

EngW 8130: Seminar: Writing of Literary Nonfiction: Bodies in Place

W, 3:35-6:05 pm
Lind Hall 202
4 credits
Spring 2009
Class #58986

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Office Hours: MW, 10-11:15 am

Course Description

Focused on "Bodies in Place," this seminar will explore the vibrant literary landscape in contemporary nonfiction that addresses the connection between human bodies and their increasingly threatened, degraded, and transformed nonhuman environments. We will take an expansive view of what constitutes "environmental" writing, examining texts that feature bodies engaged in eating, working, childbearing and other physical acts, as well as the places in which these acts occur. In the process, we will also consider the generic fluidity of such writing and the wide variety of forms in which it occurs, including literary journalism, memoir and autobiography, nature and science writing, food and travel writing, and the personal essay. Throughout the course we will be engaged in a balancing act, seeking to pay equal attention to the subjects these authors address and to the techniques they use to address them. Likewise, we will attempt to balance our reading and discussion of these texts with reading and discussion of our own works, with the goal being the production of a publishable piece of literary nonfiction that engages our course themes by the end of the term. We will read and discuss books by Michael Pollan, Sandra Steingraber, and Scott Russell Sanders; shorter pieces many other writers; and some sample essays from a forthcoming collection of personal reflections on Minnesota's environment.

Course Web Site

<http://www.moodle.umn.edu/>

Objectives

What questions will the course help you to answer? How will you grow in knowledge and understanding? What intellectual abilities will the course help you to develop?

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- understand writing as a form of critical thinking, responding to a rhetorical situation, and expressing your creative vision
- appreciate that writing is a complex process of brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading
- recognize and manipulate the components of literary nonfiction, including genre, structure, description, characterization, scene, voice, point of view, rhythm, and tone
- integrate your ideas with those of others through summary, quotation, and response
- collaborate with others to craft and critique works of literary nonfiction

Texts

What reading materials will help you to pursue the goals of this course?

There are five required textbooks for this course:

- Mark Tredinnick. Writing Well: The Essential Guide. New York: Cambridge UP, 2008. ISBN-13: 978-0-521-72768-6. \$16.99.
- Robert Root, ed. Landscapes with Figures: The Nonfiction of Place. Lincoln: Nebraska, 2007. ISBN-13: 978-0-8032-5983-6.
- Michael Pollan. The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals. New York: Penguin, 2007. ISBN-13: 978-0143038580. \$16.00.
- Sandra Steingraber. Having Faith: An Ecologist's Journey to Motherhood. New York: Berkley, 2003. ISBN: 0-425-18999-6. \$15.00.
- Scott Russell Sanders. Hunting For Hope: A Father's Journeys. Boston: Beacon, 1998. ISBN: 0-8070-6425-4. \$15.00.

We may also be reading a few additional articles, which will be available on our web site, listed above.

Grades

How will I evaluate the nature, quality, and progress of your learning?

I will award grades in this course according to the University of Minnesota's Uniform Grading Policy:

- A: achievement that is outstanding relative to the level necessary to meet course requirements
- B: achievement that is significantly above the level necessary to meet course requirements
- C: achievement that meets the course requirements in every respect
- D: achievement that is worthy of credit even though it fails to meet fully the course requirements
- F: represents failure and signifies that the work was either:
 - completed but at a level of achievement that is not worthy of credit, or
 - not completed and there was no agreement between the instructor and the student that the student would be awarded an "I" (Incomplete)

I will also award pluses and minuses, with the highest possible grade being an "A." Grades of "A," "B," "C" (including "C-") may be applied to a Graduate School degree program.

I will assign an "I" (Incomplete) only when a written agreement exists specifying when the work of the course will be completed. In most cases, the deadline for completion will be the beginning of the following semester; only in extraordinary circumstances will the deadline extend beyond this. If a student receiving an incomplete has not successfully completed the work of the course after one year, I will replace the "I" with a final A-F grade.

Grades will be assigned in terms of a percentage of possible points according to the following standards:

	B+ >= 87%	C+ >= 77%	D+ >= 67%		
A >= 93%	B >= 83%	C >= 73%	D >= 63%	F < 63%	
A- >= 90%	B- >= 80%	C- >= 70%			

I may choose to grade more generously, but I will not raise my standards above these. If at any time you have concerns about your grade, please do not hesitate to contact me. All grades are based on the quality of work submitted, not on hours of effort.

University Policies

What University policies apply to this course so that you will have a safe, productive, and fair environment for learning?

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment by or toward a member of the University community is prohibited by Board of Regents policy. Complaints about sexual harassment should be reported to the University's Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action, 419 Morrill Hall.

Classroom Conduct

All students at the University have the right to a civil, productive, and stimulating learning environment. In turn, instructors have a responsibility to nurture and maintain such an environment. Lively, even heated, discussion is not disruptive behavior. Both instructors and students have a fundamental obligation to respect the rights of each other and an equally fundamental obligation to respect the instructional setting as a place for civil, courteous behavior. Students who disrupt the educational process because of discourteous, threatening, harassing, or other aggressive behavior will be removed from class.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

It is University policy to provide, on a flexible and individualized basis, reasonable accommodations to students who have disabilities that may affect their ability to participate in course activities or to meet course requirements. If you have a disability, please contact me and/or Disability Services (180 McNamara Alumni Center, [612] 626-1333 TTY/voice) to schedule an appointment with a Specialist. All requests will remain confidential. This syllabus is available in alternative formats upon request.

Student Academic Integrity and Scholastic Dishonesty

Academic integrity is essential to a positive teaching and learning environment. All students enrolled in University courses are expected to complete coursework responsibilities with fairness and honesty.

Failure to do so by seeking unfair advantage over others or misrepresenting someone else's work as your own can result in disciplinary action. Any student found guilty of scholastic dishonesty in this course can be assigned a penalty up to and including an "F" or "N" for the course and be reported to the University's Office for Student Academic Integrity. If you have any questions regarding the expectations for a specific assignment or exam, please ask.

Course Requirements

What will you be doing to pursue the goals of this course?

To succeed in this course, you must complete the following requirements, which are worth a total of 1,000 possible points. For more information on this point system, see the section on grades.

1. Attendance and Participation (100 points): The word "seminar" derives from the Latin *seminarium*, or "seed plot," a place or thing in which something is developed or cultivated. For all of us to develop our knowledge and skills with regard to our subject will require equal amounts of independent study and collaborative learning. Each week we will assemble for 2-½ hours (with a 15-minute break), bringing with us the results of our independent reading, thinking, and writing. Even more than other kinds of courses, seminars are intended to be places where everyone works together to broaden our knowledge and deepen our skills. As a result, I expect only the best of what you have to offer. Your mind, your courtesies, and your sense of humor should all be operating in top form. Your regular attendance and active participation are, therefore, required. If you know in advance that you are going to be absent on a particular day, please let me know.

To help us get started, I would like you to submit a writer's autobiography of 600-900 words (approximately 2-3 pages), explaining who you are, where you've been, and where you're going. I am particularly interested in the intersection of your physical travels with your literary and intellectual ones. Please also explain your expectations for this class and how we can all help you fulfill them. Use this as an opportunity not only to enlighten us about your personal story but also to establish your own focus for the semester. Please post your autobiography on the appropriate "Discussion Forum" on our Moodle site by 9 a.m. on 1/27 (Tuesday). It will not be graded, but its submission will count toward your attendance and participation score.

I may also give occasional quizzes over the course of the semester as needed, which will likewise count toward your attendance and participation score.

2. Reading Responses (150 points): Another important part of this course is the series of six reading responses you will write over the course of the term, in response to our three major course texts. These responses will allow you share your written thoughts with other students in the class, and they could also help you to develop one or more of your papers.

Each response should be 300-600 words long (approximately 1-2 pages) and should be a thoughtful, considered reaction to the text we are reading for that week. Your reading responses should be based primarily on your own attention to and engagement with the texts, but I also encourage you to engage the responses of other students by posting follow-up responses.

Reading responses should be submitted to the appropriate "Discussion Forum" section of our Moodle site by 9 a.m. on the days listed on the course schedule. Because we all need time to read and process these responses before class, late and missing responses will receive no credit. Please plan your reading accordingly. At the end of the semester, I will grade your responses according to the following scale:

- A: frequent and courteous participation, with mature and thoughtful insights
- B: above average participation and insight
- C: moderate participation and reasonable insight

3. Leading Discussion (50 points): For one class meeting, I would like you to be the "point person" for the text(s) assigned for that day. This means that you should pay particular attention to the reading and be prepared to provide some insight and commentary about it for 10-15 minutes at the start of class.

4. Attendance at a Reading or Literary Event (100 points)

At some point during the semester, I would like you to attend a reading or literary event, so that you can hear an author or literary/cultural critic in person, have the chance to ask this person questions, and participate in the broader conversation about books and ideas that extends beyond our classroom. After you attend this event, I would like you to write 600-900 words (approximately 2-3 pages) about your experience, the reading or event itself, the ideas discussed, and the manner in which they were addressed

and post your response on the appropriate "Discussion Forum" section of our Moodle site. Links to several calendars of literary events may be found on the site as well.

5. Papers (200 points each)

To help you develop your skills as a writer, I would like you to write three essays in draft and revision: a work of literary journalism, a memoir, and a personal essay. Specific assignments will be given out in class. Drafts of these will be read by the whole class, commented upon in detail by 2-3 members of your peer-response group, and (if time allows) discussed by the whole class in workshop. Revisions will be due two weeks after the drafts, although you may certainly turn them in before then if you wish. We will discuss the problems and challenges of evaluating creative writing in class.

Papers

How should you write and format your papers?

I expect your writing to be nothing less than a model of clarity and grace. This includes both online submissions and printed papers. All printed papers must be written on a word processor, proofread, and spellchecked. Pages should be double-spaced with one-inch margins, numbered in the upper right-hand corner, and stapled in the upper left-hand corner. Your name, the course number, my name, and the date should appear at the top left of the first page, and the title should be centered on the next line. Do not include a separate title page. Please keep a copy of everything you write. I also encourage you to print your papers on the reverse sides of previously used, recycled paper.

Contact Me

How can you contact me to help you learn?

The best way to contact me is immediately after class; I would be happy to meet with you briefly to answer a question or to elaborate on a point made in class. To contact me at other times, feel free to call me at my office, send me email, or stop by during my office hours. If my office hours are inconvenient for you, please let me know, and we can arrange to meet at another time. Even if you do not have a specific question, I encourage you to stop by my office at some point during the semester, so that I can get to know you better as a person and so that we can talk in more detail about the subjects that interest you. The main reason I am here is to help you learn and grow, so please take advantage of this opportunity and come see me. **My contact information appears at the top of this syllabus.**

Course Schedule

How is this course structured to develop your knowledge, understanding, and abilities throughout the semester?

This schedule is subject to change, so if you miss a class you should check with a classmate for the most current information. Lecture notes, handouts, and additional readings will be available on our web site.

1. Introduction to Literary Nonfiction

1/21 **Welcome**

1/28 **Literary Nonfiction: Bodies in Place**

Read: Mark Tredinnick, *Writing Well*, prologue, chapters 1 and 4
Landscapes with Figures: Robert Root (Introduction) and Kim Barnes

Due: Writer's Autobiography

Discussion Leader:

2. Food Journalism

2/4 **Reading**

Read: Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, chapters 1-10

Due: Reading Response #1 by 9 a.m. on 2/3

Discussion Leader:

- 2/11 **Reading**
 Read: Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, chapters 11-20
 Due: Reading Response #2 by 9 a.m. on 2/10
 Discussion Leader:
- 2/18 **Reading and Writing**
 Read: *Landscapes with Figures*: Alison Deming, Elizabeth Dodd, David Gessner, Barbara Hurd
 Due: Draft of Literary Journalism Essay
 Discussion Leader:
- 2/25 **Reading and Workshopping**
 Read: Everyone's work, plus Tredinnick, *Writing Well*, chapter 2
 Due: Written responses for members of your peer-response group

3. Science Memoir

- 3/4 **Reading**
 Read: Sandra Steingraber, *Having Faith*, chapters 1-7
 Due: Reading Response #3 by 9 a.m. on 3/3
 Discussion Leader:
- 3/11 **Reading**
 Read: Sandra Steingraber, *Having Faith*, chapter 8-afterword
 Due: Reading Response #4 by 9 a.m. on 3/10, revision of Literary Journalism Essay
 Discussion Leader:
- 3/18 **Spring Break**
- 3/25 **Reading and Writing**
 Read: *Landscapes with Figures*: Lisa Knopp, J. H. Mitchell, Simone Poirier-Bures, Robert Root
 Due: Draft of Memoir Essay
 Discussion Leader:
- 4/1 **Reading and Workshopping**
 Read: Everyone's work, plus Tredinnick, *Writing Well*, chapter 3
 Due: Written responses for members of your peer-response group

4. Personal Essay of Place

- 4/8 **Reading**
 Read: Scott Russell Sanders, *Hunting for Hope*, chapters 1-8
 Due: Reading Response #5 by 9 a.m. on 4/7
 Discussion Leader:
- 4/15 **Reading**
 Read: Scott Russell Sanders, *Hunting for Hope*, chapters 9-15
 Due: Reading Response #6 by 9 a.m. on 4/14, revision of Memoir essay
 Discussion Leader:
- 4/22 **Reading and Writing**
 Read: *Landscapes with Figures*: Scott Russell Sanders, Reg Saner, Natalia Singer, Deborah Tall
 Due: Draft of Personal Essay
 Discussion Leader:
- 4/29 **Reading and Workshopping**
 Read: Everyone's work, plus Tredinnick, *Writing Well*, chapters 5-6, epilogue
 Due: Written responses for members of your peer-response group
- 5/6 **Last class**
 5/13 Due: Revision of Personal Essay