Section 4, Richer Nonfiction Now

For writers of essays, short memoir essays, blog material, stories.

June 15-19, 2015

9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. each day

Pyle Center, 702 Langdon St., Madison

UW-Madison Continuing Studies & UW-Madison Dept. of English

Instructor: Amy Lou Jenkins

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You have a voice. You want to write. You have decades of experience that no one else has lived. Perhaps you have written for scientific or trade journals. Perhaps you teach writing. Perhaps you have published work or you have drafts, journals, or a head filled with ideas ready to be mined. We will explore the glories of writing publishable short-form nonfiction. Advance your publishing and writing voyage. This journey is more difficult and wonderful than you could imagine. On your journey, we will enter the continuum of reading and writing, which are two sides of the same page. We will steal from the masters.

**Difficult? Yes.**

Annie Dillard offers writers a lamentation:

> There are many manuscripts already—worthy ones, most edifying and moving ones, intelligent and powerful ones. If you believed *Paradise Lost* to be excellent, would you buy it? Why not shoot yourself, actually, rather than finish one more excellent manuscript on which to gag the world? —Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

**Wonderful? Yes.**

Discover a depth of insight available to those who use the writing process to articulate the complexity of truth. Celebrate lives and times. Enter another kind of immortality as your work finds an audience. See you words in print alongside other esteemed writers.

**Find answers:**
How do you know if your writing honors your topic and your reader? How do you know if it is art? How do you know if a publisher and or discerning reader will recognize your work as worthy of their attention? What is the difference between a sweet story or funny anecdote and a transcendent essay? Should you attempt to publish a book before you have published shorter works?

**My Journey**

Years ago, I discovered that when I couldn’t face a blank page, I could answer an editor’s specific call for submissions. The call served as a writing prompt. I studied literary journals and anthologized writers’ literary techniques and began to submit work to editors. This approach gave me direction as to how to hone a piece of writing for an editor and audience. Reading literary journals and literary anthologies imparted lessons about writing valued by editors, and these readings became gateways to more focused writing. They also earned me hundreds of publishing credits and dozens of writing awards. You can do the same.

**Your Journey**

If you have survived to an age of reason, you have a story worth telling. Enter the vortex of literature and commit yourself to purposeful art, and you will make progress. You can write publishable articles, essays, memoir and more. We will focus on short-form literary non-fiction (from one to about thirty pages). By literary, we mean writing that utilizes artistic elements that offers the reader a depth of experience. We don’t necessarily mean high-brow (not that there’s anything wrong with that). These shorter pieces may, however, serve a larger work. They may be chapters in a book or stand-alone pieces that do or do not serve a book project.

Writers who wish to plant their feet on their own literary path and study nonfiction in this class will write drafts or final versions of two different nonfiction pieces. One work will respond to an actual call for submissions that the participant elects; another work will respond to a class exercise.

Amy will also critique one finished essay from each participant after the retreat, included in the fee.

Each day the sessions will include lecture/discussion, group work, and writing exercises directed toward writing publishable nonfiction literature to delight your editor and reader. All workshop-type responses to individual writing will be structured to maximize the benefits of feedback and show respect for the writers work. Group feedback will be structured, kind, and no one will dominate. We will attend to your work.
Suggested readings

This is My Best: Great Writers Share Their Favorite Work, Retha Powers and Kathy Kiernan, Chronicle Books, 2004.

Readings will provide examples of master writers at their best and their techniques in structure, dialogue, vocabulary, tone, narrator, voice, and resonance. Note that each writer has included a short essay about why they chose their selection, so you’ll read models from every genre and nonfiction essays from writers of every genre. If you don’t read the entire book, do read the entries by Ruth Reichel, T. C Boyle, Scott Turrow, Michael Pollan, David Sedaris, Anchee Min, Richard Rodriguez, and Barbara Kingsolver. In addition, we have other writing selections that will be distributed to you upon arrival.

Other preparations for the first class

1. Optional /encouraged. Send me a copy of an actual call for submissions to a literary journal or anthology and the first page of the work you wish to submit in response to this call. Also submit a one paragraph to one page developed statement of your short term and long term writing goals. Include what sort of things you will write about including subject manner and genre and how you would like to get them to an audience. Send this all in one email to AmyLouJenkins@gmail.com. Send copy as one attachment in an MS Word document (.doc) or a Rich Text File (.rtf). Again—send all in one email and include WBTL in the subject title.

2. Also, bring one page of writing from a published work. Bring a page of published writing that you love that was written by someone you consider a master writer. While you might be a master, for this exercise, don’t bring your own work. Perhaps this page is from a favorite book, poem, or novel. While our focus is nonfiction and there is some expectation you will bring a page of nonfiction, better that you bring a page you absolutely love than you bring a page of nonfiction.

Monday:

• Writing exercise.
• Short session of goal setting. Set out your target: We will help you hit it. Don’t have a target? I’ll give you one.
• Discover seven specific acts to keep your manuscript out of the rejection pile. Learn about the psychology and art of the opening and how to go beyond (but not abandon) the thesis sentence by developing a contract and relationship with the reader.
• Consider the decision-making process of an editor to understand why some work calls out to be rejected.
• Overnight: Write or hone the first few pages of a response to a specific call for manuscripts. Also include a description of the rest of the essay.

Tuesday:
• Writing exercise.
• Read your work and participate in guided group response.
• Identify why writing engages the reader with a look at the voice and structure in works by Ruth Reichel, Michael Pollan, and David Sedaris. (Marriage of experiences and fact. Language, word choice, structure, themes and narrative threads. Sentimentality—earned or unearned? Use of dialog. Chronologic vs. nonlinear time.)
• Identify the craft issues and development of a persona that apply to your writing. Learn why both show and-tell are essential components in creative nonfiction. Recognize both in great nonfiction.
• By the end of the session you will recognize master writing strategies in nonfiction that contribute to the literary merit of the work. You will also increase the amount and or acumen of writer tools available to tell your own stories. You will be able to name these tools.
• Overnight: Complete the draft of the essay submission and choose one craft issue you worked with. Choose one paragraph that demonstrates your craft effort for reading the next day.

Wednesday:
• Writing exercise.
• Read your work and participate in guided group response. Identify how to use life lessons, observations, and experiences as we discuss Scott Turrows’ The Laws of our Fathers and Anchee Min’s From MAO to America: A Writer’s Remarkable Journey.
• Learn how to use the skills of expansion of an anecdote and the controlling metaphor.
• At the end of this session you will be ready to respond to an editor’s call for manuscripts with attentiveness. You will understand the nonfiction writer’s tool chest of literary devices and add to your own toolbox
• Overnight: Write a minimum of two paragraphs of the essay in response to the writing exercise.

Thursday:
• Writing exercise. Read your two paragraphs and participate in guided group response.
• Identify and discuss craft lessons from Richard Rodriguez and Barbara Kingsolver: time sliders and genre shifters. Claim writer’s tools for yourself. Identify strengths and tendencies in own writing and ways to shake things up. Know your quirks, which of the five types of sentences do you tend to use the most? What words tend to habitually creep into your prose?
• Overnight: Complete at least one essay and prepare to read up to three pages.
Friday:
• Writing exercise.
• Read up to three pages of your work and provide two written critiques to peers. Receive written feedback from Amy and two additional classmates.
• Develop a long and short-term plan for writing and reading.
• Develop a written plan to submit. (Include a plan for continued peer review, a way to track submissions, and writing schedule.)

By the end of this session you will have completed drafts of two essays and have specific plans for development and publication. You will have experience incorporating editorial instruction and master writer techniques into your own nonfiction. You will have developed a plan for your writing life. You will have a plan to find answer calls for submission.

**Credit Option:** Participants earn 1 credit by attending class and completing the assigned work for the week: daily reading, writing at least five pages of original work, and critiquing of own and others' work. To earn 2 credits, participants submit an additional five pages of their work. Participants earning 3 credits complete all of the above requirements supplemented by another five to 10 pages of creative work or a short paper synthesizing how the material covered during the week applies to their own creative projects and/or teaching. The work must be handed in within two weeks of final class date.

**Amy Lou Jenkins** is the author of *Every Natural Fact: Five Seasons of Open-Air Parenting*

**Amy Lou** holds a BSN in Nursing and Professional Communication and an MFA in Literature and Creative Writing from Bennington College. She teaches as a university adjunct and at writing retreats, conferences and workshops. Her environmental and nature writing has been honored by, *The Florida Review* Editors Award in Nonfiction, Literal Latte Essay Awards, Flint Hills Review Nonfiction Award, X.J. Kennedy Award for Nonfiction, and twice by the Ellis/Henderson Outdoor Writing Award. Her nonfiction has also won first place in the Jade Ring Award for Essay Writing, Wisconsin Regional Writing Award in Essay, Memoir, and Travel Writing. She is the recipient of a Mesa Refuge writing fellowship for environmental writing.