

CREATIVE WRITING 412 FALL 2016 SEMESTER T/Th 3:30-4:50 PM

**Anderson Hall 401**

PROFESSOR: ANITA HUSLIN

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OFFICE HOURS: WED 11AM-1PM & BY APPOINTMENT\*

On its surface, "creative nonfiction" seems a bit of a misnomer; "creative" suggesting that something is made up, which would be an inherent contradiction to the claim of nonfiction. But as Oscar Wilde once said: "The truth is never pure and rarely simple."

Which is as good a way as any to step into this interrogation of forms: What makes an essay different from a profile different from a narrative, and which one is most effective at accomplishing different goals? How do facts and truth underpin all of them? We will explore various genres of writing and investigate the forms and requirements of each. Part seminar and part workshop, the work will entail reading and writing essays, narratives, profiles and other forms of storytelling.

One of the most powerful elements of this course will be sharing each others' writing - learning how to identify what works and what doesn't in a piece and to articulate these ideas both substantively and respectfully.

There will be writing exercises in the classroom aimed at developing voice and the basic elements of nonfiction, including character, plot, detail, setting, dialogue, and subtext. The essays, narratives and profiles written in and outside of class will be shared and critiqued by your peers. You will also learn how to pitch stories and by the end of the semester will have at least one piece ready to be targeted for publication.

### What We'll Read:

Required texts:

- *Pulphead: Essays*. Author: John Jeremiah Sullivan.
- *The Best American Magazine Writing 2014*. By Sid Holt, The American Society of Magazine Editors
- October issue of *Creative Nonfiction* magazine, or *The Sun*.

I will also provide (via Moodle) copies of essays and articles by a variety of writers, such as Joan Didion, Annie Dillard, Gay Talese, E.B. White, Tom Wolfe, Katherine Boo, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, Susan Sontag, David Foster Wallace, David Quammen, Sebastian Junger, Michelle Orange, Tobias Wolff, Barry Lopez, Leslie Fiedler, Eula Biss, Paul Chaat Smith, and others.

In class, I will distribute handouts on various subjects, such as pitching, narrative structures and essay elements.

### Materials You'll Need:

- A dedicated folder/notebook for in-class writing and for research/writing exercises that you will be getting as homework.
- Access to a reliable printer for copying your pieces and other reading materials to bring to class for discussions and for peer critiques.

### What You Need to Do to Get On My Good Side:

**Attend classes.**

Come to class. On time. Not 2 minutes after it starts, not 20 minutes. The beauty of this seminar/workshop is that most of what we do in this creative writing/discussion-based setting can't be replicated in notes or emails. You get one excused absence, which means you must email, call, or reach me by carrier pigeon with the request ***before you go missing***. Otherwise it's an unexcused absence, which will automatically drop your final grade one letter. More than two unexcused absences and you fail the class.

**Listen and talk.**

A workshop class is a collaborative project, in which we all need to participate in order to maximize our learning. Initiate discussion. Ask questions. Challenge me and each other. Be kind. The more you participate, the more you'll get out of it.

### **Do the work.**

Writing is how you demonstrate your learning. Engagement in class is how I know you're reading. Your notebooks with exercises and writing assignments will testify to your words and efforts. So not completing all major assignments results in an automatic failure of the class. If you have any extenuating circumstances that will conflict with the deadlines for these major assignments, you must speak with me *in advance of* the conflict to make other arrangements. There's always a way to work around a conflict, rather than hand in an assignment late. No late assignments or final portfolios will be accepted, or work shopped by your peers.

### **Challenge yourself.**

In-depth critical reading, thoughtful commentary, and ambitious essays are so much more captivating than safe, easy ones. Stretch yourself and I'll be impressed, even if you don't always pull it off. I promise, no one will be a bigger cheerleader for your success this semester than I will be – as long as I know you're working hard.

### **Office Hours.**

are the most underused resource available to college students. Come to me with specific questions about your essays at *any stage* of the writing process. Run your ideas by me, use me as a sounding board, ask me about a problem in your writing that you can't see your way around. I'll be happy to schedule special appointments if my regular hours conflict with your other commitments.

Office visits are opportunities for one-on-one instruction; they are not editing sessions where I merely correct your work. Whenever you want to work with me on an essay draft, it is helpful if you bring two copies. You should make any handwritten changes to your own draft. I will not serve as your proofreader. Do not come to my office and ask me to look over a paper "in general." If I am to help you develop as a writer, you must come to me with specific questions, and you must learn to recognize the areas in which you need help.

Asking for help on an essay does not guarantee that you will receive a high grade. Use my advice along with your own knowledge and skill to revise and edit carefully. I will help you, but you are ultimately

responsible for the quality of your essay.

You need to participate in all draft workshops in order to be eligible for individual help.

### Writing Assignments

Classes will begin with free-writing, with prompts given by the instructor. These are not critiqued and do not have to be shared with the group, but anyone who wants to read what they've written is welcome.

You will produce short weekly writing pieces (exercises and assignments such as descriptive narrative of an event you went to, an interview, a scene or dialogue you witnessed). These are designed to develop research and writing skills that you'll need for three longer pieces:

- A proposal/pitch for your final article or essay, no more than 500 words. **DUE Tuesday, October 11.**
- An essay – can be personal, reported or a narrative scene piece of approximately 1,000 words. **DUE: Tuesday, November 1**
- A final, researched and/or reported article or essay of 1,000-3,500 words. **DUE: Tuesday, December 6**

**All submissions must be printed in 12-point type, doubled-spaced, with standard margins. Please print single-side, for editing purposes.**

### Workshopping & Writing Exercises

You will be required to bring a hard copy of your writing for each classmate when it is your turn to be work shopped. You will provide written feedback on that hard copy before returning it to the writer.

### Other requirements:

- One meeting with me before you submit your pitch on October 11

- One meeting with me before you submit your final paper on November 24

### **Classroom Respect & Coursework Ethics**

Imaginative writing is a form of art, and artistic exploration can lead to subjects that are dark, uncomfortable and even taboo. You will read and see such work in class and you may choose to write about such subjects yourself.

We're not here to be comfortable and complacent—we're here to stretch and challenge ourselves, to expand other's minds. Be prepared to read tough stuff and learn to respond with empathy and sensitivity.

However, I do not accept essays or exercises that rely on excessive shock value: inappropriately graphic violence, blatant pornography, and/or hate speech masquerading as art are not acceptable. Students whose creative work is deemed to be a direct or indirect threat to other students or instructors will be taken seriously and dealt with appropriately.

Workshop discussions are a chance for us all to practice our critiquing and learn both as a reader and writer. This requires we all hold ourselves to rigorous standards of clarity and respect in sharing our opinions in workshop. Please keep in mind that everyone's emotional connection to his or her story is different and requires consideration, and that critique is not the same as criticism. That being said, writers should not submit pieces for workshop that deal with subjects about which they are not ready to receive critique.

When writing about highly personal, trauma-related subjects, you should be sure that you are able to deal with it on a professional level. Writing as therapy is a totally legitimate goal and purpose of writing, but that's not what we're doing here. Be sure you can handle what you're writing about because we are here to respond to your words on the page, not to provide therapeutic support. If you do choose to write about such personal subjects, make sure it's a good strong story and that you have something more to say than "it happened."

### Grading

Your final grade in this class will be determined by a combination of your own original writing, your contributions in workshops, and your active participation in reading and discussion:

1. Three longer writing assignments, which will make up your final portfolio for the course (40% of your grade)
2. Weekly short writing assignments, which we will workshop in class. (30%)
3. Attendance and participation, both in class and work on your own. (30%)

### Other Notes:

Plagiarism is a waste of everyone's time. If it is discovered that you have plagiarized, you will automatically fail.

UM does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, age, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, sex, marital status, or disability. An effective learning environment values and supports diversity. Our classroom should be a place of lively discussion and all opinions are welcome. Intolerance and hateful statements of any kind are not welcome, and anyone making the classroom environment uncomfortable for shared learning will be asked to leave.