



## **Creative Nonfiction: Memoir, Turning Your Life Into Literature**

**Course Code:** CNF 46 W

**Quarter:** Spring 2021

**Instructor:** Julia Scheeres

### **Introduction**

How do you take the messy stuff of your life and shape it into a compelling, streamlined story interests strangers? The answer – on display in every successful memoir – is both complicated and completely natural. In short, memoir lies at the intersection of fiction and nonfiction, truth and art.

In this course, we will explore the boundaries of our own stories. We will dig deep into our memories to identify the best material – the drama, turning points, tension and character arcs of our lives. We will discuss the importance of theme and throughlines. We will hone our craft – learning how to create powerful scenes, deft summaries and insightful reflection and backstory. Along the way, we'll glean wisdom from close readings of standout memoirs by Roberto Lovato, Mary Karr, Greg Bottoms, Jeannette Winterson, and others. Weekly writing prompts will build toward a longer excerpt, which will be workshopped in the second half of the course. Students should come away from this class with a sturdy foundation on which to model the rest of their manuscript.

### **Course Texts:**

- "This Boy's Life" by Tobias Wolf
- "Wave" by Sonali Deraniyagala
- Shorter excerpts by other memoirists (I will provide copies)

### **Course Materials**

I will include supplemental material such as craft essays and author interviews. This supplemental material is entirely optional. My hope is that the materials will deepen your understanding of the points I've made in class as well as your understanding of how creative nonfiction works in general.

### **Schedule**

- Weeks 1-5: students do short (250-750 word) craft exercises.
- Weeks 6-10: students workshop up to 2,500 words.
- I will hold a class Zoom each Friday at 2 p.m. P.T. This informal chat will be used to recap the week's lessons and allow time for a more spontaneous

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discussion and questions. These chats are not mandatory, but are a fun way to interact with the class. These sessions will be recorded for folks who can't make it.

### Grading:

- No Grade Requested (NGR)
  - This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.
- Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)
  - Participation in discussion forums
- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)
  - 10% of grade based on weekly exercises
  - 50% of grade based on your workshop submission
  - 40% of grade based on participation: a combination of responding to your peers' writing, attendance at Zoom sessions, and activity in forum threads.

### Schedule

#### Week 1: Choose Your Material

Deep thoughts: Before sitting down to write, it's useful to identify the time period your memoir will cover. Unlike autobiography -- which covers an entire lifespan -- memoir focuses on a discrete time period, relationship, or topic. Narrowing down your material at the beginning of your project will help you waste less time in the long run.

Read: "This Boy's Life," by Tobias Wolf, pages 1 – 56, Anne Lamott's essay, "Shitty First Drafts"

Write: 1) The jacket copy for your book. (max 250 words)

#### Week 2: Find Your Theme

Deep thoughts: Your memoir needs a theme that unifies the material and lends it a universal appeal. What larger topic does your book illuminate? *Overcoming addiction/ a violent relationship/ depression? The long road to redemption? The enduring bond of sibling love? The nature of violence?* A theme gives your book universal appeal -- a way for readers to relate to the material. It will also help you determine where to open your book

Read: "Life," pages 57– 116, opening, "The Liars' Club," by Mary Karr

Write: A list of turning points (500-750 words)

OR

Option B: If you came into this class knowing what you wanted to write about, feel free to swap out the assignment and instead work on producing sections of your opening, moving sequentially. I do encourage you to do the exercises, which should be useful, but I include this choice for those of you who would really prefer to work more independently. Regardless of which option you choose, be aware that you will be turning in a chapter in on the date you signed up to be workshopped, and I encourage you to build it from the writing that you generate in these exercises. (750 words max).

### **Week 3: The Building Blocks of Story**

Deep thoughts: In creative nonfiction, storytelling is everything; writers must entertain the readers even as they enlighten the reader. What are the building blocks of story? Scene, summary and musing. We'll consider each element in turn.

Read: "Life," pages 117 – 178, opening pages, "Wild," by Cheryl Strayed

Write: Option A: Take one of those meaningful events you listed in Week Two and develop it into a detailed scene. (750 words max.)

OR

Option B: Continue work on your memoir. (750 words max.)

### **Week 4: Gradations of Truth**

Deep thoughts: The various subgenres of creative nonfiction are held to different standards of truth. Journalism is beholden to facts. Memoir falls in a gray area where authors recreate scenes and dialogue to convey the "emotional truth" of their experience. But when do memoirists get into hot water with fabrication? How can journalists create vivid scenes when they didn't witness an event?

Read: "Life," pages 179 -233, "A Million Little Lies," about the James Frey scandal.

Write: Option A: Take one of those meaningful events you listed in Week Two and develop it into a detailed scene. (750 words max.)

OR

Option B: Continue work on your memoir. (750 words max.)

### **Week 5: Eliciting Emotion**

Deep thoughts: How do we elicit an emotional response in the reader without falling into "purple prose?" How do we artfully convey our characters' emotions through their words and actions? How do we write about injustice without sermonizing? Every word you choose signals an emotional response in your reader. Don't tell the reader how to feel, show them.

Read: "Life," pages 237 – end, opening Greg Bottoms' "Angelhead"

Write: Option A: Write a scene that elicits a strong emotion in the reader (750 words max.)

OR

Option B: Continue work on your memoir. (750 words max.)

### **Week 6: Developing Character**

Deep thoughts: Writers use different techniques to breathe life into the people they write about, be they a beloved yet eccentric Southern Aunt or a serial murderer. How do we convey a child's sense of wonder and naiveté on the page? Or a refugee's sense of dislocation? What interesting verbal tick, worldview, sartorial habit or way of walking makes your characters stand out? In short, what makes individuals unique?

Read: "Wave," Sonali Deraniyagala, pages 1 – 35, Excerpt from Jeannette Winterson's "Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?"

Write: **WORKSHOP BEGINS! UP TO 2,500 WORDS**

### **Week 7: Conjuring the Past**

Deep thoughts: Because creative nonfiction is based on true events, you may need to do some amount of research and reporting. Memoirists may revisit childhood haunts and talk to family members to fill in memory gaps. Another way to tap into a past era is by using sensory triggers.

Read: "Wave," pages 84 – 131, Excerpt from Roberto Lovato's "Unforgetting"

Write: *Workshop, continued UP TO 3,000 WORDS*

### **Week 8: Difficult Subjects**

Deep thoughts: Some people find certain topics, such as sexual abuse or struggles with addiction, off-putting. How can we write about difficult subjects in a way that won't repel readers? What about family members who don't want to be written about? We'll also talk about how to avoid being sued for your words.

Read: "Wave," pages 84 – 131

Write: *Workshop, continued*

### **Week 9: The Joys of Revision**

Deep thoughts: For some writers, yours truly included, the careful reconsideration of their prose is even more thrilling than the initial word dump. When we revise our sentences, we can linger over them, pondering word choices and metaphors, infusing our work with the kind of fastidious attention that elevates ordinary writing into literature. But how to begin the revision process?

Read: "Wave," pages 132 - 189

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*Write: Workshop, continued*

### **Week 10: Moving Forward**

Deep thoughts: By now you've worked hard to set the stage for the rest of your book. You've introduced your main character(s), let the reader know what's at stake and infused the narrative with drama. Here we'll discuss the next steps in the process, including suggestions for plotting out the rest of the book and getting published.

Read: "Wave," pages 190 - end

*Write: Workshop, continued*

**Congratulations! You've finished!**

*\*\*\* This syllabus is subject to change*