Advanced Non-Fiction Workshop:
Confession, Autobiography & Auto-Fiction

This is an intensive, hard-working class for committed readers/writers. If you engage fully in the process, you will surely improve your writing.

Course Objectives

- Deepen and strengthen your writing and revising. Discover how momentum will help you get past blocks and inhibitions.
- Find heretofore unidentified territory that may turn out to be yours.
- Explore the possibilities of first person narrative, whether in memoir, faux-memoir, confession, the personal essay, so-called creative non-fiction, or, for that matter, fiction, or any of the hybrid genres that have flourished in recent years.
- Learn to read as a writer.
- Discover how to avoid impasses, tedious verbosity and various other disastrous pitfalls.
- Expand your editorial skills.
- Work in a congenial and generous atmosphere, a good environment for learning which risks work for you and which to avoid.
- You should finish this course with at least three promising pieces and the basics of a writing practice.

Methodology

- In the first month of the semester, each class will include:
  -- A craft discussion, using an assigned story for illustration.
  -- Writing exercises in response to a prompt
  -- Reading the exercises out loud and working together to improve the prose, pacing, structure
- In the second month, we will continue with brief craft sessions, but we will also workshop three or four student stories per class, between three and eight pages each. Each workshop will last 20 minutes.
- In the third month, we will have another round of workshops, of 30 minutes each. Stories may run anywhere from three to fifteen pages.
- Immediately after midterms, I will meet with each student for a half hour conference.
Homework Assignments

- Reading: Two or three short pieces, whenever possible illustrating the craft element we have been discussing. Count on an average of 40 pages of reading per week. Focused reading is crucial in this course.
- Writing: One two-page piece each week, exploring a theme and/or applying the craft elements we have discussed in class. The two-page pieces may be inspired by your classroom writing exercises, or you may start over. If all goes well, one of your two-page pieces will then form the basis of a workshop story, or you may start over, if you prefer. Each month, you will revise and improve at least one of your two-page pieces (other than those you use for workshops).
- Online Posting: On our class forums, you will complement the classwork by responding to assigned reading, by contributing to a class writer’s notebook and by continuing our class conversation. Participation required.
- Workshop Responses: Each workshop piece will be posted on our class web site a week ahead of time, and each class member will post a written response prior to the workshop. This response will tell the writer what the writer has done well and then make specific suggestions for what needs to be improved. Each reader will also print the work, perform a line edit, and bring it to class. The responses and the line-edits will form the basis – or the beginning – of the workshop conversation.
- At midterm and for the final, you will gather your work into a portfolio, accompanied by a process note in which you review your progress and plan for what comes next.

Grading

- Punctual submission of the weekly two-page pieces and of your two workshop stories.
- Punctual submission of required online posts, and of responses to assigned pieces and to your classmates’ work.
- Class attendance and participation. More than one unexcused absence will lower your grade.

Your grade will depend on your willingness to meet your deadlines, on your diligence and your engagement, both in class and online. For my part, I will try to make the class exciting and fun.

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Sample Class 1:

Assigned reading -- Letters: Kafka’s letter to his Father; Sylvia Plath’s letter to her mother; letter by James Joyce to Nora Barnacle; letter by John Lennon to Cynthia Lennon.

Craft Discussion: (a) Economy. How to make prose feel compressed, explosive, and fast-moving? Begin in media res. Avoid static openings, exposition, repetition, unnecessary explanation, excess words. (b) Honesty/Limits of Self-Expression: What’s allowed, and what
isn’t, and why. The impossibility and absolute necessity of telling the truth. (c) *Narrative Intimacy:* How the personal letter may work as a useful model for addressing the reader in various writing contexts.

Discussion/Prompt/Writing Exercise/Discussion.

**Sample Class 2:**
Assigned reading – Excerpts from great memoirs: *This Boy’s Life* by Tobias Wolff; *The Boys of My Youth* by JoAnn Beard; Memories of a Catholic *Girlhood* by Mary McCarthy.

*Craft Discussion:* (a) *Character – major and minor.* Description, action, reaction, interaction. (B) *Advantages and rhythms of the past tense.*

Discussion/Prompt/Writing Exercise/Discussion.

**Sample Class 3:**

*Craft Discussion:* (a) *The author’s radiant presence.* How is it that some fiction sounds so “real?” Where is the line between fiction and non-fiction? Who is the “I” in first-person writing. What is the difference between the narrator and the protagonist? (b) *The use of resonant details.* Every element tells the story. Every detail of the setting and the situation helps to establish a mood and, most important, conveys the characters’ emotions and the writer’s attitude, whether these are explicitly stated or not.

Discussion/Prompt/Writing Exercise/Discussion.

**Sample Class 4:**

*Craft Discussion:* *What is the line between sentimentality and tragedy and how to stay on the safe side?* Rely less on your characters’ vulnerabilities for drama, and look deeper into their ambivalence.

Discussion/Prompt/Writing Exercise/Discussion.

**Sample Class 5**

*Craft Discussion:* *Confession.* First person accounts of violence (physical, emotional, sexual) and prose style.

Workshop: Group 1

**Sample Class 6**
Assigned reading: “Mother of Sorrows” by Richard McCann; “River of Names” by Dorothy Allison; “Secretary” by Mary Gaitskill.

Craft Discussion: Families – snapshots, tableaux, portraits.

Discussion/Prompt/Writing Exercise/Discussion.

Workshop: Group 2