English 91: Introduction to Creative Nonfiction (Memoir and Personal Essays)
Stanford University, Winter 2014
Tu/Th 1:15 – 3:05 PM
Civil and Environmental Engineering Building (#540), Room #105
Instructor: Greg Wrenn (gjwrenn@stanford.edu)

Office: Margaret Jacks (Building 460), Room #213
Office Hours: Tu/Th 5:30-7 PM

“I don't write about what I know: I write in order to find out what I know.”
― Patricia Hampl

Course Description

As we write memoir and personal essays this quarter, I’ll be encouraging you to see the writing process as an exploratory quest—a journey through beguiling, surprising thoughts and feelings. In short, to paraphrase memoirist Patricia Hampl, we don’t aspire to write what we know; we write in order to know. Indeed the best essays feel like archaeological dig sites around which the dust is still settling, rather than stuffy, curated museums. Each week we will read celebrated essayists such Alice Walker, David Sedaris, and Henry David Thoreau in order to inspire us. Along the way, we will aspire to exceptional craft, paying special attention to plot, scenes, dialogue, description, characters, point of view/persona, research, syntax, and figurative language. My wish is for each of you to walk away less timid as artists, more open to the mystery of language and life.

Required Texts

Tell It Slant by Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola (2012, Second Edition)

Course Requirements

Class Participation: 15%
Presentations: 15%
Workshop Letters: 20%
Final Portfolio: 50%
   One narrative micro-essay (handwritten)
   Two 3-4 page essays
   10-12 page final essay

* The final drafts of the essays included in the final portfolio must show significant evidence of revision—not just editing—in order to earn full credit.

Attendance and Class Participation

My attendance policies reflect the absolute importance of your physical presence in our classroom. Each absence in excess of 2—and each tardy in excess of 3—lowers your final grade by 1/3 of a letter grade. (For example, an A- becomes a B+.) 5 or more absences results in a failing grade for the course. If you do not show up to class the day of your workshop, barring extraordinary circumstances such as hospitalization, your final grade will be dropped 1/3 of a letter grade.

Your intellectual and emotional presence in the form of class participation—asking thought-provoking questions, answering questions, basically adding to the richness of our class by being prepared and sharing your insights—is also extremely vital. To earn full participation points, please contribute at least one substantive thing to each class discussion. In addition, I ask that electronic devices—especially cell phones but also laptops and iPads—be turned off for the duration of class. Texting during class is not acceptable. Please do not consume loud, crunchy foods (e.g. apples!) during class.

Assignments

We’ll spend nearly all class meetings discussing readings, your own work, or other texts.

In the class before a poem of yours is being workshopped, you’ll distribute your work to all of us in hardcopy form. Your work should be stapled, and there should be sufficient copies for everyone, including the instructor. As far as formatting is concerned, please use 12-point Times New Roman font and 1-inch margins. Use the standard MLA formatting for heading, title, and page numbers.

After an essay is workshopped, a letter from each of us will be given to the student. In these letters, you’ll offer constructive feedback that notes both strengths and weaknesses in the writing and offers ideas on further developing the ideas, voice, and structure. These should be approximately 500 words in length and include specific details from the text. A copy of each of your letters will be given to me as well. If a letter is not thoughtful and rigorous, I will ask you to redo it.
You’re required to attend three readings, though I encourage you to attend as many University-sponsored writing events as possible. You’ll almost always see me in the audience. Check the Creative Writing Program website (http://creativewriting.stanford.edu/event-list) and “like” Stanford Creative Writing on Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/stanfordcw) for up-to-date information.

Mid-quarter I’ll meet individually with you in a required conference to discuss your overall development—missing this conference or canceling it (or any other meeting with me) at the last minute is not acceptable and will affect your final grade. Again, I’m happy to meet with you during my office hours or at another mutually agreeable time—indeed for me it’s one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching.

Please do not discard any completed assignments with my feedback on them. At quarter’s end you’ll submit a final portfolio with revisions (include the drafts with my comments on them); and an extended letter to me of at least 1000 words assessing your revision choices, tracking your growth as a writer during the quarter, providing an overview of future writing possibilities, and summarizing your experiences (using specific details!) at the three readings. If you’d like to get specific feedback on your final portfolio, at the end of the quarter please make an appointment to meet with me after the quarter ends.

Students with Documented Disabilities

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (650-723-1066 or http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oaes).

Honor Code

The Honor Code is the University’s statement on academic integrity written by students in 1921. It articulates University expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work.

The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:

1. that they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading;
2. that they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.
3. The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code.

4. While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.

All work must adhere to the University’s policies on academic integrity. Failure to cite work that is not your own constitutes plagiarism, as does the dual submission of work (submitting a piece to this course that you submitted to another).