

San José State University
Humanities and Arts: Department of English
Engl 178, Creative Nonfiction, Spring 2021

Instructor(s): Susan Shillinglaw
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Online Office Hours: Tuesday, 1-2 and by appointment on Zoom
Class Days/Time: TTH 10:30-11:45
Classroom: Online

Course Description: This course considers the history of creative nonfiction—what it is; who has written it most forcefully/creatively/honestly; and where it might be headed in the future. But we’re going to begin the semester with a contemporary book, a narrative profile, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. The times call for opening with an inspirational text, it seems. We’ll then turn to other exemplary examples of creative nonfiction, looking at several examples of the genre: **memoir, biography, travelogue, historical nonfiction, the literary essay and longform journalism**. Books include Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*, Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Steven King, *On Writing*, and David Sedaris, *The Best of Me*.

A month of the schedule has been left open for class reading selections. On Feb. 2, we’ll choose texts from the following list: Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*; John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley*; James McBride, *The Color of Water*; Mary Karr, *The Liars Club*; Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*; Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* or *Caste*; Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me*.

Course Format: online

1. The class will be conducted synchronously, meaning that students are expected to reserve the allotted class time for online Zoom sessions.

2. Please leave your video camera on during class. Also, please mute your microphone when you are not speaking; be prepared to engage in class discussions and respond if called on. If you wish to select an appropriate virtual background, that is an excellent option. Please contact me after the first class with any individual challenges.
3. Please focus camera at eye level so all students can engage with one another.
4. Please turn off all notifications, close or minimize apps, turn off cell phones.
5. If the class wishes, I will record the seminars and post on zoom; please note that University policy requires that students agree to the recording in advance of recording/posting on Canvas.
6. If anyone wishes to record sessions, you need to obtain instructor's permission in advance. And all recordings must be used for private, study purposes only—not shared with other individuals.
7. All students are required to have an electronic device (laptop, desktop, or tablet) with a camera and built-in microphone. SJSU has a free equipment loan program.

MYSJSU

Course materials will be available on Canvas. Please check messaging system through MySJSU. Feel free to email me at any time with questions.

Course Learning Outcomes:

- To appreciate the historical contexts of creative nonfiction.
- To understand fully the meaning and range of the term creative nonfiction
- To consider works by prominent writers of the genre
- To appreciate broad range of creative nonfiction
- To analyze style of each writer

And students should be able to respond to these questions by the conclusion of the course:

“Some Essential Questions to Guide Our Reading and Writing” [taken from the Tell It Slant website:<http://www.mhprofessional.com/sites/tellitslant/>]

- What is “creative” about “creative nonfiction?”
- When does the “creative” part become fiction?
- What are the ethical considerations writers must take into account?

- What writerly techniques are most effective in this genre?
- How do writers effectively structure pieces in this genre?
- How do we characterize a strong “voice” in this genre?
- What about writing other people’s stories? Who “owns” the story?
- How does a writer gain access to memory? How can this memory be represented both accurately and aesthetically?
- How do writers incorporate research in creative nonfiction?
- Why are personal stories interesting to others? What makes them “universal?”

The Student Learning Outcomes of the Department of English and Comparative Literature are that students will demonstrate the ability to:

1. read closely in a variety of forms, styles, structures, and modes, and articulate the value of close reading in the study of literature, creative writing, and/or rhetoric;
2. show familiarity with major literary works, genres, periods, and critical approaches to British, American and World Literature;
3. write clearly, effectively, and creatively, and adjust writing style appropriately to the content, the context, and the nature of the subject;
4. develop and carry out research projects, and locate, evaluate, organize, and incorporate information effectively;
5. articulate the relations among culture, history, and texts.

Required Texts/Readings

- Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003)
- Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (1965)
- Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968)
- Steven King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (2000)
- David Sedaris, *The Best of Me* (2020)

Selections from this list: Hunter Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*; Tobias Wolff, *This Boy’s Life: A Memoir*; Mary Karr, *The Liars Club*; John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley*; James McBride, *The Color of Water*; Claudia Rankine, *Citizen:*

An American Lyric; Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* or *Caste*; Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me*; Trevor Noah, *Born a Crime*

Course Requirements and Assignments

1. **One-page weekly reading responses (9 total, each worth 10 possible points =90 possible points).** Each week when there is not a workshop, please turn in a one-page exercise based on that week's reading. Please mimic in some way whatever we've read that week. You can imitate style or content, whatever has struck you about the week's reading. Imitation is one way that many have learned to write more effectively; carefully study other writers. It's challenging—but also fun.
Please turn in responses before class (on Canvas), but have a copy ready to read aloud in class. We won't have time for everyone to read each week, but please come prepared to read.
2. **Workshop essays, 3-5 pages. (4 essays, 25 points each = 100 possible points).** Some classes are designated as workshops; we'll split into small groups and read one another's essays. For each workshop, you are to work within the assigned nonfiction genre: a profile (after reading several); a memoir; a travel essay; open.
3. **Final essay: (54 points).** You will develop one of your short workshop essays into a final paper of 7-10 pages. It can be a profile, a memoir, a travel essay, a humorous essay, narrative journalism, biography. You will present this final essay to the class during the final exam period.
4. **Midterm exam, short answer and essay. (50 points)** This exam will demonstrate your appreciation of the material we've read.
5. **Participation throughout the semester (56 points. 28 classes, 2 per class):**

Active participation in all discussions; insightful responses to peer's comments; curiosity about texts, authors, and issues. All assignments must be completed before class, as noted on syllabus.

At the heart of any good seminar is discussion, both in-class and, of course, in small groups. As a full participant, you should come to class with texts read and questions formulated. Please respectfully consider all viewpoints and ask thoughtful questions about your peers' responses. All of this will enter into a participation grade.

350 points possible in the course. Grades will be determined by the number of points you receive.

Classroom Protocol

I expect students to sign onto Zoom on time; to refrain from texting on phones or other devices; to actively engage in discussion; to listen politely and attentively to peers; to respond thoughtfully.

University Policies

Please see syllabus information web page at <http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo>

“Success in this course is based on the expectation that students will spend, for each unit of credit, a minimum of 45 hours over the length of the course (normally three hours per unit per week) for instruction, preparation/studying, or course related activities, including but not limited to internships, labs, and clinical practica. Other course structures will have equivalent workload expectations as described in the syllabus.”

SCHEDULE

WEEK 1

Jan. 28: Introduction to course. What is Creative Nonfiction? Memoir: “Once More to the Lake,” E.B. White (essays without link are posted on Canvas)

WEEK 2

Feb. 2: “What is Creative Nonfiction, Anyway” and “Finding an Original Subject,” Philip Gerard; “Nonfiction as Literature,” William Zinsser; “Squatters Camp” John Steinbeck.

Feb. 4: Memoir/familiar essay: “The First Oyster” in *The Gastronomical Me*, MFK Fisher (1943); “Preface” and “Collecting Nature,” Anne Fadiman.
Reading Response.

WEEK 3

Feb. 9: Narrative profile: *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Kidder

Feb. 11: Narrative profile: *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Kidder;
Reading Response.

WEEK 4

Feb. 16: Narrative profile: "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," (1966) Gay Talese. Published in Esquire; in 2003 the magazine declared it "the best story Esquire ever published."

Feb. 18: Writing Workshop #1: Narrative profile

WEEK 5

Feb. 23: *In Cold Blood*, Parts I and II. "Why is your Writing so Violent?" Joyce Carol Oates

Feb. 25: *In Cold Blood*, Part III. "Using the Humanities to Help Heal"
Reading Response.

WEEK 6

March 2: *In Cold Blood*, Part IV

March 4: Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*: "Some Dreamers..." "John Wayne..." "Where the Kissing Never Stops," "California Dreaming"; "Place in Fiction"
Reading response.

WEEK 7

March 9: *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*: "Slouching..."

https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/02/01/what-we-get-wrong-about-joan-didion?utm_source=nl&utm_brand=tny&utm_mailing=TNY_Daily_012521&utm_campaign=aud-dev&utm_medium=email&bxid=5c9295d33f92a40ad9e45f58&cndid=631467&hasha=81cee059b55b5049ed4afaec755ff14c&hashb=6d6fb3c57bfa0f1b5d6f37fa48201b601d4a988c&hashc=4e8c30c6fdb8de287c9e6eeb6db76fcc7dd80ff0aa5df45f1235e6517b2f1da&esrc=Auto_Sub&utm_term=TNY_Daily

March 11: *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*: "On Keeping a Notebook," "On Self-Respect," "On Going Home" "Considering Memoir and "I"
Reading Response

WEEK 8

March 16: *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*: “Notes from a Native Daughter,” “The Seacoast of Despair,” “Los Angeles Notebook,” “Goodbye to All That.” Documentary, “We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live.”

March 18: Writing Workshop #2: Memoir, “On Going Home” or “Notes from a Native Daughter” as models

WEEK 9

March 23: MIDTERM EXAM, short answer on readings (40 minutes). Steven King, *On Writing*, 17-101.

March 25: MIDTERM EXAM, essay (40 minutes). Steven King, *On Writing*, 103-200

WEEK 10

March 30: SPRING BREAK

April 2: SPRING BREAK

WEEK 11

April 6: *On Writing*, Complete. “Insert a Carrot,” Anne Fadiman. “Shipping Out” (“A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,”) David Foster Wallace. <https://harpers.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/HarpersMagazine-1996-01-0007859.pdf>

April 8: “Consider the Lobster,” David Foster Wallace. <http://www.columbia.edu/~col8/lobsterarticle.pdf>
Reading Response.

WEEK 12

April 13: Writing Workshop #3: Travel

April 15: TBA

WEEK 13

April 20: TBA

April 22: TBA
Reading Response

WEEK 14

April 27: TBA

April 29: Writing Workshop #4: open

WEEK 15

May 4: TBA

May 6: David Sedaris, *The Best of Me*
Reading Response

WEEK 16

May 11: David Sedaris, *The Best of Me*

May 13: David Sedaris, *The Best of Me*
Reading Response

THURSDAY MAY 20: Take home FINAL EXAM PROJECT submitted online; Zoom presentations

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Final Examination

As noted above, all students will attend the final exam on May 20 at the designated time and be prepared to read all or part of their final essay. Each student must also be prepared to note which authors read this semester impacted their own writing.

Grading Information

You will be graded on the point system outlined above, with 350 points possible in the course.

--Workshop Essays, weekly response papers, and midterm essay:

Full credit for assignment (10-50 points, depending on assignment): A superior piece of writing. The topic focused, the language sharp, and the writing free of grammatical errors. The piece has originality and style, is elegant, thoughtful and persuasive. Specific examples are included. The piece conforms to the type of nonfiction assigned, or reflects a careful imitation of an author studied that week.

Partial Credit (8-45 points, depending on assignment) A good piece of writing, solid and clear. But it may lack the innovation and sharpness of the top category. The point is clear but could be supported with additional details. There may be minor spelling, typographic, and/or grammatical errors. But it is interesting enough to hold a reader's attention.

Half Credit (5-25 points, depending on assignments) This response may be too broad or unsupported. Examples may be general rather than specific. There may be grammatical errors. The central idea may not be fresh. The writing may be wordy and vague.

Minimal credit (3-15 points, depending on assignment): These essays are unfocused, without a sharp thesis. Examples are general or the essay lacks examples. There may be serious grammatical errors. The essays do not reflect a great deal of thought or specificity.

Determination of final grade will depend on completion of all work noted under "Course Requirements and Assignments." Late work will receive a lower number of points, 1 point taken off per day.

A plus = 340-350 points

A = 320-339 points

A minus = 300-319 points

B plus = 280-299 points

B = 250-279 points
B minus = 230 to 249 points
C plus = 210 to 229 points
C = 190-209 points
C minus = 170-189 points
D plus = 150-169 points
D = 120-149 points
D minus = 100-119 points
F = 99 points or lower