

Carleton University
Fall 2017
Department of English

ENGL 2915A: Creative Nonfiction Workshop
Prerequisite: Permission of the Instructor

Schedule: Tuesdays, 6:05 – 8:55pm
Please confirm location on Carleton Central

Instructor: Richard Taylor
Email: rick.taylor@carleton.ca

APPLYING TO THE COURSE:

Like all of 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.

Before the term begins you must submit a 5 to 10 page double-spaced portfolio. 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: postcard stories, blogs, magazine pieces, personal essays, (see Globe and 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 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. (If you do not receive one, please follow up with the Dept.) The deadline for submission is July 31 and you will be contacted by August 8. 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.

Because of the large number of enthusiastic applicants, it's advisable to apply early.

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

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

In 2012 I started offering the Creative Nonfiction Workshop, English 2915. My 2013 Creative Nonfiction Workshop students produced an anthology of their writing, *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, essay writing, research 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 have to work with facts: “The narrative nonfiction writer is a novelist, except for the lying.” The writer is 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 posthumous memoir of Paris in the 1920s, *A Moveable Feast*. Other examples of creative nonfiction are Robert Pirsig’s 60s cult classic inquiry into values, *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 occasionally might be from your portfolio, but most will be new work generated from the workshop assignments. 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 workshoppers 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 page numbered, typed, double spaced and double sided 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.

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 exams. 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, perspectives and personalities.

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 Brevity style or Globe & Mail Facts & Arguments style memoir/personal essay, 900 words or less.**
- 3) Write a Personal Essay/Memoir, 2000 words or less. (Or write a Researched Immersion Personal Essay, 2000 words or less.)**

4) Choose only 'one' of the following assignments:

Write a Travel piece, 750 words or less.

Write a Lyric Essay, 750 words or less.

Write a Meditative or Nature Essay, 750 words or less.

Write a Humorous piece, 750 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. Each piece of your writing must be submitted to your peer editing group before it is submitted to class to be workshopped.

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 fellow writers' 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 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.

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

REQUEST 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 see the [Student Guide](#).

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 see the [Student Guide](#).

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*). **Requests made within two weeks will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.** After requesting accommodation from PMC, meet with me to ensure accommodation arrangements are made. Please consult the PMC website (www.carleton.ca/pmc) for the deadline to request accommodations for the formally-scheduled exam (*if applicable*).

CREATIVE NONFICTION WORKSHOP WEEKLY SCHEDULE: Fall 2017 (Subject to Improvisational Changes)

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

Week 1 (Sept 12) Introduction with Australian Byron Bay Surfboard

What is Creative Nonfiction by Lee Gutkind.

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.

This Actually Happened: An Anthology of Creative Nonfiction, by students of the Fall 2013 Creative Nonfiction Workshop, English 2915.

The Hidden Connections Among Things...

Writing exercises and prompts.

Shitty First Drafts by Anne Lamott.

First Assignment: Write a short piece of creative nonfiction using a photograph, 750 words.

Class broken into groups of 3 students for peer editing.

Week 2 (Sept. 19) 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 Facts & Arguments style memoir/personal essay, 900 words.

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. 26) Personal Essay/Memoir

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

Third Assignment (Option 1). Write a personal essay or memoir about something that happened in the past with a friend(s) or family, 2000 words.

Workshop manuscripts.

Week 4 (Oct. 3) Researched Personal Essay

Researched personal essay, immersion 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

Swimming with Albert and the Theory of Everything by Richard Taylor.

Third Assignment (Option 2). 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, 2000 words.

Workshop manuscripts

Week 5 (Oct. 10) 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 1: Write a 750 word 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.

Week 6 (Oct.17) 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 2: Write a lyric essay, 750 words.

Fourth Assignment Option 3: Write a meditative essay/nature essay, 750 words.

Workshop manuscripts.

(FALL BREAK – NO CLASSES – OCT. 24-28)

Week 7 (Oct. 31) 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, 750 words.

Workshop manuscripts.

Week 8 (Nov. 7) 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 Books*.

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. 14) Revision

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. 21) 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. 28) Catch Up

Workshop manuscripts.

Week 12 (Dec. 5) 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 140 workshops in

Ottawa. For the last 12 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*.