Spring 2018 Course Descriptions

Instructor: Susan Stabile  
Course: ENGL 359  
Title: Forms of Creative Writing – Narrative Health

Description: Revising the framework begun by physician and literary scholar, Rita Charon, to train medical students and physicians in empathy through close reading of literary texts, this course approaches the medical encounter from the creative nonfiction writer’s perspective. How do we craft truthful, compelling narratives of diagnosis, illness, and suffering; of empathy, invisibility, and death; of personal and social responsibility for our health care? What does it mean to organize our bodies’ illness or wellness by experiential symptoms into stories? And how do we interpret other people’s health narratives, bearing witness to another’s pain? Students will read a range of creative nonfiction essays (personal, hybrid, experimental, and lyric), considering the aesthetic construction (reading as writers) as well as the role of interpretation (responding as empathic readers) in understanding the individual, social, and medical ambiguities as well as boundaries of sick bodies. They will craft their own stories, playing with available and invented narrative forms. And they will bear witness to those of others (through peer review). Because our focus is on aestheticizing the human body through nonfiction storytelling, students will experiment in creativity: participating an in-class life-drawing lesson by a local artist; attending performing, visual, and/or spoken-word events and exhibits; proposes a TedX talk on narrative health; and submit a creative work to a literary medicine journal by the semester’s end.

Proposed Readings: Leslie Jameson, The Empathy Exams; Bryan Doyle, The Wet Engine; Arianne Zwartjes, Detailing Trauma; Richard Selzer, The Exact Location of the Soul; Sarah Manguso, Two Kinds of Decay; Oliver Sacks, Gratitude; Mark Doty, Still Life with Oysters and Lemon; Nora Ephron, I Remember Nothing; Anatole Broyard, Intoxicated by My Illness; and Dana Walrath’s graphic narrative, Aliceheimer’s: Alzheimer’s Through the Looking Glass.