

Creative Writing Lab
Summer Session I, 2016

Instructor: Liza Monroy

Instructor bio: Liza is the author of the forthcoming collection of essays *Seeing As Your Shoes Are Soon To Be On Fire* (Counterpoint/Soft Skull Press October 2016) and two previous books: *The Marriage Act: The Risk I Took To Keep My Best Friend In America...And What It Taught Us About Love* (Counterpoint/Soft Skull 2013) and the novel *Mexican High* (Spiegel & Grau/Random House 2008). Her articles and essays have appeared in numerous publications, including *Poets & Writers*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *O (Oprah Magazine)*, *Newsweek*, *Village Voice*, *Marie Claire*, *Everyday With Rachael Ray*, *Jane*, *Self*, *Bust* and various anthologies, including *The New York Times Best of Modern Love* collection, *Goodbye To All That: Writers on Loving and Leaving New York*, *One Big Happy Family*, and *Wedding Cake For Breakfast*. Liza has taught writing at Columbia University, UCLA Extension, Mediabistro.com, and currently teaches at UC Santa Cruz and in private workshops. She lives in Santa Cruz with her husband, pug, baby, and a potbellied pig named Señor Bacon.

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Time: Wednesdays, 5:30—8:30pm

Location: Soc Sci 1 145

Office Hours: By Appointment

“Autobiography is actually a form of philosophy.”

-Siri Hustvedt

“Good writing disturbs: it creates dissonance.”

-Irene L. Clark, Betty Bamberg, *Concepts in Composition*

Course Description

The lab will focus on various genres of creative writing: memoir, essay, short story, novel, immersion journalism, and graphic memoir/novel—with a final project in a genre of your choosing. The project can be designed to be read silently or performed, recorded (such as for a radio segment, think *This American Life* or KCRW's *UnFictional*), or even filmed. We will focus on workshopping weekly assignments and projects in-progress which will arise from each student's specific interests.

Each week's work will consist of short readings in different forms (personal essay, short story, novel/memoir excerpts, etc) and in- and out-of-class creative writing exercises to practice these various forms, with a focus on developing the work of your choice (ideally the pieces of writing you're most engaged with) into a final project.

We will also conduct a weekly workshop, the ongoing practice of providing feedback/collaboration with your instructor and other lab members in order to take full advantage of the shared insights of the group.

This is a 2.0 unit class. UC provides guidelines for minimum out-of-class reading and writing per week at 6 hours for a two-unit class. This means 4.5 hours of outside work, on average. This will mean between 3 and 4 hours of reading and writing combined.

Weekly writing exercises are approx. 2.5—4 pages, 12pt font, double-spaced;

Final Project within 5—7 pages, 12pt font, double-spaced.

***Please bring your laptop or notebook to each class for freewriting time.** You will often generate exploratory material toward your assignments and final project.

FINAL PROJECT options: create either an expanded and revised version of one of your writings for the course; a portfolio of revisions of each of your pieces or selected pieces; OR an entirely new creative work in the genre of your choice. Final project should total between 5-7 pages, 12pt font, double-spaced.

Class Schedule

Class 1: Wednesday June 22

Introduction

Intros: What's Your Story

Distribute and review syllabus, materials, and assignment 1

Class policies and requirements. Workshop sign-ups

Discussion: Why do we write? Orwell & Didion "Why I Write," Selections from *Why We Write About Ourselves*

-Written reflections –

Craft talk: Audience

Genre: Creative Nonfiction: personal essay, memoir

Readings/discussion: "Modern Love" columns; Modern Love college essay contest; Slate "The First-Person Industrial Complex"

Reading: Kassi Underwood, "A Lost Child, but Not Mine"

What is the creative nonfiction genre? Why write personal essay? What differentiates it from journaling or the dreaded "navel-gazing"? In our writing, how might we use our personal experience, interests, and obsessions as an entry point into a larger conversation?

Homework:

Write: your own creative nonfiction piece – 2-3 pages - three people volunteer for workshop, distribute work via email on or before Sunday evening.

Print, read, make notes on your classmates' pieces to bring to workshop, as well as a ½ page typed response letter.

Read:

-Fiction pieces

Short stories:

“The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” by Ursula K. McGuin

“What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” by Raymond Carver

Novel excerpt:

from “The Portable Veblen” by Elizabeth McKenzie (she will visit our class)

Class 2: Wednesday June 29

Guest Speaker: Kassi Underwood, **author of the forthcoming memoir *May Cause Love***: My Humbling, Heartbreaking, Hugely Satisfying Search for Enlightenment After Abortion and Modern Love column, “A Lost Child, but Not Mine” (via Skype)

Workshop: *3 lab members' creative nonfiction pieces*

Fiction

Why read and write fiction? What can fiction “do”? How can it help us illuminate our lives in ways other forms cannot?

Reading & discussion: short stories & excerpt of “Portable Veblen”

HW Assignment:

Write: Fictional story or opening of a novel (other forms—play, poetry, etc—ok but this time must be fiction, ie, you made stuff up to communicate a particular message to readers.)

Three volunteers for workshop, distribute work via email

Print, read, make notes on your classmates' work to bring to workshop, as well as a ½ page typed response letter.

Read: Immersion stories: excerpts from Miranda July, *It Chooses You* and *Playing Dead* by Elizabeth Greenwood

Class 3: Wednesday July 6

Discuss Final Project: Developing your creative final project

-Workshop: *3 lab members' fiction pieces*

Craft: Oulipo exercises—formal constraints

Exercise: apply an Oulipan exercise to one of your pieces of writing

-turn in exercise

Genre: Immersion / “guinea pig” story or oral history/interview

Immersing yourself for the story

How can writing an oral history or journalistic profile bring about a new understanding in the author? We'll discuss the possibilities of structure, and the practice of “thinking on the page.” Research practices for fiction and nonfiction writing

Craft talk: research and interviewing

Written assignment in response to reading + write full interview questions for a subject/source. Developing effective interview questions.

Exercise: *Revision!*

(time permitting: epistolary form—*Station Eleven; May Cause Love*)

Guest Speaker: Elizabeth McKenzie, author of *The Portable Veblen* (live!)

Assignment:

Writing: Conduct an interview or practice immersion journalism this week. Incorporate what you learn into the work that's becoming your final project, OR write or revise a different piece using material gathered from your immersion experience and/or interview

-Final Project – distribute via email in advance

-small-group workshops / conferences with instructor

Read: excerpts from *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel

Larceny In My Blood by Matthew Parker

Class 4: Wednesday July 13

GRAPHIC MEMOIR/NOVEL

Fun Home

Larceny In My Blood

Workshop: Final Projects in-progress!

Assignment: turn any of the creative writing you've done for class so far into a 1-page graphic with panels. (Don't have to be a visual artist. Computer renderings and/or stick figures ok!)

Revise the piece that will be your final project for the course.

Class 5: Wednesday July 20

Last meeting! Readings/Presentations of polished & finished final projects to the class + refreshments served

-Turn in graphic piece, Final Project, and artist's statement

Guest Speaker (Skype): Matthew Parker, author of *Larceny In My Blood*

Grading and Evaluation

Attendance and participation, including workshops/collaborative work: 30%

Reading responses (writing and level of engagement): 20%

Creative assignments: 25%

Final project, analytical component, and presentation: 25%

Per instructor discretion, syllabus may be adjusted during the quarter to meet the needs and interests of the class.

*A note on “hours”: The required number of hours for final projects is approximately 10; if you are finding that you think you’re “finished” with a significantly less number of hours, consider how to expand your project in a range of ways. Consult me if necessary. Assume that for our class, your project will not achieve as much in relation to the standards reached by the majority of the group if you spend under 10 hours on the material. I hope this helps challenge you to keep creating the most possible best work this quarter.

DROP AND WITHDRAW DEADLINES (I hope you don’t have to go anywhere! But if you need to...):

Drop deadline: June 27

Withdraw deadline: July 8

Some Important Guidelines for Workshopping Your Classmates:

Workshopping is a weekly process that develops good writing habits of mind. One of the best ways to improve your own writing is to think actively about the writing of others. With that in mind, when you comment on your colleagues' work in our workshops, please do the following:

1) Touch upon and discuss what you feel the writer did successfully, backed up with at least one concrete example. (ie, "The scene where Augusten watches his mother use the curling iron reveals the narcissistic tendencies that are central to the conflict he introduces on page 2.")

The "what's working" aspect can point to places that captivated, riveted, engaged—and, importantly—why these moments are successful.

Then, please respond to points you think need revision, also explaining your rationale. (ie, "The dialogue on page 3 repeats some of the information you've set up at the beginning of the essay. The reader already knows this, so you might consider reworking the scene to make it less expository.") Give suggestions for how the writer might address specific problems.

This formula keeps things specific, to the point, and manageable. The main thing is not to say "It was great! I loved it," or "I didn't get it," and leave it at that. We want to help each other learn and develop as much as possible, and one of the main ways to do that, in editing and responding to each other's work, is to describe *why* you reacted as you did. Also, keep in mind reacting to the work and not the writer. This is an especially important distinction in workshopping personal essays. "I'm so sorry about what happened with your mother," is not a workshop comment, but "The sadness of the situation comes through in your essay, and I felt the impact this had especially in the scene on page 2" is.

Hone in on "**one big thing**" both for the positive and the critique. It's not our job as readers to "fix" everything, but rather to provide our thoughts on the most important elements of a piece of writing that are both working well and in need of improvement. When your piece is being critiqued, remember that you ultimately retain ownership over your writing, so if a nugget of feedback doesn't sit right with you, or your instinct is something different entirely, you needn't incorporate that particular feedback. Other feedback

will ring a bell. This will begin to feel familiar as the weeks of our course progress.

A note about line editing: writers are responsible for proofreading and line-editing their own work. We will be focusing on form, content, and style: the big-picture issues. Also, as you are drafting, it is possible to assume that sentences and paragraphs—or even the entire work—will be rewritten; therefore, line editing is not a good use of our time in a workshop. That's not to say that I as instructor won't comment on grammar and usage, especially if a tendency to repeat a specific error is observed. That will happen, but I hope to keep your focus on macro- *before* micro-level issues.