Preliminary Course Syllabus

Creative Nonfiction: How To Grab Your Reader
Course Code: CNF 43 W
Quarter: Spring 2017

Instructor: Julia Scheeres

Course texts (students will read the opening pages of each):

1. “In Cold Blood” by Truman Capote
2. “Jesus Land” by Julia Scheeres
3. “The Liar’s Club” by Mary Karr
4. “Wave” by Sonali Deraniyagala
5. “Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?” By Jeannette Winterson
6. “Angelhead” by Nick Bottoms
7. “The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks” by Rebecca Skloot
8. “The Source of All Things” by Tracy Ross
9. "Half a Life” by Darin Strauss
10. “Wild” by Cheryl Strayed

Introduction

The opening pages of a book are arguably the most crucial. In them, the author must set up the story, infuse it with drama, and captivate the reader. These are the pages publishers focus on when they decide whether or not to buy your manuscript or book proposal. They’re what readers browse online and in stores as they debate whether to pull out their wallets and dispense with their hard-earned cash. In other words, they must be irresistible.


In this class, students will study the opening pages of ten successful works of narrative nonfiction, including memoir and literary journalism. For each work, we’ll examine how the first pages underscores the book’s themes and hooks the reader. Then students will try their hand at writing a dramatic opening to their own book, sharing drafts and feedback with their peers. This class is a good fit for writers of any level.

Course Materials
I will provide all the readings as pdfs.
I will also include supplemental material such as craft essays and author interviews. This supplemental material is entirely optional. My hope is that the materials will deepen your understanding of the points I’ve made in class as well as your understanding of how
creative nonfiction works in general.

**Schedule**
- Weeks 1-5: students will do short (250-750 word) craft exercises.
- Weeks 6-10: students workshop their own first ten pages (2,500 words).

**Weekly Writing Assignments**
The weekly writing exercises are designed to allow you to practice the techniques you’re learning and build toward your first own first ten pages. The maximum length for these is 750 words. After they are posted, you will choose at least three classmates and write a paragraph-long critique of their assignment.

**Workshop**
Workshops begin Week 6. You will sign up for your workshop slot by the end of the first week, so you can prepare for this deadline. On the SUNDAY of your workshop week (by 11:59 p.m.), you will post an attachment of your excerpt as a Word document to a forum thread that I’ve labeled with your name. Your submission will be, unsurprisingly, 10 pages (2500 words). Everyone will have until the following FRIDAY (by 11:59 p.m.) to read your piece and write a letter of response of at least 250 words.

I will send out specific workshop guidelines when we enter that phase of our course. **Note:** some students may be writing books of an extremely personal nature. For that reason, please treat your classmates’ work as private and confidential. That means no sharing other students’ material outside of class unless you have their explicit permission.

**Weekly Schedule**

**MONDAY:** Class week “officially” starts. I’ll post the weekly lecture along with the writing assignments and discussion questions.

The forum will be organized thusly:
- The required weekly reading will be posted under “This Week’s Reading.”
- Under “Optional Materials,” I will post links to essays on craft and author interviews.
- Under “Topics for Discussion,” I will pose a couple of questions based on the readings.
- Under “Writing Assignments,” you’ll find the written requirements for that week’s lesson plan, be they craft exercises or the workshop schedule.

Our group conversation begins when you post your musings and discoveries in the Discussion Forum. The Forum is a bulletin board where all the action happens. Here, we’ll have ongoing conversations about your work, the book excerpts we read together, and different story topics. This is where you’ll post your work, and where our workshop will take place.
DURING THE WEEK: You will engage in the Discussion Forum, work on your assignments/ workshop piece, and respond to your classmates’ work.

BY WEDNESDAY NIGHT 11:59 P.M. (PST): Your writing assignment is due (though the earlier you post, the more time you'll have to receive feedback).

THURSDAY/ FRIDAY: You will comment on your classmates’ work. Also, I will host a live, drop-in “office hour” chat with interested students to discuss the class and related themes. These chats are not mandatory, but are a fun way to interact and learn. The chat time will be posted at the beginning of each week.

WEEKEND: I won’t be in the classroom over the weekend but you're welcome to log on to start discussing the next week’s reading. The classroom is always open!

*Please note, as with a live class, after we begin a new week, the previous week’s discussion will be done and I will only read new material.

If you have questions about the course or assignments, please post them in the forum rather than emailing me directly. Chances are, someone else has the same question and could benefit from the response. If you have a private concern, however, feel free to email me directly.

A Note About Weekly Readings
Reading is a fundamental part of a writer’s training. We become better writers by reading quality literature and figuring out how it works. I’d like you to read each weekly reading assignment twice: once for pleasure, and the second time as a writer.

When reading for pleasure, consider the following questions:
• What emotion does the passage elicit in you?
• Is the pacing fast or does the story reveal itself slowly?
• Who are the main characters?
• What’s at stake?
• At what point does the narrative “grab” you?

When reading as a writer, ponder these questions:
• How did the author elicit an emotional response in you? Through a scene, word, or image?
• What influenced the pace? Sentence length? An opening scene or image?
• Do you know where the book is going and what its themes appear to be? How did the author achieve this – through an explicit statement or through more nuanced means, such as foreshadowing?
• How does the author raise your interest enough to make you want to keep reading?

Feel free to borrow the architecture of any of the examples we read in class as you formulate your own opening pages.
Workshop Guidelines
Becoming a good reader is crucial to your development as a writer. Learning how to identify the strengths and weaknesses in others’ writing will help you recognize the strengths and weaknesses in your own. Please read each piece twice. Once for an overall sense of the work, and the second time as an editor, paying attention to specific issues such as clarity, tone, structure, etc. Besides commenting on these issues, state what you enjoyed about the excerpt – what caught your interest or made it memorable. Try to articulate its underlying ideas or themes. Finally, offer specific suggestions for revisions. Remember: your job isn’t to tell the writer to write a different book, but to take the piece on its own terms and offer feedback accordingly. Be kind. Be generous. Read the work as you would like your own work to be read. Don’t shy away from making suggestions. (Being too nice or unwilling to offer constructive feedback doesn’t help the author improve her craft either). Comment with an eye towards helping another writer craft the best opening pages possible. More on this later.

My commentary
I will post my own critiques in the forum with everyone else, just as I’d discuss your piece of work aloud during a live class. My hope is that everyone will find my response constructive -- not just the person being critiqued. Although we aren’t sharing the same physical space, you should think of Forum and the discussion threads as a place to interact with each other – our virtual classroom. After posting your critique, you may read someone else’s and find yourself wanting to elaborate on his or her comments or offer a different perspective. I will also read your comments to one another and pipe in when I have something to add. These discussions will be as lively as you make them.

A Final Important Note
Although many students take online courses with the absolute best intentions of doing every last assignment, "real life"—family, illness, and professional deadlines—often has a way of making that impossible. Sometimes, the frustration this causes prompts students to drop completely out of the class. Rather than adopting an "all-or-nothing" approach to your participation in this course, I recommend simply doing what you can, when you can. If there are a few weeks where you don't get to the reading, fine. If you have to skip a couple exercises, this is also okay. As long as you're continuing to work on your full-length piece and commenting on your classmates' submissions, you'll be fine.

Grading:
For those taking the course for a grade, the breakdown is as follows:
10%: weekly exercises (each week’s lesson will outline specific assignment).
50%: workshop submission
40% participation: responding to the writing of your peers, office hour (chat room) attendance, and activity in forum threads.

Lectures, Week by Week
Here's a weekly breakdown of our lecture topics:
**Week 1: Beginning**
Deep thoughts: Before sitting down to write your book, it helps to have a sense of your theme. What larger topic does your book illuminate? *The long road to redemption? The enduring bond of sibling love? The nature of violence?* A theme gives your book universal appeal—a way for readers to relate to the material.
Read: “In Cold Blood,” by Truman Capote
Write: 1) The jacket copy for your book. (max 250 words)

**Week 2: The Building Blocks of Story**
Deep thoughts: In creative nonfiction, storytelling is everything; writers must entertain the readers even as they enlighten the reader. What are the building blocks of story? Scene, summary, and musing. We’ll consider each element in turn.
Read: "Jesus Land," by Julia Scheeres
Write: A dramatic opening for your book (750 words, max)

**Week 3: Weaving in Background**
Deep thoughts: Learning how to break from the primary narrative to weave in background information is something all writers struggle with. Yet, after we hook the reader with a dramatic opening, we must put the story into context. How can we provide background without interrupting the narrative flow or confusing readers?
Read: “The Liars’ Club,” by Mary Karr
Write: Background on a place, person or event in your book (750 words max.)

**Week 4: Eliciting Emotion**
Deep thoughts: How do we elicit an emotional response in the reader without falling into “purple prose?” How do we artfully convey our characters’ emotions through their words and actions? How do we write about injustice without sermonizing? Every word you choose signals an emotional response in your reader. Don’t tell the reader how to feel, show them.
Read: “Wave,” Sonali Deraniyagala
Write: A scene that elicits an emotional response in the reader (750 max)

**Week 5: Developing Character**
Deep thoughts: Writers use different techniques to breathe life into the people they write about, be they a beloved yet eccentric Southern Aunt or a serial murderer. How do we convey a child’s sense of wonder and naiveté on the page? Or a refugee’s sense of dislocation? What interesting verbal tick, worldview, sartorial habit or way of walking makes your characters stand out? In short, what makes individuals unique?
Read: “Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?” By Jeannette Winterson
Write: Convey one of your character’s unique traits through actions (750 words)

**Week 6: Gradations of Truth**
Deep thoughts: The various subgenres of creative nonfiction are held to different standards of truth. Journalism is beholden to facts. Memoir falls in a gray area where authors recreate scenes and dialogue to convey the “emotional truth” of their experience. But when do memoirists get into hot water with fabrication? How can journalists create
vivid scenes when they didn't witness an event?
Read: “Angelhead,” by Nick Bottoms
Write: Workshop begins – up to 2500 words

Week 7: Reporting
Deep thoughts: Because creative nonfiction is based on true events, you will need to do some amount of research and reporting. Memoirists revisit childhood haunts and talk to family members to fill in memory gaps. Journalists delve into public records and interview key players. A surprising amount of research can be done online.
Read: “The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,” by Rebecca Skloot
Write: Workshop, continued

Week 8: Difficult Subjects
Deep thoughts: Some people find certain topics, such as sexual abuse or struggles with addiction, off-putting. How can we write about difficult subjects in a way that won’t repel readers? What if a family member is opposed to being written about?
Read: “The Source of All Things,” by Tracy Ross
Write: Workshop, continued

Week 9: Revision
Deep thoughts: For some writers, yours truly included, the careful reconsideration of their prose is even more thrilling than the initial word dump. When we revise our sentences, we can linger over them, pondering word choices and metaphors, infusing our work with the kind of fastidious attention that elevates ordinary writing into literature. But how to begin the revision process?
Read: "Half a Life," Darin Strauss
Write: Workshop, continued

Week 10: Moving Forward
Deep thoughts: By now you’ve worked hard to set the stage for the rest of your book. You’ve introduced your main character(s), let the reader know what’s at stake and infused the narrative with drama. Here we’ll discuss the next steps in the process, including suggestions for plotting out the rest of the book and getting published.
Read: “Wild,” by Cheryl Strayed
Write: Workshop, continued

Congratulations! You’ve finished!

*** This syllabus is subject to change