

## Writing about Family

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Office Hours: Tues/Thurs by appointment

We're delighted to be teaching Writing about Family at Yale for the sixth year in a row, and for the first time in person since the pandemic began! Writing about Family is a transformative creative writing workshop that is open to all students (there are no prerequisites; there is no separate application process). It provides opportunities for both beginning and experienced creative writers to write deeply, get abundant feedback from instructors and peers, and read work by and meet published writers. Read on for testimonials from past students and information about this year's class!

### Testimonials from Former Writing about Family 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.

You will also have the chance to meet and talk with a couple of acclaimed creative writers. In the past, guest writers have included Carina del Valle Schorske, Vanessa Mártir, and Jodi Savage.

### **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 a couple documentaries.

### **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
2. working with primary documents
3. conducting and reflecting on interviews for writing profiles or portraits

### **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: on

parents, on place, on redefining family, on family arguments. You're encouraged to read your classmates' writing exercises and reading responses! It's a great way to get to know them.

## Essays

You will also write two short essays about family:

1. a portrait or profile of a family member (3-4 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 in 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.

You should also include a sentence or paragraph of *acknowledgements*. This is your space to shout out classmates, assigned writers, and anyone else who has inspired or helped you with this particular piece.

## Sparking Conversation

You'll each get the chance to help spark our conversation about the readings *once*. Sparking conversation is simple: just share a question or idea with the class that you think would provide a good way into the readings, or choose a particular passage, scene, technique, etc. that you think would be interesting for us to focus on. During the first week, sign up for any of the six days that interest you, and touch base with the other people signed up for that day in advance to plan for how you want to approach things. You are welcome to come up with a quick writing prompt or break-out room activity for the class, but you're not required to. This is all informal and low-stakes, not a formal presentation; don't overthink it! Sign up to be a conversation sparker for the readings on any day of your choice.

## Grades

Writing exercises and reading responses: 20%

Portrait essay: 30%

Family-in-context essay: 30%

Class participation, including workshops and sparking conversation: 20%

You will receive detailed, in-depth feedback on your drafts and essays. If you do the work, you will receive full credit.

## Confidentiality Note

In order for us to be able to write and share freely with each other, it's essential that personal and family information shared in writing and in our class conversations is kept confidential. Make sure you ask for and receive permission from your classmates before you talk outside of class about what they say or write.

## Content Note

Some of the readings for this class deal with painful and potentially triggering topics. Sometimes the title itself will address the topic (e.g. "I Accidentally Turned My Dad Into Immigration Services"). In other cases I've added content notes for writing and films that deal with violence or abuse. Depending on what you write, you might want to include content notes for particular posts or drafts you write as well, so your classmates know what to expect. I'm still figuring out how to handle these issues, but I want our virtual class space to feel as safe as possible for everyone.

## Part 1: Writing and Not Writing About Family

Week 1

### Tuesday May 30: Motivations and ethical considerations in family writing

Sign up to be a conversation sparker for the readings on any day of your choice.

- 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, Documents, and Lexicons

### Thursday June 1: Interviews

*Writing/Research Exercise #1: Reflection on your motivations, ethical considerations, practical/relational issues, and unanswered questions (2 paragraphs or more). Post to forum Thursday at noon.*

- [No Crying at the Dinner Table](#) (dir. Carol Nguyen) (15 min) (**watch this before class**) (content note: suicide)

- Lilly Dancyger, “Interviewing My Mother for My Memoir Helped Me Start to Forgive Her,” *Brevity*
- We will watch and discuss *Stories We Tell* (Sarah Polley, 120 min) together in class.

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 6: Documents and Lexicons

### Conversation Sparker:

*Writing/Research Exercise #2: Annotated family document (2 paragraphs or more). 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. You can also write about a lost, missing, or absent document.

- Charles D’Ambrosio, “Documents,” *The New Yorker* (PDF) (essay) (content note: suicide)
- Kathryn Hymes, “Why We Speak More Weirdly at Home” (essay)
- Viviana Andazola Marquez, “I Accidentally Turned My Dad In to Immigration Services,” *New York Times* (op-ed)
- Dixa Ramirez, “The Most Confederate Name in the Caribbean,” *Avidly* (essay)
- Rekha Shankar, “The Most Accurate, Detailed Story of My Parents’ Amazing Immigrant Experience,” *McSweeney’s*
- “Conducting Oral Histories with Family Members,” UCLA

## Part 3: Portraits

### Thursday June 8: Parents

#### Conversation Sparkers:

*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 letter or paragraph in the second person inspired by Krys Malcolm Belc, Kiese Laymon, or Adrienne Minh-Chau Le
- write a “mother wound” or “parent wound” paragraph inspired by Vanessa Mártir
- write something satirical like Rekha Shankar

- Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* [PDF] (graphic memoir excerpt) (content note: abuse and suicide)
- Krys Malcolm Belc, "A Letter to My Partner on My Non-Binary Parenthood[Links to an external site.](#)," *Harper's Bazaar*
- 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)
- Vanessa Mártir, "A World Where Mothers Are Seen," *Longreads*, and "To Be Well: An Unmothered Women's Search for Real Love" (essays)
- Adrienne Minh-Chau Le, "The Fruits of Your Suffering: A Letter to My Refugee Mother," *On Being* (epistolary essay)

### Week 3

#### Tuesday June 13: Siblings

##### Conversation Sparkers:

*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)
  - Last paragraph of "Dear Octopus"
- 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 5 pm for your classmates to read.*

#### Thursday June 15: Portrait Essay Workshops

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

- Read the drafts of everyone in your workshop group. You are free to read drafts in other groups if you have time!
- 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.

#### Part 4: Family in Context

### Week 4

## Tuesday June 20: Where I Was From

### Conversation Sparkers:

*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)
- Eric O’Keefe-Krebs, “[Leaving Yale for the Coronavirus Epicenter](#),” *The Yale Review* (essay)
- Alex Rocha, “[Strawberry Fields, Forever?](#),” *The New Journal* (essay)
- Carina del Valle Schorske, “[The Ladder Up: A Restless History of Washington Heights](#),” *VQR* (essay)
- Minh Vu, “[Dirty Nails](#),” [wvnorton.com](#) (essay) (Minh’s essay was written in Writing about Family at Yale in 2018 and won the prestigious national Norton Writer’s Prize!)

*Revision deadline: Portrait essay revisions due Wednesday by 11.59 pm.*

## Thursday June 22: Redefining Family

### Conversation Sparkers:

*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.*

- 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)
- We will watch and discuss *Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990) (80 minutes) together.

Week 5

## Tuesday June 27: Family Arguments

### Conversation Sparkers:

*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)
- Jodi Savage, “What If: On Black Lives and Mental Health,” *Catapult* and “Searching for Salvation at Antioch,” *Kweli Journal* (content note: sexual abuse and police violence)
- Sarah Smarsh, “Poor Teeth,” *Aeon* (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 noon: post to the forum.*

### **Thursday June 29: Family-in-Context Essay Workshops**

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

- Read drafts by the people in your workshop group. You are free to read drafts in other groups 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 Friday June 30 by 11.59 pm. Post them on the forum for your classmates to read!*