



## MARCHUTZ SCHOOL OF FINE ARTS

ART 270

3 CREDITS (45 contact hours)

### CREATIVE WRITING AND THE INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCE -- BEGINNERS

#### COURSE DESCRIPTION

The creative writing process and studying abroad have much in common -- both require reflection and critical analysis in order to realize their fullest potential. Lyrical sentences, vividly rendered images, or even the most interesting set of anecdotes in the world won't take the reader far if the writer doesn't lend shape and meaning to the material. The same is true for studying and living abroad. In this class, we will focus on an intensive writing practice and we will deconstruct and explicate various elements of the essay (particularly those oriented toward exploring a "new" culture and "self" within an intercultural context). We will explore the use of effective narrative distance and locating the narrator "on the page" in service of the story. Furthermore, we will look at how our beliefs and perspectives inform our thinking and writing, and how living within another culture challenges those viewpoints and processes as writers.

*Here before me now is my picture, my map, of a place and therefore of myself ... just as much of its reality is based on my own shadows, my inventions.* -- M.F.K. Fisher, Two Towns in Provence

*What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the larger sense the writer is able to make of what happened.* -- Vivian Gornick, American essayist and critic

*Writing as a mode of learning is ... essentially a philosophical point of departure for investigating the world. However, living in a different society will demonstrate that a personal view of the world is not always a sufficient frame of reference for interpreting experience. Writing is where the thinking begins.* -- Writing Across Culture

*I write to find out what I know.* -- Joan Didion, American essayist and fiction writer

#### COURSE OBJECTIVES

Our paramount focus will be on how to improve our writing by pushing ourselves to think critically on the page about the material (we will look to find the "Story" in the "Situation" per Vivian Gornick). We will also examine the ways in which the writing process and cross-cultural experiences are parallel endeavors that can serve to inform and answer each other.

#### LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Students will be able to identify elements of creative nonfiction writing and distinguish it from other types and genres of writing.
- Students will be able to distinguish between raw material and effectively used material in service of rendering meaning in a literary essay.

- Students will be able to use an aesthetic vocabulary to critique literary works.
- Students will be able to identify and effectively employ various narrative strategies, structures and forms related to their creative writing.
- Students will explore the use of effective narrative distance and locating the narrator “on the page” in service of the story.
- Students will become increasingly adept with the workshop process and analyzing and critiquing their peers’ creative work as well as their own.

## INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS AND ACTIVITIES

### Requirements:

- A. Image Notebook: “Three Things” (to be explained in class). This will be collected at the course mid-point and quickly returned to you, and you will submit the Notebook at the end with your portfolio; keeping up with it is vital.
- B. This is a writing intensive course with a strong emphasis on your own creative work. The focus will largely be on *generating material, developing ideas, selecting work to bring forward, and organizing the work into something meaningful and artful*. As such, students will be required to frequently write and to submit short “pieces” and drafts-in-progress. Students will be required to submit a well-worked draft to a mid-semester workshop (DATES TBA a minimum of two weeks in advance) and another piece to a group critique/individual meetings with professor before the end of the semester. As a general guide, there will be three different kinds of written work assigned.
  1. Most frequently, you will be asked to submit creative pieces in various stages of the drafting process. Subjects and forms will vary.
  2. You will also be required to write an academic response paper (2-3 pages) to one assigned readings; you will write a brief synopsis of salient points from the readings, and/or you will discuss specifically some aspect of the assigned creative works vis-à-vis where and when the writing is effective, how it might relate to what’s happening in your own work (or not).
  3. We will frequently write in class but you will be expected to do much of your creative and revision work outside of class.
  4. Per above, you will submit an essay for midterm workshops and then subsequently revise it once this semester. You will also submit a second essay draft later in the semester for group critique/individual student meetings and revise this piece.
  5. Final Portfolio (May submission date, TBA when IAU provides finals schedule): You will simply submit ALL of the work you did during this course, including your notebook, your in-class and out-of-class writing exercises, and also one revised essay (from mid-semester) and one revised essay from the latter part of the semester that are thoughtful, artful, well-revised pieces of work based on some aspect of your personal cross-cultural experience.

- C. Because we will be generating a lot of material in and outside of class, it is vital that you have a central place (i.e., folder) which you bring to class and into which all of your written *creative* work goes during the course. (Please note: of course you may organize this in any way that suits you – but notes should go elsewhere.)
- D. Workshop: Judicious, respectful participation in the workshopping of your classmates' work (and your own), twice during the semester.
- E. Collegiality in classroom comportment and group/individual critiques at all times.

## TEXTS

Selected readings from the following texts:

The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne

Lives Other Than My Own, E. Carrère\*

The Truth of the Matter: Art and Craft in Creative Nonfiction, ed. Dinty Moore

In Brief: Short Takes on the Personal, ed. J. Kitchen and Mary Paumier Jones

Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction, Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola

Mystery and Manners, Flannery O'Connor

Selected Letters, Madame de Sévigné

Cross-Cultural Psychology: Human Behavior in Global Perspective, Marshall H. Segall

Two Towns in Provence, by M.F.K. Fisher

Sightlines, Kathleen Jamie

The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative, by Vivian Gornick\*

Bird by Bird, by Anne LaMott

Selected additional readings (e.g., Doyle, Dowd, Iyer, Oliver, Alexander, Sedaris, Woods, Moore, etc.), as distributed

\*Course texts

## EVALUATION AND GRADING

Your final grade will be based on:

Participation in group discussions, field studies and workshops (25%)

Notebooks (5%)

Completeness of/demonstrated effort in writing exercises

throughout the semester (30%)

Revised Midterm Essay (20%)

Revised Final Essay (20%).

## **ATTENDANCE**

Attendance is required. This is not a lecture class, and its success for each student depends very much on your coming to class on time, prepared, and ready to participate in discussion and activities, including field studies. All unexcused absences affect negatively your grade. Each additional unexcused absence above two will affect the final grade by a half letter grade for each absence. IAU excused absences: absences linked to IAU excursions; sickness (a medical certificate is required); emergencies. As a courtesy to your fellow writers and peers, absences during pre-scheduled workshops are not allowed except in the case of IAU-excused absences (see below).

It is your responsibility to make sure you have the assignment(s) in the event of your absence from any class for any reason. Progress in writing is directly proportional to steady, disciplined work and the success of the “workshop” experience is directly related to the commitment of each group member.

### **Units to be covered:**

Segment 1, Introductory Weeks: Imagery, Metaphor, Creative Nonfiction, Situation vs. Story, Narrative Tools, the Salient Detail, exercises.

We will write, write, write and read. Several in-class and out-of-class 1-2 page writing exercises. We'll dig into the question: What IS creative nonfiction? via Gornick, Miller/Paola, John Jeremiah Sullivan, Montaigne and others. We'll read M.F.K. Fisher's take on Aix and we'll visit her beloved Ste. Sauveur Cathedral and write about it to produce our own “maps.” We'll make some initial inquiries into the relationship between living in a new culture and writing. We will closely examine the various techniques used in good creative nonfiction writing (voice, dialogue, tone, point of view, ETC.) and look at effective essay structures that support the unity of content and form. One of the challenges writers face is that of making a personal experience significant to others. We will discuss how writers find (O'Connor) “the universal in the particular,” and look for especially effective passages in a few readings that relate specifically to writing from within a “new” culture. Mostly, we will write.

Segment Two: Description and Narrative, Situation vs. Story, Flash Nonfiction, Prose Poetry, the Workshop, Vivian Gornick, Emmanuel Carrere, and “Narrative Distance”

We will write, write, write, revise and read. Pushing off of French philosopher Levi-Strauss' idea that the essence of a thing is best revealed by describing what it is “like,” students will write a piece of “extended description.” It can be about a thing, an aspect of an event or place, etc. but must be somehow based in Aix-en-Provence or surrounding areas (to be discussed in class). We will continue generating material by doing various topical writing exercises that are linked to your cross-cultural experience and to France and Aix itself. We will look at characterization of place or culture in various readings and show how the writer supports his/her observation with anecdotes and salient detail(s). We will look further at how a few essayists, poets and novelists encounter and characterize places and cultures not their “own.” We will continue to explore various narrative elements in your own writing and in other texts, and explore both “Flash” Nonfiction, essay development, and we will workshop your pieces. Vivian Gornick: We will closely examine the role of narrative distance in good writing

(and, interestingly, in studying abroad). We will examine the ways in which the narrator is NOT exactly the writer of the piece, but a construct of the writer's imagination employed to most effectively tell the story (whose elements, in nonfiction, are *true* – *what does this mean: true?*). We will discuss the parallels between good writing and intercultural experiences – *that reflection and analysis express meaning from lived experience*. We will discuss Gornick's supposition that the "Situation" is not the "Story" (i.e., a Situation is what *happens*, but the story is what it all *means*) and how the writer shapes a piece to find universally significant meaning from its particular elements. (Does this overlap with the experience of studying abroad?). Workshop.

Paper: Discuss Gornick's Situation vs. the Story and comment, specifically referring to examples in other assigned readings where this idea seems to be effectively implemented. *Consider the difference between a series of interesting occurrences and shaped experience on the page*. How is this achieved? (And, interestingly, are there any parallels between the writing process and thoughtfully experienced sojourns abroad?)

### Segment Three: Workshop, Humor, Narrative Distance, Situation vs. the Story, Revisions, Portfolio, Portraiture, Interview

We will write, revise more, write, revise, and read. "Lighten Up Francis." (Kudos to A. LaMott.) Students will write a piece that deftly uses humor to illustrate and describe some aspect of their own *encounter* with life in another culture and/or the arc of their developing experiences and impressions while living in France. Alternately, students may write a piece specifically contrasting some aspect of French life with that of another culture. (Faire attention! Humor can be tricky.) We will read Anne LaMott and her "Lighten up Francis" essay, and various other essayists and literary travel writers who employ a sense of humor (on the page) to examine the place where cultures and perspectives collide or meet (or, most interestingly, some combo of both). We will look again, through the lens of humor, at how some writers thoughtfully examine cultural differences, cues, and perspectives – and whose views are challenged as a result of their encounter with "the other." We will explore portraiture. Group critiques and individual meetings with professor about final pieces.