

English 403:
Advanced Nonfiction Writing
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:30am to 10:45am
Oddfellows #206

Professor: Matthew Ferrence
Office: Oddfellows 218
Office Hours: M,W 10am-11am; T, Th 1pm-3pm; by appointment
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Required Texts

1. Forché, Carolyn. *Writing Creative Nonfiction*. Writer's Digest Books, 2001.
2. Mori, Kyoko. *Yarn: Remembering the Way Home*. GemmaMedia, 2009.

Philosophy

True. Perhaps true enough. These are the constraints of our genre.

Creative nonfiction describes a wide scope of writing that is neither merely factual nor fully invented. It falls somewhere in the middle, operating with the full force of truth, as invented by the author behind the writing. Ah, no wonder conflict emerges now and again in this field.

As our semester winds forward, we will seek to better understand the scope of writing that fits into the genre of creative nonfiction, and we will seek to hone our skills as crafters of this limitlessly malleable form. We will work to make sense of the world through the telling of stories that are true, but that become more than just the facts through the application of metaphor, rhythm, shape. We will write, erase, bend, tear, open, and do all we can to bring to bear the focus of our intellects on those moments in life that are often discounted as just plain true.

Assignments and Grading

Original Creative Writing — 50%

This is why we're here: to hone our skills as writers within the loosely defined genre of creative nonfiction. As an advanced workshop course, this class will demand that you write with a high-level of commitment and attention, a desire you've already demonstrated by enrolling. Our intention will be to create high polish pieces that deserve to find readership beyond the confines of this class.

The writing requirement of this course constitutes:

- 1) A single specimen of "micro" nonfiction, not to exceed 750 words.
- 2) Two individual essays of at least 10 pages each.

You will be expected to revise your writing to completion. For me, in this time and place, that means you will write at least three distinct drafts before becoming eligible for final grading. These final grades will be assigned at the end of the term, when you turn in a revision portfolio as a collection of all preliminary drafts and polished versions of your work.

The form of your writing is up to you — essay, immersion journalism, hybrid, graphic. Guidelines are loose by design, as your creativity and authorial spirit are in charge. But I

expect each project to include a combination of experience and research. And I expect each project to illuminate the world for both reader and writer. Because that's really why we're here. And, always, seek to stretch yourself; in this way only will you grow as a writer.

Workshop and Participation — 25%

A significant and important portion of this class will be spent in peer workshop. Your response to your peers' writing will earn twenty percent of your own course grade, reflecting the value I place on these sessions. Each of you will workshop three times over the course of the semester, selecting the work you would most like comment on; that is, you might choose to workshop a revision of a piece workshopped earlier in the semester, or you might choose fresh writing each time.

All writing to be workshopped must be distributed on paper to the entire class one meeting before the workshop date. This is crucial, as we must all be afforded ample time to read and respond thoughtfully to your writing. Workshop respondents should come to class prepared to offer incisive and generous criticism for their peers. To prepare for response, each student should make margin comments directly on the distributed texts and must write a separate full-page analysis of the work. Two copies of this response will be brought to class: one will be submitted to me, the other to the author of the work under review.

Also, attendance at the first two of this semester's three Single Voice Reading events is mandatory. The third, for obvious reasons, is optional. Attending these readings will be considered as an element of your course participation.

Author Analysis and Presentation — 15%

While creative nonfiction is frequently cited as a "new" genre of writing, various forms of nonfiction — whether essay, travel report, or lyric — have been around for a long time. With the advanced study of genre comes an augmented need to understand its past, present, and future. As a group of writers, we will work collectively to offer a preliminary survey of the field through the close examination of specific writers. Each of you will select a single author who has been central to the field of creative nonfiction writing. You will present, in as detailed a manner as possible, the contribution that author has made to the field. You will need to do a fair amount of reading and research for this assignment, as I would like you to:

- 1) Offer a critical overview of your chosen author's collected works — this means you should thoroughly read several of his or her books and be familiar with them all.
- 2) Present the scope of scholarship that has been written about your chosen author — this means you should engage the critical scholarship responding to your author's work.
- 3) Consider your author's influence on your own writing — you should explain how your chosen author's work resonates within you, a contemporary writer of creative nonfiction.

Craft Piece — 10%

As an introduction piece for your final portfolio – due at the final exam – you will write a detailed, five page examination of craft. About half of our reading this term will be from writers writing about the act of writing nonfiction. For this assignment, I want you to offer similar meta- work. Write about writing.

I do not intend this assignment to be a "what I did" retrospective of your labors. Instead, I want you to present a critical, illuminating examination of some narrow aspect of

nonfiction writing. Think small. Think literary advice. Think, perhaps, about your greatest strength as a writer, and try to share that wisdom with others. Bear in mind that this sort of craft piece works best if it, too, appears as an “essay,” as an exemplar of our chosen form.

Administrative Details

Attendance: Ideally, you should be here. The nature of this class’s design makes your presence important and valuable, and your absence will hinder your learning and the learning of your classmates. However, legitimate reasons for absences do arise, and in the case of sickness missing class may be necessary for your health and for the health of the rest of the class. You are the primary evaluator of your ability to attend class, and I trust you to keep your classmates’ best interests in mind, both by missing class when ill and by not taking advantage of our compassion. Please email me as soon as you can if you think you will be absent, then visit me during office hours upon your return, so that we can make arrangements to have you make up the work you miss. You may miss two courses in the term without penalty to your grade (though, of course, the spirit of the missed day can never be recovered). Subsequent absences will result in the loss of 10% of your participation (i.e. each further absence reduces your *course* grade by one letter). Any student missing more than four classes will fail the course.

Late Work: We’re creative, but we’re not lazy. All work turned in after due dates have passed will be assessed a one letter-grade per day penalty. On-time work will be defined as turned in during class. Work turned in, for example, later in the day will be considered late.

Class Conduct: We will treat each other with respect in our written and verbal communication, regardless of ethnicity, gender, orientation, or religious belief. Even when offering critique of writing, we will be civil, gentle, courteous, and fair. Electronic devices will be neither turned on nor used while class is in session.

Academic Honesty: Plagiarism is a serious offense and will not be tolerated in this class. All work handed in should be your own, and any source materials should be properly cited. Plagiarized work may result in a zero score for the assignment with no chance of revision and, if serious, could result in immediate failure of the course. If you are unsure of what constitutes plagiarism, please refer to Allegheny College’s Honor Code.

Daily Schedule

NOTE: Readings should be completed, and you should be prepared for class discussion, by the dates listed below.

- 9/1 Course Introduction; “Why I Write” (6) in-class reading, writing, discussion.
- 9/6 “An Adventure in Lyric, Fact, and Story” (1); “But Tell it Slant” (8); “The Woman Who Slept...” (182); **BRING POEM TO CLASS**
- 9/8 “A Braided Heart” (14); “Basha Leah” (191); “Becoming the Godfather” (170); **MIRCO ESSAY PROPOSAL #1 DUE**
- 9/13 “Saying Good bye to ‘Once Upon a Time’” (25); “Ah Wilderness” (307); **MIRCO ESSAY DRAFT DUE**
- 9/15 Mirco Workshop _____, _____, _____;
- 9/20 “Finding a Story” (34); “Tacos and Manna” (205); Mirco Workshop _____, _____; **ESSAY #1 PROPOSAL DUE**
- 9/22 “Writing Personal Essays” (38); “Portrait of My Body” (214)
- 9/27 “Researching Your Own Life” (45); “Emergence” (299); Mirco Workshop _____, _____; **ESSAY #1 DRAFT DUE**
Single Voice Reading Sept. 28 at 8pm: Carolyn Forché
- 9/29 “As Time Goes By” (67); “Irving Berlin” (230); Workshop 1 _____
- 10/4 “Taking Yourself Out” (50); “What They Don’t Tell You” (223); **ESSAY #2 PROPOSAL DUE**
- 10/6 Workshop 1 _____; Author Presentation _____
- 10/11 “Twelve Years” (85); “It Was a Time of Hope” (240)
- 10/13 Workshop 1 _____; Author Presentation _____
- 10/18 **FALL BREAK – NO CLASS**
- 10/20 Workshop 1 _____; “The ‘New’ Literature” (104)
- 10/25 Workshop 1 _____; Author Presentation _____
- 10/27 “Not the Killing but Why” (97); “The Shadow Knows” (256); **ESSAY #2 DRAFT DUE**
Single Voice Reading 8pm: Shara McCallum
- 11/1 Workshop 1 _____; “The Comfortable Chair” (122)
- 11/3 Workshop 1 _____; Author Presentation _____
- 11/8 Workshop 2 _____; “Learning to Breathe” (158)
- 11/10 Workshop 2 _____; Author Presentation _____

11/15 *Yarn* (book)

Single Voice Reading 8pm: Matthew Ferrence

11/17 *Yarn* (book)

11/22 “The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner” (57); “Yarn” (essay, on handout); discuss long revision proposal assignment

11/24 **THANKSGIVING BREAK – NO CLASS**

11/29 Workshop 2 _____, _____; “Maps” (319)

12/1 Workshop 2 _____; Author Presentation _____

12/6 Workshop 2 _____; “Murder” (327); “Flying” (357)

12/8 Workshop 2 _____; Author Presentation _____

12/13 **LONG REVISION PROPOSALS DUE**; discuss in class; wrap-up

FINAL EXAM: Saturday, December 17 at 7 p.m. – journal due and public reading