

Writing about Family

Professor Briallen Hopper
Yale Summer Session A: June 7-July 9, 2021
Tues/Thurs 6-9.15 pm
One-on-one office hours by appointment
briallenhopper@gmail.com

Writing about Family was the most meaningful and magical class I taught during my seven years teaching full-time at Yale. I've taught it five times now, three times at Yale and twice at CUNY, and I'm delighted to bring it back to Yale for Summer Session 2021!

A Note on Writing about Family during a Pandemic

Something that I love about Writing about Family each time I teach it is the sense of community it fosters. Writing about something as intimate as family and sharing that writing with others is a profound way to share and connect. So many students from each of the classes are still in touch with each other and with me years later. This sense of real and enduring community is especially meaningful now, as so many of us have been navigating life with our families in particularly intense ways, or have been painfully separated from our families, or both. Writing and talking together is one way to help us make meaning out of this time we've been living through.

I've designed the class so that even though we will be online, we will have many ways to share reading, writing, revising, and movie-watching experiences with one another, and to get to know one another over the course of our five weeks together. I'm also excited that several of the writers on the syllabus, including some former students who have published their work, will be able to join our Zoom conversations to discuss their writing with us! I'll post more details about this as visits are finalized.

Testimonials from Former Students

"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!”

Course Description

Family is where writers begin. It is a world, a language, 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.

Readings

You do not need to buy any books! We will be reading a wide variety of essays and other short pieces that will allow us to explore many different kinds of voices. All the readings will be available online, either freely available on the internet or posted on our class site. We will also watch and discuss two documentaries, *Stories We Tell* and *Paris Is Burning*, which are available to stream online.

Writing and Research Exercises

We’ll begin with three short writing and research exercises (a couple paragraphs are fine, but feel free to write more if you want!) that will give you practice in:

- 1) reflecting on the motivations and ethical questions involved in writing about family (due June 10)
- 2) working with primary documents (due June 15)
- 3) conducting and reflecting on interviews for writing profiles or portraits (due June 22)

Reading Responses

Students will also write and post four brief reading responses (a paragraph is fine, but feel free to write more if you want!) at noon before class on days when nothing else is due:

- 1) on parents (due June 17)
- 2) on place (due June 29)

- 3) on redefining family (due July 1)
- 4) on family arguments (due July 8)

Essays

You will also write two short essays about family:

- 1) a portrait or profile of a family member (3-4 pages) (draft due June 23, revision due June 28)
- 2) a family-in-context essay that puts family in the context of a place or social issue (5-7 pages) (draft due July 7; revision due July 9)

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 with community support are some of the highlights of the class.

At the end of each essay draft and revision, you should include a one-paragraph reflection addressed to me and your classmates about what you learned from the writing process and what you are proud of in the essay, as well as what you aren't sure about or would like help with.

Grades

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

If you do the work, you will receive full credit.

Part 1: Writing and Not Writing About Family

Week 1

Tuesday June 8: Motivations and ethical considerations in family writing

- * Eric O'Keefe-Krebs, "[Leaving Yale for the Coronavirus Epicenter](#)," *The Yale Review* (essay) (Eric is a current Yale student)
- * Alex Rocha, "[Strawberry Fields, Forever?](#)," *The New Journal* (essay) (Alex is a Yale student)
- * Min Jin Lee, "[Stonehenge](#)," *The New Yorker* (essay)
- * Justin Torres, "[Lessons](#)," *Granta* (novel excerpt)
- * Justin Torres, [Granta interview](#) (interview)
- * Melissa Febos, "[The Heart-Work: Writing about Trauma as a Subversive Act](#)," *Poets and Writers* (essay)
- * Mary Karr, [Paris Review interview](#) (just the first part—read until you hit the paywall) (interview)
- * Kiese Laymon with Jennifer Baker, "[Is It Possible to Write a Truthful Memoir?](#)," *Electric Literature* (interview)

Part 2: Interviews and Documents

Thursday June 10: Interviews

Writing/Research Exercise #1: Reflection on your motivations, ethical considerations, and unanswered questions (1-2 pages). Post to forum Thursday at noon.

* *Stories We Tell* (dir. Sarah Polley), screening and discussion (film on Canvas)

We will watch and discuss the film together in class. We will have a Zoom chat open to compare notes and share observations with each other as we watch.

Plan to interview a family member by the end of Week 2 in preparation for the portrait essay and get started on next week's reading.

Week 2

Tuesday June 15: Documents

Writing/Research Exercise #2: Annotated family document (1-2 pages). Post to forum by Tuesday at noon.

Bring a family document to class (photograph, email, text thread, official legal document, book, etc.). If you don't have access to the actual document or an image of it, that's fine; you can describe it for us.

- * Charles D'Ambrosio, "Documents," *The New Yorker* (PDF) (essay)
- * Viviana Andazola Marquez, "[I Accidentally Turned My Dad In to Immigration Services](#)," *New York Times* (op-ed) (Viviana is a Yale alum)
- * Dixa Ramirez, "[The Most Confederate Name in the Caribbean](#)," *Avidly* (essay)
- * Katharine Weber, from *The Little Women* (PDF) (a retelling of *Little Women* set in New Haven! Meg is a Yale student) (novel excerpt)

Part 3: Portraits

Thursday June 17: Parents

Reading Response #1: By noon before class, post a paragraph in response to the reading. Possibilities include (but are not limited to):

- drawing a page of graphic nonfiction inspired by Alison Bechdel or Mira Jacob
- writing a page in the second person inspired by Kiese Laymon or Adrienne Minh-Chau Le
- write a "mother wound" or "parent wound" paragraph inspired by Vanessa Mártir or Beth Machlan

- * Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* [PDF] (graphic memoir excerpt)
- * Mira Jacob, "[The Menopause](#)," *The Believer* (graphic memoir excerpt)
- * Kiese Laymon, "[Do Not Accept Nan Check](#)," *Medium*, and his mother's response, "[These Are Your Memories](#)" (essay and letter)
- * Beth Machlan, "[The Talking Cure: Bunnies](#)," *Entropy* (essay)
- * Vanessa Mártir, "[A World Where Mothers Are Seen](#)," *Longreads*, plus one of the other essays in the series (your choice) (essays)
- * Adrienne Minh-Chau Le, "[The Fruits of Your Suffering: A Letter to My Refugee Mother](#)," *On Being* (epistolary essay) (Adrienne is one of my former Yale students)

Week 3

Tuesday June 22: Siblings

Writing/Research Exercise #3: By noon before class, post some informal notes from and reflections on your interview, including some quotes or moments you want to include in your portrait essay (1-2 pages).

- * Jazmine Hughes, "[Sisters, Ranked](#)," *The Hairpin* (essay)
- * Briallen Hopper, "Dear Octopus" from *Hard to Love: Essays and Confessions* [PDF] and "[On Sisters](#)," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (essays)
- * James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues" [PDF] (short story)
- * Rebecca Rainof, "[Spring](#)," *The Slowdown* (poem)
- * Brenda Shaughnessy, "[I Wish I Had More Sisters](#)," *The New Yorker* [PDF] (poem)

Draft deadline: Post the portrait essay draft to the forum by Wednesday at noon for your classmates to read.

Thursday June 24: Portrait Essay Workshops

Everyone's draft will be workshopped! To prepare for class:

- Read everyone's draft on the forum.
- Post comments on the drafts in your workshop group. After you read each draft, post one thing you appreciated or admired about it and why, and one suggestion you have for revision. You should be finished reading/posting comments by noon before class.

Revision deadline: Portrait essay revisions due Monday night by 11.59 pm.

Part 4: Family in Context

Week 4

Tuesday June 29: Where I Was From

Reading response #2: By noon before class, post a paragraph about a place that comes to mind when you think about "where I was from." This place could be as big as a country or as small as a nail salon, library, apartment, or drawer.

- * Joan Didion, "On Going Home" [PDF] (essay)
- * Chang-Rae Lee, "[Coming Home Again](#)," *The New Yorker* [PDF] (essay)
- * Jhumpa Lahiri, "Rhode Island" [PDF] (essay)
- * Carina del Valle Schorske, "[The Ladder Up: A Restless History of Washington Heights](#)," *VQR* (essay)
- * Minh Vu, "[Dirty Nails](#)," *wnnorton.com* (essay) (Minh's essay was written in Writing about Family at Yale in 2018 and won the prestigious national Norton Writer's Prize!)

Thursday July 1: Redefining Family

Reading response #3: By noon before class, post a paragraph about a way in which your family doesn't fit within dominant definitions of family, and the ways it redefines family, or lives according to alternative definitions of family. And/or write about the ways it embodies or upholds dominant definitions of family.

- * *Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990) (film on YouTube)

We will watch and discuss the film together in class. We will have a Zoom chat open to compare notes and share observations with each other as we watch.

- * Belle Boggs, "[The Art of Waiting](#)," *Orion Magazine* (essay)
- * Nicole Chung, "[Introduction: Rewriting Adoption](#)," *Catapult*, and one other essay of your choice from the "Rewriting Adoption" series (essays)
- * Leslie Jamison, "[In the Shadow of a Fairy Tale](#)," *New York Times* (essay)
- * Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, "[I Don't Have Children But I'm Still a Mom—Kind Of](#)," *Glamour* (essay)

Week 5

Tuesday July 6: Family Arguments

Reading response #4: By noon before class, post a paragraph that is either 1) a political or social argument based on your family experiences (the readings for today are examples of this); or 2) a reflection on/dramatization of how arguing and arguments and dissonance/disagreement work within your family; or 3) a combination of both.

- * Ayendy Bonifacio, "[For Many Immigrants, an Even Greater Risk](#)," *New York Times* (op-ed)
- * Sarah Smarsh, "[Poor Teeth](#)," *Aeon* (essay)
- * Scott Russell Sanders, "Under the Influence" [PDF] (essay)
- * Claudia Rankine, "[The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning](#)," *The New York Times* (essay)

Family-in-context essay drafts due Wednesday at 5 pm: post to the forum.

Thursday July 8: Family-in-Context Essay Workshops

Everyone's draft will be workshopped!

- Read drafts by the people in your workshop group. You are free to read drafts in the other group if you have time!
- After you read each draft, write about one thing you appreciated or admired about it and why, and one suggestion you have for revision. You should be finished reading/posting comments by noon.

Family-in-context essay revisions due July 9 by 11.59 pm. Post them on the forum for your classmates to read!