Course Title: Memoir Writing: Shaping Your Story  
Course Code: CNF 27 W  
Instructor: Ammi Keller

Course Summary:

In this course we will find forms for the stories we need to tell, all while keeping in mind the ways in which telling a story changes the teller.

The goal of the course is for each student to create at least one memoir piece they feel authentically represents their voice and experiences. Students will spend the first four weeks experimenting with short writing exercises in response to prompts and sharing them with one another for encouraging feedback. Each week we will read an excerpt from a published memoir—by writers such as Jeanette Walls, Maxine Hong Kingston, Cheryl Strayed, and Ta-Nehisi Coates—and explore a craft topic, beginning with the building blocks of prose and moving on to techniques for creating vivid scenes, capturing realistic dialogue, and choosing memorable language. Each week will build on the one before so that enthusiastic beginners can thrive without prior coursework. At the same time, we will engage complicated topics, and view the basics from unusual angles, meaning more experienced nonfiction writers can expect to encounter new ideas and strategies.

During the fifth week of the course, all students will turn in a memoir piece of their choosing, of between 500 and 5,000 words, for supportive, in-depth discussion by peers and the instructor. Then, during weeks six through ten, students will participate in workshop by writing 1-2 feedback letters a week to other writers. After covering craft during the first part of the course, discussion topics during the second half will address key process issues—how to write about living people, how to approach revision, and how to find (or create) a market for one’s writing.

On week ten we will return to a question asked at the start of the class: Who is telling this story? Students will then examine the shifts in their own perspectives. Stories shape us. Through the challenge of finding coherent shapes for our work, we are and will always be changed by the act of writing. The goal of this course is to enable each writer to harness the transformative power of telling true stories.

Please see course page for full description and additional details.
Grade Options and Requirements:
• Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)
  o All assignments will be graded on a completed / not completed basis.
    ▪ Completing writing assignments on time 50%
    ▪ Writing supportive, detailed feedback letters 25%
    ▪ Participating in board discussions 25%
    ▪ Please note that the instructor does not grade the perceived quality of a student’s writing—only the effort and engagement.
• Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)
  o A passing grade (for "Credit") = at least 70% of expectations accomplished
• No Grade Requested (NGR)
  o This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.

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.

Tentative Weekly Outline:

Week 1: Reason to Write—to Learn How You Became Who You Are

Key questions: How did you become the person who is telling your stories? How do you, the narrator, differ from you, the human being?
Reading: Chapters 1 (“What Is Memoir?”) and 2 (“Who Cares? And Other Thoughts on Getting Started”) from Writing the Memoir by Judith Barrington
Activities: Introductions and community building, free-writing assignment of 125-750 words.

Week 2: Reason to Write—to Figure Out Something You Haven’t Yet

Key questions: How do we dig deeply using familiar subjects, like family? What are the bricks that make up prose writing?
Reading: Chapters 3 (“Finding a Form”) from Writing the Memoir and TBA (published memoir writing)
Activities: Discussion question on the reading, free-writing assignment of 125-750 words, brief comments to 2-3 other writers.
**Week 3: Reason to Write—to Explore the Edge Where You Meet the World**

Key questions: How do you write about new experiences, like travel? How do you incorporate scenes and write realistic dialogue?
Reading: Chapters 4 ("The Truth: What, When and How?") and 5 ("Scene, Summary and Musing") from *Writing the Memoir*, and TBA (published memoir writing)
Activities: Discussion question on the reading, free-writing assignment of 125-750 words, brief comments to 2-3 other writers.

**Week 4: Reason to Write—Because People Forget**

Key questions: What is your situation, and what is your story? Also, what are some ways to handle the past, present, and distant past in your writing?
Reading: Chapter 6 ("Moving Around in Time"), an excerpt from Vivian Gornick’s *The Situation and the Story* and TBA (published memoir writing)
Activities: Discussion question on the reading, free-writing assignment of 125-750 words, brief comments to 2-3 other writers.

**Week 5: Reason to Write—to Find the Story Inside Your Situation**

Key questions: How will you shape your story?
Reading: TBA and optional for this week.
Activities: Students work on their workshop submissions, which may be between 500 and 5,000 words and are due on Friday at 5:00 pm. Optional discussion questions.

**Week 6: Reason to Write—to Again Feel (or Taste, or See, or Hear) What It Was Like**

Key questions: How do you incorporate the five senses into your work? How do you find the right language and word choices?
Reading: Chapters 7 ("Using the Senses") and 8 ("Naming Names") from *Writing the Memoir*, and TBA
Activities: Discussion questions on the reading, each student writes response letters to 1-2 other writers on their workshop submissions
Supplemental: An optional writing assignment will encourage students to experiment with this.
**Week 7: Reason to Write—Because of (or in Spite of) the People Around You**

Key questions: How should you write about the people you know or communities you belong to? What are some strategies for speaking about larger social realities?

Required: Chapter 9 (“Writing About Living People”) and Chapter 10 (“Your Memoir and the World”) from *Writing the Memoir*

Activities: Discussion questions on the reading, each student writes response letters to 1-2 other writers on their workshop submissions.

**Week 8: Reason to Write—Because the Process of Writing and Revising Changes You**

Key questions: What are some concrete strategies for using the feedback you’re receiving? How does revision help the writer gain perspective on their material?

Reading: Chapter on revision from *The Modern Library Writers Workshop*

Activities: Discussion questions on the reading, each student writes response letters to 1-2 other writers on their workshop submissions.

An optional writing assignment will offer students a chance to practice various revision strategies. In addition, those who are interested will read pages 84-167 of *Son of a Gun* by Justin St. Germain.

**Week 9: Reason to Write—to Communicate with a Readership**

Key questions: Who would benefit from encountering your work, and how can you get it into their hands? How do considerations about sharing one’s work relate to the creative process?

Reading: TBA

Activities: Discussion questions on the reading, each student writes response letters to 1-2 other writers on their workshop submissions.

An optional writing assignment will challenge students to produce new work. In addition, those who are interested will read pages 168-242 of *Son of a Gun* by Justin St. Germain.

**Week 10: Reason to Write—to Become the You that Writing Enables**

Key question: How does the act of writing change the writer? What is the next step in your creative journey?

Reading: TBA

Activities: Discussion questions on the reading, each student writes response letters to 1-2 other writers on their workshop submissions.

An optional writing assignment will encourage students to revisit the idea of the narrative voice, as well as their own growth, perspective, and craft gains.