Course Title: Writing the Wild: Nature and Outdoor Writing  
Course Code: EGL 82 W  
Instructor: Brendan Jones

Course Description

This course is designed for writers interested in understanding and participating in the reflective and explorative tradition of nature writing. Together we will consider fundamental artistic and ethical questions, such as: Is writing about the environment and its destruction of a higher artistic order than writing about urban life? Is nature sacred? Using *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*, we will spend time looking into the roots of nature writing before inserting ourselves into the conversation with our own work. Students will focus on building an individual essay informed by the outdoors, with the goal of creating a deeply layered, original piece worthy of publication. We will close the class with a survey of outlets concerned committed to publishing work on the wild.

Required Texts

- *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*, Edited by Robert Finch and John Elder
- *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire*, John Haines
- *Wild*, Cheryl Strayed
- *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard

Grading

Students will have three options for a grade in this class:

- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass) – written work and participation is required
- Credit/No Credit (CR/NC) – participation determined by instructor
- No Grade Requested (NGR) – no credit shall be received. No work will be required.

*Please Note*: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.

Class

It is my goal in this class to (within the bounds of an internet connection) create an intimate seminar experience. We will be addressing ourselves to larger questions with important stakes; participation, and a willingness to dive headlong into these questions, will be critical. I anticipate spikes of discussion as we
pick apart what John Haines means when he writes, “The physical domain of the country had its counterpart in me. The trails I made led outward into the hills and swamps, but they led inward also.” Or Terry Tempest Williams when she says, “Wildness reminds us what it means to be human, what we are connected to rather than what we are separate from.” Discussions will inform and complicate our own thinking as we begin to consider our essays.

**Written Work**

Along with weekly reading, students will be asked to do brief reflection pieces (750 words). Work will be posted up on the class board for discussion. In the second half of the class students will embark upon a larger writing project – either an essay, or a series of linked pieces, up to 5000 words. We will do small group feedback for the early work, then address the larger pieces as a class. Students will leave the course with a tightly argued, persuasive piece of writing.

**Readings**

In order to write effectively about the natural world, one should be familiar with the roots of the tradition. When someone states in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* that nature writing is over after Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild*, we must be able to give an informed answer as to why this is, or is not so. Beginning with the romantic age, we will survey nature writing, reading up to the contemporary moment. Selected pieces will fill out and inform our own work, as we begin to locate ourselves within a specific dialectic. Reading assignments will be sensitive to the flow of discussion board, and the larger thought-migration of the class.

**Communication**

As we all know, comments received electronically can be misconstrued, or read in a way that is unintended. Therefore an extreme sensitivity toward one another, along with honesty, respect, and a generosity of spirit, is mandatory for this course. Students are expected to act with professionalism and courtesy, neither demanding too much from one another, or the instructor. I will be online each weekday to respond to student posts and will offer feedback on each assignment, but will be offline on the weekends.

**Weekly Routine**

- Log onto Canvas and read the "Lecture" page. Here you will find a lecture to being the week, along with the writing and reading assignments and any optional material. I’ll post by Friday afternoon to give you the weekend to read and start the reflection pieces.
- Complete the writing assignments and post to the discussion board by **Wednesday at 5 p.m. (Alaska Standard Time)**.
- Do assigned readings and respond to discussion questions by **Thursday at 5 p.m. (Alaska Standard Time)**.
- Read your classmates' writing assignments in your small group (four people) and respond on the discussion board by **Friday at 5 p.m. (Alaska Standard Time)**.
- Check the discussion boards throughout the week! Please contribute regularly. While I have given deadlines for assignments, please post as early as you can, to allow your colleagues more time to respond.

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
365 Lasuen St. Stanford, CA 94305
continuingstudies@stanford.edu
650-725-2650
• We will have a weekly Zoom video chat, ideally at a time that suits everyone. Please do your best to attend!
• On Sunday evening the discussion boards for the week will be closed.

My Part

As an Alaskan, living on a remote island in the middle of a 17 million acre forest of hemlock and cedar and spruce, I am intrigued by the relationship between the wild and civilization. Nature challenges and informs how we perceive our own lives, as well as one another, and I’m interested in how this desire to share our experiences with others can inform and change others.

As a classroom of writers interested in similar questions, I will be looking forward to reading your thoughts, and entering into discussion. This means I will be checking my email regularly for posts and news. When I receive written assignments, I will provide comments, along with a letter detailing my thoughts. I’ll be involved in all readings and technical conversations, and will share any knowledge I have on writing, engagement with the natural world (is commercial fishing ethical? Etc.) and publishing.

Lastly, please do contact me on an individual thread on the discussion board labeled “Thoughts & Questions” if you have even the slightest question concerning direction of the class, or your own work. I will commit to sharing all my tricks of the trade, from strategies for writer’s block to how to build a fire in a blow. I’ll also be curious and open to any and all suggestions you might have for further readings or exercises.

Weekly Outline:

Week 1:
Introductions & discussion of goals for the course
Reading:  
Meriwether Lewis, from *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*  
Ralph Waldo Emerson, from *Nature*  
Cheryl Strayed, *Wild*

Week 2:
Meeting the Wild
Reading:  
Charles Darwin, from *Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle*  
Henry David Thoreau, from *Walden* and *The Maine Woods*  
John Muir, *The Water Ouzel*

Week 3:
Rules of Engagement
Reading:  
Barry Lopez, from *Arctic Dreams*  
Farley Mowat, from *Never Cry Wolf*

Week 4:
Pushing Your Reader: Writing the Wild as Political Act
Reading:
Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*
Bill McKibben, from *The End of Nature*

**Week 5:**
**Solitary Reflection**
**Reading:**
John Haines, from *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire*
Annie Dillard, from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*
Cheryl Strayed, *Wild*

**Week 6:**
**The Nature Essay**
**Reading:**
Annie Dillard, *Total Eclipse*
Terry Tempest Williams, *The Clan of One-breasted Women*

**Week 7:**
**Ecstatic Outdoors**
**Reading:**
CLASS PIECES
Diane Ackerman, *Why Leaves Turn Color in the Fall*
Jim Harrison, *The Beginner’s Mind*

**Week 8:**
**Solitude to Crowds**
**Reading:**
CLASS PIECES
Edward Hoagland, *Thoughts on Returning to the City After Five Months on a Mountain Where the Wolves Howled*
Wallace Stegner, *Coda: A Wilderness Letter*

**Week 9:**
**Animal Love**
**Reading:**
CLASS PIECES
Alice Walker, *Am I Blue*
John Haines, from *The Stars, The Snow, the Fire*
Annie Dillard, from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

**Week 10:**
**Sharing Your Work**
**Reading:**
CLASS PIECES
Janisse Ray, *Forest Beloved*
John Haines, from *The Stars, The Snow, the Fire*
Annie Dillard, from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*