

WV Wesleyan Low-Residency MFA Program

Summer 2019 Residency Seminars

All students and auditors, regardless of genre track, are required to complete the assigned reading, writing, and listening before the residency. Purchase (or check out of the library long-term) the assigned books (there are two assigned books), access the four assigned web links (three articles, one podcast), and download and print the seven PDFs shared through Google Drive, or store the PDFs in an organized fashion electronically, for easy access. At the residency, you are required to have at the ready all materials relevant to the day's seminars. Any reading listed as "recommended" is optional, but completion of all "assigned" reading is required for passing the residency courses.

FRAGMENTED ESSAYS, Matt Randal O'Wain. I consider many styles to be housed under the banner of "fragmented" essay; the fragmented essay can be personal as we will see in the excerpt from Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, the fragmented essay can illuminate the human condition without an "I" pronoun dictating the emotional response, as we will see with essays like Weinberger's "The Stars," the fragmented essay can be a list, as with Heraclitus or a daily and determined period of observations, as with Walter Benjamin's *Arcade Projector* a fictionalized personae that meditates on melancholy, as does Ferdinand Pessoa in *The Book of Disquiet*.

With the fragmented form, writers consider storytelling as a three-dimensional narrative, a spherical narrative, one that a reader must *enter* rather than "begin" and *exit* rather than "end" after a certain and defined middle. To do this one must truly look at the object or experience in question, one must research and deconstruct concepts such as Red Shoes, as Water, at Blue, at Stars, as Arcades, as Melancholy, as Pebbles, as papyrus found in the wreckage of the Library of Alexandria after Julius Caesar burned the building during a siege of the city.

I want you, as writers, to study the technical and craft-oriented moves of the writers included in your packet and come prepared for discussion. We will tackle our own creative notions of structure and artistic communication through in-class writing exercises.

ASSIGNED READING: Download I O'Wain PDF containing:
Heraclitus of Ephesus "I Have Looked Diligently at My Own Mind" (500 BCE)
Eliot Weinberger "Stars"
Marguerite Duras *The Lover* (excerpt)
Ferdinand Pessoa *Book of Disquiet* (excerpt)
Anne Carson "Kinds of Water"
Francis Ponge "The Pebble"
Susan Griffin "Red Shoes"

ARGOT, JARGON & LEXICON: MINING THE WORD-HOARDS OF PROFESSION, POPULATION AND PLACE, Doug Van Gundy. When groups of people are set apart from others - whether by geography, interest or field-of-endeavor – they tend to come up with terms and expressions unique to their group. And whether the intention is to provide a linguistic short-cut, or to identify members of the in-group, such terms often provide a specific shade of meaning not available to the uninitiated. Argot and jargon, "words that are untranslatable without remainder" (in Robert Macfarlane's memorable phrase) are fascinating and useful to writers in all genres, whether as

a source of color in prose, authenticity in non-fiction, or musicality in poetry. In this seminar we will read several short works that make use of argot or jargon, discuss the impact (and challenge) of using specific “insider” language, and explore resources for discovering hidden terms and words. **No assigned reading.**

RIGHT TO DISCOVER: CONVENTIONS IN QUEER WRITING IN APPALACHIA AND BEYOND, Savannah Sipple.

In this seminar, we'll first explore the historical context of queer writing and queer writing in the mountains, then we'll examine the conventions used by writers like Dorothy Allison, Carter Sickels, Silas House, Aaron Smith, Maggie Anderson, and more—conventions they use to discover who they are, their queerness, and how they fit within the larger context of both Appalachia and the queer canon.

ASSIGNED READING:

<https://bookriot.com/2017/06/08/to-suffer-or-to-disappear-the-state-of-queer-literary-fiction/>

<https://lithub.com/who-cares-what-straight-people-think/>

<https://www.buzzfeed.com/cartersickels/early-in-my-transition-two-teenagers-helped-me-embrace-my-id#.qwrbo90qX>

PUSHING YOUR FICTION AND NONFICTION WITH FIELDWORK, Belle Boggs.

Designed for both fiction and nonfiction writers (and those of us who write both), this seminar will focus on the energy, inspiration, connectivity, and responsibility engendered by research, fieldwork, and asking questions. We'll talk about planning big projects, getting out into the community, and enlarging our own stories with the stories of others. Bring a notebook and an idea for a project you have been working on—or would like to kick-start. **No assigned reading.**

THE ANALYTICAL HYBRID: Using Notes, Texts, and Poetry to Push Your Narrative Toward a Deeper Truth, Jonathan Corcoran, 2-session seminar.

In this seminar, we will explore how some authors use “texts-within-texts” to push their narratives to a deeper level. We'll see how writers like Joan Didion incorporate old notes and ramblings into their current works to explore past versions of self, to explore change, to explore the idea that the “I” is a dynamic concept that perhaps shifts with time. Other writers, like Rachel Hadas, incorporate elements of their own and others' poetry to dig at mysteries and explore the subconscious mind during times of joy, suffering, illness, and change. We'll see that what exemplifies this use of the text-within-text strategy is a willingness to engage with cool, steady analysis of self, situation, and context. Ultimately, we'll learn how to use texts--notes, poetry, grocery lists, letters--to develop sustained paragraphs and sections of analysis in our own work. By exploring how to craft this sometimes academic style of analysis into our creative narratives, we'll learn how to push our works towards deeper understanding of character and self.

This will be a two-session seminar. After learning about and studying this writing strategy, we will proceed with a generative session in which we work towards creating a piece of analytical creative work by incorporating and analyzing a note/poem/religious verse/journal entry/etc. into a piece of creative writing.

Students should bring a text to the generative session that was important to them during a meaningful/traumatic/memorable moment in their lives. Some suggestions:

- a piece of poetry that was written during a trying time in your life
- a diary entry from a transitory period
- a religious verse that you once read repeatedly
- a letter from a friend or relative
- an excerpt from the story that made you want to be a writer
- an old shopping list from a parent, grandparent, or a younger version of yourself
- a passage from your favorite children's book/young adult novel
- the first poem/story/essay you wrote and felt proud of
- your parent/sibling/grandparent's favorite book
- a passage from a poem/story/essay that once made you livid
- your fictional character's favorite book/poem/story (*I will focus mostly on using this strategy in essay, but incorporating it into a piece of fiction is a piece of cake!*)

ASSIGNED READING: Download I Corcoran PDF containing the following excerpts: Rachel Hadas, *Strange Relation* (hybrid memoir/poetry), Prologue (optional, but helpful for context), Chapters 2&15

Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (memoir), Chapters 1&2

Francisco Goldman, *Say Her Name* (novel), Chapter 1, pp. 1-6

Jenny Offill, *Dept. of Speculation* (novel), Chapters 2&11

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR THE READING:

- **For all texts:** Note how these authors use analysis of texts to push their narratives forward (and yes, I mean the same kind of analysis you might use in an academic essay!).
- **Rachel Hadas:** Pay attention to how Rachel Hadas discovers the seeds of her subconscious in her own poetry—how she comes to realize that something inside her knew about her husband's dementia long before he'd had a diagnosis or even admitted she'd admitted to herself that something was wrong. How does this act of revisiting old work inform her understanding and help make sense of the present? And later, what does she learn about herself and her relationship when she revisits the work of the poets she loves?
- **Joan Didion:** Didion often uses texts, notes, and scribbles to anchor herself (and her writings) in past experience—in this case, notice how she works with a Microsoft Word document and later with a news report. How authentic does this reconstructed self feel to you? If we, as writers, don't have access to journals and notes from important past moments, what other texts might illuminate who we were and how we felt in these moments?
- **Francisco Goldman:** Goldman's wish to know his late wife's thoughts is a common refrain for those who have experienced loss. This desire almost seems to become his obsession. Notice how he quickly reconstructs his wife's personality through her obsession with Cortazar's story, "Axolotls," and how he branches beyond the knowable and fills in the gaps. How can we use our own and others' obsessions with texts, stories, poems, etc. to create or even invent the personalities of our characters?
- **Jenny Offill:** Offill's book is an act of accumulation—her character's domestic life juxtaposed against the sometimes trivial (a story, a fact, a lyric). What's both interesting and odd about Offill's work is how she, unlike some of the other authors we've read, does not hold our hand in helping us understand the importance of the texts within her text. How does situating her character's life within these largely un-contextualized pieces help make the character's experiences resonate?

COLLAGE POETRY, Mark DeFoe. For the purposed of this seminar I am defining “College Poetry” as more than just cutting out unusual type-fonts and pasting them on the fridge. I am thinking of poetry that could more productively be defined by the terms montage, conglomerate, pastiche, assemblage, collection—even less seriously—“hodge-podge.” It is poetry that finds content, language and syntax and inspiration in traditional sources—science, art, religion, sociology, history, politics, myth—but combines them in “unpoetic” ways to create a different expression not always lyric, personal or confessional. It might also draw on atypical sources—newspapers, instruction manuals, public speeches, popular culture, urban legend, government reports, music lyrics, overheard conversations, nursery rhymes, local history, lines from other poems. Poet Marianne Moore in her “Ars Poetica” was willing to include baseball statistics.

Please look at the other definitions I’ve included in the readings, along with excerpts of “famous” works of the collage technique: T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*. Also, we will consider HD’s (Hilda Doolittle) *Trilogy*, Susan Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson*, and Ed Dorn’s *Gunslinger* and two attempts by yours truly at something like collage.

THE BIG QUESTIONS: Does collage produce good poetry or good writing? Does it violate too many boundaries? What impact does it have upon the reader? What can we as writers, either of poetry or prose, learn from this technique? Can we employ it in our own writing?

ASSIGNED READING: Download | DeFoe PDF

UTTERLY PRESENT: Cross-Genre Generative Session, Devon McNamara.

Denise Levertov encourages us at the close of her short poem “Once Only”:

Try
to acknowledge the next
song in its body-halo of flames as utterly
present, as now or never

Claire Keegan’s short story “Foster,” two poems—“The Same City” by Terrance Hayes and “Williams: An Essay” by Denise Levertov—and a brief selection from Virginia Woolf’s *Moments of Being* are the prompts for a generative session in three parts focusing on how fiction, poetry, and the creative nonfiction essay inspire each other in form and content, enriching the inner song of each.

ASSIGNED READING: Download | McNamara PDF

ALWAYS CONCRETE TO ABSTRACT: How Metaphors Work, and How Metaphors Work as a Metaphor for How Language Works, Eric Waggoner. Writers often struggle to craft effective figurative language: What makes a metaphor or simile work well? What makes a metaphor or simile clichéd? How do I create a resonant metaphor that doesn’t sound like it’s trying too hard to be clever? Why does this abstract comparison, which makes perfect sense to me, flummox my readers/workshop cohort so thoroughly? These are difficult, but necessary questions. One path to answers might be found in a deeper discussion of how metaphor works both functionally, as a literary effect; and linguistically, as a feature of language with its own long-form evolutionary history and patterns. This seminar will refer to examples from commonplace and literary writing, and draw from the study of linguistics, to discuss metaphor both as an element of literary

craft, and as a useful metaphor *itself* for how language operates cyclically, to make the unfamiliar familiar, then to make the familiar unfamiliar, then back again, and so on, and so on.... Illustrative examples (multi-genre) will be short, sweet (metaphorically), and provided by the instructor the day of the seminar. 12-15 minutes will be allotted for brief writing prompts and sharing. **No assigned reading.**

STORYTELLING AS OWNERSHIP IN POETRY, Cameron Barnett. From our earliest moments as a species, we have gathered to share stories, both true and imagined. It is the form of communication most built-in to us regardless of background, country, or the times in which we live. This can be true when it comes to writing, though the waters sometimes grow murkier. Particularly in an age of identity being so centered in conversations about writing, claiming one's story is an important part of one's writing craft. Challenging stereotypes and monolithic thinking about different groups of people is best combatted by a strong narrative of one's true and lived experience. In this seminar we will discuss and practice poetry writing that does just that: claims ownership of identity, centers lived experience while connecting to historical and contemporary parallels, and uses our oldest common denominator—narrative—to build empathy. Attendees will read and discuss selected poems illustrating this work, and receive prompts for generating such work of their own. **No assigned reading.**

Graduating Student Seminar: ORDERING YOUR PRIVATE WORLD: DISCOVERING THE STRUCTURE THAT FITS YOUR PROJECT, Cynthia McCloud (nonfiction).

Nonfiction, at first glance, might seem to require a chronological telling of events. Sometimes, however, a nonlinear timeline is the best order in which to reveal facts. Ultimately, it is the nature of the story, who its characters are, and the key events of the piece, which reveal how a piece should be structured. Sometimes readers know at the outset that an activating incident has occurred, such as a historical event. The writer starts with that inciting event and explains what led up to it, as country music historian Tyler Mahan Coe does in “The Murder Ballad of Spade Cooley,” an episode of the podcast *Cocaine and Rhinestones*. Other times, such as Jean-Dominique Bauby's accident in *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, the inciting event is less important than how the subject deals with its aftermath. And sometimes, such as in *Fun Home*, the inciting event appears to be “the story” as one might call the noteworthy information the reader is to learn. But really that circumstance is just the situation, as Vivian Gornick explains: the real story is “the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say.” This seminar will examine the storytelling structures of a short book, a graphic novel, and a podcast, with close attention to when the authors chose to reveal key information. We will discuss what is effective about each approach and why each structure makes sense for each story.

ASSIGNED READING & LISTENING:

- Download I McCloud PDF (the first two chapters of John McPhee's Draft No. 4)
- Students should obtain and read Jean-Dominique Bauby's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (ISBN: 978-0007139842)
- Listen to “The Murder Ballad of Spade Cooley,” episode three of the podcast *Cocaine and Rhinestones*, found at <https://cocaineandrhinestones.com/spade-cooley-murder-ballad> (The site also contains a transcript of the episode for those who prefer to read instead of listen.)

DISCLAIMER: This episode of *Cocaine & Rhinestones* tells a disturbing story that some listeners may find upsetting. This is not suitable content for children or anyone who shouldn't read a graphic and detailed account of torture and murder. However, the podcast host gives ample warning when he reaches the disturbing part and tells listeners how to skip ahead and pick up the episode after the graphic descriptions of violence.

RECOMMENDED READING (NOT REQUIRED):

Fun Home by Alison Bechdel

Graduating Student Seminar: WRITING REAL ANIMALS: GETTING THE LEVEL OF ETHOLOGY RIGHT WITH ANIMAL SUBJECTS, Scottie Westfall (nonfiction). Writing about animal subjects can be a tricky matter. Because they do not speak, we have to engage in speculation about the exact intent and thoughts of animal characters. In order to get the best possible animal prose, we have to think about the level of ethology, a discipline that studies animal behavior based upon its natural history, and how it matches our intent and our potential audience. If we get the ethology wrong, we risk losing credibility. We will look at using speculation as a tool to address intent in nonfiction animal characters, looking at *Marley and Me* by John Grogan, *Merle's Door* by Ted Kerasote, *The Tiger* by John Vaillant, and *American Wolf* by Nate Blakeslee. **No assigned reading.**

STEREOTYPES: AN ASPECT OF CHARACTERIZATION, Richard Schmitt. Writers often think of stereotypical characters in a negative way and try to avoid them. It's true the unintentional portrayal of a character in fiction or nonfiction as stereotypical is detrimental to the genuine human emotions we seek when developing our characters into real people. But the fact is, many successful, popular, and enduring characters in literature are in various ways stereotypical, or, as E.M. Forster writes in *Aspects of the Novel*, "flat characters" as opposed to "round characters. This class came about from a workshop where readers were saying things like "I don't care about these people—I don't believe these people—they don't seem real to me." What it seems we're asking for in cases like that is more, better, character development, with recognizable human emotions and motivations. I thought, it's not worth spending class time seeking out and criticizing published writers who've failed us or who have, inadvertently or on purpose, engaged in writing negative stereotypes. The evil stepmother, the racist cop, the Billy-Bob hick, etc. I thought, rather, it would be beneficial to examine stereotypes that help us create common people and situations often found in contemporary realism. Multi-dimensional people, with hearts and minds, rather than mere narrative function or callous shallowness. I thought, it more useful, to spend our time on examples of stereotypical characters and situations done well. Using Forster's definition as a benchmark the class will focus on the difference between "flat" and "round" characters in the assigned reading. We will explore why we need both types, when and where to use both, and how to develop realistic qualities in both without falling into the trap of writing fixed, oversimplified, people and situations.

ASSIGNED READING: Download I Schmitt PDF containing:

"Sunday in the Park" Bel Kaufman. "Cathedral" Raymond Carver. "The Astronomer's Wife" Kay Boyle. "The Swimmer" John Cheever. "Guests of the Nation" Frank O'Connor. *Mystery Ride* (excerpt) Robert Boswell. "Talent" (excerpt) Sarah Shun-Lien Bynum. "Ted" (excerpt) Sherman Alexie

VALLEY OF DRY BONES: BRINGING NON-NARRATIVE PROSE TO LIFE, Jessie van Eerden. The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel describes a vision of a valley full of dry bones: God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones that God will breathe life into them, and, at Ezekiel's words, the bones come together and sinews form, flesh covers them, breath enters them, and the bodies rise up. I love to apply this mythic scene to the dry bones of our prose, particularly nonfiction prose that is not narrative or scenic. Story-based memoir, in both short and long forms, can be the default of contemporary nonfictionists, and this makes some sense: story snaps to life and immediately involves the body and is cinematic; it's the easiest prose to bring to life. But we limit our prose repertoire if we exclude non-narrative forms. In this seminar, I hope to make a convincing case for meditative prose, the prose of thinking. Although we often avoid non-narrative, meditative prose because we fear being boring or didactic, we'll take a look at several examples of meditative prose that moves and breathes, changes mode, modulates distance, is as riveting and animated as scenic narrative, and, in fact, makes use of scenic elements within a spiral of vibrant thought. We'll study how tools such as syntactical variation, figurative language, rhetorical devices, and recurrent imagery can put flesh and sinew on our dry bones and make our work rise up. My examples come from literary nonfiction, but the invitation to the meditative mode and the principles of lively writing extend across genres. **As you read the assigned nonfiction, ask the simple question: How do these meditative writers keep their prose dynamic? What strategies can you pull out?**

ASSIGNED READING:

- Download I van Eerden PDF containing two literary essays: Amy Leach's "Sail on, My Little Honey Bee" and Robert Vivian's "Hearing Trains"
- And students should obtain and read **Mark Doty's *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*** (ISBN: 978-0807066096)