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Select Course Descriptions

English 361: Contemporary Nonfiction—*Reading as a Writer*

A literary survey of contemporary nonfiction, this course aims to introduce writing students to a few significant books from the last twenty-five years or so. You may not like all of these books, but ideally you will learn from them as they represent various sub-genres for which creative nonfiction is best known: memoir, lyric essays, cultural criticism, reportage, the autobiographical novel, as well as hybrid forms. Please come to class prepared for a detailed discussion that focuses on content and form—content, meaning what an author says and form, meaning how he or she says it. Saying, “I really loved this” or “I really hated this,” is a fine beginning as long as it is followed up by specifics like, “On page 57 there’s a paragraph that illustrates a kind of characterization I hadn’t thought of before.” Please mark the text in whatever way suits you so you can get to your specific references once you’re in class. Specific criticism is the most useful criticism because that is what really sharpens the mind and feeds the talent. As you read at home and as we re-read (and discuss) texts in class, your sense of possibilities will expand. You’ll also see how rich and varied issues of craft are and how astonishing the term “nonfiction” remains, including under cover of its tent work that ranges from the narrative to the lyric to the argumentative. Required Texts: *The Language of Baklava* by Diana Abu-Jaber; *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination* by Elizabeth McCracken; *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson; *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates; *Boys of My Youth* by Jo Ann Beard; *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* by Valeria Luiselli; *We the Animals* by Justin Torres; *An Exclusive Love* by Johanna Adorjan; *The Girls In My Town* by Angela Morales; *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* by Alexander Chee

English 371: Craft of Nonfiction Seminar—*Character Study*

Many of the most acclaimed novels in the history of literature focus on and are named after a single character: Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. We read with focus, then, as we come to know the texture of Anna’s troubles, the quality of Clarissa’s mind, the futility of Emma’s aspirations. Much of what we think of as modern realist fiction centers on character and in fiction courses, it’s common to talk about rounded versus flat characterizations, how to build believable characters, how to make them as complex as we know real people to be. But what of character in nonfiction? How does the writer of memoir and personal essay (or long-form journalism for that matter) bring to life people on the page who already exist or existed in real life, characters who do not need to be built so much as revealed? This course will look at a range of work with an eye toward studying characterization in nonfiction: the craft of how writers bring to life people on the page through glimpses, sketches, group portraits, and more. We will, through discussions of readings, begin to create a taxonomy to understand how scenes as well as statistics can bring people to life on the page. And in doing so, we will ask questions: in what way are first-person narrators—those who recede into the background and those who take center stage—crafted (through a distinctive voice?) to become essential characters? Required Texts: *Sylvia* by Leonard Michaels; *The Light of the World: A Memoir* by Elizabeth Alexander; *A Cup of Water Under My Bed* by Daisy Hernandez; *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* by Nick Flynn; and course packet including work by Torrey Peters, Isabel Allende, Morgan Peter, T Kira Madden, Roxane Gay, and Yiyun Li.

English 264: Craft of Nonfiction—*Unteachable Magic*

“Of all qualities, voice is the most unteachable and the closest to magic,” says writer Barry Hannah, likening voice to something akin to a natural music in the head. And yet, the unteachable is worth

exploring—which is what this course is designed to allow students to do, both through reading and writing, starting with an exercise aimed at destabilizing the notion that the nonfiction writer, who so often relies on the first person “I,” has one “true” voice he or she aspires to attain, then maintain. For who among can be reduced to a single voice? A single style? Who among us does not, in waking life, as well as on the page, rely on multiple strains of the self, various sides of an otherwise singular soul to help us articulate, express, argue, and explain? Required texts: *The Prisoner’s Wife* by Asha Bendele; *The One-Room Schoolhouse* by Jim Heynen; *So Long, See You Tomorrow* by William Maxwell; *Moments of Being* by Virginia Woolf; and a course packet with work by such contemporary writers as Susan Orlean, Amy Hempel, Bob Schoch, Valerie Martin, Nora Ephron, and Lorrie Moore.

English 224: Craft of Nonfiction—*The Volcano of Self: Shaping the Personal Essay*

The inexperienced writer, says Jeanette Winterson, believes sincerity of feeling will be enough while the experienced writer knows that feeling must give way to form. “It is through form, not in spite of it, or accidental to it,” she writes, “that the most powerful emotions are let loose over the greatest number of people.” This course, which starts with a series of close readings, offers a vocabulary for turning feeling to form. Writing exercises are designed to encourage students to dive into what Phillip Lopate calls “the volcano of self,” extracting – then *shaping* – hot coals of autobiography into formal work of beauty, intelligence, and grace. You’ll be asked to experiment with form, in other words, creating essays whose narratives move in distinctively (but not exclusively) linear, spiral, and disjunctive ways. Toward the end of the semester, we’ll do a short round of workshoping so you’ll receive the kind of feedback necessary to revise at least one of those essays. All of which should shed light on the possibility of the essay in general and the personal essay, in particular, which Tobias Wolff says is to “catch oneself in the act of being human.” Required texts include: *The Art of the Personal Essay* edited by Phillip Lopate; *In Brief* edited by Judith Kitchen & Mary Paumier Jones; *The Boys of My Youth* by Jo Ann Beard; *Book of Embraces* by Eduardo Galeano.

January Term—*Modern Romance: Sex, Love, and the Cheating Plot*

In great classic novels like *Anna Karenina*, *Madame Bovary* and *The Age of Innocence*, writers created characters torn between romantic love and marriage in plot lines that pit passion against bourgeois respectability. But these days, with divorce as common as marriage, the question remains: can infidelity—once the “great motor of the novel,” according to critic James Wood—effectively fuel fiction? In an essay titled “The End of the Novel of Love,” Vivian Gornick says no, arguing that infidelity today may inspire many things, including sorrow and regret, but it lacks larger meaning now that it’s set against a backdrop with so few social taboos. The plot line of infidelity “cannot provide insight,” she writes; “it can only repeat a view of things that today feels sadly tired and without the power to make one see anew.” But what does the plot line of infidelity involve? What modern meanings can “cheating” take? This is a course designed for creative writers interested in wrestling with these and other questions in order to find out how love works—or fails to work—as a transforming event in literature. We will spend our time reading what many consider one of the critical novels in the development of literature—*Anna Karenina*—and comparing Tolstoy’s text to contemporary short stories, trying to analyze the pages with a writer’s eye by looking at elements of plot, setting, character, and voice. Exercises will be aimed at helping students generate their own love stories (imagined or experienced)—stories that will attempt to illuminate love in our modern times. Required texts: *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (2000); and a course packet with contemporary short stories and Vivian Gornick’s essay.

January Term—*Reading and Writing the Short Story: Anton Chekhov & Alice Munro*

In this, a reading-and-writing course, students will immerse themselves in the deeply pleasurable task of writing and revising short stories of their own while reading the work of two extraordinary writers,

one canonical, the other contemporary: Anton Chekhov and Alice Munro. Both Chekhov and Munro are praised as writers who favor ordinary moments over dramatic ones and small, revelatory detail over action-laden plots. Both are obsessed with what one critic calls “time and our much-lamented inability to delay or prevent its relentless movement forward.” Both show the aspiring writer what it means to “seize upon the little particulars, grouping them in such a way that in reading, when you shut your eyes, you get a picture,” as Chekhov himself put it, describing a version of what has now, in the modern creative writing class, become the familiar mantra of “show, don’t tell.” Required texts: *The Essential Tales of Chekhov* by Anton Chekhov, translated by Constance Garnett with introduction by Richard Ford; *Selected Stories* by Alice Munro.

January Term—Reading and Writing the Short Story: William Trevor & Yiyun Li

On the surface, William Trevor and Yiyun Li appear wildly different: Trevor was born in Ireland in 1928, Li in China in 1972. But to read their work is to see that these two critically acclaimed writers share a great deal in common: a penchant for setting stories in small towns; an interest in quiet dramas; and an understanding of the malleability of time. When asked what Chinese authors had influenced her, Li recently said it was not a Chinese writer but Trevor who had had the greatest effect. She praised Trevor for focusing on the bleakness of life for ordinary people, for an “unmistakable village-ness” in his work, or a kind of stoicism, an understanding that, in Li’s words, “time moves onward, never stopping for an individual’s tragedy.” Li would be too modest to intimate as much, but she could be speaking of her own work in describing what she loves about Trevor’s. For her characters, too, reveal a similar stoicism; her stories, too, unfold in similarly muted ways. In this, a reading-and-writing course, students will spend two weeks immersed in reading stories by Trevor and Li, learning something about structure, time, plot and character. Then students will draft their own short stories, identifying strange happenings from their own “villages.” Because good writing often takes a village, we will help one another generously during a workshop portion of the course, revising a story by the end of the month.

English 214: Nonfiction Workshop

The aim of this course is to allow for as much freedom as possible to produce and revise original work, no matter what category of nonfiction the work falls into: memoir, criticism, personal essay, lyric essay, travel writing, nature writing, humor writing, the autobiographical novel, political reportage, or even (and wouldn’t this be a delight?) vital work that no one has named. We will review issues of scene, structure, form, and voice as they emerge from individual manuscripts. Plan on contributing to a workshop that is both supportive *and* rigorous. That some workshops wind up being one without the other is a shame. Because let’s face it: we all know how easy it is to announce a thumbs-up or thumbs-down verdict on a piece of writing (editors do it all the time) and tempting as that may be to do at times, such a blunt style offers little back to writers except an abbreviated glimpse of readers’ tastes. A more sustained and intelligent conversation, by contrast—an illumination of what the work *is* so far and what, when revised, it *might* be about—*this* is the more worthy goal. This is what we will strive to articulate: what a given piece is; what the piece is aiming toward; what it wants to become; what it may be about. This is tricky territory, of course, this question of “aboutness” in written work. “Story is its own meaning, self-contained,” writes Tim O’Brien, author of *The Things They Carried*. “What’s the point of *Huckleberry Finn*, for example? Don’t leave home? What’s the point of *Moby Dick*? Don’t get obsessed with whales? Novels and stories,” he continues—and, we might add, essays and memoirs and the like—“don’t have single points; they are what they are.” All of which is true. Yet, too much work remains unfinished for having failed to find some focus. We will use workshop sessions, then, to help one another discover these potential centers of gravity—where a piece might go after careful and multiple revisions—and in doing so, students will sharpen their critical awareness (and vocabularies and editing skills). Bring a pencil, a cup of coffee and a raging reverence, then, for what a workshop aimed at intelligent discussion can yield.

