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FALL 2012
ENGLISH 214
MFA NONFICTION WORKSHOP

CLASS TIME:
WEDNESDAYS 3:45 P.M. TO 6:45 P.M.

CLASS LOCATION:
DANTE 119

OFFICE HOURS:
WEDNESDAYS 1 P.M. TO 2 P.M. AND BY APPOINTMENT

Course Description:

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 yet has had the nerve to name.

We will review issues of scene, structure, form, tension, voice, character, plot and more as they emerge from individual manuscripts during workshop sessions. 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—and essential as it may be to do in another setting—such a blunt verdict-only 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. Such a critique can feed writers and respondents equally for years, giving writers a chance to get to understand their work better and giving readers a chance to consider many more stylistic possibilities than a snap judgment of “good” or “bad” or “mediocre” allows. And so, 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, some gravity, some conceptual core that matches its stylistic terms. 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.

Workshop Learning Outcomes as outlined by the *MFA Handbook*:

Students in this course will:

- produce a significant amount of original work;
- learn through the practice of reading, annotating, and discussing the work of their peers;
- develop the vocabulary and critical skills necessary for revising nonfiction.

Course Requirements:

You will be expected to submit your work three times for workshop and to participate in a final informal workshop at the end, reading a 2-page exercise out loud. Your work may fit into any category of nonfiction (such as travel writing, the personal essay, or literary reportage) and it may be part of a larger whole (such as a memoir in progress) but it should *not* be something you have put up for workshop here at Saint Mary's (or elsewhere) before, unless you have, before submitting it here, revised the piece substantially. (That will help you avoid the temptation to recycle the same work, polishing and re-polishing that same shiny gem.) Workshops best serve the writer who uses them as motivation to write something new. If it's unwieldy or unfocused—no problem. We'll help you think through possibilities. Ideally you will workshop two brand new pieces and revise a third for your final workshop.

Particulars: Drafts should be **10 to 25 pages**. If you're working on a longer project and want to use that page consideration to put up two chapters, fine. Likewise, if you're working on linked short pieces, by all means give us a sampling. (Example: Five two-page stories.) Use **12-point font** (nothing fancy), **one-inch margins**, and be sure to **double space your work, title it (even if it's only Chapter Three), and number your pages**. (*Please number your pages!*) **Staple your copies** before you arrive in class. If you are submitting part of a longer work in progress it's helpful if you write a short note to the class explaining the context of this chapter or part, filling us in on what we have missed. If you have specific questions you want your readers to consider, attach a note explaining that. In general, however, notes to your readers are not necessary. And—this is important—**do not take advantage of our collective goodwill by missing your workshop deadline and then trying to email us the work late**. Emergencies come up, of course, and we will, as respondents, be more than happy to accommodate someone in such a situation, but in lieu of an emergency, **stick to all deadlines** faithfully. The student who fails to meet workshop submission deadlines for this course will likely miss the chance to be workshopped. And the student who misses deadlines may also be in jeopardy of passing the course overall.

Also: what comes to the workshop stays in the workshop. **Please don't circulate your**

classmates' drafts among others or talk about the contents of these manuscripts outside of class. What may appear innocuous to you may well be private material to the writer—perfect for the page but not intended by the writer just yet to be discussed socially. The workshop table should not only be a place of great trust but one of literary professionalism. To that end, it is important that writers **refrain from bringing to the workshop table those stories that relate to people in the Saint Mary's community.** Save those for another, less subjective audience. (If you have questions about this, please see me.)

The other major component of workshopping—and the other major responsibility of the course—is full participation in workshops as a respondent. That means coming to class having read your peers' work and thought about it and having responded to it formally in writing. **Please type a 1-page (single-spaced) endnote to your classmate,** describing the piece in service of evaluating it and offering suggestions for revision. Your endnote should take the form of a letter. **Turn in one copy to the writer with his or her manuscript and the second copy of the endnote to the instructor, who will provide feedback on your criticism.** (See attached handout, "A Letter On Reading for Workshop" for a fuller discussion of what form the endnotes should take.) Peer critiques are due the day of the workshop.

Grades:

All grades for Saint Mary's MFA Creative Writing students are Pass / Fail unless a student requests otherwise. The student who misses four or more class sessions for *whatever reason* will likely not receive credit. (Arriving more than 10 minutes late to class, disappearing for extended periods during class, or leaving more than 10 minutes early translates into an absence.) Also in jeopardy of failing the course is the student who fails to participate in the discussions on a weekly basis or who is late or misses more than five written responses to his or her peers for workshops. (Responses to peers are due on the day of a workshop.)

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is the undocumented use of someone else's ideas, words, or sentences. To present another's work as your own, even if you are paraphrasing, is plagiarism. Doing so is a serious offense and will result in failure for that assignment and, most likely, for the course.

Tutorials:

You are required to meet with your instructor at least twice during the semester and are encouraged to schedule visits during **office hours (Wednesdays 1-2 p.m.)** or at other times as well. Ideally, your meetings will come the week after you've been workshopped so that we can discuss the strengths of your writing, areas for revision, and plans for new work. The emphasis will be on issues of the craft of writing, though you're welcome to bring in questions about other issues related to living a literary life: what to write about; how to publish; finding work in the teaching profession; coping with writer's envy—whatever is on your mind.

Tutorial Learning Outcomes as outlined by the *MFA Handbook*:

Students will:

- move toward a sophisticated knowledge of revision and the craft of nonfiction applicable to the participation in workshop;
- gain a greater understanding of their own strengths and areas for improvement;
- receive advice and instruction on the professional aspects of publishing the work and/or selections from it.

Classroom Etiquette:

Drinks are fine, but no food. And remember that during class discussions, respect is key: turn your cell phones off; do not whisper to others while classmates are trying to articulate their ideas; do not say things during workshop such as, “I wouldn’t read this except that I had to.” Consider it your job to find a more tactful—and insightful—way to communicate your reading experience to others and to articulate issues of craft. To say something along the lines of “this piece doesn’t work for me” is a shallow, empty phrase; instead, consider how *you* can work for the piece, aiming to understand its embryonic ambitions and help the writer forge ahead.

MFA Program Etiquette:

You are strongly encouraged to attend as many events in the Creative Writing Reading Series as possible as well as your peers’ readings (which are a great way to hear work in progress—the stories, essays, and poems that you will, ideally, soon see in print). If you’re reading this semester, remember to stay under your time limit. Same goes for introductions: those that are long, however charming, tax the patience of your audience. Don’t miss the Afternoon Craft Conversations, either, since these are your chances to hear writers discuss many of the issues you are now facing or will soon face in your writing lives.

Special Considerations:

Student Disability Services extends reasonable and appropriate accommodations that take into account the context of the course and its essential elements, for individuals with qualifying disabilities. Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact the Student Disability Services Coordinator at (925) 631-4164 to set up a confidential appointment to discuss accommodation guidelines and available services. Additional information regarding the services available may be found at the following address on the Saint Mary’s website: <http://www.stmarys-ca.edu/academics/academic-advising-and-achievement/student-disability-services.html>

If you have any concerns that require special consideration such as physical disabilities, please see me as soon as possible so we can make the appropriate arrangements.

Words to Write By:

“There’s only humility. That’s my view of writing.” —Ha Jin