

# CRWR 495 Storytelling

INSTRUCTOR: Debra Magpie Earling

Office: TA 215 / Office Hours: 2-5 T/Th and by appointment email to:

[debra.earling@mso.umt.edu](mailto:debra.earling@mso.umt.edu)

“You should understand / the way it was / back then, / because it is the same / even now.”

“Okay go ahead laugh if you want but as I tell the story it will begin to happen.”

*Leslie Marmon Silko*

“the different season as season follows season, the climate different as well, / spring comes (not as brutal as it once was, back there, back then; / back there, back then: a thing fled, another house, another land, less tender / vaguely remembered, just a few papers and photographs left) / the sky another color, and other sounds, other heat, / more rain, and a different color to the trees (greener but a lighter green) / comes imperceptibly (the leaves not falling): / and birds, more birds, more living things (fireflies for instance, but in another season)”

*Pascalie Monnier Bayart*

“Your memory often tweaks and adjusts the information it stores to make you look better...”

*Dean Burnett*

## **Storytelling: Ghosts, Monsters, and Stories of Wonder**

Welcome. Our lives are stories. History itself is a grand story woven together of many stories. And what is your place in the fabric of stories—what stories do you hold that once shared will help others to see the world with new eyes? Traditional American Indian stories were told in deepest winter so the people could survive. Stories lifted the people from hunger, from death and made them see visions of perseverance and hope. Some traditional stories spun a furious wind of telling and stories would travel great distances at astonishing speeds revealing that story, voice, and the spoken breath is a mighty vehicle that possesses its own authority. And it is no different today than it was back then—we tell stories to survive. There has been a resurgence of storytelling in this country and around the world. Isabelle Allende, says, “A story is a living creature with its own destiny and my job is to allow it to tell itself.”

GHOSTS, MONSTERS, AND STORIES OF WONDER is merely a focal lens for discovery. We will look at traditional and not so traditional ways of storytelling. For the first five weeks we will seek the stories that haunt us—real or imagined ghosts, in the second five-weeks we will look at monster stories and the monsters that are in the room and out in the world, and for the last five weeks we will look at stories of wonder and how people have survived and thrived. This semester, because of class size and certain limitation we will also have outside storytelling gatherers. The stories we will hear will create a firestorm of stories and with it new inspiration for writing and for living. Stories are also useful tools and can help you sell an idea in business, in the workplace, or to start-up your own company. How well can you hone your story for success? This is a class for everyone, the writer, the storyteller, and the listener but come prepared for a life-changing event for stories are a powerful entity.

### Course Goals:

- o To gain the skills to artfully and creatively communicate, o To gain further understanding of the elements of narrative craft, o To incorporate literary constructs in both oral and written stories.
- o Most of all, to learn the oldest survival skill — to gain an appreciation of the stories that can save you.

- o To identify, collect, and organize your own life stories and the life stories of others illuminate an important cultural occurrence, phenomenon, or movement.

NON-REQUIRED BUT YOU-SHOULD-GET-THOSE BOOKS I have hundreds of book recommendations for this class but because we have little time to discuss the books I do not require them. This year we've faced enormous changes in our physical and social world so I recommend books that are critical to an understanding of the enormous power of stories and their impact on **you** and the ways in which **you** might meaningfully contribute to the world. I've ordered a limited number of these books because many of you purchase books on line. Here they are: **SECONDHAND TIME**, Alexievich; **EARTH RECITALS: ESSAYS ON IMAGE AND VISION**, Melissa Kwasny; **STORYTELLER**, Leslie Marmon Silko; **TALKING PICTURES**, Ransom Riggs. (Please feel free to add to the list onto Moodle which will go up in October.)

The class is divided into three five-week segments that complete the fifteen-week semester. We will begin the class on the subject of ghosts but the idea of ghosts and monsters can be figurative or literal although all stories in the class are based on true events.

#### **Ghosts**

What stories haunt you? The niggling stories of the past, old relationships, wonderful experiences, last words, new beginnings (that turned into something unexpectedly strange), scars, teachers, trees, rivers, haunted roads, ghost stories, strange events. Things that stay.

#### **Monsters**

Ever encountered a monster? Maybe you have seen a UFO, or a Sasquatch, or something inexplicable in the woods that made you feel a certain sublime terror? Witches, hobgoblins, strange swamp lights, snakes in the woods, alligators in the swamp. Maybe you babysat a monster, or the monster was an illness or a bad relationship, or fires storming toward you, or waking to another day of suffocating smoke. What about terrifying people, or catastrophic events, or vampires, or werewolves, or fairies? Illness, deaths, psychos, bothersome siblings, or the larger issues and events that currently threaten our world and our way of life?

#### **Stories of Wonder**

Ever had an experience so amazing you felt the world was more mysterious than you could have imagined? Miracle, wonder, strange coincidence, serendipity, saved-in-the-nick-of-time, love, grandpa, knights and damsels in shining armor, rescue, survival, signs sent, angel sighting, animal saviors, any amazing no-one-is-going-to-believe-this stories.

There are myriad ways to tell a story and your expression is unlimited except in one regard—the stories you express must stem from real events or personal memories, or be things that you've experienced or collected—as in interviews or home stories. If you are a singer, dancer, videographer, comedian, or artist please don't feel confined. You are free to express your stories in your best medium of expression. I have had dance concerts, puppet shows, video movies, shadowbox theater, art installations, comedic routines, dramatic recitation or performance with props and or accompaniment, and musical performances of original work with invited guests.

#### REQUIREMENTS:

1. **Active Participation:** Always be prepared to tell a story. Pay attention. Listen. In-class exercises/assignments and participation, including Memory Glimpse Assignments, account for 40% of your grade.
2. **Memory Glimpses/Short Prompts:** September 27 — November 15. Beginning September 27 thru November 15 you will turn in Memory Glimpses/Short Prompts for an eight (8) week period. Undergraduates are responsible for turning in two (2) paragraphs per week. Graduate students are responsible for turning in four (4) paragraphs per week. Overall,

undergraduates will turn in a total of sixteen (16 ) short prompts, and graduates will turn in (32) paragraphs. Refer to sample handout.

3. **Midterm and Synopsis:** Weeks to be determined. Midterm time limit yet to be determined. Because of the class size this semester it isn't possible for all students to present their midterm stories in class. However, **graduate students must present an in-class midterm but this too is negotiable.** All others, if you believe an in-class presentation is a must for you because your medium lends itself to the stage, please let me know on your synopsis form. The most compelling ideas outlined on the synopsis forms will be chosen to present in class. If your story is not selected, and you still wish to be considered, you will have an opportunity to pitch your story to me before the program is set. Approximately, 35 students will present in-class. Those who will not be presenting live will make a CD recording of their story. CDs will be due in-class on the first day of midterm presentations. I will hand out mid-term synopsis forms prior to the midterm.  
**Midterms require props**—lighting or background images, recorded sounds or, mood setting. It can be something as simple as an image on the screen, boxes set up to resemble a particular memory setting, or something as elaborate as a backup musician. If you think you might be presenting a video, please let me know as soon as possible. The information you provide on the synopsis will help me set up the date of your presentation. It is rare that someone wants to be an early presenter but it is often easier to present early and relax and enjoy the other presentations. Please see me if you wish to collaborate. Midterms account for 20% of your grade.
4. **Finals:** Dates to be announced. Group Collaborations led by graduate students. We will close the semester with Stories of Wonder. Have you ever experienced a miracle or had an experience that was wondrously baffling? Have you ever asked yourself how could that have possibly happened? We will close the class with a joyous raucous storytelling final—music perhaps? Singing maybe. Dancing? Art installations, all welcome. The final will have collaborative groups, however, there will be a few choice spots for single storytellers elected by group nomination. The final is 20% of your grade. Finals week meet same day but at 7:40-9:40 p.m.
5. **Cabinets of Wonders, Cabinets of Curiosities, Wunderkammers, and Inventory List:** Finals week meeting / December 17, 7:40-9:40. For purposes of this class, I will call them Cabinets of Wonder. Ok, I lie. I love Wunderkammers, and Museums of Personal Fascinations, True Curiosities. Etc. Your Cabinet of Curiosity is 10% of your grade. I urge you to begin thinking about this project now. It is the spark of your creativity and will help define the stories you share with the class.
6. **Class attendance is required.** If possible, please email me when you cannot attend class. Because this class requires hands on participation you will not be able to make-up missed exercises. If you are absent for more than one (1) class, it will affect your grade. If you miss more than two (2) classes, you will fail the class if you are not excused. *Unique circumstances arise from time to time and allowances will be made when necessary if emergency or illness is documented.*

Note: Independence and creative thinking is the directive of this class. Please begin brainstorming about your midterm presentation now. If you wish to interview someone or make a short video or stage a play or dance routine or ?, begin planning now. Do not wait. Depending on your presentation, you may want to try out the equipment in the room, have a practice run with the projector or computer, to alleviate any problems or glitches. The earlier you begin thinking about your presentation, the more enjoyable your time will be.

## Course Polices

1. **All papers must be typed.** Work that is not typed will be returned without credit. Story Glimpses should be numbered from 1-8 and single-spaced following the memory glimpse examples. Please use standard font Times New Roman in 12 pica. Please keep back-up copies of all the work you turn in. Written work is due at the beginning of each class. In October, I will begin having you upload your memory glimpses to Moodle.
2. Also, always type your name, the course number, and the number of the glimpse memory in sequence. The first paper due would be Glimpse Memory 1, and so on. Papers should be professional without scribbles or last minute additions.
3. Please respect your colleagues and do not disrupt the class by late arrival. If you must arrive late, please make sure you seat yourself in the first desk immediately available to you so as not to disrupt the class. Once the presentation is complete feel free to find a more suitable desk.

## General Information

- Plagiarism — See University Catalog.
- Deadlines: Before the course has begun or during the first three (3) weeks of the semester you can drop the course on Cyberbear — <http://cyberbear.umt.edu>. The last day to drop/add, change option is noted in the course catalog. Please make sure that you are aware of the important dates that affect you. Undergraduates must obtain advisor's signature after the drop date. After the 30<sup>th</sup> instructional day has passed, you must petition to drop.
- Finals - We will meet during finals week at the assigned time: Wednesday, December 15 from 7:40 — 9:40. Please keep this date in mind when making travel arrangements.
- Students with Disabilities: All students are welcome and will be treated fairly and with respect. Qualified students with disabilities will receive appropriate accommodations in this course. Please come and see me if you require additional assistance. If it is necessary, please be prepared to provide a letter from your DSS Coordinator.

### **Important Class Protocol:**

Expect the unexpected and prepare for it. The emotional tone of the class is never cast—what may be funny or sad to you might appear sad or hilarious to an audience. Roll with the punches. Own the story that you tell in class. Please make sure that all the stories you tell have been digested. If you've experienced a recent or past trauma that you have not dealt with—it is not advisable to reveal the story to the class. The class is not a counseling session. Many stories can still have harrowing or heartbreaking aspects, expect that you may become emotional but take a moment, collect yourself, and go on. Remember if a difficult story goes on for a beat too long it can have a devastating effect on a class as audience. The act of telling a story is a physical thing with physical consequences. A story reverberates in a classroom.

The National Storytelling Network explains:

“Storytelling is interactive. Storytelling involves a two-way interaction between storyteller and listener. The response of the listener influences the telling of the story. In fact, storytelling emerges from the interaction and cooperative, coordinated efforts of teller and audience... The completed story happens in the mind of the listener, a unique and personalized individual. The listener becomes, therefore, a co-creator of the story as experienced.”

Be mindful of your story's impact on others. You are more than welcome to tell a difficult story but do not wallow in troubled times as bad times have a way of resurrecting in the moment. Be kind. Remember to include the good or interesting memories that buoy up troubled events in storytelling.

- Be respectful and act respectfully. No one wishes to tell an important story to someone who is not paying attention. Let the presenter know you are listening fully to his or her story.
- Computers are unnecessary in class unless you are using them for a presentation or you have a disability that necessitates use. Please put your computer away so you do not have a shield between you and the class.
- Turn off your cell phones as you enter the class and stow them.

**This syllabus is subject to change.**