

Write-by-the-Lake 2009

Section #1: CREATIVE NON-FICTION MAKEOVER

Syllabus

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Over the past 12 years at my Lakeside Writing Studio in Chicago, most of the creative writing has been non-fiction, with an emphasis on memoir. Time and again, writers show up having a story to tell but without the wherewithal to know how to structure it. As Gypsy Rose Lee used to say, "You gotta have a gimmick..." What's more, most people don't know the difference between themselves-as-narrator and the themes and topics that inspire them. They want their topics to sell themselves. Ha! This results in lots and lots of telling and telling in sequential order. Consequently their writing is excruciatingly BORING. It's "sad-making" I tell you.

My solution to the non-fiction storytelling dilemma is to give writers the ability to incorporate fictional techniques into their true stories, so that readers WANT to keep reading. So that's what I'm going to do. You will receive a one-page lesson on well over a dozen fictional techniques. I believe in showing writers a lot of examples of published works that incorporate these techniques; that will stimulate you to consider new sources, re-structuring existing materials and re-positioning yourself in the writing process. In so doing, you will no longer be wielding a wad of information, however personal it may be; instead, you will be actively, dramatically, involving yourself in a discovery process that you will share with the reader. Try it, you'll like it—or at least bust a gut trying. By the time you leave this workshop you will have an idea not only of how to structure your project, but what added sources you might use. Most importantly you will have a work plan to keep you going forward in the months to come.

Now, because everybody wants to go to heaven and nobody wants to die, a non-fiction project proposal for this workshop is not mandatory. But those of you who choose to write one—and you will be rewarded in heaven—need to **send it to me via email attachment no later than Friday, June 12th**. Each proposal should shoot for an overall description of the project and a chapter outline.

The rest of you bums will be given diagnostic questionnaires, templates and repeated chances to pitch your ideas to the group. Over the course of the week's work, you will incorporate still more ideas gleaned from my handouts, other peoples' pitches and our discussions to enhance your project. Everyone will walk away with a clear picture of how to shape, design and set up an approach for writing a work of creative non-fiction. Books, articles and long-form essays are not written, they're re-written; so too with pitching. How do you like them apples? What follows is a quick run-down of techniques and published examples.

Monday: Introductions.

Diagnostic, in-class questionnaire to assess projects. Everyone writes a succinct, half-page description of their project.

Overview of Creative Non-Fiction
Essays,(McPhee)
Personal essays, (Maxwell)
Memoir, (Cooper/Gallagher)
Biography/profiles, (Weschler)
Literary biography, (Patchett/Lurie);

Sharing Pitches that include descriptions and sources (5 min. each);

At the end of this session you will know which sub-set of creative non-fiction your project falls into and why and what questions you need to address in your project's structure. You will also get a glimpse of strategies that may prove useful.

Tuesday: Surface Time vs Depth Time Strategies

Date stamps, {Louise DeSalvo's *Vertigo*}
Space on the page; {Mark Doty's *Dog Years*}
Activating the time of the writing vs the back stories. {*The Year of Magical Thinking*}
Framing devices;
Quotations, numbers, titles, mixing sources. {*Jane Austen Book Club, The Cliff Walk, Fried Butter*}
Wraparound frames;

Sharing revised pitches (5 minutes each)

At the end of this session you will understand how to increase the value of the (surface) writing to increase stakes for the narrator. You will also look at a variety of time management strategies that can keep the narrative open-ended.

Wednesday: Alternating Chapters and other Patterns

Splitting the book into sections, halves, {*The Glass Castle, Eat Pray Love, Any Given Day*}
Multiple narrators; {*The Color of Water*}
Switching tenses, {*The Seeing Glass*}
Telling two stories at once. {Don Snyder's *Of Time & Memory* + James Ellroy's *My Dark Places*}

Sharing revised pitches (5 minutes each)

At the end of this session you will consider sections of your book and alternative patterns rather than chapters and think about borrowing organizing principles from other sources (including novels).

Thursday: The Game of the Book or the Value of Writing About Process

Road trips, { *Trials of the Monkey*, *Out of Sheer Rage* }
investigations, { *The Shadow Man* }
re-enactments, { *Julie on Julia* }

Setting up a time frame in advance that includes contests or goals { Nanowrimo, Morning Pages, Website 365 }

Sharing revised pitches (5 minutes each)

At the end of this session you will consider having a real-time discovery process/project to complete alongside your story materials *that you will write about in addition to what you consider the real writing* .

Friday: Final pitch incorporating new strategies. Read 3-page samples to the group and receive supportive, constructive feedback from me.

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.