Course Title: Memoir and Personal Essays That Matter
Course Code: CNF 47 W
Instructor: Monique Wentzel

Course Summary

This course is intended for anyone who has a personal story to write whether you’ve begun the process, have stacks of untapped journals and no idea what to do with them, or simply have the inspiration but don’t know where to start. We’ll keep in mind the premise that everyone has a story worth telling, and that ultimately our work over the ten weeks of this course is to explore ways to tell it with clarity, honesty, and integrity. As Mary Karr puts it, the memoirist’s job (and essayist’s) is “to help the average person come in.” Feedback from others is an invaluable tool, allowing us to gauge where we’re writing our stories in such a way that invites others in or not. To that end, a crucial part of this course will be both the supportive community we create and the helpful feedback we give one another on written exercises and the piece for workshop. Writing personal material is a vulnerable endeavor, but as we’ll see, the most compelling work derives much of its power from this very vulnerability. Keep in mind that simply getting your story on the page in the first place is a huge accomplishment, one that we’ll strive to value in ourselves and in our peers.

Due to the personal nature of the material that students write and share in this course, it’s of the utmost importance that what everything we read in the class stays there. It’s also essential that our comments and responses to each others’ writing focus on craft; how the words on the page are working rather than what any given story is about. There will be more specific guidance about this as we approach the workshop segment of the course.

Weekly Routine

Each week you’ll log into Canvas and work through the week’s module. I’ll be online at least once a day Monday-Friday but the beauty of an online course is that you can show up at your convenience. I’ll post lectures, reading assignments and discussion questions first thing Monday morning. The sooner in the week you contribute and post your work, the more responses you’ll likely get. Written exercises will be due Wed at 2pm PST. Weeks 6-10 are the workshop part of the course and pieces to be workshopped will be due Friday by midnight PST so that everyone has the weekend to read them. Do your best to keep up, bearing in mind that your own writing takes priority and it’s okay if at some point you may not be able to do everything in the course justice. Every module will consist of five main parts:

1) A written lecture on a craft topic relevant to personal non-fiction writing.

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2) A reading assignment from one of our three required texts. We’ll read two very different styles of memoir and a selection of personal essays by various authors, all but one from the Touchstone anthology. You’ll likely resonate with some of the reading material and not care for all of it. Reading with a good radar for what moves you and what doesn’t is key. Keep in mind that as writers, we sometimes learn more from work that we don’t care for, so long as we read as writers. Reading as a writer means reading with an eye towards craft and looking beyond our reactions to how the language is working, how it’s creating any given effect in us. There is quite a bit of reading for this course, so our focus is generally global. How do these writers organize their stories? How do they use scene and incorporate backstory? What themes or questions guide the work and what draws us in as readers? I’ll occasionally post supplemental, non-required reading material like craft essays, articles about memoir and the science of memory, or interviews with writers.

Required Texts: *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed  
*Speak, Memory* by Vladimir Nabokov  
*The Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Non-Fiction* edited by Lex Williford and Michael Martone

3) An optional live audio/visual Zoom session. This will take place on Fridays 12-1 PST and is a kind of informal meeting during which we can use part of the time to share our thoughts about craft, the writing process, and establishing a writing habit. We’ll devote part of the hour to new writing prompts.

4) A writing exercise. Each week I’ll provide at least two writing exercises, or prompts. These exercises are intended to help you generate new material or illuminate new directions you can go with existing material. If you’re so inspired, do them all, but you’ll choose one to post on Canvas. If you’re coming to the course without a particular story in mind to write about, use whichever exercise felt the most generative, the most juicy, and expand that into your longer workshop piece. The word “exercise” sounds inconsequential, and yes, you want to cultivate a kind of looseness when writing them—write them raw and see what’s there. Occasionally an exercise, maybe because they are simply exploratory, can surprise us and turn into unexpected and worthwhile material. You’ll share these written exercises for informal class responses and receive feedback from the instructor on each exercise.

5) A Discussion Thread. I’ll post questions to initiate discussions about the readings and craft topics. Here we can also talk about how to develop a regular writing habit, writing challenges we’re facing and progress we’re making, etc.

During weeks 6-10, we’ll hold a workshop in which we’ll read everyone’s work, a few pieces each week, and offer honest, compassionate and constructive feedback. I’ll continue to give writing exercises, but they’ll be optional beginning week 6.
Keep in mind that the most important thing is that you are generating new material. I realize that as you’re trying to write about your life, life is still happening. If you run into trouble or are feeling behind, don’t worry, just email me as soon as possible.

**Grade Options and Requirements**

- 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)
  - Credit will be determined by regular participation, as determined by the instructor. Must turn in written piece for workshop to receive credit.
- Letter Grades are evaluated as follows:
  - 50% workshop submission
  - 40% participation (discussion threads, workshop critiques and responding to fellow classmates’ work)
  - 10% writing exercises
  Grading writing is subjective; grades will be based on how much time and effort you put into the class, both in terms of your own work, and in participating in our online writing community with thoughtful, insightful responses.

*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.

**Weekly Outline**

**Week 1:** Introduction: What is memoir? A brief history of the genre. The difference between autobiography and memoir. Why do we care and what makes good autobiographical material? Why fiction and memoir are closer cousins than you might think.

Special Assignment: Write two paragraphs to introduce yourself to the class. Sign up for workshop by the end of the week.

Weekly writing exercise (choose one): Firsts and Lasts
- Diving In: Writing From Your Deathbed

Reading Assignment: *Wild* pp. 1-101

**Week 2:** Finding your way into your story. The importance of voice in personal non-fiction.

Weekly Writing Exercise (choose one): Letter Writing
- The Imagination as an Act Of Empathy

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Reading Assignment: *Wild* pp.103-205

**Week 3:** Writing the Scene vs. Explaining the Story

Writing Exercise: Expanding a True Life Story Into a Scene  
The One-Inch Window

Reading assignment: finish *Wild* pp.205-311

**Week 4:** Choosing a Salient Detail to Bring a Scene Alive

Weekly Writing Exercise: Your Childhood Kitchen  
Writing On the Periphery

Reading Assignment: *Speak, Memory* by Vladimir Nabokov, chap.1-4

**Week 5:** Dealing With Time in Memoir—How to Organize Your Story—Linear Writing vs. The Spiral Approach

Writing Exercise: Writing On the Periphery  
Making a List of Backstory Material  
The Timeline

Reading Assignment: *Speak, Memory* chap. 5-9

*By midnight on Friday (PST) of the week before your piece is to be workshopped, please turn in your memoir excerpt or personal essay of up to 5000 words. In other words, if your work is up for discussion during week six, submit by Friday of week five (2/12). We’ll all read these submissions, several each week, for the duration of the course and students will submit feedback on everyone’s piece (aim for a minimum of 500 words for the response letters) and receive feedback on their own work.

**Week 6:** Telling the truth and the trouble with memory. How research shows that our memories are less reliable than we may think and what this means for memoir and personal non-fiction writing.

Workshop Comments Due

Reading Assignment: *Speak, Memory* chap. 10-15

Optional Writing Exercise

**Week 7:** Personal Essays: Starting With What You Don’t Understand.
Workshop Comments Due

Reading Assignment: “High Tide in Tucson” by Barbara Kingsolver
“Seattle, 1974” by Charles D’Ambrosio

**Week 8:** Weaving The Threads into a Solid Essay.

Workshop Comments Due

Reading Assignment: “The Fourth State of Matter” by Jo Ann Beard
“Somehow Form a Family” by Tony Earley

Optional Writing Exercise

**Week 9:** What poets and humorists can teach us about the art of essay and memoir writing.

Workshop Comments Due

Reading Assignment: “Return to Sender” by Mark Doty
“Repeat After Me” by David Sedaris
“The Glass Essay” by Anne Carson

Optional Writing Exercise

**Week 10:** Revision, Revision, Revision. How to expand what you’ve written and where to submit finished work.

Last round of workshop comments due

*There is no reading assignment this week in order to give you time to revise and share the piece you workshopped, if you so choose. Depending on when during the week you post your revised piece, you may not receive feedback, but it’s a good opportunity to complete a rewrite.

Optional Writing Exercise