

ADVANCED NONFICTION WRITING

ENGLISH 501
Friday 12:30 – 3:00 p.m.
Poetry Center

SPRING 2008
Alison Deming

This semester's nonfiction workshop will explore three forms of nonfiction writing: the memoir, the personal essay, and the lyric essay (or collage). To call these "forms" is a stretch. Perhaps it is more accurate to say they are modes, each of which might take any number of forms. One might write a memoir that is a mosaic of collaged material (as James Baldwin does in his essay "Here Be Dragons.") One might write a personal essay on alcoholism that draws from a well of personal memory (as Scott Sanders does in "Under the Influence"). Or one might cobble found material in a manner that appears to be arbitrary but winds up making a coherent, essayistic statement about one's culture (as does John D'Agata in "Hall of Fame" or Sei Shonagon in "Hateful Things.>"). The point is, as always with this genre, to be exploratory, to write in order to learn about oneself and the world, to discover some sensation, meaning, beauty, argument, irreparable contradiction that hovers right on the edge of one's comprehension. It is in this hovering that the literary nonfiction work is distinguished from the journalistic –not that there's anything wrong with that mode. I will ask you this semester to try out a range of formal possibilities with an eye to expanding the range for your work. Each essay must be structurally distinct from the others and demonstrate an understanding of the three forms or modes, in this order: 1) lyric essay or collage; 2) personal essay; and 3) memoir. Your colleagues in the class and I will give you specific editorial suggestions for revising and polishing your essays, as well as for working towards a thesis-length manuscript. We will have three guest instructors (candidates interviewing for the nonfiction faculty position) who will lead the workshop on February 8, 15, and 22.

REQUIREMENTS:

Workshop

You will write and have discussed in workshop three essays. In general, the length of each essay should be 12 – 20 pages. You may combine several short pieces to achieve this page total. Due dates and procedures for workshop essays follow on the next page. Please see me for a conference or contact me by email whenever you wish.

Revisions

One week after your essay has been discussed in class, you will hand in a revision for grading. I will not accept late work, unless you have made prior arrangements with me.

GRADING

You will receive the "K" for the semester, signifying that you are working on an ongoing project. "K" will convert to a letter grade given by your advisor when you complete your final project. I will give grades on your three essay revisions. Since this is a workshop, each participant is responsible for becoming a reader, audience and editor for each other participant. I expect you to take this responsibility seriously and to treat your colleagues in the class with respect, offering detailed and constructive suggestions for revision on

works put forward for discussion. In addition to offering commentary in class, please write a one-page written response to each essay citing its strengths and weaknesses, and making comments on the page, to be returned to the writer. Your critical and creative capacities as a writer will grow in direct proportion to your capacities as a reader and editor.

Plagiarism is a serious offence and will result in your failing the course. Cite your sources and influences, whenever possible, within the flow of the essay. You can resort to footnotes, if needed, but generally a creative piece will not require them.

I will award the grade of “I” (Incomplete) only under very exceptional circumstances and then only when all but a minor portion of the course work has been completed.

ABSENCES

Attendance is mandatory. More than two unexcused absences and you will be dropped from the course, unless you have discussed exceptional circumstances with me.

WORKSHOP PROCEDURE:

Please make sufficient copies (14) of your essay for all members of the class. Put your name at the top of the essay. Manuscripts should be titled, double-spaced and **pages numbered**. You will distribute copies of your essays on the due dates for your group, according to the attached schedule. The essay will be discussed on the following week, and the revision will be due for grading one week after that. **If you do not meet the due date for turning in the essay, it will NOT be discussed in workshop.**

**COURSE SCHEDULE
ENGLISH 501**

**Alison Deming
Spring 2008**

- January 18 Introductions. Review course requirements.
Reading packet* and discussion.
- January 25 Discuss reading assignment
Due: Group 1, Essay 1
- February 1 NO CLASS—AWP in NYC.
- February 8 Discuss: Group 1, Essay 1
Due: Group 2, Essay 1
- February 15 Discuss: Group 2, Essay 1
Due: Revision, Group 1, Essay 1
Due: Group 3, Essay 1
- February 22 Discuss: Group 3, Essay 1
Due: Revision, Group 2, Essay 1
Due: Group 4, Essay 1
- February 29: Discuss: Group 4, Essay 1
Due: Revision, Group 3, Essay 1
Due: Group 1, Essay 2
- March 7 Discuss: Group 1, Essay 2
Due: Revision, Group 4, Essay 1
Due: Group 2, Essay 2
- March 14 Discuss: Group 2, Essay 2
Due: Revision, Group 1, Essay 2
Due: Group 3, Essay 2
- March 21 SPRING BREAK
- March 28: Discuss: Group 3, Essay 2
Due: Revision, Group 2, Essay 2
Due: Group 4, Essay 2
- April 4 Discuss: Group 4, Essay 2
Due: Revision, Group 3, Essay 2
Due: Group 1, Essay 3

- April 11 Discuss: Group 1, Essay 3
Due: Revision, Group 4, Essay 2
Due: Group 2, Essay 3
- April 18 Discuss: Group 2, Essay 3
Due: Revision, Group 1, Essay 3
Due: Group 3, Essay 3
- April 25 Discuss: Group 3, Essay 3
Due: Revision, Group 2, Essay 3
Due: Group 4, Essay 3
- May 1 Discuss: Group 4, Essay 3
Due: Revision, Group 3, Essay 3
Last class. Summary and Evaluation.

PLEASE NOTE: Group 4 will have revisions due on May 7th.

OFFICE HOURS:

ML 438, Wednesday 2 – 5 p.m., Thursday 3:30 – 5 p.m. or by appointment

Phone 626-0799

Email: aldeming@aol.com

*** READING PACKET**

Ruben Martinez, “The Crossing”

Joan Didion, “At the Dam”

Joy Williams, “Safariland”

Gerald Stern, “The Sabbath”

Lucy Grealy, “Mirrorings”

John D’Agata, “National Cowboy Hall of Fame”

Charles Simic, “Dinner at Uncle Boris”

Bailey White, “Buzzard”

Kathleen Norris, “Rain”

David Shields, “The Tattoo”