

University of Iowa Dublin Writing Workshop

The Resurrectionists

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday 10 am to noon

Instructor

Inara Verzemnieks
Associate Professor and Associate Director
The Nonfiction Writing Program
Department of English and Creative Writing
inara-verzemnieks@uiowa.edu

Office Hours: Mondays and Thursdays, in person/and or Zoom, or by appointment

Course Description

The ancient Celts believed that the landscape of Ireland was hummocked with “thin places,” locations where boundaries between the living and the dead disappeared, where the corporeal and the spiritual, the eternal present and the never-ending past, could co-exist. “We are the Dead, the Dead, the Dead,” a very much living Dylan Thomas chanted daily to the Irish moorlands while on his own six-week writing retreat to the country, back in the summer of 1935. It is a potent metaphor for any artist: to find a place where time is unbound, where the past is never past, where, to borrow from James Joyce, there is never a single moment that does not encompass, with a beautiful and terrible simultaneity, all the living and the dead.

As a journalist and a memoirist, I am especially interested in such “thin-place” settings, where, from our position in the present, we are able to access and inhabit the lives of the “the dead,” while still working within what we’ll call the reality of “documentary” constraints. Together, as we explore Dublin and its surrounding areas, I will show you how to do this kind of nonfiction necromancy. You’ll learn tried-and-true practical techniques that draw from journalism and archival research to resurrect long-buried experiences and re-create pasts that we personally could never have witnessed. No prior journalism or archival experience necessary! Through immersive site-visits that will take us to such locations as Francis Bacon’s Studio, and the permanent exhibit of the Bog Bodies of the National Museum of Ireland, we’ll practice how to look for the kind of tangible artifacts and traces of the past that allow writers to conduct the equivalent of nonfiction seances on the pages. Then I’ll introduce you to a variety of generative exercises that will reveal to you how to transform the “raw” documentary material you gather into vibrant, transfixing prose.

Course Readings

All writers must dedicate themselves to a careful and passionate program of reading that never ends; it’s as vital to our development as the words we log with our own hands and hearts and minds. Writers of exceptional gifts delight in reading to x-ray the work of others, to see invisible

structures as breathtaking as any real-life architectural feat; to isolate and analyze the effect of every decision, what is achieved and what the opportunity cost might be, to understand how all these individual choices work together to achieve the soul of a particular work of writing. We do this not find fault, or to belittle, or be superior, but to access wonder, to marvel at the divine mechanics of it all, and to teach ourselves again and again that what is miraculous can be achieved through humility and discipline and intention and hard work, as much as a touch of genius.

In creative nonfiction, our autopsies of readings by our precursors take on an added dimension. We are also reading for the art of process, looking beyond what is on the page to draw conclusions and lessons on what kind of research undergirds every sentence. What did they have to do on the front end to summon and justify these particular creative leaps.

For this class, we'll be looking to other writers, skilled "resurrectionists" in their own right, for inspiration and for guidance. Among the precursors from whom we will read excerpts: Petrarch's Guide to the Holy Land; "Thin Places" by Kerri ní Dochartaigh; "Genesis: Memory of Fire" by Eduardo Galeano; "The Book of the Dead," by Muriel Rukeyser; "Say Nothing" by Patrick Radden Keefe; "Chernobyl" by Svetlana Alexievich; "Zong" by M. Nourbese Philip; The Devil's Highway by Luis Urrea; "The Yellow House" by Sarah Broom; "Animals Strike Curious Poses," by Elena Passarello; JoAnn Beard's *Undertaker, Please Drive Slow* ; and "The Storm" by Daniel Defoe

All excerpts will be posted to our class ICON page in advance of class discussion, so that you can access them with whatever electronic devices you bring with you to Dublin. Of course, if you lock eyes and fall in love with any of these writers, my hope is you would be inspired to buy their books and immerse yourself more deeply in the lessons they hold. But you will not need to purchase any books for our class.

Our basic class structure, subject to change, with notice

For the first half of the course

M: Discussion of assigned reading + breakdown of craft and research strategies

T: Immersive site visits + generative writing

W: Workshop --- "Lite"

For the second half of the course

M, T, W: Workshop -- Extended

A Detailed Breakdown on Structure and Course Expectations

In this course, I will be placing emphasis on exploration, risk, trying new things, being generative and creative – in both your writing AND your explorations of various forms of resurrection-worthy research. That means committing to the process, showing up for all classes, barring an emergency or illness, being enthusiastic, curious, and open to setting aside how you've previously done things to make room for new breakthroughs. As we work toward personal revelations in our

writing, and in thinking about research, we're also going to be conscious of what we are contributing to our literary community. Courses with workshop at their core require interdependence; we are all learning with and from each other. So, a willingness to engage thoughtfully and fully with your colleagues' writing, and to identify how you personally can contribute to amplifying the quality of group discussion—to help support the emergence of excellence in those around you—is vital. This is what I mean when I speak of participation, and that will be part of your final grade for the class, alongside the opportunities to share your engagement with the process and resulting breakthroughs with me and with your colleagues, which are listed below.

Generative Prompts: These are on-the-spot creative assignments that are inspired by the present moment, site visits, things we have seen or discussed that allow you to isolate and practice some aspect of the work of the resurrectionist. These are meant to be rough, moments to play, to try. They won't be formally reviewed in any way, but you will be given opportunities to share them aloud with each other in more casual, early workshops. These prompts are also designed to help you generate possible inspiration for your extended workshop essays. After our "lite" workshops, you will have a chance to make any additions or adjustments to your generative work, and then send one to me for written feedback, around the midpoint of our time together.

Be sure to have a notebook dedicated to our workshop, a place for notes and for writing out responses to prompts – please define "notebook" according to your personal situation; if you can write things out by hand, please bring good old pen and paper. If you find that doesn't work for you, be sure you have an electronic device that can accommodate your need for notes and spontaneous acts of generation.

Extended Workshop: Everyone will have the opportunity to have an extended workshop of a sincere draft of an attempt at a resurrection. These extended workshops will begin toward the end of our session, allowing you to take advantage of the opportunity to receive feedback you can incorporate in your final submission to me. These workshops are also a chance for you to practice various forms of sincere engagement with your colleagues' work and demonstrate participation. Your workshop submissions should be in the range of 5 pages. You will post your essay to ICON by our agreed upon deadline, and everyone will be responsible for posting your prepared editorial remarks to be shared with the writer on the class ICON page before we meet for workshop.

I want us to try to commit to bringing only new work to our workshops, writing generated in real-time, in this place. It may be more raw, weird, wild than what you are used to, but I promise that letting go of some control, risking yourself, will lead to breakthrough. Please try not to recycle writing, or bring what I like to call "Trojan Horse" essays, meaning a piece of writing that you've already spent time previously perfecting, but which is packaged as "new" to spare yourself the vulnerability of... showing yourself in-process.

Editorial Remarks: You should make sure each essay you engage with holds the physical traces of your experience as a reader – some people refer to that as marginalia. But beyond helpful copy-editing notes, each of us should be sure we are offering each writer answers to some specific bullet points:

- 1) What is one exceptional, luminous thing this writer is doing? Why does it work? What superpowers does it point to, superpowers that carry beyond these pages?
- 2) Given the strengths that you see here, given what this piece is showing us it can do and what it wants to do, what other possibilities might exist for it in the creative multiverse?

- 3) Where do you site the draft's beating heart? Why?
- 4) What questions do you want to ask the draft?

Conferences: Beyond the opportunity to see me during office hours, I will strongly encourage each of you to debrief with me following your extended workshop so we might talk through the experience together and help you to clarify your thinking about next steps that make the most sense for you.

Final Resurrection: A 6 to 8 page (approximately!) creative resurrection with a cover letter reflecting on problems and lessons in research, as well as an articulation of what you are doing now that you were not doing before, and what that might inspires you to do in the future—a way to bring together all the threads of what you have done over the last six weeks, due to me by the course's end

Participation and Attendance:

We have such a brief amount of time together, and so much to accomplish and experience. A truly successful, transcendent workshop experience depends on a shared commitment to collaboration and trust. To do this, we must, every day, work on building our classroom culture, together. If you aren't in class, we are missing your contributions, and you are missing ours. The experience is patchwork, incomplete, and you will never have a chance to know what it could have been like if you had invested fully in the process.

You may miss one class, but please be sure to alert me ahead of time that you won't be attending. Beyond that, we'll talk about the possible effect on your final grade. If you miss a workshop, given our tight schedule and large numbers, we most likely will not be able to reschedule you.

Because we are all far away from home, and we are each other's community and I care deeply about your well-being, I ask that you let me know if you have any issues that prevent you from attending not only my class, but also, any of your required classes or events.

We will be a large group and it's going to take a lot of concentration and grace to make sure everyone has the space and time inside the class for what they need. I have been at this for some time now, and I know that one critical element to a healthy workshop community is one where everyone speaks. Not just in workshop, but in discussion of readings, or amongst each other before or after classes start. If you are someone who is very shy or anxious and the thought of speaking up fills you with dread, I urge you to reach out to me and I will ask you to think about how you can practice what it could look like to risk trying some new approaches to participating, acknowledging the fear. Similarly, if you are person who struggles with silence, who finds yourself speaking to cover over your own anxieties and fears, I'm going to ask you to think about how active listening, embracing silence on occasion, could be a way to level-up in your own practice.

My Grading Philosophy

I am most interested in how much effort you put into truly exploring this genre and pushing your capabilities as a reader and a writer. Did you take risks, creatively and otherwise? How hard did you try to push yourself, whether in our discussions, or in terms of the care you took to put words together on the page? How hard did you work to help others, as well as to seize every opportunity to learn from others? I think you will find that genuine and earnest effort, as well as a willingness

to risk and try new things, will be rewarded in this class. On the other hand, you shouldn't approach this as an easy A, and anyone who simply wants to coast, to do the same thing they've always done, or anyone who just tends to dash things off at the very last minute without thought or care or reflection is likely to be frustrated.

To help give you a better sense of what I will be looking for as I assign your final grades – and we will be working within the scale of A to F – I'll define the minimum requirements of this class; meeting these will earn a "C":

For our purposes, meeting the minimum requirements means showing up to class faithfully; participating meaningfully and thoughtfully in each of our discussions; and completing all assignments thoroughly and on time.

Students who meet these requirements and who also consistently demonstrate hard work, a commitment to pushing their thinking and their craft throughout the semester, who embrace risk, in addition to being conscientious of and supportive of their colleagues—always doing their best to be good and caring members of our literary community—will earn a "B."

An "A" is reserved for those students who show truly exceptional effort, dedicated hard work, in all these areas.

What You Will be Graded On

Participation/Collaboration/Attention and Care Shown to Others' Writing	40%
Generative Prompts (one shared aloud in class and one that you revise to be turned into me for feedback by the midpoint of the class...)	20%
Extended Workshop Piece/Editorial Conference with Me	20%
Final Resurrection + Cover Letter	20%

Our Weekly Schedule – Subject to Change with Advance Notice

Week One

Monday: Discussion of expectations, group agreements, what we want our workshop culture to be; extended workshop deadlines and rotation; discussion of excerpts from Petrarch's *Guide to the Holy Land* + Eduardo Galeano's *Genesis: Memory of Fire* + Elena Passarello's *Sackerton* (from *Animals Strike Curious Poses*)
(to be read in advance)

Tuesday: Site Visit – The National Museum of Ireland; generative prompt

Wednesday: "Workshop Lite" of generative prompts

Week Two

Monday: Discussion of excerpts from Daniel Defoe's *The Storm* + Luis Urrea's *The Devil's Highway* + Svetlana Alexievich's *Chernobyl* + Sarah Broom's *The Yellow House* (to be read in advance)

Tuesday: Site visit – Francis Bacon's Studio; generative prompt

Wednesday: "Workshop Lite" of generative prompts

Week Three

Monday: Discussion of excerpts from Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* + *The Life of Poetry* + Charles Rezinokoff's *Testimony* + M. NourSe Philip's *Zong* (to be read in advance)

Tuesday: Site Visit; generative prompt

Wednesday: "Workshop Lite" of generative prompts

Half-way point!

[Extended workshops are to begin. All those to be workshopped for the week should submit to ICON by the preceding Friday – so all those to be workshopped on week four should submit to ICON by Friday of week three]

Week Four

Monday: Discussion of excerpts from Patrick Radden Keefe's *Say Nothing* + Kerri ní Dochartaigh's *Thin Places* + JoAnn Beard's *Undertaker Please Drive Slow*

Tuesday Extended Workshop – 1,2,3

Wednesday: Extended Workshop –4, 5, 6

[All those to be workshopped by week five should submit to ICON by Friday of week four]

Week Five

Monday: Extended Workshop – 7,8,9

Tuesday: Extended Workshop – 10, 11, 12

Wednesday: Extended Workshop. – 13,14,15

[All those to be workshopped by week six should submit to ICON by Friday of week five]

Week Six

Monday: Extended Workshop – 16,17,18

Tuesday: Extended Workshop –19, 20, 21

Wednesday: Extended Workshop – 22

[Final papers due to me, by email, on rolling submission, by one week after the final date of the program]

On our classroom community, and a commitment to inclusion and change and transcendence and grace and redemption

As writers in a genre dedicated to exploring the vast richness of the human experience, it is imperative that we actively work to ensure all voices are elevated, that every student feels supported to find the words for the stories only they can write. In keeping with university nondiscrimination policy, we want to ensure that this classroom is a safe and respectful space where people are welcomed irrespective of their identity, appearance or presentation. We will endeavor not to assume anyone's gender, sexual, racial, religious or other identities without their voluntary input, nor to impose such identities on them without their consent. Expressions of hate and bigotry directed at particular individuals or their identities are counter-productive to respectful exchange and learning, and are not acceptable in this classroom.

Here are some things to know about my core beliefs, which underpin my teaching and also how I try to be in the world every day:

As an artist and as a human being, I want to remain ever-teachable so the world might always contain more possibility than not. That means I expect to change my mind, to grow, to question, to reconsider, to start again, and again, and again. I value process as much as product.

The most succinct way to express my own ethical code as a writer and a human being is that I try to live by the campground rule, which is: Always try to leave the place you visit in better shape than when you found it. Put another way, I think as writers, particularly writers of nonfiction, where we are often dealing with lives and feelings beyond our own, we can all agree that we are bound by a basic duty of care—to do what we can to minimize unnecessary harm—but I take it one step further: I'd like for us not only try to minimize harm, whenever possible, but I hope we might also find a way through our art to be useful to others and create some good in the world. So, if it happens that we inadvertently cause harm, we acknowledge our mistakes as soon as we realize it ourselves or when it's called to our attention by others, and we turn our focus to repairing what we can. If we can't make up for the past, we focus on living in the present in a way that honors what we know now.

I also believe that no one should be reduced to the worst thing they have done and we all deserve the opportunity to rise above our mistakes if we are willing to listen, learn, and live in new ways. I have seen again and again how a secular version of grace and redemption are possible when people agree to be vulnerable and honest and commit to earnestly living as a student to their own missteps. I want that to be something we practice in class.

To give ourselves a more formal structure to work from in this practice, we'll be drawing on the Being Institute's "Being Touchstones" to help guide the kind of classroom culture we create, the kinds of conversations that we have, the values we want to strive for, and we'll return to them as touchstones and points of questioning.

In addition, here are some suggested guidelines that are drawn from wise colleagues who have devoted thought to how to keep the classroom a place where we can practice taking risks, but also doing so with a commitment to our basic duty of care in mind.

-Let's not use or speak aloud – even if we are reading from someone's essay - charged language if we are not part of that community. This isn't about censure. It's about acknowledging the blunt power and mysterious alchemy of what we do, that there are times when words can become more than words.

-If you are writing about an identity or community that you don't have intimate knowledge of or an extended amount of time invested in understanding, I welcome you to come talk to me before you submit your essay for workshop. None of us has all the answers, nor could we ever figure out all the possible probabilities on our own. I can help you map out your thinking, and together we can identify places where the map you hold may reach its edges, and more consideration and counsel is needed before proceeding and walking off an unforeseen edge.

-If you are uncomfortable with how another writer is thinking through portrayals of other communities that you claim intimate association with, I'd like you to come to me with your concerns before addressing it in class or with the individual. I say this not to manage or control your feelings but to take on that work of mediation for you. My job is to mediate difficult conversations; I have trained for it. I have both the capability and capacity to do it.

If over the course of the term you find you need additional help, or clarification on university policy, here are some resources...

[Accommodations for Students with Disabilities](#)

[Basic Needs and Support for Students](#)

[Classroom Expectations](#)

[Free Speech and Expression](#)

[Mental Health](#)

[Military Service Obligations](#)

[Non-discrimination](#)

[Religious Holy Days](#)

[Sexual Harassment/Misconduct and Supportive Measures](#)

[Sharing of Class Recordings](#)

BEING TOUCHSTONES

— intentional practices for collaboration from The Being Institute—

1. Practicing Being Present: Be here. Be present as fully as you are able. Be here with your doubts, fears, and failings as well as your convictions, joys, and successes.
2. Practicing Welcome: Receive welcome and extend welcome. People learn best in welcoming spaces. In ARC, we support each other's learning by giving and receiving welcome.
3. Practicing Speaking with Intention: Speak your T(t)ruth in ways that respect the T(t)ruths of others.
4. Practicing Listening with Authenticity and Depth: Listen deeply with respect. Help to "hear each other into deeper speech".
5. Practicing Exploration: Breathe. Everything is an invitation. It is not share or die. Simultaneously, everyone's voice matters and contributes to creating a picture of the issues in the moment as it helps us to understand our present reality and identify our work.
6. Practicing Trust: No fixing, saving or advising. Respecting that the inner teacher is present in and guiding each of us while we learn in community.
7. Practicing Confidentiality: Safety is built when we can trust that our words and stories will remain with the people with whom we choose to share and are not repeated to others without our permission. Be attentive to and assure that your Zoom space is secure. Stories stay, lessons go.
8. Practicing Living the Questions: Let go of right answers. When it's hard, turn to wonder. If you feel judgmental, or defensive, ask yourself, "I wonder what brought her/him/them to this belief?" "I wonder what feelings are arising for him/her/them?" and perhaps most important "I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?"
9. Practicing Pausing: Offer space and time to ponder. Be open to pausing, silence, and listening to understand before speaking and to hearing from our inner teacher as well as from each other.
10. Practicing Grace and Reflection: Honor that we are all learning together. Embrace missteps as an opportunity to learn — about ourselves, about others and about how we are socialized. Be open to the cycles of ownership, responsibility, regret, grace, reflection, redemption, and forgiveness.

11. Practicing Hope: Believe that it's possible to emerge from this work with what you need, what the community needs, and with more energy, openness, and perspective, so that our community can hold greater capacity for transformation, healing and wholeness.

Adapted from Circle of Trust® Touchstones Center for Courage & Renewal (CCR), founded by Parker J. Palmer <https://couragerenewal.org/wpccr/touchstones/> by Sherry Watt—with deep gratitude to Veta Goler and Sally Z. Hare. Each are facilitators prepared by the CCR.

The Theory of Being: Practices for Transforming Self and Communities Across Difference; Sherry K. Watt, Duhita Mahatmya, Milad Mohebbi and Charles R. Martin-Stanley II, Stylus Publishing, 2022 ISBN 9781642673654