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CRWR 513.01: Techniques of Nonfiction

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CRWR 513— Techniques of Modern Nonfiction

The Long and Short of Lyric Essay

Spring 2018

Tuesday 3:30-6:20 LA 102

bluntj@mso.umt.edu

Office: LA 112

Required Texts:

Heart Berries by Terese Marie Mailhot

The Chronology of Water by Lidia Yuknavitch

Because by Joshua Mensch

Another Bullshit Night in Suck City by Nick Flynn

The lyric essay is a subgenre of creative nonfiction that uses tropes of poetry in addition to those of prose. The form lends itself to humor and irony, but also to surprising poignancy and power. Lyric essay ranges from some that might be mistaken for prose poems to snippets of compressed narrative, stories told short but with a familiar narrative arc. No two are the same, but we will discover the common elements they share. We will read a wide variety of lyric essay, from the very brief to the book-length, studying elements of craft, style and technique that identify this form. In addition to reading assignments and discussion, you will be given prompts or examples of a lyric essay style and asked to write your own essays for peer review. The book-length memoirs also have very different approaches to lyric form. Students will be divided into teams and charged with leading the book discussions. I will create the reading packets for the class, but each student is in charge of making copies for workshop.

Grading:

Everyone starts with an A, and if they attend to the basic requirements of the class, they will keep it. You're not expected to write this form expertly, but you'll be learning as you go along and in the end I want to see a portfolio of your best eight [8] lyric essay attempts. In final grading, I will consider class presentation, participation in class discussion, your thoughtful, respectful evaluation of peer work, in addition to the final portfolio.

Because we write from personal experience/observation, the nonfiction workshop format is that of a community of writers working together toward a common goal: creating publishable works. We assume the author of each essay is also the narrator [and often a character] and we take this into account in our discussion. Writers who address very sensitive topics or personal events must be prepared to discuss the work objectively, and readers must be prepared to set aside their own discomfort to facilitate that discussion. If you have any questions or concerns about the appropriateness of an essay topic, please come to see me during office hours. I am a proponent of free speech, and have a high level

of tolerance for any well-formed argument or opinion—even if I don't agree with it. But there are some ground rules. In class, all opinions will be offered and countered respectfully. I will not tolerate hate speech or writing for the sole purpose of attacking, denigrating or degrading other people.

Attendance counts:

our class meets once a week, and we have only 14 meetings. You are allowed one excused absence per semester before absences will impact your grade. If you feel you will have difficulty maintaining this requirement, please meet with me after the first class. Absence is not an excuse for failing to complete an assignment.

Participation in class discussions and workshops is mandatory and comments should be offered voluntarily. To participate fully, you must come to class prepared, which means: reading all materials thoroughly, more than once if necessary; researching names and events if they are unfamiliar; writing down discussion questions and observations in preparation for class; backing up your observations about technique, theme and language with textual quotes, both for peers' work and for professional works.

Disabilities:

In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, I will make every effort to provide appropriate accommodations for students with documented disabilities. Students must register with a Disability Services Coordinator and meet with me to make arrangements.

Plagiarism:

Enrollment in this university and in this class assumes a commitment to upholding the principles of academic integrity. If you have any confusion about proper citation of published works or questions about documentation of work other than your own, bring these to my attention prior to submitting for workshop or final grade.

Defining the form, by Dinty Moore, editor of *Brevity*:

As an editor of *Brevity*, I am often asked to define and demarcate the flash nonfiction genre. Many will initially assume a flash piece is an excerpt from a longer work, and yes, sometimes a significant moment out of a chapter or a long essay can stand alone, but the best flash work in my opinion could never work in the longer form because the energy of the piece hinges on the rapid-fire sharing of information. The urgency of having to fit the content into an abbreviated frame is what makes it powerful.

Though trying to pin down any art form too strictly is ultimately a fruitless exercise, I've come up with what I think is an apt metaphor: Imagine there is a fire burning deep in the forest. In an essay of conventional length, the reader begins at the forest's edge, and is taken on a hike, perhaps a meandering stroll, into those woods, in search of that fire. The further in the reader goes, with each page that turns, the more the reader begins to sense smoke in the air, or maybe heat, or just an awareness that something ahead is smoldering.

In a very brief essay, however, the reader is not a hiker but a smoke jumper, one of those brave firefighters who jump out of planes and land 30 yards from where the forest fire is burning. The writer starts the reader right at that spot, at the edge of the fire, or as close as one can get without touching the actual flame. There is no time to walk in.

The brief essay, in other words, needs to be hot from the first sentence, and the heat must remain the entire time. My fire metaphor, it is important to note, does not refer to incendiary subject matter. The heat might come from language, from image, from voice or point-of-view, from revelation or suspense, but there must always be a burning urgency of some sort, translated through each sentence, starting with the first.

Judith Kitchen has her own comparison, focusing on ice instead of fire. "I often use a snowball metaphor," she has said. "You've got all this stuff out there called snow but when you gather it all up and really pack it together, you know, and you throw it off, there's a sting. I think with these short pieces—even when they're quiet and meditative—the effect is a little sting."

Fire or ice?

Either way, the air changes.