Writing about Family

Writing about Family was the most meaningful and magical class I taught during my seven years teaching full-time at Yale. I’m delighted to bring it back to Yale for Summer Session 2019.

Some testimonials from student evaluations:

This class is so much more than a class about writing. It teaches empathy and a deep understanding of kinship ... Definitely one of the best classes I’ve ever taken in my life.

Taking this course ranks in [the] best experiences I’ve had at Yale. I wish every incoming student could have the chance to take it. This course is timely and crucial for young adults. The insight we gain about our own identities-- sorting through the complex baggage and past that we each arrive with-- is priceless. To do this in a setting of such diverse and supportive community, while also developing our skills as writers, is simply the best possible experience of a class. I hope this course continues, in semesters and summer programs, for years to come.

No other class I’ve taken has so effectively balanced content and craft. In each discussion, I emerged with concrete takeaways about how creative nonfiction works: structure, form, audience, research, public point, defamiliarization. But beyond the technical elements of textual analysis, our discussion of the themes of family was rich and deep. I had the sense we were collectively grappling, tackling topics of personal significance in ways that inspired real catharsis and growth in each of us.

I learned to think critically about creative writing and what the ethics of writing about family and friends are. I have never been challenged to explore my thoughts and feelings in such an academic and thoughtful way and cannot speak more highly of the takeaways from this course. I learned so much about myself, my experiences, and learned to write these thoughts down in a powerful and accessible way.

I thought a huge strength of the course was the way in which Professor Hopper seamlessly integrated material from each week into active discussions about important debates in the field of writing about family. A few of my favorite weeks included conversations on race, class, gender, and disability. The course discussed a range of relationships that moved outside of traditional narratives about family to question what constituted the idea of "family" to begin with.

Honestly, this was the most well-crafted course I’ve ever taken. The strengths that stand out include: The excellent mix of genre, form, and voice in the syllabus. The workshop format and chance for constant feedback from peers. The way that the content of the readings-- deep personal reflections-- set a standard for sharing that allowed us to create an open and trusting environment. The strong and inclusive community feeling Dr. Hopper created in the course. The dual focus on themes of family and personal growth, while also paying attention to the craft of creative nonfiction. My only suggestion for improvement is to say that I wish this course went on longer than one semester!
Class Description

Family is where writers begin. It is a world, a language, a home, a cast of characters. People write about family to escape it, return to it, remember it, make sense of it, memorialize it. They write to spread the love, make an argument, revel in the absurdity.

In Writing about Family, we will read a range of (mostly US, mostly 20th and 21st-century, mostly non-fiction) family writing. The readings are all chosen to help you develop your own skills in researching and writing creative non-fiction.

Writing and Research Exercises

We’ll begin with three short assignments that will give you practice in:

1) reflecting on the motivations and ethical questions involved in writing about family (1-2 pages)
2) working with primary documents (1-2 pages)
3) conducting interviews for writing profiles or portraits

Students will also write brief (one paragraph) reading responses for each day of class.

Essays

You will then write two short essays about family:

1) a portrait or profile of a family member (5-7 pages)
2) a family-in-context essay that puts family in the context of a place or social issue (5-7 pages)

Each of the essays will be submitted first as a draft to be workshopped by the class. Students consistently say that workshops and the opportunity to revise your work are some of the highlights of the class.

Grades:

Writing exercises and reading responses: 20%
Portrait essay: 30%
Family-in-context essay: 30%
Class participation, including workshops: 20%

Book to Buy

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*

All other readings will be available online.
**Part 1: Writing and Not Writing About Family**

**Week 1**

Tuesday: Motivations and ethical questions in family writing

Read in advance:
- Mary Karr, interview, *Paris Review*
- David Sedaris, “Now We are Five,” *The New Yorker*
- Melissa Febos, “The Heart-Work”

In-class reading:

Selection of photography books and children’s books
- Justin Torres, “Lessons”

*Writing Exercise #1: reflection on motivations, responsibilities, and unanswered questions (1-2 pages)*
*post to forum by Wednesday night*

**Part 2: Interviews and Documents**

Thursday: Interviews

*Stories We Tell* (dir. Sarah Polley), screening and discussion
(We will watch the film in class. Begin reading *Fun Home* for next week.)

*Plan to interview a family member by the end of Week 2 in order to write an essay about them.*

**Week 2**

Tuesday: Documents

Bring a family document to class (photograph, email, text thread, picture of official legal document)
- Viviana Andazola Marquez, “I Accidentally Turned My Dad In to Immigration Services”
- Charles D’Ambrosio, “Documents”
- Katharine Weber, from *The Little Women*
- Dixa Ramirez, “The Most Confederate Name in the Caribbean”

*Writing Exercise #2: annotated family document (1-2 pages)-- post to forum by the beginning of class on Wednesday*

**Part 3: Portraits**
Thursday: Parents

Kiese Laymon, from *Heavy*, and his mother’s response
Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*
Adrienne Minh-Chau Le, “The Fruits of Your Suffering”
Anne Fadiman, from *The Wine-Lover’s Daughter*

Week 3

Tuesday: Siblings

Jazmine Hughes, “Sisters, Ranked”
Briallen Hopper, “Dear Octopus”
James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues”

And two poems: Rebecca Rainof, “Spring”; Brenda Shaughnessy, “I Wish I Had More Sisters”

*Portrait essay draft due Tuesday night*

Thursday: PORTRAIT ESSAY WORKSHOPS

*Portrait essay revision due Sunday night*

**Part 4: Family in Context**

Week 4

Tuesday: Where I Was From

Joan Didion, “On Going Home”
Chang-Rae Lee, “Coming Home Again”
Jhumpa Lahiri, “Rhode Island”
Minh Vu, “Dirty Nails” (this essay was written for Writing about Family in 2018 and won the Norton Writer’s Prize)

Thursday: Not Like the Others

Nicole Chung, from *All You Can Ever Know*
Andrew Solomon, from *Far From the Tree*
Leslie Jamison, “In the Shadow of a Fairy Tale”
Belle Boggs, “The Art of Waiting”

Week 5

Tuesday: Family Arguments
Sarah Smarsh, “Poor Teeth”
Scott Russell Sanders, “Under the Influence”
Claudia Rankine, “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning”

*Family-in-context essay drafts due Tuesday night*

Thursday: FAMILY-IN-CONTEXT ESSAY WORKSHOPS

*Family-in-context essay revisions due Friday night*