**ENGLISH 353**

**Creative Nonfiction Prose--Fall 2012.**

**Instructor: Peter Chilson**

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**REQUIRED TEXTS:**

*-Best American Essays 2010* (Mariner Books)*,* Robert Atwan, ed*.*

*-Scribbling the Cat* (Penguin), by Alexandra Fuller

-*Telling True Stories* (Plume), Kramer and Call, eds

-*Devil’s Highway* (Back Bay Books), by Luis Alberto Urrea

-*Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* (Bantam), by Tom Wolfe

-*Devil in the White City* (Vintage), by Erik Larson

-*The Elements of Style* (Longman), by Strunk and White

This is a creative writing course, but the focus here is on nonfiction.  This also means that the foundation for any piece of writing in this course must be solid, thorough research. In the late 1950ss, writers like Gay Talese, Joan Didion and Tom Wolfe began publishing a form of journalism largely new to newspapers and magazines in the United States. Tom Wolfe—author of *The Right Stuff* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*—called it the “New Journalism.”  This form of nonfiction, which borrows from the techniques of fiction writing, changed the face of American journalism forever.

In fact, people have been writing this stuff for centuries. We can take the genre back to the work of the Greek historian Herodotus, regarded as the first writer of narrative history and the first historian to name his sources. More recently we can look to the work of Jonathan Swift, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Mary Kingsley, Stephen Crane, Edith Wharton, Isabella Bird Bishop, and George Orwell, to name a few. But in the 1960s more creative and visual ways of telling nonfiction stories really grabbed the popular American consciousness and and the attention of the media, and then began to take off in different experimental (and occasionally weird) stylistic directions. Here, we get into Hunter Thompson, some of the work of Truman Capote, as well as David Foster Wallace, William T. Vollman, Mary Karr and others.

Experimentation in writing is what this class is about.  We’re going to play around a bit with writing style, tone, voice and with the kind of reading you are doing.  We’re going to concentrate on reading and writing nonfiction stories that use elements of story telling normally found in novels and short stories. So, we’ll examine building characters, setting scenes, developing dialogue, and plotting nonfiction stories. And we’ll look at the different things creative nonfiction writers do to their stories, and how in certain cases they have gotten themselves in trouble.

**CONTENT:** It is a fact that you cannot write well if you don't read a great deal, and widely: books, articles, poetry as well as fiction, nonfiction.  Writers learn and pick up ideas from what other writers are doing with the language. Our reading list borrows from both fiction and nonfiction.

We will read a broad range of writers working in fiction and nonfiction, and examine a variety of writing techniques and issues important to the craft of creative writing.  These include different narrative methods, developing lead paragraphs, developing voice and point of view, and ethical concerns.  We will discuss methods of research, such as finding and using various kinds of documented information and doing interviews.  We will also look at audience and how to sell fiction and nonfiction stories in different markets.

     We will examine the basic reporting and research skills needed for good nonfiction writing.  We will also look at what we can learn from writers of short fiction and the methods they employ to tell a story. We will study how techniques of writing fiction and nonfiction can be blended to produce a better fiction piece, or a better work of nonfiction.  Students will write a piece of straight reporting, a short personal memoir, a character profile, a profile of a place, and a long nonfiction investigative feature story as a final project. Thus, with a little luck and a lot of hard work, each student will have at least one piece of fiction or nonfiction to put on the market for publication at the end of the semester.

**REQUIREMENTS**:

**ATTENDANCE:**  You have two free absences, no more.  After that, you lose a half letter grade for every unexcused absence.  Note: I rarely excuse absences. It makes things easier if you email me of your absence in advance.

**PAPERS:** You are required to write three major papers of 5 pages, 8 pages, and finally, 15 pages. ALL PAPERS MUST BE TYPED.  Final drafts should be double-spaced with margins and font size identical to what you see on this syllabus.  The font, by the way, is 12 pt. and the margins are the same as you see on this syllabus.

You will write a number of short papers. These are 2-3-page exercises in reporting and writing scenes, which will take you through the research process of putting together a larger piece of work. This “larger piece of work” will be your final project of 15 pages. The choice of topic is also up to you and I will ask you to write a proposal and discuss your Final Projects with me.

**\* NOTE:** For each careless error—typo, spelling, or egregious grammar—you will lose a full letter grade on your paper.

Here's the breakdown of papers:

·      **1. Third Person Reporting 20%:** Choose an event to "cover" as a reporter. The event has to be current and it has to be somewhere in Whitman or Latah Counties—this means the general Pullman-Moscow Region. There is a lot going on here at WSU and in the surrounding communities. You may choose a speech, a public meeting, or even a fire in progress.  You will choose your event and write a short one-page proposal to the instructor explaining what your report will be about. Students must include a bibliography of at least three secondary primary sources of research information. (5 pages)

One Revision required.

·      **2. First Person Reporting 20%:** This assignment requires you to inject more of your personal voice. Here, too, you will choose an event to cover as a reporter, but you will tell this story in the first person. This, too, must be a story that is somewhere in the Whitman or Latah Counties. This is not memoir, though you will be using first person. You are your story’s first primary source. You are THE eyewitness to the story. Include a bibliography of at least two secondary and two primary sources of research information. (8-10 pages)

One Revision Required.

**3. Final project 30%:** This is a piece of well-researched creative nonfiction.  First Person or Third Person—you choose. You must turn in a one-page proposal two months before the paper is due. Students must include an annotated bibliography of at least ten secondary and primary sources of research information. (at least 15 pages, with at least five primary sources, three of which must be people)

\* **Participation counts for 30%.** This covers grades on exercises, the quality of your participation in class discussion, and the quality of your participation during in-class rough draft workshops.

**ROUGH DRAFTS:** Good writing only comes with revision. You are required to revise the first two papers you turn in. I will collect the revisions and grade them again.

**WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU:** This is a discussion as well as a writing course, requiring spirited participation from each student. **Participation is 30 percent of your final grade,** which includes how well you perform on short papers and exercises in and out of class. Do not be shy with opinions and do not be afraid to disagree–-constructively and politely–-with anyone, especially ME. You will not be graded on your opinions, but on the quality of your participation–-which is directly connected to how well you listen and prepare for class. It’s easy for me to see if you’re not reading.

     You will also be given a number of small assignments that focus on matters of writing style and tone.  Some exercises may involve issues of sentence structure and grammar, though the course does not deal with these matters intensively. **Students will each be asked to report on an assigned author and story in class, and lead related discussion.** The exercises, how seriously you take them, make up part of your participation grade.

**This course should be a lot of fun, but without your cooperation and participation it will be a real drag.  So don't hesitate to offer your views in class.  And also remember, good writing does not come easily.**

READING AND PARTICIPATION: Students have no excuses for not keeping up with the assignments, especially given that there are so few books for this course. This is a small class and it's immediately obvious to me when students come to class unprepared. Moreover, in such a small class when even one or two students are not carrying their weight, this creates an energy drag that brings the entire class down. The problem of students coming to class unprepared has in the past been such a serious issue with creative writing students that I have decided to impose and enforce two simple rules.

**\* First, students will not be allowed to attend class if they do not have the reading in hand.**

**\* Second, students who are not doing the reading will be asked in to explain themselves.**

Look people--you are creative writers! You are by definition supposed to be passionate students of literature and the concept of the story. If you show up in a class of 20 people with the attitude that you really don't care, then the class quickly becomes difficult to teach and a drag to be in as a student. This is true even if the students who have this mentality are in the minority.

This is why participation in the class will be 30 percent of your grade. It is not enough to write well. You must be able to intellectually argue and defend your ideas about literature and about writing.

Now, if you are nervous, relax. This class should be a great deal of fun and I mean that! You are going to be reading and writing some very cool stuff this spring. I hope the readings show you just how interesting this course will be. But if students are not doing the basic work required, then the class ceases to be functional and fun.

**WEEKLY SCHEDULE:**

·      All readings after the first mention will be referred to by the author's last names.  Thus, *Scribbling the Cat* will be called "Fuller."

**\*** Instructor reserves the right to change the syllabus.

**Tuesday, August 21, 2012**:  Tues. 1. Introduction to the course and to the definition of literary journalism.  Question for thought: What kind of reading are you doing. READ: Introduction to *Telling True Stories* and the entire essay, “Mau-Mauing the Flak Catcher,” which is on page 83 of Wolfe.

Discussion of Assignment One: Basic Reporting Techniques within structure of a basic newspaper news and feature stories: The inverted triangle and the buried feature story lead. In-class writing exercise. Here we will be looking at the format of the standard news story, which is perhaps even more relevant as news becomes more streamlined with Internet news sites.

Discussion of definition of Literary Journalism with student thoughts on readings.

Discussion of Final Project, due at the end of the semester. We will focus heavily on the issue of audience in today’s discussions.

**Aug. 23**:  1. Discussion of the final project. 2. Discussion of Assignment One in relation to assigned readings.  We will also focus on research techniques for gathering information. Discussion of the interview process. In-class interview exercise. Consider what interview techniques Wolfe might have used to gather his information for “Mau-Mauing”. READ: Continue with assigned essays and read Part I of *Scribbling the Cat*, which ends on page 91. Have this read for today.

    Discussion of third person voice in the readings.  We will focus on the idea of using *Status Detail* and overall *Sensual Detail* to make writing more vivid. In-class writing exercise and discussion. We will look at writing nonfiction stories through scene.

**Aug. 30 :** In-class writing exercise and discussion/workshop of Paper One. The in-class writing exercise will be about scene. Discussion of Issues in literary journalistic research and use of detail.  In-class research exercise. READ: Continue with READINGS of essays and Fuller (pages 91-158). Students will lead discussion of the reading. Also READ the introduction and first chapter of *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White

Discussion/Lecture on the narrative arc on nonfiction story structure.

**Septmeber 4:  PAPER ONE DUE** Paper Two Discussion, with more on interviewing techniques. Question for thought:  What kind of detail makes a person come alive on paper? 2. Introduction writing mechanics:  Question for thought: Does writing have a voice, a rhythm?  Why use the third person. This is a writer’s decision. What goes into making that decision? We will reexamine voice and style in the context of our readings.  READ:You should have Fuller finished today and assigned essays*.*

     Thurs:  1. Brainstorming topics for the Final Project. 2. Point of view in nonfiction: First and Third Person. We will also begin discussion mechanics of language from a writer’s point of view, focusing on theories of Subordination and Coordination in sentence structure.  In-class exercises.  Question for thought:  What is a comma for anyway? 2. Workshop Assignment Two in second half of class.

I will assign new reading in Strunk and White.

**Sept. 6:** Tues:1. Discussion of the Revision Process. What do your critics want? What do you want? Who is your audience and what does the audience want?Workshop Assignment Two first half of class.  2. Discussion of readings. Assignment of Proposal for Final Projects. 3. Lecture on the Revision Process: Revising for language, revising for research content, revising for focus. Revising with your audience in mind.

     Thurs:  1. Further discussion of mechanics of style, focusing on issues of punctuation: the comma, the dash, the semicolon. In-Class exercises. READ:  Continue with assigned essays. Question for thought:  Can you identify different voices between he writers we have read? READ: *Devil’s Highway,* the first 100 pages

Two things of importance we will begin looking at: First Person versus Third Person Points of view.

**Sept. 11:** Bring draft of Assignment Two. Final Project Proposal Due.  3. Discussion of Assignment Three and how to make a place come alive on paper. Begin. Discussion of Points of view in writing, first person as opposed to third person.  Are these strategic choices worth thinking about?  Questions for thought: Why write about yourself?  Who would want to read it? Question for thought:  Are you thinking about who will read your writing, and where they will read it? Begin READING the second 100 pages of Urrea

Research Problems: The task of digging up information about people, about governments, about private organizations, about businesses, about issues. Where do we find this stuff?

**Sept. 13**: Assignment Two Workshop.  Group critique of student work. More Discussion of Issues in Research and Techniques of Interviewing when you are using the first person. Brief discussion of Final Project. READ: Continue with Ureaa, and read assigned essays.

     More discussion of Research Issues in Literary Journalism.  Discussion of structure in storytelling, focusing on the theory of the Narrative Arc.  Questions for thought:  Is it possible to think in terms of taking the reader on a journey?  How would you describe, or map, the narrative arcs Fuller, Wolfe, and Urrea use?

More READING in Strunk and White.

**Sept 18:  ASSIGNMENT TWO DUE.** Discussion of Final Project.  READ:  Handout, "On Keeping a Notebook" and today you are finished with Urreah. Also, we will continue discussion of Urrea. READ the first 100 Pages of *Devil in the White City* by Erik Larson.

Discussion of revision issues. We will go back over a few revision issues. What to look for in revising your work, what questions to ask. Revising with language in mind. Revising with research content in mind. Revising with your audience in mind. In-class writing exercise.

You will be nearly finished with Strunk and White at this point.

**Sept. 25**: Discussion of readings with revision in mind. READ: Focus on the essay, “The American Man at Age 10,” to be handed out. In-class writing exercise. Discussion of progress with final projects. You should be on page 150 of Larson by today.

I’m going to finish the month of September with more discussion and some exercises of language style issues: Commas and their relations in punctuation, sentence structure, paragraphs, and how you work with language to make your own stylistic mark on a piece of writing.

**Sept. 27:** Discussion of final project with regard to overall writing structure, research issues, blending of character, place, dialogue, narrative arc. READ: assigned essays. READ the next 100 pages in Larson.

     Investigative Reporting techniques. Assigned readings will be a big part of this lecture. In-class research/writing exercise.

Essay handouts for next week’s discussion of Libel Law and ethics. AP Libel Law Handouts. We will have a workshop on Libel Law in October.

**October 2:** Ethics in journalism, libel law, the blending of fiction and nonfiction writing. Study and discussion of a Case History of a Libel Suit. Reading handouts will look at celebrated controversies involving writers with *The New Yorker* and *The Washington Post.* READ: Related handouts, excerpt from the *AP Style Book*.

You should be finished with Larson at this point.

**Oct. 4:** In-class writing exercise. More on Ethics in Journalism. Will try to fold in discussion of at least one essay reading with focus on looking for models to help with Final Projects. READ: Assigned Essays. Discussion of Readings.

Film Excerpts discussions*: Almost Famous, All the President’s Men, Shattered Glass.*

From this point on all READINGS will be assigned essays. READ “Radical Chic,” the other essay in your Tom Wolfe book

**Today or October 9 I will hand out the syllabus update for October and early November.**

**April 14**: Beginning of workshop process for Final Projects. READ: Assigned Readings

     Thurs: Discussion of readings, with a focus on looking for models to help with Final Projects. We will examine these with an eye for research, structure and writing styles.

**April 21**: Final Project Workshop. all week. We will be doing group work as well as deconstructing student work using the overhead.

**April 28:** Final Project Workshop all week. We will be doing group work as well as deconstructing student work using the overhead.

All Work is due on Monday May 3, by 9 a.m. This date is not negotiable