

**NonFiction:
Writing the Self**
CRW 4303-001/ CRN 18250
Aug. 23rd / Dec 2nd

I. Professor's Information

Professor: Sylvia Aguilar-Zéleny, MFA

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Office Hours: 10:00-12:00 pm, Tuesdays and by appointment

II. Course Description

Memoirist Mary Karr says that “a dysfunctional family is any family with more than one person in it” and in her own writing she has proven one too many times that dysfunctionality makes a great book because “truth works a trip wire that permits the book to explode into being.”

In this course, we will discuss what it entails to write about one's self, and will read essays and excerpts of novels, poems, and short-stories that, dysfunctional themed or not, explode into being. Our main learning objective is to analyze the core of this genre as well as the distinction between autobiography, memoir, autofiction, and biography.

We will also discuss the relationship between fact and fiction while working on a personal project that enhances the idea of **situation** and **story** as defined by Vivian Gornick.

III. Course Objectives

- 1) To master literary analysis using critical thinking and a socio-historical and cultural contextualization to understand personal nonfiction.
- 2) To effectively apply knowledge and research methodologies required for academic and creative writing.
- 3) To embody and curate a personal literary project.

IV. Course Requirements

- 1. Sessions.** We will meet almost weekly in our classroom. Please be punctual. We might use some of our synchronic sessions to simply write individually, but together. The solitude of these times invites to companionship. Once in a while our sessions will be held completely online, check your schedule.
- 2. Readings.** An important element of our course is reading, I have chosen one textbook and some excerpts here and there but you will be in charge of bringing attention to a second source.
- 3. Discussion Boards.** I will post questions based on our readings, in some cases you must participate BEFORE our face-to-face session, so that we can base our conversation in a more solid ground. It is expected that you create a post that offers your analysis of the text in question and engage in a conversation with your classmates.
- 4. Critical Response.** You will read prose and poetic books that address the self, based on this, you will write 1 or 2 **argumentative essays** that addresses the craft, possibilities and strategies of this genre. Instructions and format of such responses are included at the end of this document.
- 5. Creative Exercises.** We will write weekly exercises in which you will “replicate” a technique, point of view, or form by one of the authors or that explores themes. A revised version of these quick exercises might be included in your final project.
- 6. Final project.** You will write the first two chapters of a book about the self, this could be a memoir, an autobiography or autofiction or, why not?, the biography of someone in your family. You can do this in prose or verse form, you can even do a graphic memoir or a script. Instructions can be found at the end of this document.
- 7. Workshops.** We will have two workshops. One in class, one online. We will be using Liz Lerman’s Critical Response tool. For both, you are required to provide a summary with your general comments to the author, visible to the rest of the group, as well as in-text comments on the margin of the story using the Review tool of Word.
- 8. Source of my own.** After discussing with professor, you will choose a book that informs your personal project and will 1) Provide an excerpt for everyone to read, and 2) Do a presentation that both introduces us to such author and work, but mostly describe the dialogue between this and your own work.

Grading Breakdown:

Your grades will be determined by your completion of:

- 10% -- Discussion boards
- 10% -- Participation and attendance
- 30% -- Creative Exercises
- 10% -- Critical Response
- 40% -- Final Project

V. Themes and Sources

- Name, face, body: Discovering yourself
- Family and Place: Writing about past
- Second-hand emotions: Subtext emerging
- The Politics of our time: Because the personal is political

Textbooks:

You are in charge of buying these two books,

- *The Face: Cartography of the Void*. Abani, Chris.
- *The Situation and The Story*. Gornick, Vivian. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2002

Other sources:

I will provide with pdf's of:

- “When my brother was an Aztec” and “Hand-me-down Halloween.” *When my Brother Was an Aztec*. Díaz, Natalie. Copper Canyon Press, 2012
- “Googolplex” and “Señorita”. *Mean*. Gurba, Myriam. Coffeehouse Press, 2017.
- *The Art of the Memoir*. Karr, Mary. Harper Collins, 2015. Preface and selected chapters TBD
- “Portrait of my Body” and “The uses of Contrariety”. Lopate, Philip.
- “Happy Childhood” *The Chronology of Water*. Yuknavitch, Lidia. Hawthorne, 2010.

For Further reading, in case you are interested. Also, help me build this list?

Family: Longing, Belonging, or Not

- *Men We Reaped: A Memoir*. Ward, Jesmyn. Bloomsbury, 2013.
- *The Distance Between Us*. Grande, Reyna. Simon and Schuster, 2012.

Graphic Memories

- *The Best We Could: An Illustrated Memoir*. Thi Bui, Abrams ComicArts, 2017.
- *Stitches: A Memoir*. Small, David. W.W. Norton, 2010.

Hybrid memoirs:

- *The Book of Jon*. Sikelianos, Eleni. City Lights, 2004.
- *The Crying Book*. Christle, Heather. Catapult, 2019.

Figthing Against Nature:

- *Wave*. Deraniyagala, Sonali. Thorndike Press, 2013.
- *Salvage the Bones*. Ward, Jesmyn. Bloomsbury, 2011.

VI. Policies

Academic Dishonesty: Dishonesty in any form is not tolerated in this course. Even one instance will result, at the least, in a failing grade for the assignment. Academic dishonesty is taken very seriously and may result in failure of the course and suspension. The following are brief descriptions of certain types of academic dishonesty. If you have further questions, please speak to the instructor for clarification.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is submitting or using someone else's writing as your own. This is not tolerated. You may wish to use a short quote from another source as part of an essay. You may do this only if the source is properly documented.

Collusion: Collusion is unauthorized collaboration with another person in preparing your written work. You may be asked to work with a partner on a specific assignment. Except for those instances, all work must be your own. Getting others to do your work for you is not tolerated.

Students with Disabilities: To promote academic success, UTEP offers a variety of services to persons with documented sensory, mental, physical or temporary disabling conditions. If you have a disability and believe you may need services, please contact the Center for Students with Disabilities to discuss your needs with a counselor. All discussions and documentations are kept confidential.

VII. Critical Response

A critical response is an analysis of and a commentary on a piece of writing. It is expected that you focus on form, techniques, as well as on content. See this assignment as an argumentative or a comparative essay; you have two missions, to summarize the source's main idea and to respond to such ideas based on your point of view and analysis.

All critical responses include the following basic elements: Introduction, Thesis statement, body and conclusions. Your response must provide valid and relevant arguments, feel free to rely on excerpts of the text to develop your ideas.

You will submit one or two critical responses, between 600-800 words (2-3 pages). The quality of everyone's first response will help me decide if we need a second essay, so **DO YOUR BEST, GIVE YOUR BEST.**

You will workshop your first critical response in small groups on Blackboard before submitting.

VIII. Presentation & Final Project

A Source of My Own: Once your project proposal is presented, you will work with your professor to find THE source that will be your writing buddy. You will read such book, and prepare a presentation about this book and how it informs your own work. Include excerpts for us to read that highlight the devices used by the author.

Final project: You will be submitting the first few pages of a memoir Project that can be written as autofiction, memoir, personal essay, or a mix of them all, in prose or poetry (or both). Your project should also be built upon a poetics of exploration in form, allow yourself to walk out of your comfort zone, play with genre, speech, defy the terms of storytelling.

To secure the quality of your work, you will first submit a proposal, then work on two submissions for workshop. You will submit the revised version of these submissions plus a preface for your final project.

IX. Calendar

Week 1 Aug. 23rd – 25th	<p style="text-align: center;">Introduction to Course</p> <p>Tuesday</p> <p>Thursday</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Syllabus, Calendar, and Who we are 2. Nonfiction, today 3. Read “These Literary Memoirs Take a Different Tack” by Megan O’Grady, available in Bboard. 4. Creative Exercise 1: A book of my life <p style="text-align: center;">Homework: Read <i>The Situation and the Story</i> and o “Googolplex” and “Señorita”. Mean. Gurba, Myriam. Coffeehouse Press, 2017. Available in Bboard.</p>
Week 2 Aug. 30 th - Sept. 1 st	<p style="text-align: center;">Memoir</p> <p>Tuesday</p> <p>Thursday</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Memoir: turning points in life 2. Why, how to write about the self? 3. The Situation and The Story 4. Myriam Gurba <p style="text-align: center;">HW: Work on your project proposal. Read: Start reading <i>The Face: Cartography of a Void</i> by Chris Abani. Download or print Natalie Diaz poems.</p>
Week 3 Sept. 6 th - 8 th	<p style="text-align: center;">Everything Goes</p> <p>Tuesday</p> <p>Thursday</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Liz Lerman: Critical Response 2. You should not write a memoir, if... 3. Natalie Diaz, two poems 4. Final project proposals <p style="text-align: center;">HW: Form in Chris Abani, bring three questions to discuss. Bring a photo of you as a baby, what you believe is your first photo (printed or on your phone).</p>
Week 4 Sept. 13 th – 15 th	<p style="text-align: center;">Turning Yourself into a Character</p> <p>Tuesday</p> <p>Thursday</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Chris Abani: a face-lift 2. The idea of <i>Persona</i> 3. Creative Exercise 2: My face 4. Quick Workshop <p style="text-align: center;">HW: Start working on your “Source of My Own”. 1 Read “Introduction” and “Portrait of my Body” by Philip Lopate</p>

ONLINE SESSION!	
Week 5 Sept. 20th – 22nd	
Tuesday	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ZOOM Sept. 20th : Philip Lopate: writing about you and your face and your body and more of Chris Abani 2. Creative Exercise 3
Thursday	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. On your own: Quick workshop online for Creative Exercise 2 4. Discussion board 1: Lopate
	HW. R Work on 1 st submission, due Oct. 1 st . Chapters 1-3 <i>The Art of the Memoir</i> , Mary Karr
Week 6 Sept. 27 th – 29 th	Pinch of Theory 2
Tuesday	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Art of Memoir: Mary Karr vs. Gornick 2. Mary Karr vs. All of Us
Thursday	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. <i>The Stories We Tell</i> by Sarah Polley
	HW. Bring snacks on Thursday. Submit first installment for workshop by Oct. 1 st .
Week 7 Oct 4 th – 6 th	Workshop 1
	Groups 1, 2
Week 8 Oct. 11 th -13 th	Workshop 2
	Groups 3, 4
	Discussion board 2: <i>The Stories We Tell</i> by Sarah Polley. Homework: “Explicit Violence” and “Happy Childhood” Lidia Yuknavitch
Week 9 Oct. 18 th – 20 th	Autofiction
Tuesday	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explicit Violence and Happy Childhood 2. Structure and Form
Thursday	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. <i>The Stories We Tell</i> 4. Creative Exercise 4
	HW: “A Source of My Own” presentation due next week
Week 10 Oct. 25 th – 27 th	A Source of My Own
	-Presentation -Excerpt -Tools I need

HW. Submit second installment	
Week 11 Nov. 1st – 3rd	Workshop 2, Groups 3, 4
Week 12 Nov 8th – 10th	Workshop 2, Groups 1, 2 Homework: Read “The uses of contrariety” by Lopate. Submit Critical Response 1 due on
Week 13 Nov 15 th – 17 th	Autobiography and Biography
Tuesday	1. Fiction techniques for nonfiction writing 2. The Ethics of writing about others
Thursday	3. The uses of contrariety 4. Creative Exercise 5
Week 14 Nov. 22 rd	Writing Session
Week 15 Nov. 30th	Pinch of Theory 3
Tuesday	1. Speculation 2. Self-editing
Thursday	3. Preface 4. Blurb
Final project due on:	

Questions for reading: You must use this as a guideline for all the creative readings of this semester.

a) how do authors negotiate with memory, b) What elements crisscross their storytelling of the past, c) How are details built? d) How are those forgotten or unknown details built? e) How do they built trust? f) Tense and use of verbs.