

## Critical Reading and Writing: Nonfiction—Pr. Bizzell—Fall 2004

**Office hours:** M, T, W, R 1:00-3:00 and by appointment, in Fenwick 210, x 2524, 2562, [pbizzell@holycross.edu](mailto:pbizzell@holycross.edu)

### Required texts:

Carter, Stephen L. Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy. 1998; rpt. New York: Harper Collins, 1998. [First-Year book, Class of 2008]

Gornick, Vivian. The Situation and the Story. New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 2001.

Hacker, Diana. A Writer's Reference. 5<sup>th</sup> edition. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 2003.

Philip, Leila. A Family Place: A Hudson Valley Farm: Three Centuries, Five Wars, One Family. 2001; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 2002.

Roorbach, Bill, ed. Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: The Art of Truth. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

In this course we will study **literary nonfiction** and its subgenres, literary journalism, personal essays, and memoirs. The world is full of nonfiction—the front-page news, the essay you write for class, your last email home—but is it all of literary quality, comparable to the best drama, fiction, and poetry? No. We will consider what characteristics elevate nonfiction to literary quality. We will find that these characteristics are similar to what makes drama, fiction, and poetry good. Therefore, in learning to understand and analyze literary nonfiction, you will also be introduced to college-level literary study generally. You will develop critical reading skills that you can use in other literature courses.

You will also develop writing skills that you can use in other courses. We will place special emphasis on your learning how to compose good literary-critical essays, which must be well argued and well written. As your literary-critical writing improves, you will also develop abilities that can be used to make your papers for other college courses better written and better argued. I am eager to help you write better and I urge you to take full advantage of office hours to consult me about your writing both before and after papers have been submitted for grades. I also encourage you to consult the peer tutors in the **Writers Workshop**, 2d floor Dinand Library. I am hopeful that in this course, you will be able to develop your own written voice—like the nonfiction writers we will be studying.

Ultimately, too, we will have to consider the ethical issues involved in creating literary nonfiction. If it is nonfiction, should it be artful? Will not the literary qualities falsify the

truth promised by the nonfiction label? These questions remain on the table for our consideration.

Additionally, of course, you confront ethical issues when writing your college papers. I assume that you will follow the College's policy on **academic honesty**, and I have given you a sheet explaining the specific applications of this policy in English courses. If you are in doubt about whether something you want to do in a paper might violate this policy, please feel free to consult me with no penalty. I will enforce the College penalties on deliberate violations of this policy.

### **Further notes on writing assignments and grading**

Weekly work in this course is essential: because we are trying to develop your skills, you need regular practice and cannot simply cram for a few exams or major papers. In addition to the writing assignments listed in the syllabus below, there will be in-class assignments graded pass/fail, which, obviously, you must be in class, prepared, in order to complete.

The in-class exercises plus your record of attendance and discussion participation will comprise 15% of your final grade. If you miss no more than three classes, complete all exercises and speak at least once in each class meeting, you will receive an A for this grade.

Other grades contributing to your final grade will be weighted as follows:

9/22, 9/29 papers: 10% each.

10/20, 11/10, 12/1 papers: 15% each.

Final exam take-home question, in-class written portion: 10% each.

**Late paper policy:** papers are due on Wednesday class meeting days. With my permission, you may have an extension on any paper to the following Monday, provided you also complete the work due for that following week as well. Papers submitted any later than that will receive a grade of F. Harsh? Yes. But as noted above, you must give yourself regular writing practice and keep up with our work weekly in order to gain maximum benefit from this course. This policy aims to help you keep on track.

**Rewrite policy:** you may rewrite any paper if you wish to try to improve the grade. If you rewrite a paper, the grade recorded for that assignment will be the average of the grades on both versions. For example, if you get a B on the first version and raise your rewrite to an A, I would record a 3.5 for you for that assignment. Please note that you are not guaranteed a better grade on a rewrite—the paper must be revised, not merely corrected. Consult me if you are unsure about what you need to do. Rewrites must be submitted within two weeks of the original due date.

## **Syllabus:**

Reading assignments below are identified by authors' names, mostly in the Roorbach anthology [those labeled "Roorbach" comprise the editor's introductory material]. All reading assignments should be completed by the first class meeting each week. When a film is scheduled, I will give you information in advance about when to view it. Writing assignments will be given in separate hand-outs in advance of each due date.

### **Introduction: Basic Concepts**

Sept. 1: Introduction  
Getting acquainted; in-class writing.

Sept: 6, 8: What is the "art" of nonfiction and who is its narrator?  
Read Roorbach pp. 1-8, Abbey, Hubbell, McPhee, Gornick pp. 3-26.

### **Unit I: Literary Journalism**

Sept. 13, 15: Literary journalism: Where is the narrator?  
Read Wolfe, Ehrenreich.

Sept. 20, 22: Literary journalism, continued.  
Read: Krakauer, Herr.

Film: Touching the Void.

Paper due 9/22 on Wolfe or Ehrenreich.

Sept. 27, 29: Literary journalism, continued.  
Read Hersey, Mailer.

Paper due 9/29 on Krakauer and/or Herr and/or Wolfe.

### **Unit II: The Personal Essay**

Oct. 4, 6: Personal essay: Telling and Interpreting.  
Read Roorbach pp. 191-193, Williams, Kincaid.

Film: Life and Debt.

Columbus Day Break

Oct. 13: Personal essay, continued.  
Read: Gornick pp. 29-85, Abbott, Ellison.

Oct. 18, 20: Personal essay, continued.  
Read: Lopate, Mairs.

Paper due 10/20 on Gornick and Abbott or Ellison.

Oct. 25, 27: Book-length personal essay: Civility

Entire book should be completed before our classes on it [many of you will have read it over the summer and can simply skim/review at this point, going into more depth with working group assignments on the book that I'll give you].

Nov. 1, 3: Civility, continued.

Working group reports this week.

### **Unit III: The Memoir**

Nov. 8, 10: Memoir: its pleasures  
Read Gray, Wolff.

Paper due 11/10 on Chapter Two in Civility.

Film: My Architect.

Nov. 15, 17: Memoir: its problems  
Read Roorbach pp. 79-81, McCarthy, Hong Kingston, Gornick pp. 89-156.

Nov. 22: Memoir: complicated forms  
Read Dubus III, Ruiz.

Thanksgiving Break

Nov. 29, Dec. 1: Book-length memoir: A Family Place.  
Entire book should be completed before our classes on it.

Paper due 12/1 on Gornick and/or Roorbach on memoir, and Allison or Karr.

Dec. 6: A Family Place, continued.

Take-home exam question on A Family Place, due on day of final exam—there will also be a timed final exam in the examination period.