Perri Klass, MD

The Long Personal Essay
Sample Syllabus

This course examines the long, thoughtful, and well-written personal essay, looking at memoir, but especially at memoir which goes beyond the strictly personal, which is used to examine some particular aspect of experience. We will discuss the pleasures and pitfalls of writing about yourself as a character in serious nonfiction, the complexities of keeping your distance and coming too close, and of course, the interplay of experience and accuracy, memory and narrative. We will look at readings ranging from Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, which specifically engages the issues of memory and truth, to first person accounts of world events, great and small, of professional training, of illness and adventure. And we shall consider the always intriguing question raised by the first line of David Copperfield: "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show." 

In this class, advanced students will look at a wide variety of stories and think about the choices that writers made in deciding to treat them as personal essays, to become characters in their own narratives. We'll think about the issues involved in researching or reporting a story which you think you may treat as a personal journey. We'll also discuss the issues involved in writing about the people and events of your life, from ethics, responsibility, and confidentiality, to the problems of memory and reconstruction that arise when you write about events that you didn’t initially treat as reporting assignments. Our goal is strong and compelling writing which is about more than the writer, but which uses that personal perspective and the opportunities of the first person voice to create stories which inform and surprise the reader.

We will examine essays which incorporate research and reportage, journeys and personal narratives, memoirs and deliberately constructed adventures. We will deliberately attempt the transformation of memoir and memory into personal essay, and of reported experience into personal essay. Our theme will be the use of the personal essay format, and the incorporation of the personal narrative voice, into strongly written pieces which address a wide variety of issues, at home (literally) and out in the great wide world. We will talk about the many options for presenting reported material, and about the advantages—and pitfalls—of the personal voice. We will talk about the writer’s job of constructing that personal voice, in an essay, and about the essential job of writing a personal essay which is about more than that personal voice and that personal perspective.
Week 1—Introduction—the long personal essay
Week 2—Classic personal essays
Week 3—Contemporary personal essays—creative nonfiction
Week 4—Memoir and truth
Week 5—War and upheaval
Week 6—Doctors and sickness
Week 7—Travel and adventure
Week 8—Witnesses to history
Week 9—Student essays
Week 10—Student essays

Readings:
Individual essays to be assigned (some selected by students), and books to include:
Mary McCarthy, Memories of a Catholic Girlhood
Anne Fadiman, At Large and At Small: Familiar Essays
Christopher Hitchens, ed, Best American Essays, 2010
Joyce Carol Oates, ed, The Best American Essays of the Century
Adam Gopnik, Paris to the Moon

Week 1—Introduction—the long personal essay
Week 2—Classic personal essays
Week 3—Contemporary personal essays—creative nonfiction
Week 4—Memoir and truth
Week 5—Reportage and research
Week 6—Food and culture
Week 7—War and turmoil
Week 8—Travel and adventure
Students will be responsible for close reading of assigned material, including careful examination of form, structure, and contents. Students will also select essays to be read and discussed by the class, and lead those discussions. There will be two short assignments, one involving a piece which builds on memoir, and one a piece which builds on a reported interview or adventure, and then a long final essay, on a subject selected by the student after discussion with the class and the instructor. This essay will involve the incorporation of reporting, research, and investigating, and students will have the opportunity to discuss their essays in progress in class workshops.