Course Title: "Writing the Globe: Travel Writing in the 21st Century"
Course Code: EGL 46
Instructor: Peter Fish

COURSE SUMMARY

Sister Sarah Joan: You clearly love Sacramento.
Christine “Lady Bird” McPherson: I do?
Sister Sarah Joan: You write about Sacramento so affectionately and with such care.
Christine “Lady Bird” McPherson: I was just describing it.
Sister Sarah Joan: Well, it comes across as love.
Christine “Lady Bird” McPherson: Sure, I guess I pay attention.
Sister Sarah Joan: Don’t you think maybe they are the same thing? Love and attention?

“Lady Bird,” Greta Gerwig

Great travel writing makes a place, and the people who live there, come to unforgettable life on the page. How do you do that? Follow Sister Sarah Joan’s advice: write with love and attention. This course will help you take a place you love—understanding that love is often complex and often mixed with other emotions—and capture in words what makes it unforgettable. We’ll show how to take individual moments in a journey and link them together to tell a vivid and moving story. We’ll explore the different sub-genres of the travel essay, including the personal memoir, the reported travel story, and that most delicious of hybrid genres, the travel/food story. We’ll work on finding then honing your own writerly voice. Finally, because of all genres, travel writing most requires that you enjoy doing it, we will have fun.

In this course you will:

- Learn to register the world around you. Sharpen your sensory skills—looking, listening, more—in real time and in memory.
- Find your story. You want to write a travel essay about the Grand Canyon. Within that vast canyon, what’s your story—the one narrative only you can write?
- Write vivid scenes. Like novels and movies, a successful travel essay is composed of strong individual scenes that come to life through observation, dialogue, and dramatic suspense.
- Build your narrative arc. In a successful travel essay, individual scenes link to build a sustained story that will inform, entertain and move the reader.
• Find your traveler’s voice. The best travel writing reads like you at your most passionate, entertaining and insightful.
• Learn how to revise your own work, and how to give constructive advice to other writers.
• Take a travel essay from initial idea to polished completion.
• Learn about the business of travel writing: how and where to get published.

Please see course page for full description and additional details.

NOTE ABOUT LIVE ATTENDANCE AND RECORDING

These classes will be recorded. However, EGL 46 is a writing workshop, run like an extended magazine story conference. We’ll be responding to and critiquing each other’s story ideas and writing on a weekly basis. For that reason, live attendance at all or almost all of the classes is key. Classes will be recorded for you to use as reference. But live attendance is important to making the class work for you.

STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

• Completion of reading assignments and participation in discussions
• By week 10, final draft of a travel essay submitted to instructor (600-1500 words)
• In-class and take-home writing exercises, including first drafts of selected portions of your travel essay
• Weekly engagement with your fellow students’ writing

GRADE OPTIONS AND REQUIREMENTS:

Students have three grading options for Continuing Studies courses:

1. Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass) – written work is required in this class; letter grades will be determined as follows:

   Participation in discussions: 20%
   Weekly writing assignments: 20%
   Completed travel essay: 40%
   Response to fellow writers’ workshop submissions: 20%

2. Credit/No Credit (CR/NC) - participation is required. You must receive at least 70 percent according to the letter grade formula to receive credit.

3. No Grade Requested (NGR) - no work is required; No credit shall be received; No proof of attendance can be provided. (Not suitable for those requiring proof of attendance/completion.)
Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final class meeting, by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies program.

TENTATIVE WEEKLY OUTLINE

WEEK ONE: CREATING A SENSE OF PLACE

From Bali to Bakersfield, travel writing begins with summoning an indelible sense of place. We’ll explore methods of doing that, whether you’re reporting on a place in real-time, or working to recreate one from memory. We’ll be reading from contemporary fiction writers—among them, Donna Tartt and Andrew Sean Greer—particularly adept at portraying places, and we’ll be taking an on-campus field trip to hone our own place-summoning skills. Short written assignment TBA.

WEEK TWO: WHAT IS A TRAVEL ESSAY?

The travel essay is a sprawling, untidy genre that ranges from intimate personal memoir to tough-minded reportage. What good travel essays share is what all good essays share—they need to start at Point A and move to Point C (maybe even to Point D or E). The reader needs to know and feel more, know or feel differently at the end of the essay than she did at its start. To achieve that goal the writer must pick a good essay topic and pick the right approach to the topic—creative challenges we’ll explore in this class session. In-class discussion of written assignments. Writing assignment: for the following week’s class, bring in a one-paragraph description of the place or experience you want to write about for your essay and how you hope to approach it.

WEEK THREE: FINDING YOUR STORY, WRITING POWERFUL SCENES

We’ll start this class session working as magazine editors work—talking (insightfully and encouragingly) with our fellow class members as they present their essay ideas. Does the idea seem interesting, workable? Are there ways it might be made more interesting, surprising, compelling? We then move onto the individual scene. If the travel essay is a Cartier necklace, the scene is the individual diamond: it needs to sparkle. We’ll explore how good writers make sure their scenes dazzle. Writing assignment: write one scene from your travel essay.

WEEK FOUR: THE CRAFT OF FACT

The travel essay is non-fiction: even the most lyrical essay rests on a solid bed of facts. How do you decide what facts you need to know for your essay, how do you uncover them, how do you decide what to leave out and what to put in? And how do you do this gracefully, compellingly? Writing assignment: write a paragraph or two of fact-based exposition that will be useful for your essay.
WEEK FIVE: PEOPLE

Places are dead without the people who live in them. Whether you’re writing a reported-in-real-time essay or a memoir of a travel experience long past, you’ll need to incorporate the human voice into your story. Doing that successfully means training your ear to capture the way people actually talk. It means learning how much of what they say will work for your essay. It often means learning how to interview people—to get them to share their most evocative thoughts, feelings and memories of the place you’re writing about. This session will focus on the craft of interviewing and the craft of incorporating accurate yet evocative quotes into your essay. At some point mid-way through the course, we’ll be devoting at least half a class to the craft of writing about food.

WEEK SIX: STRUCTURE

“Structure,” says the distinguished non-fiction writer Susan Orlean, “is essential. Write as many pretty sentences as you want, but if they aren’t organized well, they’ll just fly away.” This class session will focus on how to find the write structure for your travel essay—the one that helps you tell the story you want to tell.

WEEK SEVEN: VOICE

Who do you want to sound like when you’re telling your travel story? Ideally, yourself—perfected. How do you find that person? This class will focus on the mystery of the writer’s voice—discovering it, polishing it, while keeping it your own. This week also starts our in-class workshopping of our travel essays—first drafts of completed essays, or drafts of partially completed essays, the goal being to help all class members finish a polished final draft by Week Ten.

WEEKS EIGHT AND NINE:

These class sessions will be substantially devoted to in-class workshopping of travel essay drafts. In addition, I plan to be bringing in at least one guest travel editor to share his or her expertise and insights.

WEEK TEN

Wrapping up. Any class members who would like to share their final essay with the class for discussion are encouraged to do so. I’ll also be giving advice about the best ways of getting your work published, in print and online.