

EngW 5106: Advanced Nonfiction Workshop

Th, 3:35-6:05 pm
Lind Hall 207A
4 credits
Fall 2010
Class #24907

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Office Hours: Tu/Th, 10-11:30 am

Course Description

This is an advanced workshop for graduate students and upper-level undergraduates who have considerable experience in writing literary nonfiction. We will focus our attention on three forms of nonfiction writing: memoir, essay, and writing about society. Students will read and discuss a book written in each of these forms, as well as several other short pieces of creative nonfiction and a handbook to the genre. While our principal concern will be the writer's craft, we will also spend some time addressing the subjects these writers address and the role of audience and context in the creation and reception of literary nonfiction. Requirements include attendance and participation (including providing written comments on student work and participating in workshops), a writer's autobiography, several short reading responses, leading discussion, attendance at a reading or literary event, and three 10-page works of creative nonfiction (or their equivalent) in draft and revision. This term our texts will explore place, race, and animals: Janisse Ray's Ecology of a Cracker Childhood, Eula Biss's Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays, and Jonathan Safran Foer's Eating Animals. Our handbook will be Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola's Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction. Eula Biss will also visit our class in November.

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 four required textbooks for this course:

- Janisse Ray, Ecology of a Cracker Childhood (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2000), ISBN: 9781571312471, \$14.95.
- Eula Biss, Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2009), ISBN: 9781555975180, \$14.50.
- Jonathan Safran Foer, Eating Animals (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2010), ISBN: 9780316069885, \$14.99.
- Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola, Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), ISBN: 9780071444941, \$15.45.

We will also be reading a number of additional articles that will be available on our course web site.

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:

A >= 93%	B+ >= 87%	C+ >= 77%	D+ >= 67%	
A- >= 90%	B >= 83%	C >= 73%	D >= 63%	F < 63%
	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): A successful writing workshop requires intensive student involvement, with everyone working together to broaden our knowledge and deepen our skills. As a result, your regular attendance and active participation are essential. For this reason, and because we meet only once a week, more than one unexcused absence will seriously affect your grade in this portion of the course. (A pattern of unexcused absences is cause for a grade of "F" or "N" in the entire course.) If you know in advance that you are going to be absent on a particular day, please let me know. Please also make a special effort not to miss any workshop days, as your presence is vital to their success. You are also responsible for documenting the legitimacy of any absence. Legitimate reasons for absence include:

- illnesses certified by Boynton Health Service or your family physician
- emergencies caused by a death or serious illness in your immediate family
- participation in intercollegiate athletic events or other group activities sponsored by the University
- subpoenas, jury duty, military service, and religious observances

Throughout the semester, we will assemble each week for 2-½ hours (with a 15-minute break), bringing with us the results of our independent reading, thinking, and writing. As we do so, we will also get to know each other's ideas, personalities, and foibles—both in writing and in person. To make the most of our time together, therefore, I expect only the best of what you have to offer. Your mind, your courtesy, and your sense of humor should all be operating in top form. In return, I will always begin and end class on time, will place any lecture notes online as soon as possible after the end of class, and will make myself available to answer your questions and discuss your concerns before and after class, whenever possible, in addition to during my office hours.

I will evaluate your class participation using 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

Halfway through the semester, I will ask you to evaluate your own class participation using this scale, as well as identify what can you do to improve. At the end of the semester, I will ask you to evaluate yourself again, as well as indicate what have you done to improve since mid-semester. I will then take this final evaluation into account when assigning grades in this portion of the course. To receive the full 100 points for attendance and participation, therefore, you should read the assigned texts carefully, attend the class meetings conscientiously, and participate actively in class discussions and other in-class writing assignments.

To help us get started, I would like you to submit a writer's autobiography of 600-900 words (approximately 2-3 pages). You may write this in any way you see fit, but here are three questions to consider as you begin:

- what adjectives would you use to describe yourself as a writer?
- what different kinds of writing have you done over your school and professional life?
- what types / pieces of writing have you found to be especially satisfying or difficult?

As you consider these questions, give some thought to who you are, where you've been, and where you're going, both as a writer and a person. 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 as a Word attachment on the appropriate "Discussion Forum" on our Moodle site by 9 a.m. on 9/14 (Tuesday), so we all have time to read it before class. In addition, please also post a short piece of nonfiction writing (anywhere from 2-10 pages or so) so that we can all get a sense of each other as writers. This writing sample can be any piece of writing at all, published or unpublished; it may be something of which you are proud or something on which you are still working. In the body of your post, please briefly explain the context for the piece, so we will know how to read it. Neither of these pieces will be graded or formally workshopped, but their submission will count toward your attendance and participation score.

2. Reading Responses (100 points): Another important part of this course is the series of five 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 same scale I use to judge your class participation (see page three). I will also give you feedback about them as needed.

3. Leading Discussion (50 points): For two class meetings, I would like you to work with other students to lead class discussion of 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. This assignment will help you get to know another student in the class, learn how to collaborate effectively, and practice your public speaking skills. You will be responsible for leading discussion on two different days: a day when we are reading one of our three major course texts and a day when we are reading a short piece of literary nonfiction of your choice. You and your partner should consult with me ahead of time for suggestions about how to prepare your presentation. Each of your presentations will count for 25 points, which will be awarded on a pass-fail basis.

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 our Moodle site.

5. Papers (200 points each): To help you develop your skills as a writer, I would like you to write three 10-page works of creative nonfiction (or their equivalent) in draft and revision: a memoir, a personal essay, and a piece of writing about society. Specific assignments will be given out in class. Drafts of these will be read by the whole class, commented upon in detail by 3-4 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 turn them in before then if you wish.

Recognizing that this course will function as a writing workshop, I nonetheless expect your writing to be as thoughtful, deliberate and intentional as you can make it. You should strive for originality over cliché and clarity over confusion. Your work should also be free of errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. We will discuss the problems and challenges of evaluating creative writing in class, but here are my general criteria:

- A: original, purposeful, clear, coherent, skillful, error-free (or almost)
- B: thoughtful, inspired, and complete, but with some stylistic weaknesses
- C: sufficient but somewhat unimaginative, with notable stylistic and mechanical errors
- D-F: unoriginal, incomplete, unclear, incoherent, poorly written, with numerous errors

Papers 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, for submission as part of a final portfolio. I also encourage you to print your papers on the reverse sides of previously used, recycled paper.

6. Workshops and Peer Editing Groups (50 points): The final requirement of this course is your participation in the workshops and peer-editing groups, in which you will read and comment on the writing of other students, as well as receive valuable feedback about your own writing. You may also need to meet one or more writing partners outside of class, either in addition to or in place of one or more class sessions. At the end of the semester, I will grade your participation in these groups according to the same scale I use to judge your class participation (see page three).

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.

9/9 **Welcome**

1. Memoir

9/16 **Reading (meet in Lind 202)**

Read: Miller and Paola, Tell It Slant, introduction, chapters 1-4; Janisse Ray, Ecology of a Cracker Childhood, pp. 1-69

Due: Writer's Autobiography and Writing Sample

9/23 **Reading**

Read: Janisse Ray, Ecology of a Cracker Childhood, pp. 71-285

Due: Reading Response #1 by 9 a.m.

Discussion Leaders: Kerry Voigt and Kate Johnston

9/30 **Reading and Writing (meet in Lind 202)**

Read: Miller and Paola, Tell It Slant, chapters 12-14, plus student choice

Due: Draft of Memoir

Discussion Leaders: Lucy Saliger and Amir Hussain

- 10/7 **Reading and Workshopping**
 Read: Everyone's work
 Due: Written responses for members of your peer-response group

2. Personal Essay

- 10/14 **Reading**
 Read: Eula Biss, Notes from No Man's Land, pp. 1-114
 Due: Reading Response #2 by 9 a.m.
 Discussion Leaders: Kelley Kassera and Amir Hussain
- 10/21 **Reading (meet in Lind 202)**
 Read: Eula Biss, Notes from No Man's Land, pp. 115-230
 Due: Reading Response #3 by 9 a.m., revision of Memoir
 Discussion Leaders: Sally Franson and Isaac Butler
 Note: James Salter lecture is next Wed., 10/27, at 7:30 pm in Coffman Theatre
- 10/28 **Reading and Writing**
 Read: Miller and Paola, Tell It Slant, chapters 8-10, plus student choice
 Due: Draft of Personal Essay
 Discussion Leaders: Kerry Voigt, Sally Franson, and Ying Huang
 Note: Eula Biss reading is next Wed., 11/3, at 7 pm in Pohlrad Hall, Mpls. Central Library
- 11/4 **Reading and Workshopping (Visit from Eula Biss, 3:35-4:35 pm)**
 Read: Everyone's work
 Due: Written responses for members of your peer-response group

3. Writing about Society

- 11/11 **Reading**
 Read: Jonathan Safran Foer, Eating Animals, pp. 1-115
 Due: Reading Response #4 by 9 a.m.
- 11/18 **Reading**
 Read: Jonathan Safran Foer, Eating Animals, pp. 116-270
 Due: Reading Response #5 by 9 a.m., revision of Personal Essay
 Discussion Leaders: Ying Huang and Lucy Saliger
- 11/25 **No class: Thanksgiving**
- 12/2 **Reading and Writing**
 Read: Miller and Paola, Tell It Slant, chapters 5-7, 11, and last words, plus student choice
 Due: Draft of Writing about Society essay
 Discussion Leaders: Kelly Kassera, Isaac Butler, and Kate Johnston
- 12/9 **Last class**
 Read: Everyone's work
 Due: Written responses for members of your peer-response group
- 12/16 **Portfolio Due**