Writing 251: Creative Nonfiction  
Spring 2018  
Professor David Swerdlow  
405 Thompson-Clark  
Office Hours: TTh 11:00-12:30 and by appointment

Introduction:

Under the “I couldn’t have said it better” category, I would include the following course description for a creative nonfiction workshop taught by the late David Foster Wallace:

English 183D is a workshop course in *creative nonfiction*, which term denotes a broad category of prose works such as personal essays and memoirs, profiles, nature and travel writing, narrative essays, observational or descriptive essays, general-interest technical writing, argumentative or idea-based essays, general-interest criticism, literary journalism, and so on. The term’s constituent words suggest a conceptual axis on which these sorts of prose works lie. As nonfiction, the works are connected to actual states of affairs in the world, are “true” to some reliable extent. If, for example, a certain event is alleged to have occurred, it must really have occurred; if a proposition is asserted, the reader expects some proof of (or argument for) its accuracy. At the same time, the adjective *creative* signifies that some goal(s) other than sheer truthfulness motivates the writer and informs her work. This creative goal, broadly stated, may be to interest readers, or to instruct them, or to entertain them, to move or persuade, to edify, to redeem, to amuse, to get readers to look more closely at or think more deeply about something that’s worth their attention. . . or some combination(s) of these. *Creative* also suggests that this kind of nonfiction tends to bear traces of its own artificing; the essay’s author usually wants us to see and understand her as the text’s maker. This does not, however, mean that an essayist’s main goal is simply to “share” or “express herself” or whatever feel-good term you might have got taught in high school. In the grown-up world, creative nonfiction is not *expressive* writing but rather *communicative* writing. And an axiom of communicative writing is that the reader does not automatically care about you (the writer), nor does she find you fascinating as a person, nor does she feel a deep natural interest in the same things that interest you. The reader, in fact, will feel about you, your subject, and your essay only what your written words themselves induce her to feel. An advantage of the workshop format is that it will allow you to hear what twelve reasonably intelligent adults have been induced to think and feel about each essay you write for the course.

https://www.salon.com/2014/11/10/david_foster_wallaces_mind_blowing_creative_nonfiction_SYllabus_this_does_not_mean_an_essayist%E2%80%99s_goal_is_to_share_or_express_herself_or_whatever_feel_good_term_you_got_taught_in_H/  

We’ll be involved in what Foster Wallace has described.

Goals:

By the end of the term, I hope you will be able to accomplish the following:

1) Demonstrate an understanding of the components that conspire to make good creative nonfiction
2) Write good creative nonfiction based on that understanding
3) Provide effective critiques of creative nonfiction through the deployment of that understanding
Methods:

During the semester, you will be drafting 4 essays based on my assignments. First, for each assignment, most of you will be submitting electronically a “mini-draft” of the first page from your essay. I will make comments on the draft and return it to you within 3 days. Some of you, however, will be submitting the entire essay in draft. Those drafts will be submitted to me a few days after the “mini-drafts.” Then, these drafts will be distributed to the class without your names on them, and we will consider and discuss these drafts in a workshop format. Each student will have at least one draft considered by the workshop during the semester.

Our discussions of drafts will be substantive—and not trivial or mean-spirited. Here’s an example of a trivial comment: “I like this paragraph. It’s so nice.” And here is an example of a mean-spirited comment: “This paragraph is worthless. It’s just a bunch of sappy clichés.” And, finally, here’s the kind of comment that would be most welcomed: “I think this paragraph is frightening. I mean it has frightening images, and that’s weird, because its sentences are delicate and beautiful. Can we talk about the tension between what’s frightening and what’s beautiful in this paragraph?”

So, your first responsibility is informed, thoughtful participation. It counts for a whopping 20% of your grade. You cannot participate effectively unless you have completed all of the reading and writing assignments in advance of the class in which they will be discussed.

To facilitate your participation, you will be given assignments in advance of each reading and workshop. More on that later.

During our final period, each of you will be making a presentation of your work. Again, more on that later.

Policies

More than 3 unexcused absences will result in the lowering of your final grade by one full grade. More than 4 unexcused absences will result in your failure of the course. Frequent tardiness will result in the lowering of your grade by at least one full step.

Academic dishonesty in any form will not be tolerated. Consult your student handbook for more details. No cell phones in class. If you use a cell phone in class, you will be asked to leave, and your participation grade will suffer greatly.

Grades

| Essay 1 | 18 |
| Essay 2 | 18 |
| Essay 3 | 18 |
| Essay 4 | 18 |
| Presentation | 8 |
| Participation | 20 |
| Critical Evaluations | 1/2 |
| Contribution to Discussion | 1/2 |
SCHEDULE

Jan 17  Introduction

ESSAY 1: INTERPRETING PERSONAL EXPERIENCE


Jan 24  Reading: “Bad Eyes,” Erin McGraw
Jan 26  Reading: “Black Men and Public Space,” Brent Staples (Handout)

Jan 29  Reading: “High Tide in Tucson,” Barbara Kingsolver
Jan 31  Workshop
Feb 2   Workshop
Feb 5   Workshop
Feb 7   Workshop

ESSAY 2: UNDERSTANDING PLACE

Feb 9   “Once More to the Lake,” E.B. White (Handout)
Feb 14  Reading: “The Search for Marvin Gardens,” John McPhee
Feb 16  Reading: “A Small Place,” Jamaica Kincaid

Feb 19  Readings: “Present Tense in Africa,” William Harrison
Feb 21  Workshop
Feb 23  Workshop
Feb 26  Workshop
Feb 28  Workshop
Mar 2   TBA

Spring Break
ESSAY 3: PORTRAYING A PERSON

Mar 12
Readings: “Imelda,” Richard Selzer; “Squashed,” Susan Orlean (Handout)

Mar 14
Reading: “Shitdiggers, Mudflats, and The Worm Men of Maine,” Bill Roorbach

Mar 16

Mar 19
Reading: “Torch Song,” Charles Bowden

Mar 21
Workshop

Mar 23
Workshop

Mar 26
Workshop

Mar 28
Workshop

Easter Break

ESSAY 4: CULTURAL CRITICISM

Apr 3
Readings: “Mother Tongue,” Amy Tan; “Cell Phone Naturalists,” David Brooks (Handout)

Apr 4
Reading: “Consider the Lobster,” David Foster Wallace

Apr 6
Reading: “Son of Mr. Green Jeans,” Dinty W. Moore

Apr 9
Reading: “The Date,” Brenda Miller

Apr 11
Readings: “Kissing,” Anthony Farrington; “Celibate Passion,” Kathleen Norris

Apr 13
No Class

Apr 16
Workshop

Apr 18
URAC

Apr 20
Workshop

Apr 23
Workshop

MYSTERY DATES

Apr 25
Readings

Apr 27
Readings

Apr 30
Readings

May 2
Readings

May 4
Readings

Final
Presentations