CRWR 312—Intermediate Nonfiction Workshop

Prof. Judy Blunt  Autumn 2017  T/H 2-3:20  LA 233
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Office: LA 112  Office Hours:  T/H 11-1 & by appointment

Course Description: Our study of narrative nonfiction will require a substantial commitment of time for reading and writing, so please adjust your semester schedule accordingly. Through analysis of professional writing, we will identify and discuss elements of craft and technique writers use to accomplish great works. By practicing these techniques, students will improve their mastery of nonfiction writing, and in workshop will learn to identify common errors in both their own work and in that of others.

Requirements: Students are required to provide their own paper copy of *Pulphed: Essays* by John Jeremiah Sullivan. The Book Exchange, Fact and Fiction and Shakespeare Books all have it, copies are available at the library, and they’re cheap on Amazon. No eBooks. Be aware that his class comes with some copy/printing costs, as students must print out reading packets that arrive electronically, as well as providing copies of their submissions to workshop.

Assignments: Short reading assignments will be provided, either as handouts or in electronic form. You are responsible for accessing and printing assigned reading sent via email, and coming to class with comments and questions prepared for discussion. Well-considered, thoughtful comments and contributions to both professional and peer writing will become the basis of your participation grade, which is half your overall grade. Writing assignments may include in-class writing, writing prompts, workshop commentaries and your own original essays. Present all work in standard format, 1-inch margins, 12 pt. standard font. Every essay must have a title and page numbers, and have the author’s name and “Blunt-CRWR 312” at top left. I do not accept late assignments except in extreme circumstances.

Workshop: Students will workshop two essays in the course of the semester, according to a schedule we agree to early on. Expect to have one essay draft in the first half of the semester and one in the second half. I encourage all forms of nonfiction, from literary journalism to memoir, from profile to personal essay. I simply require you to write from a first person point of view. Our workshop format is that of a community of writers working to give the most useful feedback to one another. Constructive criticism of the essay, its diction, organization, development and voice are part of a nonfiction workshop, but writers are responsible for fully editing and proofreading their submissions so we are not forced to sideline issues of content and style for those of grammar, syntax and spelling. The ultimate goal of our workshop is to give critical feedback and support, so that each student gains confidence and skill as a writer.

We will assume the author of each essay is writing from personal experience or observation, and take this into account in our discussion. Writers who address sensitive topics or very personal events in their nonfiction must be prepared to discuss the work objectively. If you
have any questions or concerns about the appropriateness of an essay topic, please come to see me during office hours. I am a proponent of free speech, and have a high level of tolerance for any well-formed argument or opinion—even if I don’t agree with it. But there are some ground rules. In class, even controversial opinions must be both offered and countered respectfully. I will not tolerate hate speech or writing that attacks, denigrates or degrades other people.

Note: I don’t like students to use computers, phones or any Wi-Fi connected electronic device during class, unless we’re doing an in-class writing exercise.

Participation: All students are required to participate in class discussion and workshop. If you’re shy or reluctant to speak up, you’re still required to participate in discussion and workshop. Your best solution will be to prepare questions, points of interest and comments ahead of time, so you don’t feel pressured.

Attendance: Your appearance in class is required. Two unexcused absences will lower your grade by one full letter. More than 6 absences—regardless of the cause—and you will be asked to withdraw from the class. After the third late arrival [10 minutes or more], chronically tardy students will be marked absent for that day. Being on time demonstrates your respect for our workshop community. I often start class with assignments and instructions, so check if you’re late.

Grades: Attendance issues aside, the highest grades will be awarded to students who complete reading and writing assignments on time with good attention to both the sentence-level construction and the overall story; who pull their weight in class discussions and in workshop with respectful, honest, well-reasoned written and spoken comments; and whose revised essay reflects a basic mastery of nonfiction writing skills.

Finals: As a final project, students are required to substantially revise or expand one of the essays they presented to workshop. This revision is due during our final meeting.

Plagiarism is defined in the UM Student Conduct Code as representing another person’s words, ideas, data, or materials as one’s own. In this course it will result in a failing grade for the class and a report to the Dean of Students.

Qualified students with disabilities will receive appropriate accommodations in this course. Please come and see me to make arrangements. Be prepared to provide a letter from your DSS Coordinator.

As the semester progresses, we, as a class, may agree to alter or amend this syllabus/schedule to suit our changing needs.
This semester, our nonfiction class will study the art and craft of nonfiction, both as readers and as writers. The workshop is our primary focus in this class, and to that end students will write at least 40 pages of nonfiction, at least three pieces of which will be offered for review in workshop. No more than 20 pages per workshop, please. One of the essays must be significantly revised or expanded by the end of the course. Present all work in standard format, with a title and page numbers. I require a single-side reading copy, but you can make double-sided copies for the group.

Workshop: Our workshop format is that of a community of writers working to give the most useful feedback on the fundamental issues of memory, meaning and method in writing from the first-person point of view. The focus of the workshop will be to assist in revision with an eye toward creating publishable works. Writers scheduled for workshop will provide sufficient copies of their work one week in advance. There are NO EXCEPTIONS to this rule, so plan ahead. Readers will turn in two signed copies of their written comments—one page minimum length—at the time of the workshop. The writer will keep one copy and I will keep the other, at least for the first few weeks. Constructive criticism of the story, its diction, organization, development and voice are welcome, but individuals are responsible for fully editing and proofreading work so we are not forced to sideline issues of content and style for those of grammar, syntax and spelling.

Nonfiction disclaimer: In nonfiction, writers will approach story that stems from close personal experience or observation; we ‘own’ our stories directly, and workshop discussion reflects an understanding of this. We refer to the writer as the narrator or character, depending on the role the “I” is taking. We are sensitive to difficult stories in nonfiction, but writers who address very personal events or have issues they’re still sorting out must be prepared to discuss the work objectively in class. If you have any questions or concerns about an essay topic or your ability to address it in workshop, please come to see me during office hours. Regardless, I expect your opinions regarding one another’s work to be both offered and countered respectfully. You are in this together.

Reading: In addition to your writing this semester, select four nonfiction books for a self-directed reading project. You can explore a genre, an author, a theme or a topic—but there should be a cohesive idea behind your choices and the project should speak to your own interests or goals. You’ll be asked to report early in the semester and again at the end. An annotated bibliography of the four books is due with your final portfolio.

Attendance/Participation: There is no way to make up a missed class. More than two absences and you may be asked to drop the course. Attendance—whether chronically tardy or absent—will affect your grade, as it’s a significant part of your class participation. If you know you will be absent for one or more classes, meet with me well in advance to make arrangements. The other side of participation is your contribution to class discussion. If you’re shy, preparing comments in advance will help with anxiety. Speak up. If you’re the talkative sort, say your piece and give others room to jump in. Don’t dominate. Don’t sit silently. Be part of our workshop community.

Grades: I’ll collect your portfolios, which shall include your revised essay, bibliography—and any new materials you submit to meet the page requirement. Attendance issues aside, high grades will be earned by all students who complete reading and writing assignments on time; who pull their weight in workshop with respectful, honest, well-reasoned written and spoken comments; whose contribution to classroom discussions shows thought and preparation; and who turn in a final portfolio that is complete and reflects a mastery of advanced nonfiction writing, craft and style.

Soup: I try to alternate meat and vegetarian offerings, and usually announce next week’s soup in workshop. I use organic meats and broth, or wild meat [elk, venison, bison]; I provide water and coffee. You are welcome to bring alternative beverages or food if you have allergies or dietary restrictions. There’s no pressure to eat if you’re not in the mood, or to bring food to share. No alcohol allowed. If you wish to contribute to the coffee fund, I appreciate whole beans.

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