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ENST 594.03: Visiting Writer - Environmental Writing - The Parts of the Whole/ Writing What's Real

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Syllabus

Env Writing: The Parts of the Whole/ Writing What's Real - 33201 - ENST 594 - 03

6:40 pm - 9:30 pm Wed at the ETM FLAT Studio

Office hours: Wednesdays, 1:30 to 4:00 pm; location TBA

William deBuys (wdebuys@earthlink.net; 505/689-1021)

Anything goes in this workshop-formatted course for writing creative non-fiction. Whether your narrative is deeply researched or deeply personal, scaled to the macro or the micro, or popular or arcane, we will look together at the elements that find their way into most non-fiction writing. We'll talk about creating characters that matter, evoking a sense of place, dramatizing action, and conveying "info" and commentary. We'll bear in mind that the resulting whole needs to be greater than the sum of all those parts, and we'll search for the magic that makes it so. Some students may use the course to refine or expand projects begun elsewhere (although they will need to be prepared to write new material as well); others may be embarking on a fresh journey entirely. Either way is okay, as long as you come with a commitment to work serious shifts in the "Sentence Factory" and to produce engaging, readable, and meaningful prose.

Goal:

We will have a number of smallish, warm-up assignments, but the main purpose of the course will be for each student to produce a publishable essay equivalent to a long-form magazine article or a book chapter. Subject matter is to be discussed in advance with the instructor. Target length: 10,000-15,000 words. First draft to be submitted approx. March 16 (we'll nail down a hard date after class gets underway). The essay will be rewritten at least once and presented to the class a second time in its revised form.

Workshop Format:

The shorter writing assignments will be read aloud in class; your long essay will be distributed ahead of class time for all to read. The quality of ensuing discussion will be vital to the success of the class. Each student will be responsible for reading all other students' work with care and offering constructive critiques purposed toward the work's improvement.

Submissions Format: hard copy with 1-inch margins, on 8.5"xl 1" paper, in 12-point type and an easy-to-read font such as Palatino, Times, Times New Roman, etc.

Readings: Short articles or essays may be assigned from time to time.

Schedule: One of our first tasks will be to schedule class meetings to make up for two weeks of the term when I will not be in Missoula. (I am told this is a normal arrangement for instructors in my position.)

Accordingly, we'll fill in most of the dates in the following schedule after we agree when to hold the make-up meetings.

Meeting 1, Feb 4. Your assignment in preparation for this meeting has two parts:

- a. Read Jonathan Franzen, "Farther Away" (*The New Yorker*, April 18, 2011), a pdf of which has been emailed to you along with this syllabus
Imagine that you are the author of the piece (but not famous, like Franzen) and that the friend whose death you mention is not famous, either. How would you pitch the article to an editor? (As in: what's your elevator speech?) Put a different way, can you say succinctly what this essay is about?
- b. Select a passage from a favorite book—it can be fiction or non-fiction—that introduces a principal character (i.e., it's the reader's first meaningful encounter with the character), and bring the passage to class to read. It should feature writing that you admire and a character whom you find compelling. The passage need only be a few paragraphs long.

In class: after administrative stuff is out of the way, we'll discuss character portraits, interview techniques (very important for covering stories in the field), and, if time permits, the Franzen essay.

Meeting 2, Feb 11.

Assignment for this class: interview another member of the class (who will have been randomly selected for you in the previous class) and write a character portrait of him/her. A page and a half or two pages is plenty.

Read and discuss character portraits

Meeting 3,

Assignment, due by class time: interview anyone who is not a member of the class (best if this person has something to do with the longer essay you will write for the class), and, well, you know what to do: write a portrait. (So maybe you are wondering why you have to write so much about people in an *environmental* writing course; the answer, to be discussed in class, is one you probably already know, but in any event it cuts to a problem that is central to environmental writing.)

Read and discuss portraits, same as before.

Additional assignment: Bring to this class a passage from a book or magazine article that evokes a lucid and powerful sense of place.

Meeting 4,

Read and discuss portraits of place.

Additional assignment: Bring to this class a passage from a book or magazine article that provides a clear and compelling discussion of an environmental issue. (Ok to use a very broad definition of what an “environmental issue” is.

Meeting 5,

Read and discuss portraits of issues.

From this point on, we'll be pacing ourselves to complete our discussions of the first drafts of your long essays prior to spring break. We may have some in-class writing exercises, but no more out-of-class writing, except for the long essays. We will also discuss various short readings and/or pursue topics of general interest to the class. After spring break, our emphasis will be on discussion of your rewrites.

Obviously, we have a lot of blanks to fill in below, but the time will fly by, and we will have fun. I promise that everyone will be a more confident writer at the end of the course.

Meeting 6,

Meeting 7,

Meeting 8,

Meeting 9,

Meeting 10,

Meeting 11,

Meeting 12,

Meeting 13,

Meeting 14, April 29.