Introduction to Creative Nonfiction, Autumn 2021

Days: Wednesdays
September 29 – November 17, 2021
6:00 p.m.–8:30 p.m.
Instructor: Kevin Davis
Location: Online

Course Description: For the next eight weeks, we’re going to explore a style of writing known as creative nonfiction. While the words “creative” and “nonfiction” might seem an odd pairing, the combination is rooted in a long tradition of telling stories, making personal observations and employing a variety of literary techniques to communicate facts. Lee Gutkind, often called the “Godfather of Creative Nonfiction,” says the creative part refers to using literary techniques in presenting nonfiction, “that is, factually accurate prose about real people and events—in a compelling, vivid manner.” Creative nonfiction writers don’t make things up. They just use facts creatively and interestingly. You’ll read, analyze and discuss the works of contemporary creative nonfiction writers. You’ll study research and reporting techniques, and learn about the use of scenes, dialogue and observation to create your own stories, which will be workshopped by fellow students. We’ll discuss craft and narrative approaches, as well as point of view, tone and style.

The class is designed to be interactive and discussion based. Each week we’ll talk about the assigned readings, breaking down stories, analyzing them and figuring out how and why they work or don’t. This is a demanding class, and it’s important that you keep up with the writing assignments and develop the discipline and time commitment required. Because the class has a workshop component, your fellow students will be depending on you to bring in your work as scheduled for discussion.

Text: Gutkind, Lee, You Can’t Make This Stuff Up ISBN 978-0738215549

Other Readings: There will be additional readings available online or by email.

Student Goals: You’re going to learn the building blocks of creative nonfiction, and how to put that knowledge into practice by crafting your own pieces of writing. You’ll also learn to analyze works of creative nonfiction and to offer thoughtful commentary on the work of your classmates. You’ll learn about research, structure, craft, and revision. You’ll also learn how to give and receive constructive and honest criticism through writing workshops and analytical papers.

Teaching Methods: This course combines short lectures, discussions and workshops. We’ll meet once a week for 2 ½ hours. During class, we’ll discuss the readings and talk about writing techniques, conduct workshops and have writing exercises.

Assignments: There will be outside writing assignments as well as in-class writing. These will be drawn from observation, interviewing, research and writing prompts.
Through the assignments, we’ll explore different forms of creative nonfiction such as literary journalism, personal essay and memoir.

**The Writing Workshop:** Our writing workshops will allow students to share drafts of their stories and essays. Classmates will offer thoughtful analysis and commentary to each other in a roundtable discussion and through written notes on the papers.

**Workshop Questions:** For those unfamiliar or new to writing workshops, the following questions can serve as a guide to help you read and comment on a piece of writing.

- What is the story/essay about?
- What literary techniques does the writer use and are they effective?
- What is the point of view?
- What works well and why?
- What does not work well and why?
- What’s your favorite sentence or passage?
- Where are you confused?
- What do you want to know more about?
- What seems out of place, too short, or went on for too long?

**Note:** Creative nonfiction rests on the foundation of fact. Although writers of creative nonfiction use a wide range of techniques to tell stories with scenes, dialogue, description and other methods, accuracy is foremost. That means what you write is not made up. Your material comes from research, observation and interviewing.

**Course Outline:** Following is the course outline. Timing and topics are subject to change based on the progress of the class.

**Before first class please read:** Gutkind, *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up*, Introduction, and pp. 3-31. Come prepared to discuss your vision and thoughts on the definition of creative nonfiction.

**Weekly Schedule**

**Week 1:** What is creative nonfiction? The contentious debate over its meaning. A discussion of literary nonfiction and narrative storytelling. Understanding the difference between traditional and literary journalism, personal essay and memoir. Discuss writing assignment. Schedule workshops.


**Week 2**
Memoir, personal essay and you. It’s about you, but it’s not all always about you. Writing about the larger world through your eyes and your insights.

**Readings for next week:** Gutkind, 69-88; “My Favorite Teacher,” Kurson.
Week 3 Understanding how to report for narrative and in-depth literary nonfiction, and the challenges and techniques of literary journalism. Immersing yourself in your subject.


Week 4 Recognizing the story and how to structure it. Writing scenes and memorable passages. Getting details and information. Writing about a place.

Readings for next week: Gutkind, 124-134, 186-203; Helen Keller, from “The Story of My Life,”

Instead: L’èpee de Damocles (Vehicular Manslaughter)

Week 5 Sharpening your powers of observation to get the kinds of details that make your stories come alive. Re-creation and reconstruction.

Readings for next week: Gutkind, 135-185, 204-215, 218-229; Capturing Character handout.

Read and comment on classmates’ essays for workshop next week.

Week 6 Framing your stories. Getting to the main point of focus and reducing your writing to its essential elements. Finding an inner point of view.

Readings for next week:

Read and comment on classmates’ essays for workshop next week.

Week 7

Begin workshops for second round of essays.

Readings for next week: “Shitty First Drafts,” Lamott

Homework: Read and comment on classmates’ essays for workshop next week.

Week 8

Revision. Cutting, slashing, revising and re-thinking your work. Last group of workshops.

Essay Assignment for Workshop – Choose one
1) Reconstruct a significant moment or event in life.
Write a story/essay that recreates a moment or event that was significant in someone’s life – yours or someone else’s. It could be the delivery of news (good or bad), a chance encounter on the street, the birth of a child or death of a loved one, something that happened at work or while traveling. It could be an accident, family event or moving to a new place. Look for unusual scenes or moments that have resonance and meaning and draw on your memory for details.

2) Write about a place.
It could be your hometown, neighborhood, favorite diner, place of natural beauty, your backyard or the workplace. Anyplace. Try to evoke memories of something significant that happened there – a spiritual connection that you have with that place. Use your powers of observation and all your senses to take readers there. Let your writing about this piece take you in a more personal direction if it leads there.

3) Write about someone who changed your life.
Think of a person who had a significant role in shifting your way of living, thinking or doing during your life – anyone from childhood to adulthood. This piece can combine a character study of the person, along with your own introspection about how that person made a difference in something about who you are.

If none of these work, you’re free to develop your own nonfiction essay based on your own interests. Please consult with me if you’re having trouble or want to discuss your ideas. Whatever you choose, your essay can be traditional memoir-style or journalistic in your approach, or a hybrid of styles. The common thread is that it’s nonfiction. You can use your own recollections, as well as research and interviewing, to develop dialogue and description to build scenes. Then, work to examine your essay for some meaning and significance. Why is it important and what can you share with readers about it to make it transcendent and interesting to other people?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE
As we may be addressing controversial topics in our class discussions, we expect students to be respectful and considerate of others.

DISABILITY INFORMATION
The Graham School of Professional Studies abides by the Americans with Disabilities Act (see http://www.ada.gov/pubs/adastatute08.htm), with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (see http://www.dol.gov/oasam/regs/statutes/sec504.htm), and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (see http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html) and will provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities covered by law. If you have a disability for which you may require accommodations, please contact Charnessa Warren, Director of Student Disability Services, at disabilities@uchicago.edu in advance of the first class meeting.