

*Creative Nonfiction, NYU, Instructor Freeman  
Room 501  
57 Boulevard Saint Germain, Paris*

Welcome to creative nonfiction, a class in writing fact-based prose with the narrative intensity of fiction and -- when you feel like it - the lyric thrust of poetry. Definitions are hardly the stuff of genius, but a few key notes here are important.

Creative nonfiction differs from nonfiction in several key ways:

- 1) It begins with facts but does not concern itself with the establishment of those facts but rather what those facts mean - dramatically (he was named after his dad and was obsessed with pineapples, what does that mean?), emotionally, stylistically, what they felt like to those who were there. This is not alternative facts, but threading a line from fact into the world fact creates.
- 2) The writer's voice is important, if not paramount as a guide for the reader in the unveiling a story. (Reportage allows for subjective use of voice and arrangement of facts, it allows the reporter to be a character in the story: reporting, however, is meant to be translucent or voiceless, a delivery mechanism for the stories of others, or of news.)
- 3) CNF is not aimed at a general reader. In fact, it does not have to be aimed at any reader. A writer of creative nonfiction essentially like a fiction writer or poet is writing what they want to read and hoping the world comes along with them.
- 4) Reiterating and elaborating on 3....the writer is often a presence - not just in voice alone - in CNF. The observer effect is actually part of narrative drive.
- 5) All these rules are broken on many occasions..they are merely guides.

Still, let's dive in. This is an eight-class, one month seminar that will hopefully help you see the potential of looking around the edges of the facts of life and creating formal responses to or from that act of looking. You will notice there was a repetition in that sentence: not an accident. In order to write well, but especially in creative nonfiction, where you only get as much

rope to play with form as your prose entitles you to, a freshness of voice, style, narrative design and a poise about how to guide your reader through a story will be paramount. We need to think about how you look, what you see. My hope is if we can talk about this way of being in the world, as an observer, you can respect the challenge of creative nonfiction, without fearing it.

#### Goals:

- 1) To find your unconscious voice - that is the voice you will write with, and you will hopefully find a way to use this voice to describe actual events.
- 2) To get you to wake-up...to write creative nonfiction, which is in the world as much as it is of your mind, you need to *pay attention*.
- 3) To show you four basic pieces -- and to progress through them. A book review, a short vignette (a story revolving around a place, event or person that has a beginning middle and end and a sense of shape), a portrait (the story about a person, and possibly their relation to you), and a piece of reportage (a fact-based investigation into an ongoing situation in which there is something at stake for the writer)
- 4) To have fun - creative nonfiction is about curiosity, messiness, and a belief that the story behind the facts - and how you relate to and assemble them, what if they were possibly different - is as interesting as the facts themselves
- 5) To get you reading - the best way to appreciate the possible breadth of how to approach creative nonfiction is to read it, to read as much as possible, things which are good and strange and wonderful and uncomfortable and also troubling but occasionally funny and full of light too.

#### Texts:

- 1) Sidewalks, by Valeria Luiselli — please read before arriving.
- 2) Selected Cronicas, by Clarice Lispector (New Directions) — to be read in the first class two classes
- 3) Feel Free, by Zadie Smith (Penguin, to be read across the class)
- 4) Pedigrees, by Patrick Modiano — to read in middle three classes
- 5) Tell Me How it Ends, by Valeria Luiselli (to be read in final three classes)

## Secondary texts:

Week to week there will be reading in class depending on the focus -

## Assignments:

### 1) Main assignments

- a) 450 word book review
- a) 700 word vignette
- b) 1200 word portrait
- c) 2000 word reportage OR 2000 word essay-memoir

### 2) Secondary assignments:

- a) In every class we will do at least two exercises
- b) There will be small amounts of homework
- c) There will be three ongoing projects for the summer, to try to open your eyes and open your language: to keep a word journal (to be shared), to keep a photo journal (to be shared); to write a postcard per class to someone not there (not to be shared)