

OLLI “Exploring Your Identity Through Writing” Class Syllabus

Instructor Anita Amirrezvani, bloodofflowers@gmail.com

Spring, 2019

Six Tuesdays, 1 to 3 pm, April 2 to May 7

No matter what your background, you have a unique and meaningful story to tell. Your family, heritage, culture, and traditions offer a rich source of material that can be used to generate powerful stories. This class will show you how to draw on your own background to generate non-fiction and/or fiction that is deeply meaningful to you, to the people you love, and even to complete strangers.

Each of the first five classes will include fiction and non-fiction reading assignments on the subject of identity, writing prompts, and assignments outside of the classroom that are both easy and fun. Sharing your work in small groups of two to three people will be encouraged, but not required. Emphasis will be placed on what is working well in your writing and on how to expand it further.

By the end of the course, you will have generated six to ten new pieces of writing. The last class will provide techniques for linking and organizing your material and for continuing your journey as a writer.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1, April 2: What Defines Powerful Writing about Identity?

Readings: “Origami” a short story by Susan Ito
“In Praise of Big Noses,” an essay by Persis Karim

We will discuss what makes the readings powerful commentaries on identity and identify the specific writing techniques they use for maximum impact. We will also consider the benefits and possibilities offered by writing fiction vs. non-fiction.

Writing prompts:

Write about an aspect of the body (such as hair, facial features, or clothing) that you associate with your background, culture, or identity, as in Persis Karim’s “In Praise of Big Noses.”

OR

Locate a family photo that inspires you (or bring one to mind). Select an aspect of identity revealed by the photo and write about what it reveals about your personal, family, or cultural background.

Bring two copies to class next week of up to 500 words (2 typed pages).

Week 2, April 9: The Importance of Scene

Readings: Excerpt from *The Scene Book* by Sandra Scofield
Excerpt from “Notes of a Native Son,” an essay by James Baldwin

We will break down and discuss the key elements of a powerful scene, using the excerpt from “Notes from a Native Son” to highlight excellent scene writing.

Writing prompts:

Write a scene that draws on an aspect of your identity using the following elements, as defined in the excerpt from *The Scene Book*: 1. Action; 2. A beginning, middle, and end; 3. Change; 4. Pulse.

OR

Write a scene of action followed by an important realization, as in the excerpt from “Notes of a Native Son.”

Bring two copies to class next week of 500 words (2 typed pages).

Week 3, April 16: The Role of “Blazing Psychic Struggle” in Non-Fiction

Readings: Excerpt from *The Art of Memoir*, by Mary Karr
Excerpt from *The Eighth Promise*, a memoir by William Poy Lee

What is at the heart of the best identity writing? We will discuss the importance of Mary Karr’s concept of a “blazing psychic struggle,” address how you can best use it in your own work, and analyze how it appears in classic journey narratives like William Poy Lee’s.

Writing prompts:

Write about a journey, large or small, that revealed an important aspect of your identity or of a character’s identity, as in *The Eighth Promise*.

OR

Write about a “blazing psychic struggle” you’ve experienced, or make one up for a character.

Bring three copies to class next week of 500 words (2 typed pages)

Week 4, April 23: The Power of Character Desire in Fiction

Readings: “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” a short story by Jhumpa Lahiri
Excerpt from “Brokeback Mountain,” a short story by Annie Proulx

Character desire is a key driving force in contemporary fiction, both in novels and short stories. We will discuss how to identify and deploy it in your work.

Writing prompts:

Write about a character (or yourself) in a moment of keen desire.

OR

Energize your thinking about identity through a roving assignment. For example, visit a food store that specializes in the food you grew up with; go to a thrift store that has clothing from an important era of your life (or revisit your own closet), or attend a festival or event that emphasizes an aspect of your identity (such as ethnic or racial background, sexual orientation, gender, profession, etc.). With fresh eyes, write about an aspect of your identity as if describing it to someone who has never heard of it.

Bring two copies to class next week of 500 words (2 typed pages).

Week 5, April 30: How to Organize and Link Your Writing

Reading: "My Father, in Four Visits over Thirty Years," by Dina Nayeri

Reading: "Three Pokes of a Thistle," by Naomi Shihab Nye

We will discuss how the authors have created a longer piece out of shorter snippets or anecdotes, as well as how to analyze your own material to figure out how you can build on what you've already written to create a powerful statement about identity.

Writing prompts:

Using the writing you've generated for this class, generate ideas for organizing your shorter pieces into a longer one with even more resonance.

OR

Re-read all the writing you've done for this class and think about what aspects are most meaningful to you. Expand one of your pieces or link several of them using the exercises you've done in class today.

For our last class next week, bring 500 to 750 words (two to three pages) to share from the writing prompts listed above, as well as any questions about how to move forward with your work.

Week 6, May 7: How to Keep Your Writing Alive

In our last class, you will be invited to read excerpts of your final assignment out loud. We will also discuss how to move forward with your work after the class has finished. You will be invited to create a "contract" with yourself so that you have a blueprint for continuing your work. Finally, we will address the issue of how to share your work with others, including pursuing publication.

Instructor Bio:

Anita Amirrezvani was born in Tehran, Iran, and raised in San Francisco. Her first novel, *The Blood of Flowers*, has appeared in 31 languages and was long-listed for the 2008 Orange Prize for Fiction. Her second novel, *Equal of the Sun*, was published by Scribner in 2012. *Tremors: New Fiction by Iranian-American Writers*, an anthology co-edited with Persis Karim, was released in 2013. Anita has given book readings in Australia, Canada, Croatia, Dubai, Lithuania, New Zealand, Scotland, and in many

locations throughout the United States. She teaches in the MFA Writing Program at the California College of the Arts. www.anitaamirrezvani.com