

Course Overview: Intro to Literary Non-Fiction, or True North (Finding the Stories That are Yours to Write)

Professor Peter Markus

CW 2500, Mondays 6:30-9:50

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Office Hours: 5:15 to 6:15 and by appointment (169 Dodge)

This is a class in Creative Writing. As the name suggests, we will be creating writing. The writings that we will be working on this semester will be true stories, or as true and as truthful as our writing can make them. We'll be discussing various approaches to getting the most that we can in our writing out of our lives and the world (the things) around us. Our writing will take up the bulk of our class time (in class and out of class), though we will also be reading the writings of other writers who have found various ways to tell the stories that are theirs to tell.

It's true, or so I believe this to be: there is a fine line between truth and fiction, between what is actual and what is imagined, or even remembered. Memory has its own story to tell. Every story, true or not, is an act of reinvention. Things happen—this is true—but just because they happened doesn't make the story of what happened any more real or powerful or true than a story that might be pure fabrication, or pure artifice. We'll be looking at and exploring and playing around with such notions of the truth, facts, story, and how the act of writing is, at best, a slippery and unreliable process of discovery and unveiling. What matters most, in my eyes, are the words on the page. The right words sequenced with authority and authenticity gives us no choice but to believe them to be true.

Students in this class will be expected to keep an ongoing "I remember" notebook (modeled after Joe Brainard's book—a required text for this course—*I Remember*). No less than 30 typed double-spaced pages will be submitted as part of your Final Portfolio (more about this later). We will begin this notebook as an in-class activity and you should return to it habitually—daily, in the very least weekly—so that the act of writing in it becomes a kind of ritual. Keeping a notebook such as this will no doubt help you uncover the stories that are yours to write.

The key verb of this course will be “explore.” Do not confuse this verb with a word that begins similarly in its “ex”-ness: “explain.” A better sibling verb might be *examine*. Other key verbs to what we will be doing over the course of the next fourteen weeks: to play, discover, make. Some of what we do will be told, some of it shown. Literary non-fiction, by virtue of its inclusive nature, allows for and invites flexibility and experimentation. We will begin simply by looking at what we remember and look outward toward such things as what we see, what we think, what we know, what we believe, what we love, what we do, where we're from, what makes us who we are, among whatever else the page and the writing process throws our way. To write what you might not otherwise have written is always one of my ambitions, as your instructor. To write what you might also take delight in, or be surprised by, to write into being a world that is

important to you, that you feel connected to, that you believe in: this is also something to look forward to. I look forward to spending time with you and your words and to getting to know you in this way.

This course will grow organically, building from week to week as we begin and continue to cultivate and find your “true north,” or the stories that are yours to write. In addition to the Joe Brainard book (mentioned above), we will also be reading Annie Dillard’s book on the writing life, called *The Writing Life*, which offers an inside glimpse into the mind and habits of one writer. We will also be reading other writers and their takes on what it takes to be a writer, to write your own life into writing, among them *The Deer Pasture* by Rick Bass. One of the things we’ll be looking for in our work is a place—a sacred, storied landscape—that is ours and ours alone. To quote Joan Didion, author of many works of literary non-fiction, “A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image.” Rick Bass’s deer pasture, for Rick Bass, is just such a place. What might your place be? is one of the questions that we’ll be looking to answer in this course on finding your own true north.

Required Books (though already mentioned):

I Remember by Joe Brainard

The Writing Life by Annie Dillard

The Deer Pasture by Rick Bass

Why I Write edited by Will Blythe

Much of the first half of our semester will be spent writing (in class assignments, outside of class assignments). In the second half of the class, we will continue to spend much of our time writing, and reading, but we will also make time—if I see that you have produced work that is ready for the eyes of others—to workshop our writing with the group. Why I am right now tentative about this aspect of the class is this: that what’s most important is for you to find your voice—or a voice—out of the writing experience. Sometimes what gets in the way of a writer finding his or her voice are the voices of others who begin to act as obstacles. There are enough obstacles already in the life of a writer. In the winter I will be offering a Workshop in Literary Non-Fiction which will be made up almost entirely of workshop time (for those of you who feel ready to receive and listen to and battle with the voices of others telling you what they think about your writing). There is value in the workshop approach, but like I said, your own words and your own voice is what I want you to most closely listen to at this point in the game. I know it is hard enough when our own voices can also get in the way and we begin to doubt and censor everything we try to say.

Eventually, of course, the writing that you write and what you bring both to the page and to the classroom will want and need to be assessed. The bulk of your grade will be based on your presence in the class (both on and off the page). You will be turning in a final project/portfolio made up of the writings that you produce (in class, outside of class) over

the course of the semester. All work that is a part of this final portfolio will be work that you have worked on, revised, typed up, destroyed, remade, reclaimed, and made, as Joan Didion might say, in your own image (what this means, exactly, is open to discussion. What I think she means is that the page and the stories that we become the stories that we tell. The page as a kind of mirror to help us see who we are and how we stand in relation to the world behind us and in front of us.

If I were to offer a breakdown of grades, this is what it might look like:

33% The 2 A's: Attendance/Attitude

33% The 2 P's: Presence/ Participation

33% Final Portfolio (due on our Final Exam day).

1% Extra credit

Learning Outcomes:

Students will:

- improve their writing skills
- explore and discover an individual voice and style
- engage critically with literary non-fiction texts
- develop critique skills for in-class workshops of peer work
- gain an understanding of core elements of the writer's craft
- demonstrate the ability to produce writing that is original
- practice skills to present a live reading of their work
- receive personal feedback and mentoring from professional writer

Other Things:

Plagiarism: don't do it. Don't even think about doing it. Fact is, it'll be nearly impossible for you to do it. Your story belongs to you. It is your signature property. "Our words," so says the great Sufi poet Hafiz, "become the house we live in." Don't be a squatter. Build and live in your own house.

Attendance: is necessary. Is crucial. This is a once a week class. If you're not here, how can you be present, right? Of course things get in the way. We get sick. The people we love get sick and need us. Cars break down. That said, be here always unless you have no choice. More than two absences will impact your final grade. If you miss more than two classes, a B is the best grade you will receive in this class (regardless of the strengths of your portfolio). More than 3 classes missed, you won't receive better than a C. More than 4, a D. Five classes (which is a third of the classes) and you will receive an E. Show up,

be engaged, try and try again, push back against the struggle, break on through to your own triumphs, or not, fail and fail better even, stay positive, write because you want to write, be who you are, be generous with your words (on the page and also in conversation), and you will do just fine. You will, in fact, do better than fine. You will excel. Better still: you will shine. I want nothing less from you and for you. The page often gives back what you give it. Think of your grade, and your relationship with this class, in this same way, and you will get from it what you give to it. One of my main jobs is to take you seriously as a young writer and to get you to take yourself seriously as a young writer and to see that we all have stories to tell (yes, even you, shy kid in the back who is right now shaking in your shoes thinking to yourself, "But I have nothing to say. I am not a writer." I was once you. If I do my job, you doing yours will follow in that wake. But here again, you have to show up. And be ready. And be open. And be willing to step outside your comfort zone. Okay, pep talk over (for now).

Now it's time to write!