

Creating Art from Real Life

GESM 110g: Seminar in the Arts

Dr. Mike Bunn

Course Description

This course will be an exploration of the creative process through which authors draw upon real-life events to produce creative texts. We will analyze a range of texts (memoirs, novels, short stories, essays, films, comedy routines, songs, etc.) that either overtly—or implicitly—blur the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction. The texts will challenge our understandings of these two genres, and questions guiding our analysis will include:

What do we make of “fiction” that is based on the lives and experiences of actual people?

What expectations do the two genres create for an audience?

What is at stake when narratives blur the distinction between reality and fiction?

What can this inquiry tell us about our own ability to tell personal stories through art?

The careful analysis of contemporary creative texts will complicate our notions of “truth” as the primary distinction between fiction and nonfiction. We will examine recent debates regarding false memoirs, particularly the uproar surrounding James Frey’s supposed memoir *A Million Little Pieces*. We will read fiction and nonfiction concerning identical topics—often written by the same author—to learn how genre can shape the portrayal of subject matter.

As students, you will draw from your own life to learn more about the creative process and about the different requirements and expectations involved in producing fiction and nonfiction. You will write both a fictional and a nonfictional account of **the same** event from your life in order to produce a short story and a personal essay. This will help you understand the particular demands that fiction and nonfiction place on writers and to realize your own affinities for and frustrations with working within each genre.

We will do all of this work in an attempt to identify what makes fiction and nonfiction distinct genres (despite their many narrative similarities), and in order to understand the particular demands that each genre places on artists and audiences.

Potential Course Texts

A Million Little Pieces by James Frey (memoir)
The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien (short story collection)
Exile in Guyville by Liz Phair (music album)
Louie by Louis C.K. (television series)
The Sarah Silverman Show by Sarah Silverman (television series)
Happy Thoughts by Daniel Tosh (standup comedy special)
Jersey Shore by SallyAnn Salsano (reality television series)
Stranger than Fiction by Marc Forster (film)
Course Reader – Available at the USC Bookstores
Various readings, websites, and videos posted to Blackboard

Course Learning Objectives

1. Analysis: This course will increase your ability to analyze creative endeavors through the close reading and subsequent discussion of texts in various genres and mediums.
2. Making: You will expand your knowledge of the creative process by producing work in both fiction and nonfiction based on your own life events, and by reflecting on your creative process via written reflection. Course time will be dedicated throughout the semester to discussing your (and your classmates') creative process. This way you can learn new techniques and strategies from your classmates while they learn from you.
3. Connectivity: This course will deepen your appreciation of the connections between creative endeavors and current cultural conditions by exploring how issues such as politics, religion, nationality, gender, etc. are portrayed in creative texts. *Also the inverse*: we will explore how compelling portrayals in creative texts can have direct, real-world influence on these types of issues.
4. Context: You will learn to identify the various contexts (rhetorical, historical, aesthetic, etc.) in which creative texts are produced, and also to consider how those same contexts—and current cultural expectations— influence the text's reception.
For example, we will discuss the public shaming of author James Frey on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* once it was revealed that much of his "memoir" was actually fictionalized. What were the cultural expectations of memoirs that led to a public outcry? Why did the popularity of his book decline so dramatically once it was revealed to be fiction even though the book itself didn't change?
5. Engagement: This course will increase your exposure to creative production in the contemporary environment by drawing upon the vast cultural resources of Los Angeles.