**Beginning Creative Nonfiction Writing:**

**Wonder in the Personal Essay**

Instructor: James Davis, Ph.D.

Class Number, Location, and Time: ENGL 3160.001, AUDB 212, TTH 2 to 3:20 p.m.

Email: james.davis@unt.edu

Office Hours: Wednesdays, 2-5 p.m., or by appointment

Office Location: LANG 408A or Zoom by request (link in Canvas)

**Course Description and General Information**

This course introduces you to creative nonfiction through writing and reading in the personal essay. Don’t let the word “essay” scare you. Stuffy as it may sound, the essay we’re studying is a fine art—designed for soulful appreciation and enjoyment. In fiction, it might be called a short story. The main differences between a short story and a personal essay are 1. how the essay’s narrator represents the writer, and 2. how this narrator’s statements relate to the truth. (More on these two differences later.)

You will write in every class and submit your writing every week You will draft six flash essay experiments (between 500 and 1000 words) and two essays: one 1,000-2,500 words, the other 2,500-4,000 words. You will also submit a few pre-writing exercises, reading responses, and reflections. At the end of the course, you will submit revisions of one workshop essay and one experiment.

We will read many published examples in the genre: very short “flash” essays (shorter than 1,000 words), one book-length essay, and many essays somewhere in between. The reading will show you how versatile, accommodating, entertaining, and *wonderful* the essay is.

Wonder, or curiosity, drives this course. We will use the personal essay to attempt answers at thorny yet tantalizing human problems. Our syllabus moves through questions: who, what, where, when, whence, how, and why. These questions may be directed outward: Who are my ancestors? What do dogs dream about? How conscious is evil of itself? But all our questions will also point inward: toward the writer. The “person” in “personal essay” is you. You will write about you: your memories, your observations, your wonders. The words “I” or “me” need not appear in the writing for an essay to be personal, but it is highly encouraged. The writing and reading in this course will deepen your sense of wonder about yourself and the self in general.

This course will also improve the quality of your prose. Much of our discussion will be about the nitty-gritty of language: figures of speech, grammatical structures, sentence fluency, usage, and style. It is such attention to language that puts the “creative” in “creative nonfiction.” This course shows how such creativity allows the personal essay to get at truths that other forms of nonfiction cannot access.

**REQUIRED MATERIALS**

* One book-length essay: *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* by Mark Doty (Beacon Edition recommended
* Several shorter essays, provided to you in print and/or electronically on Canvas
* A laptop with Microsoft Word
* Reliable access to the Internet
* Reliable access to a printer

**RECOMMENDED MATERIALS**

* A composition notebook for in-class writing
* A dictionary or dictionary app

**GRADING POLICY**

25% = attendance and participation

25% = weekly writing assignments (pre-writing, essay experiments, reading responses, etc.)

25% = essay workshops (including submission, attendance, and responses)

25% = Final portfolio of revised work and a writer’s statement

100%

**Attendance & Participation:** This is a creative writing course, not a geography survey or calculus lab. As such, your spoken contribution—your *words*—bear an enormous weight on not only your own learning but also that of your peers. Show up to class having read the assigned reading and prepared things to say about it. Take notes as you read—at the very least, underline passages you love, ones that produced a bodily reaction: a laugh, a raised brow, a mouthed “whoa.” When we are reading our own and other’s’ work, be an attentive and engaged listener and a courageous speaker. **Mind your own contributions to class discussion.** When you feel you have contributed enough, observe and listen. When you feel you have under-contributed, speak up. I will call on shier folks and privately encourage folks who contribute a lot (a good thing, mind you) to give the shier folks air.

Of course, no contribution can be made if you’re not in the classroom. Show up to every class session you can. Be on time. If you show up after 2 p.m., you will be marked tardy. **Three tardies = one absence.** **Four unexcused absences will end in your failing the class.**

**Weekly Writing:** Every week you’ll be asked to submit at least 300 words. This will take the form of flash essay experiments, pre-writing exercises, and reading responses. I’ll grade them for completion.

**Essay workshops**: Workshops will take place every Wednesday from Week 4 on. Your grade for the essay workshops will be determined by the timely submission of your own complete essay drafts and your annotations of your classmates’ drafts, as well as your attendance of your own workshops and one-on-one meetings with me afterwards, during my office hours.

**Final portfolio**: Your capstone project for the course is a portfolio consisting of

1. an artist’s statement of three- to five hundred words
2. a thoughtful revision of one flash essay experiment
3. a thoughtful revision of one of your workshop essays

The final portfolio will demonstrate that you have synthesized the responses to your creative work and applied this synthesis to your revisions. These revisions must go beyond the realm of proofreading and show your investment in the heart and soul of your writing.

**CLASSROOM POLICIES**

**Email policy:** Please communicate with me through my email, [james.davis@unt.edu](mailto:james.davis@unt.edu), from your UNT email address. Include my name in a greeting (e.g. “Hi Dr. Davis,”) and your name in a signature line (e.g. “Cheers, Michael”). I will answer emails within a day of their receipt. I do check Canvas messages regularly, but please use email to write to me rather than Canvas, especially for something time-sensitive. In the subject line, describe your reason for writing and include the course name (e.g. “Question about Weekend Writing for Beginning CNF”). This will help me keep my inbox organized and ensure a quick response.

**Absence policy:** I take attendance every day in Canvas so that you can track your absences. **I am happy to excuse three absences**, no questions asked. Please don’t feel required to email me before or after these absences with an explanation. Absences after three will result in your grade dropping and potentially failing the course. As far as excused absences, I can accommodate any personal hardships or emergencies that have been reported to the Dean of Students office. Please contact the Dean of Students office if you are experiencing any personal difficulties: deanofstudents@unt.edu.

**Late-work policy:** I cannot accept late work unless arrangements have been made at least a week in advance. Assignments will close in Canvas on their due dates and will not be reopened.

**Cell phone policy:** No cell phones visible during class unless I give you explicit permission.

**Headphone policy:** No ear buds or headphones on your ears during class unless you have an ODA accommodation or I give you explicit permission.

**AI Policy:** Any use of AI/large language learning models to summarize critical and creative readings or generate written work for submission falls under the category of academic dishonesty and is unacceptable. This is a creative writing course, which depends entirely on the full critical and creative participation of everyone involved. The use of any LLMs or generative AI, to produce your own work or to comment on your classmates’ work, is a waste of our time and the earth’s resources, as well as a breach of community trust. Also, it’s just sad and boring. You are required to use your brain for this class and are not allowed to outsource your thinking to machines or software (or other uncredited, more traditional sources). If you use AI in any capacity for coursework, research, or study pertinent to our class, you will fail the assignment, receive a 0 overall for course participation, and be reported to the University’s Office of Academic Integrity to initiate further action.

**ETIQUETTE**

Rule 1:Come to class with something to share, i.e. having completed any reading or writing assigned for that day and formulated ideas about it. Your contribution is what you’re bringing to the potluck. The more love you put into your contribution, the livelier, funnier, deeper, and wiser the class will be. Essays are meals. Sink your teeth into them. I will call on you if you’re silent for more than one class. The quantity and quality of your contributions will bear on your Attendance/Participation grade.

Rule 2: Be kind and respectful. Sharing one’s writing, especially creative writing, may feel as vulnerable as dancing in front of an audience. Treat your classmates’ work as a gift. Do not share it with anyone outside our class without getting permission from the writer first. Do not engage in side conversations during class discussions, especially of each other’s work. Disruptive or disrespectful behavior towards other students or the instructor will be monitored and may be reported.

*Respect* and *criticism* are not mutually exclusive. My colleague, the essayist Megan Arlett, puts it thus:

Respectful behavior includes the honest effort to help an author improve their writing. To be kind does NOT mean to give only positive criticism. To be kind is to offer necessary negative criticism in an instructive, helpful, and gracious manner. To be kind is to be constructive whether you’re giving positive or negative criticism.

Another way of thinking of this is to meet an essay where it’s at. Your job is to see what a piece of writing wants to achieve and help it along, not to “correct” it.

Respect also means **hate speech will not be tolerated, in writing or otherwise.** If you are questioning whether something in your writing constitutes hate speech—good! Consideration is usually a pretty good antidote to hate. Please share the writing with me prior to submitting it for reading in class so we can discuss the approach.

Rule 3: Though the narrator of a personal essay *represents* the writer, a representation is not equal to the original. A selfie is not a self. As such, our discussions will distinguish the narrator from the writer by referring to the narrator in the third person, as “**the narrator**,” “**the persona**,” or “**the I character**.” Similarly, if a classmate writes about their mother in an essay, refer to this character as “**the mother character**,” not “your mom.” This insistence on acknowledging art may feel clunky at first and require reinforcement. Don’t take it personal. Distinguishing a representation (especially a very good one) from the original is a habit of mind that takes conscious practice to develop. It can be fun, crafting the self. Enjoy the construction of the essay by appreciating the construction of the narrator.

Rule 4.Similarly, “the truth” or “how things happened” should not be confused with the *representation* of that truth in an essay. **We will be writing *a* truth (yours), not *the* truth.** Another way of saying this is, we will be writing *towards* truth, with the knowledge that we may land a bit off center. Our memories, perspectives, imagination, and reason are all powerful yet incomplete. Essay comes from a French word, *essai*, meaning “trial” or “attempt.” There is a humility to this word that the best essays honor through circumspection, nuance, and care. Too much certainty shuts out wonder. Cultivate openness and humility in your nonfiction practice.

**Reading difficulty**: You will be asked to read at least two essays for every class. Usually, the pages will total well under 30 (the max p. count per class). This is a writing-intensive course, not a literature course. That said, the assigned essays, by some of the foremost living authors in the field of literary nonfiction, are all very good and may be, cognitively and emotionally, very difficult. We will read an essay about the death of a mother, one about lynchings, one about children dying of cancer. We will read essays that deal with rape, child abuse, and other forms of trauma and atrocity. We will also read an essay about pandas, in which no panda is harmed. **No subject is off limits for this class—this is especially true of your writing**. Nonfiction is a powerful way to work through trauma and psychic pain—all of you have access to this power. If you feel you’re unable to read or write as you need to, talk to me about it during office hours and we can figure out a way.

**UNT POLICIES**

*ADA Accommodations Statement*

UNT makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Accommodation (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide a student with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding one’s specific course needs. Students may request accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. For additional information see the ODA website at disability.unt.edu.

*Academic Integrity Standards and Consequences*

According to UNT Policy 06.003, Student Academic Integrity, academic dishonesty occurs when students engage in behaviors including, but not limited to cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, and sabotage. A finding of academic dishonesty may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions ranging from admonition to expulsion from the University.

The decision of the instructor will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity, which is responsible for maintaining student conduct records. The incident may result in an official disciplinary record for the student(s).

Academic integrity violations can include copying a passage from a source verbatim, but they can also include improper or misleading citations. Please note that all source material must be acknowledged, even if the material is paraphrased. Be careful to always acknowledge the work of other writers and take the time to work out your thoughts and arguments without copying the work of others. (https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-049)

*Emergency Notification and Procedures*

UNT uses a system called Eagle Alert to quickly notify students with critical information in the event of an emergency (i.e., severe weather, campus closing, and health and public safety emergencies like chemical spills, fires, or violence). In the event of a university closure, please refer to Canvas for contingency plans for covering course materials.

*Sexual Assault Prevention*

UNT is committed to providing a safe learning environment free of all forms of sexual misconduct. Federal laws and UNT policies prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex as well as sexual misconduct. If you or someone you know is experiencing sexual harassment, relationship violence, stalking and/or sexual assault, there are campus resources available to provide support and assistance. The Survivor Advocates can be reached at SurvivorAdvocate@unt.edu or by calling the Dean of Students Office at 940-565-2648

*Retention of Student Records*

Student records pertaining to this course are maintained in a secure location by the instructor of record. All records such as exams, answer sheets (with keys), and written papers submitted during the duration of the course are kept for at least one calendar year after course completion. Course work completed via the Canvas online system, including grading information and comments, is also stored in a safe electronic environment for one year. Students have the right to view their individual record; however, information about student’s records will not be divulged to other individuals without proper written consent. Students are encouraged to review the Public Information Policy and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) laws and the University’s policy. See UNT Policy 10.10, Records Management and Retention for additional information.

**COURSE SCHEDULE (subject to change)**

**Week 1: Who?**

Tuesday, 8/19: Introductions, Building Community

**Reading (in-class):**

Ross Gay, “Tap Tap”

Thursday, 8/21: What Is the Personal Essay?

**Reading:**

Five more flash essays from Ross Gay’s *Book of Delights*

“Sharing a Bag”

“Hickories”

“Church Poets”

“Found Things”

“Grown”

**Weekend writing**: Board of Delights

**Week 2: Who?**

Tuesday, 8/26: The “I” Character

**Reading:**

Alexander Chee, “Girl”

Philip Lopate, “On the Necessity of Making Oneself a Character” (craft essay)

Thursday: 8/28: “They” Characters: Portraits and Profiles

**Reading:**

Dani Johannesen, “Intro to Creative Writing”

Cade Mason, “Revival, 2001”

**Weekend writing:** Write Your Delight (Essay Experiment 1)

**Week 3: Who?**

Tuesday, 9/2: Writing Family

**Reading:**

Linnie Green, “In the Mines” (craft essay)

David Sedaris, “You Can’t Kill the Rooster”

Diana Spechler, “Things She Says”

Thursday, 9/4: “We” Characters: Community/Ethnography

**Reading:**

Roxane Gay, “To Scratch, Claw, or Grope Clumsily or Frantically”

Jaquira Díaz, “Girls, Monsters”

**Weekend writing:** First Date with an Essay

**Week 4: What?**

Tuesday, 9/9: Subject Matter and the Tradition of Montaigne

**Reading:**

Michel de Montaigne, “On the Length of Life”

Marcia Aldrich, “Of Age”

Thursday, 9/11: Workshop

**Reading:**

Three students’ personal essays of 1,000-2,500 words

Mic Armstead

Caroline Graham

Xavier Boatner

**Weekend writing:** On … Something (Essay Experiment 2)

**Week 5:** **What?**

Tuesday, 9/16: Animals! Point of View!

**Reading**:

Annie Dillard, “Living like Weasels”

Amy Leach, “Radical Bears in the Forest Delicious”

Thursday, 9/18: Workshop

**Reading:**

Three students’ personal essays of 1,000-2,500 words

Lexi Soto

Cole Meyer

Amelia Philips

**Weekend writing:** Rabbit Hole (Essay Experiment 3)

**Week 6: What?**

Tuesday, 9/23: Ekphrasis

**Reading**:

Jay Ponteri, “In Defense of Navel-Gazing” (craft essay)

Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (pp. 1-20 in Beacon edition [ends on “This was my first intimation that style had something to do with death”])

Thursday, 9/25: Workshop

**Reading**:

Three students’ personal essays of 1,000-2,500 words

Cierra Baker

Titus King

Mike Murphy

**Weekend writing:** Second Date with an Essay

**Week 7: Where?**

Tuesday, 9/30: Setting (Spatial)

**Reading**:

Jonathan Franzen, “Interview with New York State”

Daisy Hernandez, “what you love about new york”

Thursday, 10/2: Workshop

**Reading**:

Three students’ essays of 1,000-2,500 words

Manuel Muñiz

Garon Smith

Zoe Mosby

**Weekend writing**: Interview with a Place

**Week 8: When?**

Tuesday, 10/7: Setting (Temporal)

**Reading:**

Wayne Koestenbaum, “My 1980s”

Lacy M. Johnson, “On Likability” (craft essay)

Thursday, 10/9: Workshop

**Reading**:

Three students’ essays of 1,000-2,500 words

Esrome Kiflezion

Tadhana Hernandez

Alanna Reed

**Weekend writing**: Midterm reflection

**Week 9: Whence?**

Tuesday, 10/14: Origin Stories

**Reading:**

Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (pp. 21 [“At first life seems so entirely of this world”] though 47 [“Just when you think you’re done”])

Thursday, 10/16: Workshop

**Reading**:

Three students’ essays of 1,000-2,500 words

Desirae Torres

Jamie West

Brian Gonzalez

**Weekend Writing:** Third Date with an Essay

**Week 10: How?**

Tuesday, 10/21: Shape in Autobiographical Narrative

**Reading:**

Ryan Van Meter, “First”

Carmen Maria Machado, “Dream House as Choose Your Own Adventure™”

Thursday, 10/23: Workshop

**Reading:**

Three students’ essays of 2,500-4,000 words

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**Weekend Writing**: Personal Glossary (Essay Experiment 5)

**Week 11: How?**

Tuesday, 10/28: Shape in the Lyric Essay

**Reading:**

Eula Biss, “Time and Distance Overcome”

Michael Downs, “Me, Myself, and I: Idiosyncrasy and Structure in Nonfiction” (craft essay)

Thursday, 10/30: Workshop

**Reading:**

Three students’ essays of 2,500-4,000 words

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**Weekend Writing:** Research Exercise

**Week 12: How?**

Tuesday, 11/4: Special Topics in Style and Form

**Reading:**

Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (pp. 47 [“A painting of asparagus”] though 70 [end of book])

Thursday, 11/6: Workshop

**Reading**:

Three students’ essays of 2,500-4,000 words

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**Weekend Writing:** Ekphrastic Braid (Essay Experiment 6)

**Week 13: Why?**

Tuesday, 11/11: The Situation and the Story

**Reading**:

Cheryl Strayed, “The Love of My Life”

Vivian Gornick, excerpts from *The Situation and the Story* (craft book)

Thursday, 11/13: Workshop

**Reading:**

Three students’ essays of 2,500-4,000 words

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**Weekend Writing:** Fourth Date with an Essay (Break Up or Go Steady)

**Week 14: Why?**

Tuesday, 11/18: Why Write Personal Essays?

**Reading:**

Miah Arnold, “You Owe Me”

Joan Didion, “Why I Write” (craft essay)

Thursday, 11/20: Workshop

**Reading**:

Three students’ essays of 2,500-4,000 words

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**Weekend writing:** Course reflection

**THANKSGIVING BREAK, 11/24-28, NO CLASS**

**Week 15: Why?**

Tuesday, 12/2: Workshop

Three students’ essays of 2,500-4,000 words

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Thursday, 12/4: In-Class Open Mic

**Final Portfolio Due Monday, December 8**