

LIT 4930
Creative Nonfiction
David Leavitt

Class meetings: Wednesday, 9-11, Turlington 2305

Office: Matherly 003

Office hours: Wednesday, 3-4 p.m.

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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 (John Lanchester, 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*
- Bruce Chatwin, *In Patagonia*
- George W. S. Trow, *Within the Context of No Context*

Recommended Books:

- James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*
- Geoff Dyer, *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D. H. Lawrence*
- 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*
- Joy Williams, *Ill Nature: Rants and Reflections on Humanity and Other Animals*

Basics

- **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, and Baskerville. (The use of novelty fonts is punishable by imprisonment or fine.) So long as print remains a semi-viable medium, I hold to the belief that narrative prose should be read on the page and not on the screen. Therefore I ask you to bring in photocopies of your submissions one week before they are scheduled to be discussed. If possible please do not print on both sides of the page.
- **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 marginal notes and a comment or letter to the writer. You do not need to turn these comments 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.

Information on UF Grading policies can be found [here](#).

- **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.
- **A follow-up on 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 the *American Heritage* 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 Merriam-Webster 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.
- COVID: In response to COVID-19, the following recommendations are in place to maintain your learning environment, to enhance the safety of our in-classroom interactions, and to further the health and safety of ourselves, our neighbors, and our loved ones.
 - If you are not vaccinated and boosted, get vaccinated and boosted. Vaccines are readily available and have been demonstrated to be safe and effective against the COVID-19 virus. Visit one.ufl.edu for screening / testing and vaccination opportunities.
 - If you are sick, stay home. Please call your primary care provider if you are ill and need immediate care or the UF Student Health Center at 352-392-1161 to be evaluated.
 - As with any excused absence, you will be given a reasonable amount of time to make up missed work.
- 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.
- Academic Honesty and Definition of Plagiarism: UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge: “We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: ‘On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment.’” [The Honor Code](#) specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. A student must not represent as

the student's own work all or any portion of the work of another. Plagiarism includes but is not limited to:

- Stealing, misquoting, insufficiently paraphrasing, or patch-writing.
 - Self-plagiarism, which is the reuse of the student's own submitted work, or the simultaneous submission of the student's own work, without the full and clear acknowledgment and permission of the faculty to whom it is submitted.
 - Submitting materials from any source without proper attribution.
 - Submitting a document, assignment, or material that, in whole or in part, is identical or substantially identical to a document or assignment the student did not author.
- Students with disabilities who are requesting accommodations should first register with the [Disability Resource Center](#) (352-392-8565), which will provide appropriate documentation to give your instructor early in the semester.
 - Students who are in distress or in need of counseling or urgent help should contact umatter@ufl.edu or call 352-392-1575 so that a team member can reach out to you. UF's [Counseling and Wellness Center](#) offers additional support.
 - Course Evaluations. Students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing online evaluations. Toward the end of the semester, you will receive email messages requesting that you do this [online](#).
 - Course Recordings: Students are allowed to record video or audio of class lectures. However, the purposes for which these recordings may be used are strictly controlled. The only allowable purposes are (1) for personal educational use, (2) in connection with a complaint to the university, or (3) as evidence in, or in preparation for, a criminal or civil proceeding. All other purposes are prohibited. Specifically, students may not publish recorded lectures without the written consent of the instructor. A class lecture does not include academic exercises involving student participation. Publication without permission of the instructor is prohibited. To "publish" means to share, transmit, circulate, distribute, or provide access to a recording, regardless of format or medium, to another person (or persons), including but not limited to another student within the same class section such as uploading or posting, in whole or in part, any media platform, including but not limited to social media, book, magazine, newspaper, leaflet, or third party note/tutoring services. A student who publishes a recording without written consent may be subject to a civil cause of action instituted by a person injured by the publication and/or discipline under UF Regulation 4.040 Student Honor Code and Student Conduct Code.

Schedule (Readings to Be Discussed, Subject to Change)

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

8/23

Introduction:
What Makes Nonfiction Creative?

8/30

The Personal Essay 1:
Uwem Akpan, “Night Driving”
Justin Torres, “The Sordid Necessity of Living for Others”

Uwem Akpan will be joining us for this class

9/6

The Personal Essay 2:
Cynthia Ozick, “A Drugstore in Winter”
Joy Williams, “Why I Write”

9/13

Memoir or Fiction?
Grégoire Bouillier, *The Mystery Guest*

9/20

Travel Writing 1:
Bruce Chatwin, excerpts from *In Patagonia*

9/27

Travel Writing 2:
Bruce Chatwin, excerpts from *In Patagonia*

10/4

The Creative Critic:
Essays by Merve Emre, Roxane Gay, Michael Hofmann, and/or Patricia Lockwood,
and/or others

Michael Hofmann may be joining us for this class

10/11

Feulletons:
Joseph Roth, Selected Feulletons

10/18

The Creative Interview:
Janet Malcolm, "Forty-One False Starts"

10/25

The Personal Essay 3:
RL Goldberg, "A Conversation with My Father"
Ryan Ruff Smith, "New Neighbors"

RL Goldberg and Ryan Ruff Smith will be joining us for this class via Zoom

11/1

Reading TBA

11/8

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

11/15

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

11/22

No Class (Thanksgiving)

11/29

No Reading

12/6

No Reading