
WOC 190

Creative Nonfiction: People and Places



Spring 2023 Session 4

Course meeting time: MoWe 8:10pm-9:10pm (China time)

Location: Zoom 721 869 9461 (passcode = austin)

Academic credit: 2

Course format: Seminar

Course website: <https://www.awmemorypalace.com/woc190>

Instructor's Information

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Office hours: By appointment

Austin Woerner received his B.A. in East Asian Studies from Yale University and his M.F.A. in creative writing from the New School. A Chinese-English literary translator, he served as English editor for the innovative Chinese literary journal *Chutzpah! (Tian Nan)*, and his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, *The New York Times Magazine*, the *Kenyon Review*, and other literary publications. He has published two volumes of poetry in translation (*Doubled Shadows: Selected Poetry of Ouyang Jianghe* and Ouyang Jianghe's book-length poem *Phoenix*) and a novel by Su Wei, *The Invisible Valley*.

What is this course about?

Certain places seem to exist mainly because someone has written about them . . . A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his image. . . .

—Joan Didion, *The White Album*

“Creative Nonfiction: People and Places” is a creative writing course centered on the theme of place. Through reading and writing literary nonfiction, we will explore our relationships with the important places in our lives: where we live now, and where we came from. Our work will straddle two related genres: memoir (writing from memory, usually about one’s own experiences) and journalism/reportage (writing from observation and research, usually about other people’s experiences). In the process, we will read a diverse array of literary nonfiction works that vividly evoke places and the people who inhabit them, and practice conveying the particularities of a place in a way that will be universally understood.

To capture what is essential about people and places is already a challenging task. But in this course you will face an extra challenge: to make the people and places that are significant to you come alive in the

minds of readers from other cultures—your classmates. This is also an opportunity, because what is familiar to you will necessarily be novel for them. By writing for readers outside your own culture, you will learn to view your surroundings and past experiences with fresh eyes, and convey in prose what is unique and essential about people, places, and cultures. Whether you are a scientist in training, a budding historian, or an aspiring writer, this is a skill that will serve you well in your further studies and your career.

During the course, students will write three short essays: a portrait of a place in Kunshan (outside of DKU), an essay about an object related to your home culture (however you define it), and a profile piece about a character who has a significant relationship with a place. The second two essays can be completed as either memoirs or reportage. For their final project, students will choose one of these essays to revise and polish it with the goal of making it of publishable quality. Throughout the session, students will share their essays with classmates and give feedback in the form of observations about one another's writing. They will also read (and hopefully be inspired by) diverse works of literary nonfiction about people and places, including essays by writers such as Joseph Mitchell, Susan Orlean, Rick Bragg, Yiyun Li, and others.

Students will be given the option to publish their final writing projects in an anthology that will be circulated within DKU. This "literary atlas" will become a resource for all members of the DKU community who wish to better understand the place we live now, Kunshan, and the diverse places and cultures from which DKU students hail.

What background knowledge do I need before taking this course?

There are no pre-requisite courses.

What will I learn in this course?

At the end of this course, you should be able to:

- ❖ Read literary texts from other cultures with greater sensitivity, and be more aware of what you do not know and what questions are meaningful to ask
- ❖ Read and critique pieces of student writing with an eye to conveying the particularities of culture effectively in English
- ❖ Think critically about your own writing from the perspective of readers outside your own culture
- ❖ Observe real people and places with a writer's eye, and capture significant details in writing
- ❖ Ask good questions of interview subjects and write sensitively about real people
- ❖ Edit your own writing more effectively

How will I know if I have met the objectives of this course?

- ❖ Readings: You will have read a diverse selection of literary nonfiction writing, understood how these writers conveyed the essence of their experiences for readers outside their culture, and drawn inspiration from these works for your own writing. You will have a better sense of what you *don't* know when reading a literary text in a second language; and you will be able to have more meaningful discussions of these texts with speakers of that language in order to more fully appreciate those texts. (Students with advanced Chinese reading ability will be encouraged to read a selection of supplementary texts in Chinese.)
- ❖ Writing assignments: You will have written three short essays and revised at least one of them to the point where it could be submitted for publication. You will understand better how to improve your own work and consider it from a reader's point of view.
- ❖ Reporting: For at least one of your essays, you will have done substantial observation and interviewing in a place in Kunshan outside of the DKU campus. You will have more confidence talking to strangers, asking meaningful questions, and noticing significant details in the world around you.

- ❖ Giving feedback and revising: You will have critiqued and edited your classmates' writing, been critiqued and edited by your classmates, and critiqued and edited your own writing. You will know how to give feedback on writing in a sensitive way, and incorporate others' feedback in a useful way. You will understand the difference between observation and opinion, and be able to base opinions of others' work on careful observations of what is on the page.

How can I prepare for the class sessions to be successful?

To be successful in this course, you should:

- ❖ Complete assigned readings before class and make sure you understand and remember the main points of the readings so that you are ready to talk about them in class.
- ❖ Complete assigned writing tasks before the class period in which they are due.
- ❖ Be willing to move outside your comfort zone by:
 - Experimenting with literary genres you would not normally write
 - Going to places you would not normally go
 - Interacting with people you would not normally interact with
 - Thinking honestly about your own culture and experiences and writing about them for your classmates and potentially an even wider audience

What required texts, materials, and equipment will I need?

No required textbook. Readings (short essays and brief excerpts, distributed as handouts) will be drawn from:

- *Up in the Old Hotel* by Joseph Mitchell ("The Old House at Home," "Mazie")
- *The Bull-fighter Checks Her Makeup* by Susan Orlean ("The Maui Surfer Girls")
- *Somebody Told Me* by Rick Bragg ("Savoring the Taste of Southern Summers," "Uncle Pat is the Law")
- Selected short memoirs by Yiyun Li ("Orange Crush," "The Man Who Eats")
- "The Proverbs of Hell" by William Blake
- Other readings TBD (in both Chinese and English).

What are the course policies?

Course Policies: Instructors' expectations for all assignments and activities will be made as explicitly as possible, given the likelihood of a wide range of background conventions and habits among the students. The Duke Kunshan University Community Standard will be discussed and adhered to.

Academic Integrity: Each student is bound by the academic honesty standard of Duke Kunshan University. Its Community Standard states: "Duke Kunshan University is a community composed of individuals of diverse cultures and backgrounds. We are dedicated to scholarship, leadership, and service and to the principles of honesty, fairness, respect, and accountability. Members of this community commit to reflect upon and uphold these principles in all academic and non-academic endeavors, and to protect and promote a culture of integrity." Violations of the DKU academic honesty standard will not be tolerated. Cheating, lying, falsification, or plagiarism in any practice will be considered as an inexcusable behavior and will result in zero points for the activity.

Attendance: Students are responsible for all the information presented in class. As indicated above, class attendance and participation are important components of the grade. All students are expected to participate during class time.

Absences and Tardies: If you are unable to attend a class session, tell the instructor. Repeated absences or tardiness may negatively impact your final grade.

Guidelines on getting help from other students and WLS coaches

- ❖ It is appropriate – even recommended - to:
 - Show your papers to other students (classmates, roommates, friends) and ask for general feedback.
 - Ask other students questions about specific language points, in other words, whether _____ is right or wrong, how ____ is used, etc.
 - Practice speaking a language you are trying to learn with other students.
 - Rehearse presentations and oral exams in front of other students and ask for general feedback.
 - Get help from coaches in the Writing and Language Studio with papers, specific language points, speaking practice, rehearsing presentations, and preparing for examinations.
 - Check with your professors about specific assignments to see how much help you can get and how much you are allowed to work with others.
- ❖ It is not appropriate to:
 - Ask other students to read your papers and correct all the language mistakes for you.
 - Ask other students to write papers or design presentations for you.
 - Ask other students to correct homework assignments for you.
 - Expect other students – especially roommates - to spend a lot of time helping you.
 - Ask coaches in the Writing and Language Studio to edit/proofread a paper for you.
- ❖ Basic rules-of-thumb:
 - It is appropriate to ask for help learning and improving your language skills.
 - It is not appropriate to ask someone to do your work for you.
 - Of course, it is also not appropriate to copy phrases and sentences from other sources and then put them in your own papers without quoting and citing the source.

What campus resources can help me during this course?

Writing and Language Studio: For additional help with academic writing – and more generally with language learning – you are welcome to go to the Language Learning Studio (LLS), located in the Conference Center. You can find more information on the LLS website.

Academic Advising and Student Support: For general assistance with academic coursework, staff in the Academic Resource Center can provide recommendations on academic success strategies (e.g., tutoring, coaching, student learning preferences). Please visit the Office of Undergraduate Advising website for additional information related to academic advising and student support services.

What is the anticipated course schedule?

Due dates for all reading and writing assignments will be announced in class. Broadly speaking, our time together will be spent as follows:

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| ❖ Weeks 1-2 | ❖ Weeks 3-4 | ❖ Weeks 5-6 | ❖ Week 7 |
| ➤ Place essay | ➤ Object essay | ➤ Character essay | ➤ Revisions |