua, *A Small Place*; Robert Pirsig’s 60s cult classic inquiry into values, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*; Hunter S. Thompson’s, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*; Bill Bryson’s hilarious best-selling travel memoirs; and David Sedaris’s humorous autobiographical memoirs and personal essays.

We live in an autobiographical age, the age of voyeurism, confession, reality TV, blogs, tweets, an expanding, personal and private world of social media. In this workshop we will read, discuss, critique, and write many types of creative nonfiction, including the

published work of big-name writers and my former Carleton writing students. We will learn to look for and write about what I call - the hidden connections among things.

PLEASE TAKE NOTE (Subject to Covid Considerations and Improvisational Changes)

The Online via Zoom 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 will be new work generated from the writing prompts and workshop assignments. Up to half a dozen writers will submit a manuscript online each week for the other students to read and critique and be prepared to discuss the following week. Your fellow workshopers and I will provide oral and written editorial comments on your work.

If you are scheduled to submit or present a manuscript and cannot, please give me advance notice. In some cases, we will not workshop the material you submitted the previous week because we have too many manuscripts, but your work will be workshopped the following week.

Every manuscript submission must be page-numbered and double-spaced in ordinary typeface. Each manuscript should have proper spelling, grammar, and punctuation. **Consider each piece is being sent to an editor(s) for possible publication.**

During the term, I will offer material and discuss various aspects about reading, writing, editing, revision and where and how to get published.

EVALUATION:

There is no textbook. There are no exams. Because the online workshop is based on a collective interaction between writers, attendance is mandatory. Students are expected to contribute enthusiastic, constructive, thoughtful comments on each manuscript and during our open workshop discussions. An open-mindedness for your peers and their work and perspective is critical. You will be exposed to many types of writing styles, viewpoints, and personalities. Some of the autobiographical material will at times be quite intense and personal, which means everyone must be extra sensitive and respectful about how we workshop this material. **In many cases some of the pieces will come with an assumed trigger warning.**

Please do not write about anyone in our workshop.

Early on there will be some fun, stimulating warm-up writing exercises and prompts, as well as feedback from the instructor and fellow students. There will be 4 specific writing assignments. (I will offer published examples as templates for each assignment to help you understand what I am 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, 900 words or less.
- 2) Write a Brevity style or Globe & Mail First Person style memoir/personal essay, 900 words.
- 3) Write a Personal Essay/Memoir, 1500 words.
- 4) Choose only 'one' of the following assignments:
 - Write a Travel piece, 900 words or less.
 - Write a Lyric Essay, 900 words or less.
 - Write a Meditative or Nature Essay, 900 words or less.
 - Write a Humorous piece, 900 words or less.

There will be more details and discussion about these assignments later.

The class will be broken down into groups of 3 or more for peer editing. Each piece of your writing must be submitted to your Peer Editing Group before it is submitted to class to be workshopped. Your work will have a chance to be read and improved by your Peer Editing Group before it gets to the classroom to be workshopped. There will be no mark for individual pieces. Each piece of your writing will be read and commented on by your Peer Editing Group. Then it will be sent to everyone in class to be read out loud (all of it or an excerpt) and workshopped by the entire class. Each writer will read each manuscript and say and write comments about what makes it work and what makes it work better. I'll give you guidelines – **Things to Consider When Critiquing a Piece of Writing**. You will have a chance to revise each of your assignments and email them to me along with a half page to full page commentary about your revision process. Because this is a creative writing workshop, there will be opportunities for spontaneity and improvisation, but you must be willing to read, write, edit, and fully participate.

I will give you a final email commenting on all your work from the term.

Your final grade will be based on the following factors:

(70%) Quality and originality of your writing and your ability to revise and polish your work.

(20%) Quality of your oral and written editorial comments about your fellow writers' work and your discussion contribution. The energy, depth, and enthusiasm with which you contribute to the collective process.

(10%) ATTENDANCE)

Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor subject to the approval of the Faculty Dean. This means that grades submitted by the instructor may be subject to revision. No grades are final until they have been approved by the Dean.

You must be willing to attend 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, metaphorically during Covid, go around the table of workshoppers; 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.

CREATIVE NONFICTION WORKSHOP WEEKLY SCHEDULE: Fall 2020

(Subject to Covid Considerations and Improvisational Changes)

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

Week 1 (Sept 14)

- Brief introduction of instructor and each class member
- *What is Creative Nonfiction* by Lee Gutkind
- Reading examples of the genre – reading other writers to figure out how they do it, and absorbing techniques
- *This Actually Happened: An Anthology of Creative Nonfiction*, by students of a previous Creative Nonfiction Workshop
- Writing exercises and prompts
- *Shitty First Drafts* by Anne Lamott
- **First Assignment:** Write a short piece of creative nonfiction related to Covid-19 using a photograph, 900 words or less
- **Class broken into groups of 3 or more students for Peer Editing Groups**

Week 2 (Sept. 21)

- 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:** Write a short multilayered Brevity style piece or Globe & Mail First Person-style memoir/personal essay, 900 words or less
- Assign manuscript schedule. We will generally deal with up to about 6 per evening
- Things to consider when critiquing a piece of writing
- Workshop manuscripts

Week 3 (Sept. 28)

- Personal Essay/Memoir
- **Third Assignment:**
- Write a personal essay/memoir about something that happened in the past with a friend(s) or family, 1,500 words
- Or write a researched personal essay, immersion essay, long form narrative journalism, literary journalism, new journalism and feature articles, 1,500 words
- *Driving Mr. Albert: A Trip Across America With Einstein's Brain* by Michael Paterniti
- *Swimming with Albert and the Theory of Everything* by Richard Taylor
- Workshop manuscripts

Week 4 (Oct. 5)

- Workshop manuscripts

Week 5 (No Class Oct. 12 because of Thanksgiving so we'll have it Fri. Oct 16)

- Lyric and Meditative Essays
- 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
- **Fourth Assignment Option 1:** Write a lyric essay, 900 words or less.
- **Fourth Assignment Option 2:** Write a meditative essay/nature essay, 900 words or less.
- Workshop manuscripts.

Week 6 (Oct. 19)

- Travel Writing
- (Map that route vs. Winging it.)
- 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*.
- Globe and Mail Tripping Column travel writing examples.
- **Fourth Assignment Option 3:** Write a 900 word or less travel piece 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 published examples by my writing students.)
- Workshop manuscripts

(FALL BREAK – NO CLASSES – OCT. 26-30)

Week 7 (Nov. 2)

- Humour
- Brett Popplewell (editor of Feathertale Review), David Sedaris, Steve Martin, Bill Bryson, Margaret Atwood and other funny writers.
- **Fourth Assignment Option 4:** Humorous autobiographical memoir/essay, 900 words or less.
- Workshop manuscripts.

Week 8 (Nov. 9)

- A Visiting Writer may come this week or any week depending on schedules. The following is a partial list of previous visiting Creative Nonfiction writers to my workshop:
- Charles Taylor, award winner for the best Creative Nonfiction book of the year, and friend, Isabel Huggan, *Belonging: Home Away From Home*
- Governor General Award Finalist in Creative Nonfiction, and friend, Ted Bishop, *Riding with Rilke: Reflections on Motorcycles and Book*
- Filmmaker and friend Korbett Matthews screening his film, which I helped to narrate, and participate in, *The Man Who Crossed the Sahara*, which is about my murdered Ottawa filmmaker friend Frank Cole
- Mason Hanrahan, winner of the Carleton Writing Competition in creative nonfiction
- Lorrie Jorgensen, author of *First Gear: A Motorcycle Memoir*
- Workshop manuscripts

Week 9 (Nov. 16)

- Revision is the essence of the writing process
- Opening up your story
- Stress Worry Angst, The Void
- Expose your manuscript to improve it
- Writing online and social media. (From Blog to Book)
- Where are books, publishing and writing going
- Workshop manuscripts

Week 10 (Nov. 23)

- Submitting Work for Publication
- *HOW TO BECOME A WRITER: READ WRITE PUSH*
- General Advice on How to Avoid a Shark Attack: You can't. Even metaphorically speaking, Sharks Happen
- Finding the write (right) market (place) for your work
- Workshop manuscripts

Week 11 (Nov. 30)

- Catch Up
- Workshop manuscripts

Week 12 (Dec. 7)

- Workshop Manuscripts

Week 13 (Friday, Dec. 11, Make up Class)

- Final Class and Celebration
- Workshop Manuscripts

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 165 private eight-week workshops in Ottawa. For the last 14 years he has offered an annual summer writer's retreat, Write by the Lake, in Val-des-Monts, Quebec near a waterfall at his beautiful lake house. 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. Hundreds of his writers have published work as a result of taking his workshops. While surfing and open water swimming around the world, he is working on an unusual book about swimming with writers, *Water and Desire*.

PLAGIARISM: See the statement on Instructional Offences in the Undergraduate Calendar. <https://carleton.ca/registrar/academic-integrity/>

Requests for Academic Accommodation

You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term. For an accommodation request, the processes are as follows:

Pregnancy obligation: write to me with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details click [here](#).

Religious obligation: write to me with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details click [here](#).

Academic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: The Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities (PMC) provides services to students with Learning Disabilities (LD), psychiatric/mental health disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), chronic medical conditions, and impairments in mobility, hearing, and vision. If you have a disability requiring academic accommodations in this course, please contact PMC at 613-520- 6608 or pmc@carleton.ca for a formal evaluation. If you are already registered with the PMC, contact your PMC coordinator to send me your Letter of Accommodation at the beginning of the term, and no later than two weeks before the first in-class scheduled test or exam requiring accommodation (if applicable). After requesting accommodation from PMC, meet with me to ensure accommodation arrangements are made. Please consult the PMC website for the deadline to request accommodations for the formally-scheduled exam (if applicable).

Survivors of Sexual Violence

As a community, Carleton University is committed to maintaining a positive learning, working and living environment where sexual violence will not be tolerated, and where survivors are supported through academic accommodations as per Carleton's Sexual Violence Policy. For more information about the services available at the university and to obtain information about sexual violence and/or support, visit:

<https://carleton.ca/equity/sexual-assault-support-services>

Accommodation for Student Activities

Carleton University recognizes the substantial benefits, both to the individual student and for the university, that result from a student participating in activities beyond the classroom experience. Reasonable accommodation must be provided to students who compete or perform at the national or international level. Write to me with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. <https://carleton.ca/senate/wp-content/uploads/Accommodation-for-Student-Activities-1.pdf>