

CRW 4211
Creative Nonfiction
David Leavitt

Class meetings: Monday, Periods 6-8, 2334 Turlington

Office: 4101 Turlington

Office hours: Tuesdays, 2:30-4 pm and by appointment

E-mail: dleavitt@ufl.edu

The goal of this course is to clarify, through practice and reading, the parameters of creative—as opposed, one presumes, to non-creative—nonfiction. Most works designated as creative nonfiction are memoirs. Yet whatever it is that distinguishes the *creative* in creative nonfiction can also be found in travel writing (Bruce Chatwin, Mary McCarthy, Jan Morris), essays on literature (Cynthia Ozick, Joy Williams), reportage (James Baldwin, Janet Flanner, Joseph Roth), biography (Nicholson Baker, Geoff Dyer, Lytton Strachey), and even book reviewing (Michael Hofmann, Patricia Lockwood, Lorrie Moore). The goal of the course is to provide you with a broader sense of the genre's range as well as a clearer idea of how to move forward in your own creative work.

Required Books (Others May Be Added)

- Grégoire Bouillier, *The Mystery Guest*
- Geoff Dyer, *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D. H. Lawrence*
- Yiyun Li, *Dear Friend, From My Life I Write to You in Your Life*
- George W. S. Trow, *Within the Context of No Context*

Recommended Books

- James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*
- Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*
- Janet Malcolm, *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice*
- Jan Morris, *Conundrum*
- Joseph Roth, *Reports from a Parisian Paradise: Essays from France, 1925-1929*
- Joseph Roth, *What I Saw: Reports from Berlin, 1920-1923*
- Joseph Roth, *The Hotel Years*
- Joy Williams, *Ill Nature: Rants and Reflections on Humanity and Other Animals*

Basics

- This course complies with all UF academic policies. For information on those policies and for resources for students, please see [this link](#).
- **Attendance:** Attendance is mandatory within reason. If you have legitimate cause for missing class, I ask that you let me know at least 24 hours in advance. I do not require you to supply a written excuse from a doctor should you have to miss class because you are sick. Honesty will be assumed. Missing class on the day that your work is to be discussed is the cardinal sin of workshops. Also please bear in mind that, as our class meets only once a week, missing more than two classes will result in your falling behind considerably.

UF attendance policies are outlined [here](#).

- **Format:** All submissions to the workshop should be double-spaced and typed in a legible 12-point font. Recommended fonts are Times, Times Roman, Cambria, Garamond, Palatino Linotype, and Baskerville. (The use of novelty fonts is punishable by imprisonment or fine.) Electronic submission via Canvas or email is fine, however I would encourage you to print out the submissions, since (mysteriously) prose reads differently on the printed page than on the screen.
- **Response:** We will devote a lot of our time to a lively and frank discussion of the work at hand. You should also give one another written feedback in the form of notes and comments or a letter to the writer. You do not need to turn these comments or letters in to me. During the workshop the writer whose work is being discussed should try not to speak but may interrupt should the workshop seem to be going off on an impractical tangent. In responding verbally please try to balance honesty and sensitivity and keep in mind that your fellow students come from diverse cultural, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. Some of the texts we will discuss engage controversial topics and opinions. In a workshop of this sort, our job as readers is not to endorse or debate the views, ideas, and beliefs expressed in one another's work and in the work we read, but rather to offer guidance on how to express those views, ideas, and beliefs as persuasively and eloquently as possible.

- **Grading:** In a workshop, grading is necessarily subjective. I will not give grades to individual submissions because I do not believe that imaginative writing can be rated. Your final grade will be based on your informed participation in the workshop, your improvement, and the care with which you read and respond to the writing of your fellow workshop participants.

This is a workshop course; it is not a lecture course. Student participation in discussion counts toward the course grade.

- **Grade Appeals:** Students may appeal a final grade by filling out a form available from Carla Blount, Program Assistant, in the English Department office (4008 TUR). Grade appeals may result in a higher, unchanged, or lower final grade.
- **Participation:** Some of us are, by nature, more talkative than others. If you're not the sort of person who likes to talk a lot in class, you will have ample opportunity to convey your responses in writing.
- **Grammar, Usage, and Spelling:** None of us wants to have to devote time or energy to correcting errors in grammar, usage, and spelling. The best way to spare your colleagues such an expenditure of effort is not to make any such errors. Please be sure, therefore, to have a good dictionary and style manual to hand. In the event of disputes, I am arbitrarily declaring Merriam-Webster to be our official dictionary and *The Chicago Manual of Style* to be our official style manual. Do not be put off if you prefer *American Heritage* or Strunk & White. These volumes agree with one another more often than not.
- **Reading:** You are expected to have done the assigned reading for each class and to be prepared to discuss it. The reading load will not be onerous.
- **UF Policy on Sexual Harassment:** The University of Florida is committed to providing a safe educational, working, and residential environment that is free from sexual harassment or misconduct directed towards any and all members of the community. More information on this policy can be found [here](#).

- **Late Papers/Assignments:** Email me in advance if you need an excused extension due to a medical, personal, or technical emergency.
- **Paper Maintenance Responsibilities:** Keep copies on your hard drive of all work submitted in this course.

Schedule (Readings to Be Discussed, Subject to Change)

n. b. All readings not included in required books will be distributed electronically

8/25

Introduction

What Makes Nonfiction Creative?

9/1

Labor Day (No Class)

9/8

The Personal Essay 1

Uwem Akpan, "Night Driving"

Justin Torres, "The Sordid Necessity of Living for Others"

9/15

The Personal Essay 2

Cynthia Ozick, "A Drugstore in Winter"

Joy Williams, "Why I Write"

9/22

Memoir

Yiyun Li, *Dear Friend, From My Life I Write to You in Your Life*

9/29

Memoir or Fiction?

Grégoire Bouillier, *The Mystery Guest*

10/6

Criticism as Autobiography 1

Geoff Dyer, *Out of Sheer Rage*

10/13

Criticism as Autobiography 2

Geoff Dyer, *Out of Sheer Rage*

10/20

Travel Writing

Selections from the work of Bruce Chatwin, Janet Malcolm, Mary McCarthy, and Jan Morris

10/27

Feulletons

Selections from the work of Joseph Roth

11/3

The Creative Interview

Janet Malcolm, "Forty-One False Starts"

11/10

The Personal Essay 3

RL Goldberg, "A Conversation with My Father"

Ryan Ruff Smith, "New Neighbors"

11/17

Experimental Polemic 1

George W. S. Trow, *Within the Context of No Context* (first half)

11/24

Experimental Polemic 2

George W. S. Trow, *Within the Context of No Context* (second half)