FAMILY MEMOIR: MAKING THE SKELETONS DANCE
Stanford Continuing Studies, Winter 2015
Instructor: Anne Zimmerman

COURSE DESCRIPTION:
“If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton, you might as well make it dance. —George Bernard Shaw

In this ten-week, all-levels course devoted to writing the family memoir, our skeletons will dance and our ghosts will howl, as we uncover great personal and universal truths through the intimate study of family. We’ll begin by excavating our memories. Next we’ll tackle our people—good, bad, or ugly, we’ll work to render them authentically on the page. Along the way, we’ll learn how research and interviews can help us write even richer and more authentic prose. Our attempts will be guided by the close reading of Blake Bailey’s recent family memoir, The Splendid Things We Planned and shorter selections from Mary Karr, Jeanette Walls, J.R. Moehringer, and others. Weekly writing prompts will help unlock a larger personal story that we’ll workshop in the second half of the course. During the quarter, you should expect to write twenty pages (with the possibility of more!) of polished work and gain a true understanding of the bigger story and deeper truths that you, as a writer, are hoping to share. After all—every family has a story to tell, and this one is all yours.

REQUIRED READING:
Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art (Second Edition) by Judith Barrington
http://www.amazon.com/Writing-Memoir-From-Truth-Second/dp/0933377509

The Splendid Things We Planned: A Family Portrait by Blake Bailey
http://www.amazon.com/Splendid-Things-We-Planned-Portrait/dp/0393239578/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1420668011&sr=1-1&keywords=the+splendid+things+we+planned

SUPPLEMENTAL READING:
It’s always challenging to pick the ‘perfect’ books that will both instruct and inspire each writer’s personal project. In addition to the required texts (listed above), I’ll occasionally post links to essays on the web that will help round out our discussions. These are optional, but I hope you’ll read them too.

Occasionally students have already read the assigned memoir, which is fantastic. If that’s the case (and if you feel competent enough to discuss a book you read in the past with your cohort), I’m happy to help you pick a different book that will inspire continued work on your individual project.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:
Short writing exercises submitted in Weeks 1-5 will pave the way for a longer final project that you’ll share with the group on a date you pick during Weeks 6-9. Your longer
submission may or may not be based on work done earlier in the quarter – that’s up to you.

In addition to structured weekly writing exercises, your weekly “homework” will be the following:

*Read and engage in forum discussions focused on required reading.

*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 personal work forward.

My hope is that this structure will provide the ideal 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.

**TYPICAL WEEKLY SCHEDULE:**

Each week, you’ll log onto Canvas and read the “Lecture and Lesson” page. This will include my art/craft/process thoughts to start the week, as well as both writing and reading assignments, any optional materials or links, and other announcements.

**FRIDAY:** All the materials for the coming week will be up by Friday afternoon. This way you can start your work for the following week over the weekend if you choose.

**WEDNESDAY:** Writing exercises (for the first five weeks) and workshop responses (for weeks six through nine) are due by Wednesday at 2 p.m. PST. Both writing exercises and workshop pieces can be posted in the FORUM. You’ll have my response by Friday afternoon to any work posted before the deadline.

**MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY:** Post your responses to the readings and discussion questions, respond to the work of your peers, ask any questions you have. Please post any questions about assignments, readings, or course content on the Forum for everyone to see, rather than sending it by email. There is a “Questions and Comments” thread so that you can ask questions or discuss ideas that don’t fit anywhere else.

**WEEKENDS:** Here is a chance for you to get ahead on the week’s work if you wish to post exercises or responses to discussion questions for the following week.

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 on-line class environment.

**TO REITERATE:** If you have a question about course content or assignments, please post it in the forum so that all may see both your question and my response. There are no silly queries and it’s likely that you classmates will be curious about the answer too. If you have a private question or concern, please contact me directly. The best way to
contact me is through the Canvas messaging system, but you can also email me at zimmerman_anne@yahoo.com

A NOTE ABOUT THE SENSITIVE NATURE OF MEMOIR:
All stories shared this quarter will be nurtured and respected. If you have questions or concerns about the required reading, about sharing your own work, or about content shared in the forum or how to respond to it, please contact me swiftly and directly.

POSTING AND SHARING YOUR WORK:
In Weeks 1-5 you’ll respond to the posted writing prompt, sharing your short work with everyone in the course. You’ll also offer brief, constructive criticism to four of your classmates.

In Week 6, we’ll segue into the workshop portion of the quarter, in which we’ll read fewer (but longer!) submissions each week and devote more time to constructing thoughtful responses. As a writer, workshopping involves the presentation of polished work to the group. As a reader, workshopping involves a careful reading of the piece and the posting of a letter of response to the writer (See Critique Guidelines below).

Workshop submissions are due on the Friday before we read your work. Post your writing in the Forum thread I’ve labeled with your name. Workshop pieces may be up to 4,000 words in length (~15 double spaced, typed pages in 12 point font). Please aim to submit a thoughtful critique to your classmates work as soon as possible so that we may have rich discussion and Q+A before moving into a new week.

If a student participates fully in the course, they will have written and received instructor and student feedback on 5 short exercises and one longer piece/final submission, the equivalent of more than 20 double-spaced, typed pages.

WORD LIMITS:
I ask that you keep your weekly writing exercises to approximately 750 words and your workshop submissions to no more than 4000 words (~15 pages, double-spaced and in 12-point font). If you turn in more than this, you will not receive feedback on the writing that goes beyond the maximum. If the class shows an interest, I will happily create a special forum thread for students who want to write and share more than this, but I can’t offer feedback on this additional writing.

ONE FINAL NOTE:
Although many students take online courses with the absolute best intentions of doing every last little assignment, I’ve never taught a course into which the rest of life—work, illness, children, the illness of children (germy, book-reading scoundrels!)—did not intrude. When this happens, I counsel a less is more approach: do what you can, when you can, rather than dropping out in frustration over not completing every assignment two days early, sans typos. Nothing terrible will happen if you miss a week of reading or don’t hand in an assignment. As long as you hand in a full-length piece and participate fully in the workshops of your classmates, you’ll be fine. Even if you have to take a
couple of weeks completely away from the class, you can always come back. We’ll welcome you.

CRITIQUE GUIDELINES:
During the workshop portion of the class, you are expected to 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. These responses will be posted for all to read.

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 a writing course 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.

Please note: A commitment to the value of sharing and receiving feedback on work is essential to this course. If you’d like to receive thoughtful comments on your own work, you’re expected to make comments on others’ submissions. If you fail to do this, you may lose the opportunity to post submissions for others to read.

MY RESPONSES:
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.

WEB CHATS:
In weeks 3, 6 & 9 (more frequently if there’s interest) I’ll host a forty-minute long video “chat” session. This session is an online “office hour” of sorts, but in a group context. Attendance is optional—you’re all busy people, with very different schedules and responsibilities. This is an opportunity to gather in a group and mimic the give-and-take you’d find in a traditional classroom. We’ll discuss the readings, answer one another’s questions in regard to writing techniques, and kvetch.

GRADING:
For those of you who are taking this course for a grade, the breakdown is as follows. Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final class meeting (Friday of the last week of class) by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies department.

To Receive an ‘A’ in this class: All of the weekly writing assignments along with your final project were completed and submitted on time. You made insightful contributions to most discussions and provided constructive, thoughtful comments to the work posted by your peers.

To Receive a ‘B’ in this class: Three of the five weekly writing assignments along with your final project were completed and submitted on time. You made active and insightful contributions to many discussions and provided constructive, thoughtful comments to the work posted by your peers.

To Receive a ‘C’ in this class: Two of the five weekly writing assignments along with your final project were completed and submitted on time. You made insightful contributions to some discussions and provide constructive, thoughtful comments to the work posted by your peers.

As you can see, 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.

WHAT TO EXPECT, WEEK BY WEEK:

Week 1: Welcome! What is memoir?
Reading: Selections from Writing the Memoir
To Do & Discuss: Introductions; essential questions to guide our reading and writing; pieces of inspiration. Logistics and workshop sign-up. Respond to writing prompt and student work.

Week 2: Who Cares? Why write the family memoir?
Reading: Selections from Writing the Memoir
To Do & Discuss: Truth, composite characters, changing names and other details you may be worried about now that you’re actively writing honestly about your family. Respond to writing prompt and student work.

Week 3: Memory: “The first memory I have in the world is of death and tears.”
Reading: Selections from Writing the Memoir
To Do & Discuss: Finding material by digging through memory. Respond to writing prompt and student work.
Week 4: People: “I was sitting in a taxi, wondering if I had overdressed for the evening, when I looked out the window and saw Mom rooting through a Dumpster.”
Reading: Selections from Writing the Memoir
To Do & Discuss: Writing about the people you know. Respond to writing prompt and student work.

Week 5: History: “We are a Mormon family with roots in Utah since 1847.”
Reading: Selections from Writing the Memoir
To Do & Discuss: Grounding your memoir in a specific place and time. Respond to writing prompt and student work.

Week 6: Begin Workshop of longer submissions
Reading: Selections from Writing the Memoir; begin The Splendid Things We Planned

Week 7: Workshop
Reading: The Splendid Things We Planned

Week 8: Workshop
Reading: The Splendid Things We Planned

Week 9: Workshop
Reading: The Splendid Things We Planned

Week 10: Epilogue
Reading: Selections from Writing the Memoir and The Splendid Things We Planned
To Do & Discuss: Course wrap up; further goals for writing.