Multi-Genre Creative Writing As A Path To Memoir

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Office Hours: By Arrangement

Wednesdays 2p – 4p

Course Description.

Everyone’s life contains a world of stories. Memoir is a picture-window into that world. In this course, you’ll write a real story from personal experience that weaves itself into the texture of a distinct time and place. The broad goal is to see yourself and your family as shaped by larger forces, and to use your writing, in the words of author Russell Shorto, “to connect our most intimate pains and sweetenesses to the turbid bluster of history.” The ultimate goal is to sort out your memories and emotions as you place yourself within a cultural context, while crafting a version of your past that feels true.

How do you get there? The best memoirs are at their heart a quest. As the memoirist you are searching to understand how and why key events in your life happened, and you are bringing the reader along on a fact-finding yet emotional journey. Key to this journey is investigative work: interviews w/ loved ones, combing through personal documents, excavating your memory, and researching a time and place that will uncover answers -- even to questions you didn’t know you had. This digging helps anchor your story to the truth, because memoir is about truth. But it must equally ignite your imagination, because memoir is also about invention.

The mechanism by which you serve these two gods is craft. You want to tell a true story that reads like good fiction, that unfurls in the reader’s mind like a good film. Drawing on my own skill set, I will explore with you how this feat is accomplished: by employing techniques used by novelists, writers of creative nonfiction, journalists and screenwriters. When applied to your own writing and done effectively, the result will be compelling autobiographical prose.

Course Objectives:

- Expand your knowledge of the range of styles & forms employed by contemporary memoirists
- Learn craft techniques from multiple genres of creative writing, to apply to your own work
- Share your creative work and become adept at constructively critiquing your classmates’ work
- Develop your persona as a memoirist (Every “I” is a performative “I”, said the poet Sterling Brown)

Assignments.

- **Weekly reading of memoir essays and/or assigned memoirs**, to discuss in-class – 15%
- **Weekly craft exercises**; to be workshopped in-class – 10%
- **Daily Writing in a “first-thoughts” notebook** – 5%
- **Multimedia Presentation** – a slide show of materials (documents, images, audio, video, objects, letters, etc.,) gathered as sources and resources for your essay – 10%
- **First draft, memoir essay (to be workshopped)**: 12-15 double-spaced pages -- 20%
- **Final Draft, memoir essay**: 12-15 pages -- 40%

Please note: This class is taught as a writers’ workshop, which means that attendance and participation are crucial. I trust that you’ll be fully present and engaged, both sharing your work and offering constructive feedback to classmates’ work -- with shared purpose and mutual respect.

Class Schedule.

Week 1 – Introduction to the course & to each other. First-thoughts Writing Practice


Group Discussions: Students meet in small groups to discuss memoir ideas and brainstorm source material (one hour)

Week 4 – *Black Is The Body*, Emily Bernard / Craft exercise: Write a childhood anecdote told from two POV’s w/ two different personas

**Essay outline due**: What is the circumstance or situation you’re exploring? What have you come to say, i.e., what is the story? Why are you telling this story now, i.e., what’s fueling it? What’s your agenda?
Craft exercise: Using your parents’ wedding photo, describe what’s captured in the image and what’s outside the frame, and the tension between the two, in 100 words.

Week 5 – Share Wedding-Photo Stories (100-150 words)

Week 6 – Multimedia interlude: Present a 2-3-minute slide show of key documents you have gathered to help tell your story, and discuss ways you might use this material in your memoir essay.

Week 7 – More Multimedia interlude. / PLACE: HOME AS METAPHOR: Home Baked, Alia Volz/ Craft exercise, for your notebooks: Describe a favorite place from the past, putting your present-day self into the setting.

Week 8 - One-on-One Consultations re: 1st drafts of essay (sign up!)

Essay First Drafts Due via email – 10-15 pages max

Week 9 – PERSONAL & PUBLIC HISTORY AS INTERSECTION: Craft exercise: Using your essay drafts, write two paragraphs each of a personal and cultural story which take place at the same time. Use unifying language to connect the two. Use my own example on page 107 of my memoir.

IN-CLASS DISCUSSION: SHARE THE CRAFT EXERCISE.

Week 10 –Workshopping students’ first drafts (A 10-MINUTE EXCERPT) (PLAN TO GO OVER THE TIME PERIOD FOR CLASS)

Week 11 -- Workshopping students’ first drafts

Week 12 –PARENTAL VOICE w/in our own—The Yellow House, Sarah Broome / “When Things Go Missing”, Kathryn Schulz: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/13/when-things-go-missing/
IN-CLASS: DECONSTRUCT K. SCHULZ’ ESSAY/DISCUSS OUTLINES FOR FINAL DRAFT


DUE: Craft exercise: Interview a family member; craft the interview into a scene that could be injected into your essay. Show, don’t tell.

Share in class.

Week 14 – DUE: OUTLINES FOR FINAL DRAFT/ Discuss
Week 15 - Group Work – to discuss revisions & outlines

Week 16 – Final class discussion: ethical & practical concerns / ways to build out your essay/ ideas for publication / writing practices

Final draft memoir essay due via email submission.