

**The Places I've Been
Nonfiction Workshop - Fall 2014
English 242, Section 1**

**You can't know who you are
if you don't know where you are.
— Wendell Berry**

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

The depiction of “place” in literature is the earthly foundation for all great prose, be it as setting in novels, the backstory in memoir, a connection with the planet in nature writing, or as a full-blown character in travel writing. In 242 this fall we will explore place by reading how two different authors explore the same one, the Pacific Coast Trail: Dan White in *The Cactus Eaters* and Cheryl Strayed in *Wild*. In addition we will look at another California story; Santa Cruz author Julia Reynolds’ dramatic undercover foray into the gangs of Salinas. Students will be permitted to bring in any projects of their choosing for workshop but our beloved two-pagers will explore the course theme and our relationship to the landscape of our life.

REQUIRED READING

Blood in the Fields; Julia Reynolds
The Cactus Eaters; Dan White
Wild; Cheryl Strayed

OPTIONAL READING

2@SJSU: An Anthology of Flash Nonfiction from San José State University;
eds. Jan McCutcheon, Steve "Spike" Wong

City life: millions of people being lonesome together.
— Henry David Thoreau

LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR ENGLISH 242

- To understand the roots of the creative nonfiction genre
- To improve your skills as nonfiction writers
- To improve your skills as editors
- To prepare you for the MFA exam for nonfiction
- To acquaint you with the methods of professional writers

WORKSHOP

Students will be asked to workshop at least two pieces over the course of the semester on any topic of creative nonfiction. Submissions may be essays or book chapters, but should range from 1,500 to no more than 5,000 words. *If book chapters are submitted for workshop, please preface with a brief summary of the work and tell us where this sample fits in.* I encourage students to submit at least one stand-alone essay.

During the workshop process students will learn to critique each other's work, which is a very different skill than being a good writer. The trick is to 1) praise what's good 2) ascertain what's wrong with a piece 3) offer positive criticism and suggestions on how to fix it—while realizing the individual style and goals of the author may differ from one's own. Students will bring paper copies of your writing projects to class; the work will then be distributed, critiqued at home, and brought to the following class for discussion. Editors are asked to offer line edits on the page and at least a paragraph of typewritten comments that address the overall tenor of the work; please bring two copies of the latter, one to return to the author, and one for me.

SHORT ASSIGNMENTS

We will also do short, two-page writing assignments on a specific topic each week. These will serve to generate ideas for longer works, and to help us develop techniques for writing concisely. Short assignments also give the opportunity to experiment, as they will be graded simply on quantity (the fact you've done the assignment) rather than quality. Students should hand in ten two-pagers over the course of the term; you may choose which weeks to omit according to your preference.

PRESENTATIONS

Each student will give a ten-minute talk on a facet of narrative craft or a chosen author's history (involving their personal life, career path, and of particular interest, juicy gossip; of even keener interest, juicy gossip pertaining to how the piece we're dissecting in class was conceived). As our focus this semester is “place,” think about how the author makes the place a character in his or her work.

ATTENDANCE

Required, because English 242 depends on your participation each day. You are allowed one unexcused absence before your grade can be dropped, and students who come in after roll call will be considered absent. If you are ill, or are presented with an emergency that will cause you to miss more than one class, please contact me as soon as possible.

**The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place
where we can go as we are and not be questioned.**

— Maya Angelou

PAPER FORMAT

All material handed in should follow the same guidelines as those for submitting professional manuscripts:

- typewritten, double-spaced, black ink with copy dark enough to be easily read
- one-inch margins on all sides
- text on one side of the paper only
- 12-point type in a highly-legible font, preferably Times New Roman or Courier New
- your name and the assignment title single-spaced in the upper left-hand corner of the first sheet
- title centered on the first page
- pages numbers included
- pages stapled or paper-clipped together

Points will be subtracted for improper formatting.

CLASS PROTOCOL

Students are welcome to disagree with one another during class discussions; however, all our dialogue must be conducted with respect for each individual's opinions and work. In addition, the following practices are forbidden while class is in session: the use of laptops or cell phones.

OFFICE HOURS

Please feel free to visit me during my office hours; it's a good idea to make an appointment, otherwise I work on a first-come, first-served basis. Email is meant for brief questions and I encourage you to use it sparingly; this is not an online course. If you are absent, please contact one of your classmates to find out what you missed.

**Sometimes a man hits upon a place to which he
mysteriously feels that he belongs.**

**Here is the home he sought, and he will settle amid scenes
that he has never seen before, among men he has never known,
as though they were familiar to him from birth.**

Here at last he finds rest.

— W. Somerset Maugham

**Taking trips tore all of us up inside, for they seemed,
each journey away from home, something that might
have been less selfishly undertaken, or something
that would test us, or something that had better be
momentous, to justify such a leap into the dark.
The torment and guilt—the torment of having the loved one go,
the guilt of being the loved one gone—
comes into my fiction as it did and does into my life.
— Eudora Welty**

GRADE REQUIREMENTS

Grades are meant to reflect—quite simply—the quality of a student's work. Final grades will be calculated thus:

- 50% workshop submissions (see grading guidelines below)
- 20% 10 two-page assignments (on the number completed)
- 20% verbal and written critiques (on the student's dedication to helping his or her peers)
- 10% presentation (on the quality and delivery of information)

There are no examinations for this class.

DEPARTMENTAL GRADING POLICY

The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined in the official SJSU Catalog ("The Grading System"). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A = excellent; B = above average; C = average; D = below average; F = failure. In English Department courses, instructors will comment on and grade the quality of student writing as well as the quality of the ideas being conveyed. All student writing should be distinguished by correct grammar and punctuation, appropriate diction and syntax, and well-organized paragraphs.

**We shall not cease from exploration and the end
of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.
— T.S. Eliot**