

Program in Creative Writing
Rutgers University, Newark
Fall 2020

The Craft of Non-Fiction: The Varieties of Non-Fiction

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Conklin Hall 307

Office Hours: Wednesday afternoon, every week, M-F, most weeks, simply email to set time and (virtual) place.

I am often surprised to find that MFA students have a wonderful sense of the formal varieties and possibilities of their primary genre, whether poetry or fiction, but a narrower sense of the varieties and possibilities of non-fiction, whether the traditional forms (history, biography, science writing, sports writing, literary journalism, obituaries, and much more) or the avant-garde, whether hybrids of self and subject, fiction and non-fiction, prose and poetry. In many cases, it almost as *non-fiction* were Latin for memoir, or personal essay. In this version of my craft class I aim to broaden that sense of what's out there and what's possible, to the ever so slight degree that a one semester seminar allows. We'll do that primarily through reading and discussion, but also in a series of short writing exercises.

Here's what I will expect of you:

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION: I will expect you to do all the reading and come to class prepared to contribute to a lively discussion of our common reading and one another's writing (prepared with thoughts and comments and questions and constructive criticism, all of which go beyond the easy, the predictable, the clichéd and especially the black and the white). To put it another way: Attendance and class participation are not optional. They are a fundamental part of your responsibility as a citizen of this workshop. What's more, the less you speak, the more I'll have to, and believe me when I say that you will tire of that very quickly. I realize that life will sometimes get in the way: I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know as soon as possible in advance.

Our class will be online, and my hope is that the technology will allow all of us to be there in image and voice. I understand that that may not always be possible. We'll talk about both my hope and possible extenuating circumstances in our first class.

WORKSHOPS: For our workshop sessions, you will distribute your work ahead of our meetings, probably on Canvas, and I will expect that (well ahead of class) each of you will read and if possible reread each of the pieces on the agenda for that week. Your marginalia and closing comments should be carefully considered, thoughtful, humane, penetrating, and honest most of all. Imagine a writer friend, a close writer friend, has

asked you to read an essay she's working on in order to help her figure out how to do what is trying to do better (as opposed to what you would do if the piece were yours). There is nothing is to be gained, for your friend or for the art, by holding back.

That said: How you are honest will inevitably shape how helpful your comments will be. The more you are able to say about the experience of reading and the chemistry of the experience—the voice, the language, the structure--the piece the better. The less you say about what you liked and didn't like, what worked and didn't work, the better.

Same with our outside readings: Think of it this way: A discussion is like a paragraph. A good one very rarely starts with a bad first line. The last thing I want to know is whether you liked the book. Save it. Better to talk about what they writer did, how she did it, what you learned from her about writing, what you might like to imitate, borrow, or steal. I will expect you, ahead of class, to mark up the hard copy of each other's work.

Two suggestions from last term that I want to make use of this term when they come into play. In course evaluations, several students asked me to enforce more vigorously due dates on workshop submissions. And several students, while acknowledging my justification for an honor system, asked me to oversee student commenting on classmates' writing to ensure full compliance. So together we will figure out ways to make sure that works gets distributed on time and everyone is doing their fair share of commenting.

Books: We shall talk about the readings and book buying or borrowing --what, where, when, how -- in the first week of class. There will be a fair amount of reading for a class in which there is a fair amount of writing, but all of the readings will be available in multiple forms: online, eBook, used books stores, and even local libraries. I am still a book reader and book buyer and a believer in book buying but I understand that not everyone is, or has the means to be. All the more in the midst of our pandemic.

David Shields, *Reality Hunger*

Vivian Gornick, *Odd Woman and the City*

Natalie Z. Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*

Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman*

John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Powell, *March* (Book One)

Jenn Shapland, *My Autobiography* of Carson McCullers

Jerald Walker, *How to Make a Slave and Other Essays*

J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*

Readings: Subject to Change with Plenty of Notice

Week 1 (September 2) What is Non-Fiction? Why is Non-Fiction? Polemic, Manifesto
Reading: Shields, *Reality Hunger*

Week 2 (September 9): Craft Workshop:
(Wood, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/03/15/keeping-it-real-3)

Week 3 (September 16): Memoir
Reading: Gornick, *The Odd Woman and the City*

Week 4 (September 23): Craft Workshop

Week 5 (September 30): History
Natalie Z. Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*

Week 6 (October 7): Craft Workshop
Robert Finley, "The Refashioning of Martin Guerre"
Davis, "On the Lame"

Week 7 (October 14): Biography
Malcolm, *The Silent Woman*

Week 8 (October 21): Craft Workshop

Week 9 (October 28): Graphic Non-Fiction
Lewis and Aydin, *The March*

Week 10 (November 4): Craft Workshop

Week 11 (November 11): Auto Biography as Non-Fiction
Shapland, *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers*

Week 12 (November 18): Craft Workshop

Week 13 (November 25): No Class on account of Wednesday being Friday or T-Giving

Week 14 (December 2): Essays
Walker, *How to Be a Slave*

Week 15: (December 9): Fiction as Non-Fiction
J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*

Learning Goals:

Goal 1: By the end of this semester, you will have spent 15 weeks reading and thinking about (as writers) a few of the varieties of literary non-fiction. In addition to reading and thinking, we will do a series of weekly writing exercises in which we experiment with the kinds of non-fiction that we are reading.

Goal 2: That experience will supplement and complement the experience you gain in your poetry and fiction workshops and craft classes, increasing your range as a writer and improving your ability to write critically about structure, craft, and literary traditions of the work of a wide variety of writers.

Goal 3: All that should strengthen your preparation for entry into the public life of literature, which includes locating your own work in the context of contemporary literary practice, preparing that work according to professional standards, teaching creative writing, and participating in diverse literary communities.

Academic Integrity:

We are ALL required to follow the University's Policy on Academic Integrity, which falls under the Code of Student Conduct. The policy and the consequences of violating it are outlined here: **HYPERLINK** "<http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/office-dean-student-affairs/academic-integrity-policy>" <http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/office-dean-student-affairs/academic-integrity-policy>.

I strictly follow the University's rules regarding plagiarism and other academic irregularities.

Please consult me if you have any questions about what is and is not appropriate regarding the use of sources or citation.

You must also include the honor pledge, "On my honor, I have neither received nor given any unauthorized assistance on this examination (assignment)."

Accommodation and Support Statement

Rutgers University Newark (RU-N) is committed to the creation of an inclusive and safe learning environment for all students and the University as a whole. RU-N has identified the following resources to further the mission of access and support:

For Individuals with Disabilities: The Office of Disability Services (ODS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter barriers due to disability. Once a student has completed the ODS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and reasonable accommodations are determined to be necessary and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be provided. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at ods.rutgers.edu. Contact ODS at (973)353-5375 or via email at ods@newark.rutgers.edu.

For Individuals who are Pregnant: The Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance is available to assist with any concerns or potential accommodations related to pregnancy. Students may contact the Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance at (973) 353-1906 or via email at TitleIX@newark.rutgers.edu.

For Absence Verification: The Office of the Dean of Students can provide assistance for absences related to religious observance, emergency or unavoidable conflict (e.g., illness, personal or family emergency, etc.). Students should refer to University Policy 10.2.7 for information about expectations and responsibilities. The Office of the Dean of Students can be contacted by calling (973) 353-5063 or emailing deanofstudents@newark.rutgers.edu.

For Individuals with temporary conditions/injuries: The Office of the Dean of Students can assist students who are experiencing a temporary condition or injury (e.g., broken or sprained limbs, concussions, or recovery from surgery). Students experiencing a temporary condition or injury should submit a request using the following link: <https://temporaryconditions.rutgers.edu>.

For English as a Second Language (ESL): The Program in American Language Studies (PALS) can support students experiencing difficulty in courses due to English as a Second Language (ESL) and can be reached by emailing PALS@newark.rutgers.edu to discuss potential supports.

For Gender or Sex-Based Discrimination or Harassment: The Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance can assist students who are experiencing any form of gender or sex-based discrimination or harassment, including sexual assault, sexual harassment,

relationship violence, or stalking. Students can report an incident to the Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance by calling (973) 353-1906 or emailing TitleIX@newark.rutgers.edu. Incidents may also be reported by using the following link: tinyurl.com/RUNReportingForm. For more information, students should refer to the University's Student Policy Prohibiting Sexual Harassment, Sexual Violence, Relationship Violence, Stalking and Related Misconduct located at <http://compliance.rutgers.edu/title-ix/about-title-ix/title-ix-policies/>.

For support related to interpersonal violence: The Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance can provide any student with confidential support. The office is a **confidential resource** and does *not* have an obligation to report information to the University's Title IX Coordinator. Students can contact the office by calling (973) 353-1918 or emailing run.vpva@rutgers.edu. There is also a confidential text-based line available to students; students can text (973) 339-0734 for support.

For Crisis and Concerns: The Campus Awareness Response and Education (CARE) Team works with students in crisis to develop a support plan to address personal situations that might impact their academic performance. Students, faculty and staff may contact the CARE Team by using the following link: tinyurl.com/RUNCARE or emailing careteam@rutgers.edu.

For Stress, Worry, or Concerns about Well-being: The Counseling Center has confidential therapists available to support students. Students should reach out to the Counseling Center to schedule an appointment: counseling@newark.rutgers.edu or (973) 353-5805. If you are not quite ready to make an appointment with a therapist but are interested in self-help, check out *TAO at Rutgers-Newark* for an easy, web-based approach to self-care and support: <https://tinyurl.com/RUN-TAO>.

For emergencies, call 911 or contact Rutgers University Police Department (RUPD) by calling (973) 353-5111.