CREATIVE NON-FICTION BOOK III:
And Then We Came to the End
ANNE ZIMMERMAN
Stanford University Online Writer’s Studio
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Course Description:

The ending of a book represents both the completion of a writer’s narrative and a finish to the intimate relationship between an author and her topic. This course builds on the skills honed in Creative Non-Fiction Book One and Book Two and is focused on preparing the writer for this inevitable end.

Together we’ll stare down the finish line. Don’t worry; the end of your book doesn’t have to be clear to you. In fact, you may still be working on the thorny middle. Nonetheless, the goal of the class is to help you contextualize the manuscript of your book in its entirety and insure that you have the proper tools to sustain your narrative work long past the end of this quarter.

Readings and lively forum discussions will inform a daily writing practice that is devoted to meeting your personal creative goals. The instructor and cohort will work together to dissect challenging craft issues like character, scene, dialogue, plot, tension, and voice. We will workshop new work and discuss strategies for manuscript organization and potential publication. Over ten weeks, you should produce the equivalent of three chapters or linked essays (at least 50 pages) and submit 20 pages of those pages for workshopping.

You’ll also get to find out how well what you’ve produced so far functions as a book manuscript. This will be explored through individual critiques and your optional submission of a large portion of your book.

Required Reading:


The Writing Life, Annie Dillard, **ISBN-10:** 0060919884:  

**Grading:**

The breakdown of percentages for grading student work are as follows:  
Workshop Piece(s) = 50%  
Participation in Discussion Questions: 15%  
Response letters to other students being workshopped: 35%  
I expect students to take part regularly in the online forum—to discuss published work and to provide feedback to your classmates on their works in progress. This course functions only when everyone takes part in the writing and responding process.

**Typical Weekly Schedule:**

**MONDAY MORNING:** Each new week officially starts on Monday. Every Monday morning, I will send out an email to the class introducing the topic for the week, letting you know a little bit more about the craft point we will be focusing on, the reading we will be doing together, and directing you to the new Forum threads, including your Discussion Points about the week's readings and your weekly writing exercises.

(NOTE: Because many of you may have busy work schedules, the weekend might be your preferred time to work. Because of this, I will always post up the assignments and Forum threads the prior Friday so you can get a head start if you want. If your work is being workshopped, your writing will also be posted on Friday.)

**THROUGHOUT THE WEEK:** Respond to posts, participate in discussions, submit critiques of student work.

**WEDNESDAY:** I will hold weekly office hours in the chatroom for our classroom on Wednesdays (exact time to be determined). Here we can talk more informally, discussing any general questions as well as specific issues you might be having with your exercises or stories. You can get immediate feedback on your concerns from me and from your classmates. You're not required to come to office hours every week, and feel free to drop in for shorter periods of time within that hour. During Week One, I’ll get feedback from the class on what time of day would be most convenient for everyone. We’ll kick Chat off in Week Two. We’ll also do individual One-on-One phone conferences in the latter half of the quarter.

Please also aim to submit a thoughtful critique to your classmates work by **WEDNESDAY** — this gives time for rich discussion and Q+A before the inevitable fall into Friday and the weekend.

**WEEKEND:** IF you want, use the weekend to get a jumpstart on reading assigned chapters and drafting your writing exercise. I won't be in the classroom over the weekend.
but you're welcome to start posting for the next week whenever you're ready. The classroom is always open!

**Brief Syllabus of Weeks 1-10:**
Although this syllabus may change a bit, here’s a general idea of how the quarter will unfold.

**Week 1: Welcome Back!**
How has work in prior quarters helped you establish your personal process? What craft goals do you have for this quarter? How will you push yourself and your manuscript to new highs?

Updates, workshop signup, chat scheduling, revisiting book status and goals for the quarter.
Read: Introduction, Chapters 1+2, “Method” and “Process” in A Writer’s Coach; Prologue, Chapters 1-3 in An Extravagant Hunger

**Week 2: On the Shoulders of Giants**
What makes a great ending? Think about non-fiction books you love – How do their endings build to a satisfying finish? Do you know how your book will end?
Read: Chapter 3, “Structure” in A Writer’s Coach; Chapters 4-6, An Extravagant Hunger

**Week 3: Voice Training**
A writer’s voice is an elusive thing. Distinct and personal, it is the sum of all the work that goes into her written expression. Have your found your voice?
Read Chapter 10, “Voice” in A Writer’s Coach; Chapters 7-9, An Extravagant Hunger

**Week 4: Let’s Go Verb Hunting**
Want your work to get noticed? The more energy your work carries, the more exciting it will be to read. This week we’ll focus on making your book’s engine roar!
Read Chapter 4, “Force” in A Writer’s Coach; Chapters 10-12, An Extravagant Hunger

**Week 5: Cutting the Flab**
Great writers make every word count. This week we’ll pay special attention to our sentences: Are they long and flabby or short and powerful? This week, we’re devoted to tightening our prose.
Read Chapter 5, “Brevity” in A Writer’s Coach; Chapter 13, Epilogue, An Extravagant Hunger

**Week 6: It’s Not You, It’s Me**
No sentence should ever force a second reading. This week we’ll talk about how to write work that is easy and enjoyable to read.
Read Chapter 6, “Clarity” in A Writer’s Coach. Chapters 1-3 The Writing Life

**Week 7: Hitting the Right Note**
Truman Capote claimed “a story can be wrecked by a faulty rhythm in a sentence.” This week we’ll look – and listen – to our work and study sound, cadence, rhythm, and pacing. Read Chapter 7, “Rhythm” in A Writer’s Coach; Chapters 4-6 The Writing Life

**Week 8: It’s Alive!**
Writing succeeds when it makes us think and feel. This week we’ll discuss using scenes, quotes, dialogue, and anecdote to tell our powerful stories.
Read Chapter 8, “Humanity” in A Writer’s Coach; Chapters 7-10 The Writing Life

**Week 9: Writing the Rainbow**
Metaphor, wordplay, and imaginative flourishes all add life to your work. This week we’ll make sure our work seduces – not repels—our readers.
Read Chapter 9, “Color” in A Writer’s Coach; Finish The Writing Life

**Week 10: Certificate of Mastery**
Virtual graduation!
Let’s make plans for the future: Is your book done? If not, what’s left to do?
Read Chapter 12 “Mastery” in A Writer’s Coach.

**How All This Works:**

Each week begins with an introductory craft talk that you’ll find in the Schedule section. To enrich and expand this discussion, I will sometimes attach short readings from some of my favorite writers and teachers of writing. I will also assign reading from the books that I’ve asked you to get for this class to illustrate and illuminate our craft discussions. You’ll find these listed under This Week’s Reading. Under Topics for Discussion I will pose a couple of questions based on the readings to help you think through how craft techniques are actually being used in published fiction, and how you can use them in your own writing. I’ll post an optional writing prompt each week, but you’ll be responsible for generating new work on your book manuscript this quarter. Our group conversation begins when you post your comments and exercises in the Discussion Forum. The Forum is a bulletin board where all the action happens. Here, we’ll have ongoing conversations about your work, the books we read together, and different fiction topics. This is where you’ll post your work, and where our discussions will take place.

**Weekly Writing Exercises:**

This course is the final of three workshop-focused courses in the Creative Nonfiction Book series. Over ten weeks, each student will submit two excerpts of their book-in-progress for workshop. Careful reading of student writing and detailed letters of critique will be central to our learning together.

Because this class is focused on the workshop, instead of structured weekly writing exercises, your weekly “homework” will be the following:
*Read and engage in forum discussions focused on textbooks and elements of craft.

*Provide thoughtful written critique to the work of your classmates.

*Use the information gleaned from this experience (our readings, lectures, conversations, critiques, etc.) to propel your book forward.

My hope is that this structure will provide the ideal book writing experience: You’ll have support from fellow writers who know your work, weekly does of inspiration, compelling conversations about craft, and an intrinsic desire to focus on your personal work. Should that desire lag, don’t worry! There’s a committed group here to cheer you on.

**Word Limits:**
Submissions of up to 3,000 words will allow students to submit large chunks of their book manuscript for peer review.

**Workshop Details:**
Because this course is a continuation from previous courses, we’ll start workshopping right away. Beginning in Week 2, two students per week will post up to 3000 words of their book in the Forum. This quarter, each student will have two long excerpt workshopped. Workshopping involves a careful reading of the piece and the posting of a letter of response to the writer (See Workshop Guidelines below).

On the **Friday before** your workshop week, post your writing in the Forum thread I’ve labeled with your name. Workshop pieces may be up to 3000 words in length.

Please aim to submit a thoughtful critique to your classmates work by **Wednesday** -- this gives time for rich discussion and Q+A before the inevitable fall into Friday and the weekend.

You’ll also get to find out how well what you’ve produced so far functions as a book manuscript. This will be explored through individual critiques and your optional submission of a large portion of your book. More information on this will be supplied in the first week of class.

**Workshop Feedback:**
Thanks to the intimate nature of this course, you’re already familiar with the work of your classmates. This class offers the opportunity to offer even more rich feedback as together we plow through the tough middle sections of book writing. Each week, please read your fellow students work closely and write each author a detailed critique (of a paragraph or more), identifying the strengths of the writing and what could be strengthened further in revision. They will do the same for you.

By editing and responding to other students’ writing, you’ll learn how to bring the same
critical eye to bear upon your own work. Because writing is challenging, it’s important to recognize what’s working well in a draft. This is why I encourage workshop members to start by commenting upon the strengths of a piece, what you loved, and what’s especially original and compelling before offering constructive responses to elements that might need further consideration. The tone of these critiques should always be supportive and respectful, and should move well past a simple “I thought this was really good.” This feedback should help guide your classmates in their revision. As we all know, the goal of the workshop is to provide a safe and stimulating space in which people can take creative risks and grow as writers -- let’s work together to make our time together as productive as possible.

My Commentary:
I will post my own critiques of your writing in the forum, alongside the critiques you receive from your workshop group members. In a traditional classroom setting, I would offer much of my feedback aloud, as part of the whole class’s instruction. In our online class, I make my comments public with the same hope that they will be interesting and instructive not just to the author of the piece but to the rest of the class as well. If, however, you submit a piece of writing about which you feel particularly vulnerable, you may request to receive your comments privately (over email) and I’ll be happy to accommodate you.

My Online Presence:
I’ll post the weekly lecture along with writing assignments and discussion questions by Monday morning. On Monday I’ll also send an email about the coming week’s schedule, discussion threads, who’s work is ‘up’ for workshopping, and any other miscellaneous details.

I’ll generally be online 3+ days a week -- Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday mornings, but expect to pop in and out frequently to participate in the discussion and add my own comments. I encourage you to post your own comments and participate in class discussions at any time during the week. I’ll moderate our discussions, but urge you to remain active even when I am not present -- I’d like us to have a vibrant and active online class environment. If you have a question about course content or assignments, please post it in the forum rather than emailing me directly. There are no silly questions and it’s likely that you classmates may need the answer too. If you have a private question or concern, please feel free to contact me directly. I will respond as promptly as possible to comments and inquiries.

I’ll also host weekly chats on Wednesdays at 1:30 for the first half of the quarter. For the second half of the quarter, I’ll host one-on-one personal conferences via phone to discuss your work and your writing goals. Both the weekly group chats and the individual
conferences are entirely optional.

**A Final Important Note:**

Although many students take online courses with the absolute best intentions of doing every last assignment, "real life"—family, illness, professional deadlines—often has a way of making that impossible. Sometimes, the frustration this causes prompts students to drop completely out of the class. Hold on! If you have to skip a couple exercises, this is also okay. As long as you're getting most of the work done and commenting on your classmates' submissions, you'll be fine. Please don’t hesitate to get in touch if you have any concerns about your standing. If you foresee some bumps in the road, let me know. We’ll work together to find the best possible solution for you.

This is your class. I’m the guide, yes, but the quality of our discussions will depend upon your engagement, insightfulness, and good humor. This course will be as good as you (and you and you and you and you and you….) give. So, please participate fully and generously in discussions. Read your classmates’ work with a keen eye and a sense of possibility. And please, let me know if there’s anything I can do to make this a better experience for you. I welcome suggestions, detours, and even shortcuts on gravel roads. If there’s something you want to discuss, let me know. If there’s an assignment that you think would work in this class, tell me. This is your class.

One more note: writing workshops are built on trust. I think this is even truer in online workshops where we’re not all sitting together in the same room. To build this trust, it’s important that we all agree that the work you present here stays within the workshop. If you love someone’s piece and want to share it with your husband/wife/best friend/crazy cousin, ask the writer first. Chances are, she (or he) will be thrilled and give you the go ahead. But please first get permission.