English 595: Creative Non-fiction

Professor Aritha van Herk

Wednesdays, 17:00 to 19:45
September 9 – December 9, 2020

Those who wish to take this course must apply for permission with a portfolio of relevant writing (20 pages), attached as a pdf document, to vanherk@ucalgary.ca

Your name: ____________________________________________

E-mail address: __________________________________________

Student number: __________________________________________

Prior Creative Writing and English courses:

Your reasons for wishing to take this course:

You MUST include a one-page proposal of the nonfiction project you plan to write.


You will be notified of your enrollment in the class by August 1st, 2020.
Course Description

This Creative Writing course seeks to enable students to work from experience and research toward the writing of an effective and compelling narrative. Creative Non-fiction’s impetus is to use the techniques of literary craft within a factual or research-based framework to write in a compelling, dramatic, and aesthetically interesting manner. This work can comprise an essay, a journal article, a research paper, a memoir, or a prose-poem. The subject can be personal, but it need not necessarily be so. The mixture of public and private, historical and contemporary matter contributes to the power of this writing: there are no limits to subject matter as long as that topic is explored in a narrative way. The writing should seek to translate to the reader a particular subject, place, or personality vividly and unusually. Topics (NOT themes) might range from barber shops to grain elevators, from elixirs to eyeglasses, from shoes to revolving doors, from the phrase *esprit de l’escalier* to “no one expects the Spanish inquisition.” This class provides an opportunity to engage in depth with an object, neighbourhood, or locution.

Constraints: NO violence; No fantasy

This form enables the investigation of unusual questions in contemporary times. Although focused on narrative, it is less a genre in and of itself than a text instigated by voice and research, strong description, evocative images, and powerful revelations. While it relies on the author’s ability to recount or to springboard from actual events, it relies also on imagination and craft to relay important ideas: stories of event, experience, loss, coincidence, and accident. Most of all, the successful work of nonfiction incites reflection on a crucial epiphany or moment of recognition that the writer can offer the reader.

We will discuss contemporary works of creative non-fiction, including examples of autobiography, memoir, travel narrative, literary journalism and ficto-criticism. The aim of the course is to enable students to research and develop a powerful piece of writing that is both creative and critical, whether a lyric essay, a meditation, or a well-researched dive into an historical or place-based subject.

This is NOT a course in writing critical essays, but a course that will seek to inspire students to stretch their notions of writing as a persuasive or informative incentive in order to create a narrative that informs and pleases.

Text: Lee Gutkind, *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction*

The class will function as a workshop of the whole. As we will likely be working virtually, students should expect to be active and present via ZOOM.

Students’ writing will be workshopped at least twice in the term.
Grade breakdown:

- Final project of 75 pages of a well-crafted work of Creative Non-fiction: 50%
- Presentation on one challenging aspect of research and practice: 10%
- Workshopped writing: 20%
- Participation in workshopping, contributions to class discussion: 20%

Book-length works as examples

Andre Aciman, editor. The Proust Project
Laura Buzzard, Don LePan, Nora Ruddock, Alexandria Stuart, editors. The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose – Third Canadian Edition

Kyle Buckley, The Laundromat Essay
Alain de Botton, A Week at the Airport
Chelene Knight, Dear Current Occupant
Robert Kroetsch, A Likely Story
Alberto Manguel, The City of Words
Jan Morris, Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere
Patti Smith, Woolgathering
Rebecca Solnit, Hope in the Dark
Jesse Thistle, From the Ashes
Kim Thuy, Ru