**Spring 2013**  
**ENGLISH 102—CREATIVE WRITING**

**Mythical Pictures:**  
**Autobiography Distilled**  
**Tuesdays & Thursdays 4:30 to 6 p.m.**  
**Class Location: TBA**

**Description:** Any given moment—no matter how casual, how ordinary—is poised, full of gaping life.” So says a character in the novel *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels. And is with this understanding—of the fullness of small moments—that we will approach the task of this personal writing course: to distill on the page particular moments from our lives—moments experienced, observed, imagined, and misunderstood. We will look to practitioners of the form for inspiration, studying texts by such writers as Jo Ann Beard, Joan Didion, and Nick Flynn to learn about craft: how to shape narrative time, for instance, turning decades into pages, years into paragraphs, and moments into scenes; how to modulate our voices on the page; how to move between showing (scene) and telling (exposition) or how to braid a story of action with a story of thought, all in service of creating a rich experience for readers.

In workshop, we will engage one another’s pieces with the motive of providing—and receiving—constructive criticism, the kind that draws a writer toward purposeful revision. By the end of the semester, students will not only have a better understanding of specific writing techniques and a fuller appreciation of the personal essay as a literary form—what Phillip Lopate called “the genre of littleness”—but a sense of discovery about the way writing can teach us things about ourselves that we didn’t know before.

As Stuart Dybeck writes: “It’s only a relatively few moments that we get to keep and carry with us for the rest of our lives. Those moments are our lives. Or maybe it’s more like those moments are the dots and what we call our lives are the lines we draw between them, connecting them into imaginary pictures of ourselves. You know? Like those mythical pictures of constellations traced between stars.”

Assignments will include a series of short writing exercises, two critical essays, two workshop drafts, and a final portfolio of creative work.

**Required Texts:** *(Available at the Saint Mary’s Bookstore)*

-- *In Brief: Short Takes on the Personal* edited by Judith Kitchen
-- *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination* by Elizabeth McCracken
-- *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* by Nick Flynn
**Major Assignments:** You will be asked to write short exercises during the first few weeks of the course (which will not be graded), then expand two of them (or write something new) for the purposes of workshopping with your peers. You will revise the workshop pieces based on the feedback you receive and turn those in as part of your final project of creative work. The final portfolio will be graded according to how well you revise and improve the work.

You will also be asked to write two short critical essays, using our READING QUESTIONS as a way of examining specific issues of craft.

All work for this course should be typed and double-spaced. You should proofread all of your work before turning it in. Late work will be penalized. See the GRADE CHECKLIST for details of the major assignments and evaluation process.

**Learning Objectives:** As a core course for Artistic Understanding, by the end of the term, students should be better equipped to:

* Read works of published work to develop an appreciation for the genre of personal essay/memoir and an understanding of its complexities.

* Analyze/interpret form and meaning by writing two short critical papers analyzing how published writers employ the techniques studied in class. These critical writing assignments require students to demonstrate their understanding by citing specific examples from the texts and explaining these examples using the technical vocabulary introduced in the course.

* Apply discipline-based vocabulary in writing critical craft essays (described above), discussing peers' work in workshops as well as the published works of writers in the genre, and in composing an endnote to their Creative Writing Final Portfolio, explaining the decisions made for their own revised work using this established vocabulary.

* Explore the artistic significance of a piece of nonfiction within the context of craft, or better understanding how a given piece of writing works—how it was crafted or put together and to what effect.

* Participate in the creative process through writing exercises attending to issues of craft and critiquing one another's work (in writing) in workshop.

* Produce an artifact appropriate to the discipline--a Final Portfolio of creative nonfiction, including significantly revised work (12 to 20 pages, typed and double-spaced).

**Attendance:** Attendance for this course means attending in both body and spirit. You will be counted as absent if:

* you are ten minutes late to class;
* you fall asleep during class;
* you repeatedly leave class;
* you text or use your cell phone during class;
* you do not bring the required text to class;
* you have not done the assigned reading.

Saint Mary’s attendance policy stipulates that students are allowed to miss two class periods without penalty. Save these to use when you are sick or have an emergency. Three absences will lower your grade in that area of the course; missing more than seven class sessions for whatever reason will result in a failing grade overall. (No distinction is made between “excused” absences and “unexcused” absences.) If you know you will be missing a class in advance, please see me to make arrangements. If an unavoidable problem comes up that prevents you from attending class, please contact the professor afterward (preferably by email) to find out what you missed so that by the next session you will be back on track. It is your responsibility to obtain all class materials when you are absent. You are also required to attend two readings in the Creative Writing Reading Series as if they were class sessions. (See schedule for details.)

**Academic Integrity:** 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. All written work submitted in this course is expected to be original to you, to this course, and generated from the assignments given. That means you may not turn in an essay or story that you wrote or are writing now for another class.

**Etiquette:** Typically, class discussions based on readings will be run seminar-style, meaning you needn’t raise your hand when you want to make a comment or ask a question but you should plan to contribute each day and to listen attentively. Please avoid a thumbs-up or thumbs-down approach to reading: “I really like this essay” or “I hate this essay.” We will be reading to try to understand each piece on its terms and then to abstract out lessons in craft so that we might imitate or borrow from these strategies we observe. To that end, whether we like an essay or don’t is of less importance than our devotion to careful and thoughtful interpretations and--this is the important part--attention to issues of craft and strategy. How is the given piece working? In what way does the writer negotiate real time? How would you describe the writer's voice? How are characters rendered? Through physical detail? Dialogue? Reactions from others? This is especially important since we will, in workshops, be talking about autobiographical work—work that springs directly from one another’s lives. These stories exposed for critique are part of people’s lives so it’s vital that we, as respondents, use respectful language that is not judgmental of the writer-narrator's experience per se but instead attempts to describe the piece through the language of craft, which is a way of providing us with critical distance so we can comment more on form (and make suggestions for revisions). Put simply: we will focus on how work is presented more than what the writer's ostensible subject is, though form and content cannot (and, some of us believe, should not) be separated entirely.

We are part of a community in this classroom. Though we won’t—and shouldn’t!—agree, respect at every level is key. Do not whisper to the person next to you or engage
in side conversations of any kind. Aim to converse rather than deliver a monologue. That means listening to what others are saying and trying to respond—sometimes by asking clarifying questions; sometimes by countering; sometimes by adding—in a collegial way.

In terms of out-of-class communication: when you make an appointment with your professor or teaching intern, please be respectful. If you need to cancel, let him or her know in advance. And in corresponding via email, be sure to treat the email note as a letter, addressing your professor or graduate intern by name (first names are fine!) and signing your note with your name (first and last to avoid potential confusion) and the course (English 102).

Avoid comments about this class on Facebook. (Consider this course your “job” and as such, something that demands professionalism and restraint.) Also, to keep our class running smoothly (and focused on literary texts), please observe the following rules:

* No food. (Drinks are OK.)
* No texting in class.
* No cell phones.
* No getting up and leaving repeatedly.
* No sleeping.

**The Writing Center:** Students of all disciplines and levels are welcome to drop in or make appointments for free, one-on-one sessions with Writing Advisers in Dante 202. The phone number of the writing center is 925.631.4684. **Writers also are welcome to request weekly sessions.** Through collaborative engagement, Writing Advisers guide peer student writers to express their ideas clearly and to revise their own work with an eye toward reaching an audience. To that end, student-writers should bring their assignments, texts, and related material.

**Special Accommodations:** 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 May’s website: [http://www.stmarys-ca.edu/academics/academic-advising-and-achievement/student-disability-services.html](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.

**Office Hours:**

Marilyn Abildskov
333 Dante
1-2 p.m. Tuesdays and by appointment
**Words to write by:**

“Art is first nothing, then something.” —William Stafford

“Can it be that I am the subject?” —Elizabeth Hardwick

“Ninety percent of success is showing up.” —Woody Allen
English 102
Spring 2013

ENGLISH 102
READING & WRITING SCHEDULE

Tuesday, February 12:
“Bread” by Sandra Cisneros (handout)
“Kissing” by Mark Salzman (handout)

Thursday, February 14:
From In Brief: “Rhapsody in Green” by Marjorie Sandor, p. 27
“The Problem of Describing Color” by Robert Hass (handout)

Creative Writing Exercise #1 due: 3-5 pages

Tuesday, February 19:
From In Brief: “On the Street” by Vivian Gornick, p. 205
“Goodbye to All That” by Joan Didion (handout)

Wednesday, February 20: OPTIONAL ATTENDANCE
CREATIVE WRITING READING SERIES:
KAZIM ALI, SODA CENTER, 7 P.M.

Thursday, February 21:
From In Brief: “January 13” by Rick Bass, p. 224
“Clip from a Winter Diary” by Kelly Cunnane, p. 132
Selections from A Pillow Book by Sei Shonogan (handout)

Creative Writing Exercise #2 due: 3-5 pages

Tuesday, February 26:
From In Brief: “Considering the Lilies” by Rebecca McClanahan, p. 182
“How to Tell One Bird from the Next” by Cecile Goding, p. 151
“The Weather of Distance” by M.J. Iuppa, p. 264

Critical Essay #1 due: 3-5 pages

Thursday, February 28:
From In Brief: “Nearing 90” by William Maxwell, p. 65
“Turning Twenty-Nine” by Beth Ann Fennelly (handout)

Workshop Draft due: 4-6 pages

Tuesday, March 5: WORKSHOPPING

Thursday, March 7: WORKSHOPPING
Tuesday, March 12: WORKSHOPPING

Thursday, March 14: WORKSHOPPING

Tuesday, March 19: WORKSHOPPING

Wednesday, March 20: OPTIONAL ATTENDANCE

CREATIVE WRITING READING SERIES: LOU BERNEY, SODA CENTER, 7 P.M.

MARCH 23-APRIL 1: EASTER BREAK

Tuesday, April 2:
From In Brief: “Two Hearts” by Brian Doyle, p. 249
“Remembering, I Was Not There” by Anne Panning, p. 54
“The Bend From Home” by Dermot Healy, p. 47

Thursday, April 4:
*An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination* by Elizabeth McCracken

Tuesday, April 9:
*An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination* by Elizabeth McCracken

WORKSHOP DRAFT DUE: 4-6 PAGES

Thursday, April 11: WORKSHOPPING

Tuesday, April 16: WORKSHOPPING

Wednesday, April 17: REQUIRED ATTENDANCE

CREATIVE WRITING READING SERIES: SUSAN GRIFFIN, SODA CENTER, 7 P.M.

Thursday, April 18: WORKSHOPPING

Tuesday, April 23: WORKSHOPPING

Thursday, April 25: WORKSHOPPING

Tuesday, April 30: WORKSHOPPING

Thursday, May 2:
"The Fourth State of Matter" by JoAnn Beard (handout)

Tuesday, May 7:
*Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* by Nick Flynn
Wednesday, May 8: OPTIONAL ATTENDANCE

CREATIVE WRITING READING SERIES:
CHRISTOPHER SINDT AND BRETT FLETCHER LAUER,
SODA CENTER, 7 P.M.

Thursday, May 9:
Another Bullshit Night in Suck City by Nick Flynn

Tuesday, May 14:
Another Bullshit Night in Suck City by Nick Flynn

Thursday, May 16: EVALS / CLASS READING

Critical Essay #2 due: 3-5 pages

Monday, May 20:
CREATIVE WRITING PORTFOLIO DUE: 10-20 PAGES
DUE BY 11 A.M. VIA EMAIL: mabildsk@stmarys-ca.edu
GRADE CHECKLIST

ATTENDANCE:  (10 percent): __________

0-2 absences = A
3 absences = B+
4 absences = B
5 absences = C
6 absences = D
7 or more = F in the course overall

Oral Participation: (10 percent): __________

Critical Essays:

Critical Essay #1 (10 percent): __________
Critical Essay #2 (10 percent): __________

Workshop critiques to peers: (10 percent): __________

Creative Work:

Creative Writing Exercises (10 percent) __________
Workshop Draft #1: (10 percent): __________
Workshop Draft #2: (10 percent): __________
Final Creative Writing Portfolio (20 percent): __________

FINAL GRADE:

__________
**Basis of Grading:**

* Attendance:
Attendance for this course means attending in both body and spirit. You will be counted as absent if: you are ten minutes late to class; you fall asleep during class; you repeatedly leave class (except during our break); you text or use your cell phone during class; you do not bring the required text to class; you have not done the assigned reading.

Missing more than seven class sessions for whatever reason will result in a failing grade in this course overall. (No distinction is made between “excused” absences and “unexcused” absences.) If you know you will be missing a class in advance, please see me to make arrangements. If an unavoidable problem comes up that prevents you from attending class, please contact the professor afterward (preferably by email) to find out what you missed so that by the next session you will be back on track. (If you are unprepared for the session following an absence, you will be counted as absent for that day as well.) It is your responsibility to obtain all class materials when you are absent.

You are also required to attend two Wednesday-night on-campus readings in the Creative Writing Reading Series, one by Samina Ali, the other by Wesley Gibson.

* Participation:
Your participation will be based on the quality and quantity of your responses during each day’s discussion—evidence of your preparation and the thoughtfulness of your questions and comments as well as your written comments to peers for workshop. See Oral Participation grading standards (based on those used in Seminar) for details.

* Critical Essays:
Critical essays will be graded according to the Seminar Program’s Grading Standards. (See rubric attached.) These essays should respond to specific craft questions, as outlined in the assignments, and should reflect an understanding of what insights close reading can yield.

* Creative Writing Exercises:
There is ample room for experimentation in your early creative writing exercises for this course. You will be graded on whether your efforts reflect attention to the prompts and your manuscripts are free of typos and whether you have turned the work in on time and followed all directions.

* Workshop Drafts / Critiques:
Your workshop drafts will not be graded on quality since this is a chance for you to experiment. But it must follow directions for the assignment (including things like numbering and stapling your pages and giving your piece a title) and they must demonstrate careful proofreading. Those that have typos or do not follow the housekeeping details of the assignment, or arrive late will receive lower grades.
Workshop critiques to peers are due on the day of the workshop and should be typed, single-spaced, and in the form of a letter to the writer. One copy should go to the student-writer; one copy to the instructor. Critiques should be honest but tactful, focusing on craft issues as a way of offering advice for revision.

Although critiques to peers account for only 10 percent of your final grade, there is the following stipulation: To receive a C or above in this course, you must turn in all workshop critiques to your peers. That means if you miss a single critique, you will receive a C- or lower in the course overall. Critiques will be evaluated according to their thoroughness and completeness and thoughtfulness. Late critiques are automatically graded down.

* Final Portfolio:
You are strongly encouraged to experiment throughout the semester and then to revise with purpose. The work you present in your Final Portfolio will be graded on how well you have improved or revised it from its earlier draft form and how well the new work exhibits an understanding of the strategies of craft we have discussed all semester.

Again, the housekeeping details also matter: whether you turn the work in on time; whether your work is free of mechanical and grammatical glitches—misspellings; comma splices, etc.

Here’s a specific breakdown:

D=Final draft differs little from the original exercise. There are no significant additions, subtractions, rearrangements and no evidence that the writer has applied the techniques presented in class.

C=Final draft shows some development compared with the first. However, changes have been smoothly integrated to make a coherent whole. In addition, the piece may suffer serious mechanical errors and some cliché language.

B=Final draft shows significant development from original exercise by the addition or deletion or rearrangement of material. The writer has consciously applied lessons and techniques from class.

A=The final draft leaves little room for improvement because the writer has used techniques from class, taken significant risk, found fresh language to communicate his or her ideas and followed the initial idea beyond the obvious.