Creative Nonfiction II: Diving Deep and Surfacing  
Stanford University Continuing Studies, Spring 2017  
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Course Description

When I’m working on a book, it often feels like I’m trying to draw an elephant while that elephant is sitting on my head—I want to see the whole thing, but mostly I just see the little square of gray skin in front of me. It is true, alas, that we can only write one page at a time, but it’s also true that we can use these smaller moments to help us understand and shape the entire book. In this course, we’ll focus, as we must, on detailed aspects of the writer’s craft, all the while lifting up our eyes to find the bigger maps we need to help us complete our books. We’ll dive deep into one aspect of craft, then see what that aspect can tell us about the rest of the book.

Nonfiction books come in many shapes and sizes and intents—from purely autobiographical memoirs to third-person studies of history or society or nature or other people’s lives—sometimes a combination of many approaches in one book. No matter the scope or style of your book, you’re welcome here. In fact, the broader the range of work we read, the better for all of us, as we’ll be able to expand the scope and texture of our own work—how can history inform memoir, or how can intimate scenes inform broad social canvases? Etc.

For the first three weeks, we’ll read, and discuss, some of our best writers, to learn from their examples. We’ll undertake, several writing assignments that offer new strategies and techniques gleaned from the reading. The last four weeks of the course will be devoted to workshop, where we’ll discuss the work of 4-5 writers per week. By reading and discussing one another’s work, we’ll find new possibilities for our books, and a clearer sense of where those possibilities might lead us.

Required Reading

Best American Essays of the Century  
ed. Oates and Atwan  
paperback, Houghton Mifflin  
978-0-618-15587-3

We’ll read selected essays from this collection, ranging in approach from intimate memoir to reportage to research-driven exposé. Most of our focus will be on specific moments of craft, each detailed week by week, though we will be able to talk about issues of structure in book-length works though considering the shape of these shorter pieces. By exposing ourselves these accomplished writers, we’ll be able to “steal” more ideas, and we’ll also have time to re-read these essays. As Nabokov says, “there are no good readers, only good re-readers.”

Our Online Week
Weekly lectures and assignments posted: Friday mornings before the beginning of each week.

Weekly writing assignments and reading responses due: Thursday by 8:00 p.m Pacific time.

Workshop submissions due: Posted Fridays, with student critiques due the following Thursday at 8:00 p.m. All writers must submit their workshop manuscripts to me by Friday before the beginning of Week 7, May 12. Workshop schedules will be announced Week 6. Each student will be responsible for reading 2 submissions every week, Weeks 7-10.

Live Zoom video conference: Wednesdays, 4:00 Pacific Time. Zoom sessions are recommended but not mandatory. Recordings of the Zoom sessions will be available for viewing by the following day.

Announcements: I'll post regular announcements (which will also reach you as emails). Here I'll offer information, reminders of weekly assignments, and workshop/critique groupings.

Craft Lectures, Weekly Reading, and Discussion Questions

Each craft lecture will be tied explicitly to that week’s reading and discussion questions; there will be reading discussions every other week until workshops begin. The lectures are intended to give you a frame of reference for your reading, and to help you focus on that aspect of craft as you read. I’ll pose several discussion questions, though you are only required to respond to one of those questions.

Weekly Writing Assignments

Every other week, until workshops begin, you’ll write up to 750 words using a prompt tied to that week’s craft lecture and reading assignment. The purpose of these assignments is to offer you possibilities for your work that you might not find otherwise. Some of these assignments will be “outside” of the book, writing to help you think about the bigger picture. Other assignments will be very narrow, and may well produce new scenes and approaches that you can directly incorporate into your book.

You’ll each post a brief—150 words—comment on everyone’s weekly assignment, not as a critique, but as a response that can help broaden and deepen our sense of how these assignments might be used.

Workshop Submissions

All students must submit their manuscripts to me on the Friday before the beginning of Week 7, May 12. I’ll post the schedule for workshops in Week 6. Manuscript workshops will begin Week 7, and will continue through Week 10.
You will each submit one long piece, with a maximum of 5,000 words. The submissions are up to you completely, whatever it is from the book you most want the workshop to look at it, a whole chapter, or an entire essay, or parts of a chapter or essay, and these submissions can be from anywhere in the book.

Workshop submissions must be in a Word doc, double-spaced in a 12-point font; don’t forget to include name, title, PAGE NUMBERS, and any brief explanatory note (less than a page).

**Workshop Critiques**

The ideal workshop should be both rigorous and generous. We do need to help one another see what’s not working or is confusing in a manuscript, but the purpose of a workshop isn’t to judge the writing or the writer. Our goal is, in the end, to offer the writer possibilities for the next draft, ideas and strategies he or she could not think of from the solitude of the desk. Our task is to open new vistas rather than shut them down.

I also believe that the most benefit a writer gets from workshop is when discussing the work of fellow writers. When you critique someone else’s manuscript, you’re honing your own critical skills and making yourself a smarter writer. Participation in workshop discussion, and in written critiques, is a vital tool for improving your own work.

And respect, of course, is mandatory. It’s not up to the group to say whether or not we “like” a work, but honoring the writer’s intentions for that work, help the writer move toward the best possible version of it.

Rigor; generosity; respect.

You’re expected to write a critique of at least 450 words for each workshop ms. you read; you will read 2 a week during Weeks 7-10. I will address, later in the course, in a brief lecture and discussion, how these critiques might best be approached.

Along with critiques from the group, each of you will also receive a detailed response from me.

**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)
  
  Score will be determined by student attendance and participation.

* Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)
  
  Written work, as assigned by the instructor, will determine a student’s grade.

If you’re taking this course for a grade, the breakdown is as follows. Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final class meeting by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies department.
Weekly Writing Assignments: 20%
Workshop Submissions: 50%
Forum/Workshop Participation: 30%

I base grades solely on timeliness, and evidence of engagement. It’s all about doing the work.

Weekly Schedule

Week One:
  Lecture: The Book’s Essential Shape: Structure and Story
  Reading Discussion: Beginnings: How do these writers announce the essence of their essays in the beginning pages?
  Writing Assignment: The Essence of Your Book in 750 words.

Week Two:
  Lecture: Scene: Animating the World
  Writing Assignment: Write or revise a scene from your manuscript.

Week Three:
  Lecture: Compressed Narration: Stories in Motion
  Reading Discussion: How do these writers use compressed narration?

Week Four:
  Lecture: Research: Constructing the World: Ways of Writing About the World
  Writing Assignment: Translate one of your longer scenes into compressed narration.

Week Five:
  Lecture: Research: Putting the Facts in Motion
  Mini-Lecture: How to Write a Helpful Critique
  Reading Discussion: Show how these writers put “facts” into motion.

Week Six:
  Lecture: Memory: Diving Deep and Surfacing
  Writing Assignment: Putting Research into Motion.

FRIDAY, MAY 12: ALL WORKSHOP SUBMISSION DUE TO TEACHER!
Week Seven:
  Lecture: Point of View: Who’s in Charge Here?
  Workshops begin.

Week Eight:
  Lecture: Revision #1: Expansion
  Workshops continue.

Week Nine:
  Lecture: Revision #2: Concision
  Workshops continue.

Week Ten:
  Lecture: Finishing Your Book: Where to Now?
  Workshops continue.