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CRWR 412.01: Advanced Creative Writing - Nonfiction

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CRWR 412: Advanced Nonfiction

The Rise of Modern Memoir

Prof. Judy Blunt Spring 2017 M/W 3:30-5:20 p LA 102

Office: LA 112 bluntj@mso.umt.edu

Office Hours: M/T/W as posted; email for appointment.

Required Texts:

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou

This Boy's Life, Tobias Wolff

A Girl Named Zippy, Haven Kimmel

Bettyville, George Hodgman

With or Without You, Domenica Ruta

A House in the Sky, Amanda Lindhout, Sara Corbett

In this course, we will explore memoir as a literary sub-genre, specifically its evolution from the 1960s to present day. We will investigate issues of craft and technique in each required text, and explore topics specific to memoir. Through the prism of memoir, students will view cultural, gender, racial and ethnic issues, then explore the significance of these individual stories through written response and reflective class discussion.

The reading requirements are designed to help students become better readers, and to advance their abilities to discuss, write about and assess good writing.

The writing component of this class requires each student to submit three memoir essays [or chapters of longer works] for peer review, working toward a final portfolio of his or her best nonfiction writing.

Reading Component: The reading list for this class includes a substantial packet of short works that will be provided to the class, and six memoir books students are required to purchase in paperback. [No EBooks or tablet readers.] The books range from classic memoir to the latest in the field and are widely available; students are required to obtain books and be prepared to begin reading assignments by the second week of class.

Writing Component: At the senior level, I assume writing habits are well established and your creative work is ongoing. See me during office hours if you feel you need direct assignments. You'll be required to submit three memoir essays to workshop, with a goal of at least 30 pages of revised, polished writing by the end of semester. That final portfolio must reflect your finest effort, as it constitutes 50 percent of your grade.

Workshop requirements: Students furnish copies of their essays one class period before the workshop. The standards for submission are non-negotiable: Please present all work double spaced, with standard margins, in

a 12-pt. font. You're required to use page numbers. You're required to title your work, even if it's a chapter or segment of a longer work. I require a single-side copy of your essay, but you can make double-side copies for the class. No more than 15 pages per submission. If you're writing lyric or short nonfiction, you may submit up to three short pieces in one packet within that page limit. As a reader, you mark each essay with notes, edits and questions, and then compose a typewritten page of overall comments to attach to the manuscript. All copies of the manuscript will be returned to the author following workshop, and at that time, you will pass forward a copy of your comments to me.

Workshop format: Our workshop format is that of a community of writers working to give the most useful feedback on the fundamental issues of memory, meaning and method in writing from the first-person point of view. The focus of the workshop will be to provide critical feedback and support for each writer, with a goal of creating publishable works. Your contribution to class discussion is a fundamental requirement of the course, and best offered without prompting, as that reflects preparation and engagement. Constructive remarks concerning diction, organization, development and voice are welcome, but everyone is responsible for proofreading work so we are not forced to sideline issues of technique and style for those of grammar, syntax and spelling. You are the editors in this class, in charge of offering thoughtful, well-reasoned advice to a writer. Edit work with a style-guide at your elbow. Make editorial comments that reflect your understanding of the writer's intent—we must assume every element offered in a manuscript is deliberately included. You are the storytellers in this class, proud to offer up solid first drafts, work that's as good as you can make it without advice.

In memoir, the author is writing from close personal experience or observation, and workshop discussion reflects an understanding of this. The "I" character is referred to as the narrator. Writers who address sensitive topics or very personal events in their nonfiction must be prepared to discuss the work objectively. Readers who disagree with the actions or events portrayed must be prepared to discuss the work, not the writer, objectively. If you have any questions or concerns about the appropriateness of an essay topic or your ability to address it in workshop, please come to see me during office hours. I am a proponent of free speech, and have a high level of tolerance for any logically presented argument or opinion—but there are some ground rules. In class, even controversial opinions must be both offered and countered respectfully. I will not tolerate hate speech or writing that attacks, denigrates or degrades other people.

Attendance: I take attendance and it is a significant factor in your class participation grade. Miss three classes, and I will ask to meet with you to discuss problems. Further absences will reduce your grade by one letter. If you know you will be gone, please contact me in advance. Contact me via email if accident or illness forces you to miss class. Remember, this is a collaborative studio course, not a lecture course; there's no way to effectively make up a missed workshop or a missed discussion. If you miss more than 6 classes [that's three weeks of the semester!] you will be asked to withdraw from the class. After the third late arrival, chronically tardy students will be marked absent. Please be on time. If you are absent on the day of your own workshop, it will not be rescheduled. It's up to the absent student to contact peers for workshop manuscripts and return to class with reading, writing and editing assignments prepared.

Grading: Class participation makes up half your grade, and the final portfolio constitutes the other half. The best class participation grades will be earned by students who attend class consistently, complete assignments correctly and on time, proofread written submissions and submit them error-free, keep up with reading assignments, join class discussions without prompting, and contribute respectful, honest and well-reasoned spoken and written comments in every workshop. The best portfolio grades will be earned by those whose final work

reflects improvement and a substantial mastery of nonfiction writing skills. **IMPORTANT:** Writers who display persistent errors in grammar, punctuation, usage or sentence construction in their final portfolio will fail this course. I will identify these early and often in your written assignments. I offer this semester of individual instruction in the form of office hours. Every good writer has to face and master a few demons. Please let me help you conquer yours.

Graduate Students meet with me early in the semester to discuss graduate level requirements.

Plagiarism is defined in the UM Student Conduct Code as representing another person's words, ideas, data, or materials as one's own. In this course, it will result in a failing grade and a report to the Dean of Students.

Qualified students with disabilities will receive appropriate accommodations in this course. Please come and see me if you need something. Be prepared to provide a letter from your DSS Coordinator.

As the semester progresses, we, as a class, may agree to alter or amend this syllabus/schedule to suit our changing needs.