LIT 6076, Studies in Contemporary Nonfiction
Fall 2011

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Prerequisites
Admission to the Creative Writing MFA Program or express, written permission of professor based on submission of manuscripts and other materials.

Course Overview
We'll engage in the study of contemporary literary nonfiction writing with a special emphasis on craft—that is, what it takes to create such works of art. Class discussion will consider matters of form, structure, style, narrative, character, dialogue, and notions of the self, memory, and place. This semester, we'll focus chiefly on memoir and the personal essay. Readings in memoir will range from traditional memoir to exploratory and postmodern memoir and the graphic novel. Readings in the personal essay will explore both the traditions in the essay form as well as contemporary experiments at the “borders” of the essay.

This course also explores the contemporary scene in nonfiction with a special focus on the dialog about the form among contemporary theorists and writers. The following questions reflect the many issues we will explore:

- What's going on in contemporary nonfiction?
- What do today's writers write about--and how do they craft it--when they sit down to write memoir and personal essays?
- What differentiates literary memoir from navel-gazing or self-indulgent public purging of private crises and trauma?
- Are contemporary nonfiction writers borrowing from the techniques of fiction? Poetry?
- Are there any experiments in form?
- When is the so-called graphic novel really a memoir?
- What counts as “truth”?

Students will be asked to: read vigorously; participate regularly in class discussion; take weekly quizzes; write several short papers (e.g. position papers, style studies, craft analyses); collaborate on a presentation; write creative sketches (e.g. drafts of original memoir chapters and/or personal essays); and write a final project combining creative and analytical work.

While students will use critical and analytical skills in writing, reading, and talking about contemporary nonfiction, this course focuses on practice: each class member will write some original sketches that make use of the forms and techniques under discussion.

Whether or not you've had any experience writing literary nonfiction, you've certainly spent many valuable years reading narrative prose, whether fiction or nonfiction. Given your experience and mine we'll engage in an ongoing dialogue about what constitutes artful and effective literary nonfiction. We'll also take a look at how contemporary writers engage in, create dialogues with, and challenge traditional ideas about memoir and the personal essay.
The first few weeks will be devoted to discussing some early contemporary works of memoir and personal essay as well as theoretical perspectives on such works. During the next few weeks, we'll alternate between reading works that challenge or sustain the traditions in the form and hearing from panelists who will broaden our ideas about contemporary writing. Next, we'll discuss some original work written by members of the class. Near the end of the semester, in analytical essays as well as creative works, students will build discoveries into individual theories and craft statements as well as revised original literary nonfiction.

**Required Reading**

There will individual reading (chosen in collaboration with the professor), web-based reading, and classmates' writing as well as required and recommended books (available at the campus bookstore). This book list is subject to change.

**Required books (available at the campus bookstore):**

- John D'Agata, *The Next American Essay*
- David Foster Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*
- David Shields, *Reality Hunger*
- Charles Baxter, *The Business of Memory*
- Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*
- Lucy Grealy, *Autobiography of a Face*
- Nick Flynn, *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*
- Bob Shacochis, *The Immaculate Invasion*
- *Domesticity: A Gastronomic Interpretation of Love*
- Patti Smith, *Just Kids*
- J.M. Coetzee, *Boyhood*
- Art Spiegelman, *Maus I*

**Individual books and journals (for individual presentations):**

- Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*
- Frank Conroy, *Stop-Time*
- Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories*
- Carl Klaus, *The Made-up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay*
- Sven Birkerts, *The Art of Time in Memoir*
- Richard Larson, *The Memoir and the Memoirist*
- David Lazar, *Truth in Nonfiction*
- Anders Monson, *Vanishing Point: Not a Memoir*
- Deborah Tall, *A Family of Strangers*
- Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*
- Ann Patchett, *Truth and Beauty: A Friendship*
- *The Missouri Review* essay award winners (10-15)

**Recommended books (essential background reading):**

- Jo Ann Beard, *The Boys of My Youth*
- Tobias Wolff, *This Boy’s Life*
- Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis I*
Harvey Pekar, *American Splendor*
Mary Karr, *The Liars Club*
Phillip Lopate, *The Personal Essay*
Frank McCourt, *Angela’s Ashes*
John McPhee (any book)
Tracy Kidder (any book)

**Course Objectives**

- Explore a range of approaches to writing literary nonfiction
- Obtain a thorough knowledge of craft-based approaches to discussing, analyzing, and writing literary nonfiction
- Understand the contemporary scene in literary nonfiction
- Explore strategies for writing narrative, lyric, segmented, graphic, and postmodern works about the self
- Practice and refine the art of reading like a writer, attending to craft
- Build an appreciation for the various approaches to contemporary literary nonfiction
- Explore your own writing from a fresh perspective
- Draft a philosophy of the form and begin professional a presentation and/or article
- Map out a strategy for a professional contribution to the field (presentations, articles)

**Required Participation**

- Sustained, analytical participation in discussion
- Careful written studies of reading
- An individual and/or collaborative presentation
- Participation in workshops of student manuscripts

**Required writing**

The following requirements are subject to change over the course of the semester.

- An initial position paper on your philosophy of nonfiction
- Brief position papers and/or annotations of each assigned book
- Craft studies and analytical responses to reading as assigned
- Creative writing sketches as assigned
- Critiques of student manuscripts
- Outline of your presentation
- Draft of a conference paper
- Abstract of a professional paper
- Final project combining analysis and creative writing
Attendance and Deadlines

This class has a strict attendance policy. Because it's a discussion, presentation, and workshop course, it's important to be here and prepared to discuss assignments thoroughly. Late work will not be accepted. Be sure to keep pace with assignments.

Graduate classes require not only your physical attendance for each class meeting, but also focused engagement in the manuscripts, books, and discussion. These are simple, straightforward requirements. If you foresee any problems meeting them, it’s important to set up a meeting with me before our second class meeting. There can be a good deal of flexibility in a graduate class, but attendance and deadlines are not the flexible part of the class. It is expected that all members of the class are serious about their writing and reading. Be here prepared to join every discussion and to talk about the assigned works in detail.

Meeting these requirements without being reminded and nagged at will show that you take your writing seriously.

Here are the specific requirements for attendance and deadlines, all spelled out:

- Attend every workshop meeting.
  - If you are sick, send me an email message well before the class meeting to let me know you won’t be there.
  - If you need to travel for professional business this semester, inform me by email as soon as you know when you will be gone.
  - If you have a family emergency that requires travel, contact me as soon as you can once you know what class session you will meet.
    - You may take no more than two of these excused absences. Beyond that, you would not really be part of the class.
    - Get to class on time. If you are not in class when we start the workshop, you will be considered absent for that part of class. No participation, no credit for attendance.
    - Read all assigned works—whether workshop manuscripts or required texts—thoroughly and carefully before class. No preparation, no credit for attendance.
    - Take part in all discussions, both workshop and craft-centered. No participation, no credit for attendance.
  - Turn in all assignments by the deadline. Late work will not be accepted and will not receive credit.
  - Be there for your own workshop. If something comes up and you have to miss it, it’s your responsibility to get someone to switch with you.
  - Work on drafts all semester, not just the week before your manuscript is due. Pressure makes for writer’s block and often results in sloppy writing that doesn’t really serve your vision or lend to your artistic growth.
  - Turn in workshop manuscripts that are:
    - Work written expressly for this class.
    - Work that has never before been turned in or workshopped.
    - Work that is 100% original. (See plagiarism rules, below.)
    - Manuscripts that you’ve worked as hard as you can on, over time, and that you’ve taken through some revision (e.g. no rough drafts).
- Edited and proofread manuscripts that are free of errors and mark-overs.
- Double-spaced.
- Have your name on every page.
- Have page numbers.
  - Are collated and stapled before you get to class.

**Late work will receive a score of "zero."** Be sure to keep pace with assignments. If you anticipate problems with making deadlines, talk to me early to develop a strategy for meeting deadlines and avoiding procrastination.

**Cell Phone and Electronics Policy**

During class meetings, cell phones must be turned off except in the most extreme emergency, in which case notify me, and I will notify the entire class. Lap-top computers must be turned off and closed. We’ll work from paper copies of manuscripts and reading- and workshop notes.

Usually, graduate students don’t need to be reminded of proper classroom courtesy, but just to make sure we’re all on the same page about what’s expected, here’s a list:

- Speak to the whole class, not just one or two people sitting next to you.
- Follow UCF standards for personal and academic conduct as outlined in The Golden Rule.
- As a matter of common courtesy, please arrive on time, prepared to stay for the entire class, and do not engage in conversation other than the classroom discussions we will be having about the reading and writing on hand.
- Proper classroom conduct also entails creating a positive learning experience for all students, regardless of sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, social class, or any other feature of personal identification.
- Differences of opinion and interpretation must be expressed tactfully and professionally.

**Disability Accommodation**

UCF is committed to providing reasonable accommodations for all persons with disabilities. Students with disabilities who need accommodations in this course must contact the professor at the beginning of the semester to discuss needed accommodations. No accommodations will be provided until the student has met with the professor to request accommodations. Students who need accommodations must be registered with Student Disability Services, Student Resource Center Room 132, (407) 823-2116, before requesting accommodations from the professor.

**Academic Honesty and Original Work**

All work that you submit for this class must be your own. Your online postings, your final portfolio, and any other assignment you turn in for the course must be original--that is, written by you alone and written for this course and no other course. Your writing will improve only to the extent that you put in the effort to create your own postings, portfolio essays, and other writing,
and strive to reach your vision.

"Recycling," in which students turn in a project for more than one course (or make a few changes in writing turned in during a previous semester) is cheating. It will result in an "F" for the assignment.

"Rewriting," in which students consult a source, change a few words, and present the material as their own, is plagiarism. Plagiarism and cheating of any kind on an examination, quiz, or assignment will result in at least an "F" for that assignment and may also lead to an "F" for the entire course. Plagiarism and cheating subjects a student to referral to the Office of Student Conduct for further action. See the UCF Golden Rule for further information (http://www.goldenrule.sdes.ucf.edu/)

Grades

Grades for discussion, papers, and most writing assignments will be based on thoroughness and analytical skill of critiques (e.g. position papers, craft studies, collaborative presentation etc.) and discussion; creativity, clarity, and writerly skill of creative writing assignments; and the achievement, clarity, creativity, and critical and analytical nature of the final project. Each assignment will receive both written commentary and points, according to the following scale (which is subject to revision over the course of the semester):

- Initial position paper on your philosophy of nonfiction-10%
- Brief position papers and/or annotations of each assigned book-combined, 10%
- Craft studies and analytical responses to reading as assigned-combined, 10%
- Creative writing sketches as assigned-combined, 10%
- Critiques of student manuscripts-10%
- Presentation (including outline)-10%
- Draft of a conference paper – 10%
- Abstract of a professional paper-10%
- Final Project - 20%

These grades will appear in terms of points; For example, if your participation in class discussion is excellent, you will receive 9 or 10 (or perhaps even 9.5); if it is good, you will receive 8; if it is fair, you will receive 7 and so on. To earn a grade of B or above, then, you'll need to meet or exceed all the requirements specified above. To pass with distinction (that is, to earn a grade of A), you'll need to write sophisticated, effective work, participate avidly in all discussions, and offer excellent critiques to classmates.

If at any time you have questions about your work, or want to know how my comments "translate" into a letter grade, schedule an appointment.

The grading scale for the course follows the standard UCF plus/minus grading system. The points you receive on your work throughout the semester are added up and translated into letter grades according to the following point system:

A, 93-100; A-, 90-92
B+, 87-89; B, 83-86; B-, 80-82
C+, 77-79; C, 73-76; C-, 70-72
D+, 67-69; D, 63-66; D-, 60-62
F, 0-59

Grades of "I" (Incomplete) may be negotiated only in extreme, documented emergencies such as long-term hospitalization.

**Conferences:**

Please schedule a conference if you have questions or concerns about any aspect of your work. You might, for example, discuss ideas for a special project, particular ways to market the review, or how your work might translate into a final grade. You might also discuss how to critique and select manuscripts for publications.

Please don't wait until the end of the semester to ask questions, especially if they concern improvement or grades. Stop by when there's still time to have an effect on your work. I can't tell if you have any questions or concerns about the course unless you talk about them.