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

A Note from the Instructor:

This course is designed for writers interested in understanding and participating in the reflective and explorative tradition of nature writing. Over our ten weeks 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? What role does the wild play amidst so much worldly chaos? We will take the bulk of our reading from *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* in an effort to understand the roots of nature writing, before embarking on our own work. Students will turn to building an original essay informed by the outside world, with the goal of creating a deeply layered piece worthy of publication. We will close the class with a survey of outlets concerned with work on the wild.

Required Texts

- *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*, Edited by Robert Finch and John Elder
- *The Wild Places*, Robert Macfarlane
- *Wild*, Cheryl Strayed
- *Fishcamp*, Nancy Lord

Grading

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

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

*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.*
It is my goal with 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 dig deep 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.” These discussions will inform and complicate our own thinking as we begin to consider our separate essays.

Written Work

Along with weekly reading, students will be asked to complete brief reflection pieces. Work will be posted 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. In the final four weeks students will be expected to write a letter of response to be posted on the discussion board.

Readings

In order to write effectively about the natural world, one must first have some understanding of the roots of the tradition. Beginning with the Romantic age, we will survey nature writing up to the contemporary moment. When a writer 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. These readings will fill out and inform our own work, as we will be able to locate ourselves within a specific tradition. 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. 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.

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.
• We will have a weekly Zoom video chat, generally Friday afternoon, but 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

The relationship between art and nature fascinates me. As wild places on this earth diminish, nature writing becomes more and more important. It has the power, on a very fundamental level, to challenge how we perceive our world, as well as to affect definitive change in how we treat flora and fauna.

From where I live — a remote island in Alaska — I will be looking forward to your missives on this subject. This means I will check 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, I’ll set up a thread on the discussion board if you have even the slightest question concerning the direction of the class, or your own work. Students are more than welcome to encourage me directly. I will commit to sharing all the tricks I know, from how to push through writer’s block, to how to build a fire in the rain. 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:
Cheryl Strayed, *Wild*
Meriwether Lewis, from *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*
Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, from *Letters From an American Farmer*

Week 2:
Encounters of the Wild Kind
Reading:
Susan Fennimore Cooper, from *Rural Hours*
Nick Jans, *Threads of Life*
Robert Macfarlane, from *The Old Ways*
Henry David Thoreau, from *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

Week 3:
Permission to Engage
Reading:
Luther Standing Bear, *Nature*
Richard Nelson, *The Gifts*
Virginia Woolf, *The Death of a Moth*

**Week 4:**
**Politics and Nature Writing**
Reading:
Edward Abbey, from *Desert Solitaire*
Bill McKibben, from *The End of Nature*
Gary Snyder, *Ancient Forests of the Far West*

**Week 5:**
**Solitary Reflection**
Reading:
Nancy Lord, from *Fishcamp*
Annie Dillard, from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*
Cheryl Strayed, *Wild*
William Least Heat-Moon, *Atop the Mound*

**Week 6:**
**The Nature Essay**
Reading:
Annie Dillard, *Total Eclipse*
Norman Maclean, from *A River Runs Through It*
Peter Matthiessen, from *The Tree Where Man Was Born*

**Week 7:** Feb 26
**The Outside**
Reading:
CLASS PIECES
Richard Wright, from *Black Boy*
Louise Erdrich, *Big Grass*

**Week 8:** March 5
**The Maddening Crowd**
Reading:
CLASS PIECES
Barry Lopez, *Leaving Alaska*
Wallace Stegner, *Coda: A Wilderness Letter*
Robert Macfarlane, from *The Wild Places*

**Week 9:** March 12
Heartbeats
Reading:
CLASS PIECES
Alice Walker, Am I Blue
Nancy Lord, from Fishcamp
Annie Dillard, from Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

Week 10: March 19
Sharing Your Work
Reading:
CLASS PIECES
Robert Macfarlane, from The Wild Places