

ENGLISH 596H 003
Thursday 12:30 – 3 p.m. at the Poetry Center

SPRING 2009
ALISON DEMING

THE ESSAY IS DEAD: LONG LIVE THE ESSAY

This craft seminar will explore the history of the essay, its grounding in the work of Montaigne as well as other cultural wellsprings, and its practice in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As the title for the course suggests, we will consider how the definition of the essay continues to be overthrown as new aesthetic regimes become influential. We will consider writers who have built a substantial body of work writing essay collections without any needless neigning after more “marketable” nonfiction forms. Reading list, in this order, is:

Michel de Montaigne, tr. Donald Frame, from **THE COMPLETE ESSAYS**
Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Tr. M.S. Peden, from **POEMS, PROTEST, AND A DREAM**
Yoshida Kenko, **ESSAYS IN IDLENESS**
George Orwell, **SELECTED ESSAYS**
Henry David Thoreau, “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience”
Doris Lessing, **PRISONS WE CHOOSE TO LIVE INSIDE**
William Carlos Williams, **IN THE AMERICAN GRAIN**
James Baldwin, **NOTES OF A NATIVE SON**
Roland Barthes, **MYTHOLOGIES**
Joan Didion, **SLOUCHING TOWARDS BETHLEHEM**
Richard Rodriguez, **BROWN**
Lia Purpura, **ON LOOKING**
David Foster Wallace, **CONSIDER THE LOBSTER**

READING PACKET OF SELECTED ESSAYS:

A sampler of essays by Gilbert White, Charles Lamb, John Clare, Robert Louis Stevenson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Zora Neal Hurston, William James, Mark Twain, W.E.B. DuBois, Elizabeth Hardwick, Wendell Berry, Gary Nabhan, and Bono. We will include a special section on early American oratory, including sermons, American Indian and African American speeches.

ALTERNATES (if you wish, you can substitute one of the following books for one of the last four on the list):

Annie Dillard, **HOLY THE FIRM**
Atul Gawande, **COMPLICATIONS**
Dave Hickey, **AIR GUITAR: ESSAYS ON ART AND DEMOCRACY**
Ander Monson, **NECK DEEP**

COURSE CONTENT AND REQUIREMENTS:

We will read and discuss twelve books plus a reading packet that I will hand out on the first day of class. You’ll be expected to **write a brief (one-page) response paper or imitation for each weekly reading assignment** and to hand it in on the day that book is discussed in class. These should address the author’s intent, stylistic devices,

strengths/weaknesses, and thematic concerns of the work. Please note specific passages, sentences, words that win your admiration. If you chose to write an imitation, cull stylistic or structural devices not simply subject matter or theme from the author. Weekly papers will not be graded. I will not accept late work. If you have a printer crisis, you may email the paper to me on the day that it is due.

Each participant in the course is required to **write one 15 – 20 page personal essay** that explores the history of the essay and incorporates reflection upon your reading this semester. You can approach this assignment as broadly and freely as you wish: a portrait of an essayist; a personal history of your engagement with (or disengagement from) the form; an argument between memoir and essay; a series of interviews with essayists; a futurist manifesto on the death of the essay; a lyric or comic or graphic essay. The field is open. Your goal is to write a publishable essay for a general readership. This is a craft course for writers, therefore your reading and writing should be intuitive and acquisitive. This is all about expanding the sense of formal possibility for your own work. **The essay will be due on the last day of class.**

INTRODUCERS

You will be expected to share the leadership for the seminar by taking a turn introducing one of the books on the reading list. We will set up a structure for this on the first day of class.

GRADING

I will **not** give you a letter grade on your weekly annotations, but I will keep a tally. I will base 70% of your final grade on your final essay, the other 30% on fulfilling weekly assignments and class participation. Attendance is required.

READING SCHEDULE: Books are available at the UA Bookstore

January 15. Syllabus and Introductions

January 22. Reading packet.

January 29. Montaigne (Donald Frame anthology published by Stanford U Press)

Book I: Essays 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 20, 21, 28, 31, 44, 55, 56, 57

Book II: Essays 2, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 26, 30, 31

Book III: Essays 2, 4, 8, 10, 13

February 5. Sor Juana (Penguin Classics edition, tr. Margaret Sayers Peden

Introduction and “Response to the Most Illustrious Poetess Sor Filetea de la Cruz”

Recommended: “Theater, Sacred and Profane,” p. 193 - 239

February 12. Yoshida Kenko, tr. ESSAYS IN IDLENESS

NO CLASS MEETING DUE TO AWP CONFERENCE

PAPERS DUE ON SCHEDULE ELECTRONICALLY.

Discussion via blogspot: <http://longlivetheessay.blogspot.com/>

February 19. George Orwell
 “Such, Such Were the Joys”
 “Shooting an Elephant”
 “Politics and the English Language”
 “Reflections on Ghandi”
 “Marrakech”
 “Looking Back on the Spanish War”
 “England Your England”
 “Why I Write”

February 26. Henry David Thoreau, “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience”
 Doris Lessing, PRISONS WE CHOOSE TO LIVE INSIDE

March 5. William Carlos Williams, IN THE AMERICAN GRAIN
(Will need to re-schedule this class)

March 12. James Baldwin, NOTES OF A NATIVE SON

March 19. SPRING BREAK

March 26. Roland Barthes, MYTHOLOGIES

April 2. Joan Didion, SLOUCHING TOWARDS BETHLEHEM

April 9. Richard Rodriguez, BROWN

April 16. Lia Purpura, ON LOOKING

April 23. David Foster Wallace, CONSIDER THE LOBSTER

April 30. LAST CLASS: ESSAYS DUE
Summary and Evaluation

OFFICE HOURS, ML 438
Tuesday, 1 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.
Thursday, 3:30 – 5 p.m.
Or by appointment
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