

ENST 373 A
Spring 2017

NATURE WORKS: Writing about Nature

Heather McKee
T/Th 12:30-1:50pm
Davidson Honors College Room 120

Jeannette Rankin Hall 016 (Basement) Office Hours:

Tuesdays & Thursdays 11:30 - 12:30 & Wednesday afternoons by appointment

Contact: heather.mckee@mso.umt.edu

“A universe in which everything is known would be static and dull... A universe that is unknowable is no fit place for a thinking being. The ideal universe for us is one very much like the universe we inhabit.”

– Carl Sagan, from his essay “Science and Human Concern”

Texts:

Tell It Slant. Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola. 2012.

Bird by Bird. Anne Lamott. 1994.

Braiding Sweetgrass. Robin Wall Kimmerer. 2013.

A Natural History of Now. (Edited by) Sarah Call and Li-Yen Douglass. 2012.

Teaching a Stone to Talk. Annie Dillard. 1982.

The Forest Unseen. David George Haskell. 2012.

Other Readings:

ENST 373 on Moodle will have the required weekly readings outside of our texts.

Assorted Camas (the literary magazine published by the Environmental Studies Graduate Program) issues may be used. If so, they can be purchased in class for \$5 each.

Course Purposes and Outcomes: Express depth and creativity in writing about the natural world, and human relationships with it. Build authority in critically evaluating work of this subject.

We will accomplish this by:

- Exploring methods of finding meaningful questions through observation and memory

- Studying examples of and practicing interweaving experience, research, and reflection in writing
- Gaining practice in all aspects of the writing process - discovering ideas, making notes, writing drafts, revising, editing, and reading aloud
- Identifying and responding to tendencies in your own writing, both strengths and weaknesses
- Respectfully critiquing the work of your classmates, by identifying and responding to both their strengths and weaknesses
- Understanding how you and others read and respond, and integrating this into your writing
- Expanding your writing by studying and experimenting with new or different forms of nature writing

Primary Writing: Minimum combined total of 4,500 original words (+/- 300 words = ~15 double-spaced pages) in 3 assignments, including a required rough draft for each, plus a major revision (not included in word count), as follows (*subject to minor changes*):

- **Assignment #1:** A personal essay of between 1,200-1,800 words (4 to 6 pages). Reflect on a natural place or organism that has influenced you in some way. Essay should be rich with detail, showing your powers of observation. It should also illustrate an inquisitiveness, and be woven with explorations of connected ideas. **Four copies of a working draft are due 2/7 to discuss in small groups and get my feedback. Be sure to edit for mechanics before you provide copies of your final draft for the entire class on 2/14.**
- **Assignment #2:** A larger, more in-depth work or possibly a collection of themed nature writing between 1,800-2,400 words (6 to 8 pages). Writing should once again illustrate keen observation, curiosity, and depth of thinking on this natural universe that we humans both shape and are shaped by. Look to our readings and discussions of nature writing for inspiration for your particular choice of style or form. Work to push your prose with lyrical elements. Work to build your understanding of your subject and depth in your writing through research, and focus on blending facts organically into your prose. **Four copies of a working draft are due on 3/14 to discuss in small groups and get my feedback. Be sure to edit for mechanics before providing copies of your final draft for the class on 3/28 (1st group) or 3/30 (2nd group).**
- **Assignment #3:** One or Two Field Notes (to round out your 4500 required word count) on the natural history of an aspect of the local Montana environment that you've had experience with. A subject could be a particular geological formation, an animal or a plant, a weather or astronomical feature, a body of water, etc. Each Field Note needs to be around 600 words to fit the podcast. Field Notes are inspired by curiosity about the natural world, and typically contain a combination of detailed observation, lyricism, and research about their subject. Field Notes is a natural history podcast sponsored by the Montana Natural History Center, and broadcast on Montana Public Radio. For more information, you can visit the Montana Natural History Center's website. **Four copies of a working draft are due on 4/25 to discuss in small groups and get**

my feedback. Two copies of your final draft are due on our last class, Wednesday 5/10, during Finals Week.

· **Revision** (significant!) of Assignment #1 or #2. Use your growth in the class and the comments from workshop to improve one of your previous assignments. A revision does not necessarily mean longer or shorter: consider if you need to expand certain ideas or scenes, or condense or remove others. Pay special attention to clarity, focus, voice, blending of research and story, and openings and closings. As with the other essays: **Be sure to edit for mechanics before providing copies of your revision for the class on 4/18.**

· **Finals Class:** Prepare to **read aloud your Field Notes for our final class at 8:00am on Wednesday, 5/10.**

Required Format for All Writing for MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS: (Check these points off for each essay you turn in!)

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1) Double spaced | 2) Double Sided (copies for class to workshop) |
| 3) 1" margins l/r/t/b & 12 point font | 4) Title, Name, Date |
| 5) Word count included in essay | 6) Pages Numbered (by hand ok) |

Other Required Writing:

1) **Working Writings** (TYPED) – One to two double-spaced pages of in-progress writing. These often provide the fodder for your larger assignments. Topics for these informal writings are provided in the syllabus. **There are 7 of these through the semester, check syllabus.**

2) **Writing Journal** – Here you can compose in class writings (ICWs), responses, notes, and questions to outside readings, notes and work for your assignments, and any other resources. **This will be collected and reviewed on 3/3 and 5/7.**

3) **Field Journal** – Find a place. A nook along the river, beneath an old maple tree, a sitting rock along a hiking trail. **At least once weekly, visit this same exact place for at least 15 minutes**, and using **all** senses, jot observations, questions and/or sketches with notes about your immediate natural surroundings. Be specific. Record weather, date, and time. You will develop your own natural history and phenology associated with this unique natural place over the semester. **This will be collected and reviewed on 3/3 and 5/7.**

4) **Responses to other students' essays:** You are expected to read each other's work attentively and critically. Use the copies you are given to underline strong and weak points, and make notes throughout. In addition, a response of at least two paragraphs is required to EACH student essay read for class. You can type this up or write directly on the essay, but if you handwrite, it must be LEGIBLE. Although short, these should be thoughtful, constructive,

and SPECIFIC responses. Respect the work that your fellow students have put into these writings, with an eye to help refine their work. Refer to Chapter 14 of *Tell It Slant*, or talk with me if you need ideas for how to approach reviewing a piece. **These are due on the days we are workshopping essays – we typically read 3-4 essays at a time, and so 3-4 responses will be due. I will collect responses several times randomly throughout the semester to ensure they are thoughtful.**

5) **Responses to Wild Mercy/outside readings:** (TYPED) – Wild Mercy is a nature writing reading series sponsored by the Environmental Studies program at the University of Montana. You are required to attend (and hopefully enjoy) at least THREE Wild Mercy Readings, or outside readings of nature writers at other venues. Wild Mercy Readings are from 7:00-8:15 on Thursday evenings at the UM Flat on 633 S. Fifth Street E., adjacent to the University. If you have a conflict with Thursday evenings, let me know ASAP so we can work to make these other arrangements. Local bookstores often have nature writers read their work, and these events qualify as well. Type a minimum of a one paragraph response to each reading you attend (this means two paragraphs if there are two readers.) Pay attention to writing style, rather than a summary of the subject. **Responses are due within one week of attending a reading.**

Attendance: You are expected in class. Ultimately, this is a workshop, and it only works with your participation. **If you are unable to make a class, you must turn in the required materials in hard copy to my mailbox in Rankin Hall BEFORE that class to receive full credit,** unless you have made prior arrangements with me. Repeated tardiness and unexcused absences will strongly affect your participation grade.

Writing Grades: I will return each of your major assignments with a comprehensive response, although not a letter grade. My responses will be based on my overlapping appraisals of clarity, mechanics (grammar, punctuation, spelling), flow and organization, research, detail, intention, tone, originality, and style in your writing. You must of course, also meet the basic assignment objectives, including word count and due date. Grades will be influenced by your individual effort and personal development in writing over the semester. Ask me anytime for a tentative, current course grade.

Course Grade Determination:

Total of Main 3 Assignments + One Revision = 2/3

(Approximately 1/6 each, but your progress and improvement will be considered)

Attendance and Participation=1/6

Weekly Writing, Journals, & Outside Events=1/6

Outside Help: I am always happy to discuss writing with you. I am available during my office hours, by appointment, and over e-mail to help develop ideas, clarify feedback, problem solve, and assist with any other questions you may have about your work. In addition, the University

offers The Writing Center as a free service to all students. I encourage you to use it, particularly for technical issues you may have with your writing. <http://www.umt.edu/writingcenter/>.