

# **Nature Writing in the West**

## **English 325 – Fall 2011**

### **Tuesday / Thursday 2:00-3:20**

Instructor: Chris Robertson

Office Hours: T 3:30-5:30, Th 11:30-12:30, W 2-4 pm, or by appointment

“I walk in a world I have come to understand as mutable, ever-changing.”

–Freeman House, *Totem Salmon*

### **Course Description:**

In this course we'll explore writings about the western landscape and environment. While our focus will be upon recent and contemporary writing, we'll consider Western nature writing's roots by looking at writing by Sarah Winnemucca, Mark Twain, John Muir, Mary Austin, and others. Our goals will be twofold. First, we'll examine the myriad ways authors explore relationships between human and non-human nature. Second, in order to learn more about the places we live we'll put the tools of nature writing—observation, memory, exploration, research, analysis, and expression—to work. We'll ask questions such as: How do relationships between humans and their environments reflect and shape literature? How do gender, race, ethnicity, and class shape an author's standpoint toward the natural world? What is the relationship between nature and culture? What alternative views of nature (and culture) are possible? How does our attitude toward nature affect our reading of literature? What is the purpose and importance of writing about nature? Have both changed over time? Classes will be devoted to discussion of the readings, written responses, formal papers, creative writing, and a term project that incorporates field work, Service Learning, research, and writing. A final goal in this course is to make connections between the literature we read, current environmental issues, and personal experience. Each of us will keep a field notebook in which we record our observations of place. Students will also give a final presentation about their term project.

### **Course Goals:**

- \*To expose you to a range of authors and books in this field.
- \*To increase your awareness of the roots of Western environmental and nature writing.
- \*To consider the multi-genre “nature” of nature writing.
- \*To increase your vocabulary in the fields of nature writing, natural history, ecology, and literary criticism.
- \*To practice writing expository and critical prose, with a specific focus on illustrating abstract ideas with concrete examples.
- \*To practice writing both creatively and systematically about literature, nature, culture, and places.
- \*To gain experience reading literature through an environmental lens.
- \*To gain experience reading the environment through cultural lenses.
- \*To explore both broad and narrow definitions of “nature writing.”

\*To gain experience doing interdisciplinary research.

\*To explore possibilities for personal involvement, field work, and service learning.

**Required Texts:**

Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (1968)

Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1992)

Gary Nabhan, *Counting Sheep: Twenty Ways of Seeing Desert Bighorn* (1993)

N. Scott Momaday, *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages* (1997)

Hannah Hinchman, *A Trail Through Leaves: The Journal as a Path to Place* (1999)

Karsten Heuer, *Being Caribou: Five Months on Foot with an Arctic Herd* (2005)

Lyanda Lynn Haupt, *Crow Planet: Essential Wisdom from the Urban Wilderness* (2009)

Essays on reserve (Mary Austin, Robert Michael Pyle, Linda Hogan, Rick Bass, Mary Clearman Blew, Freeman House, and others)

**Grading and Course Requirements:**

Class Participation (10%)

Reading Responses (15%)

Field/Place Notebook (15%)

Essay #1 (15%)

Essay #2 (15 %)

Final Project (15%)

Pop Quizzes (10%)

Class Presentation (5%)

**Reading Responses:** Reading will be evaluated by one-page written responses, due the first class of each week. These responses can be quite informal and may be handwritten or typed. They will be evaluated for quality of thought, not for style or grammar. Each response should be structured as follows: At the top of the page write the book title and assigned page numbers. Pause to think about the assigned reading. Below the book title, write out one provocative question about the reading, a question that genuinely puzzles you, and for which you have no immediate answer. With this question in mind, flip through the reading again, looking for clues that give you some insight into the question. The rest of the page should be devoted to further pondering and perhaps answering this question. Please limit your responses to one side of the page. The goal of these responses is not only to get you to think seriously about what you read, but also to provide you with some ideas to share with the class, thus making our discussions more thoughtful and productive. I will call upon you at any time to share your response with the class. Good responses receive 3 points, mediocre ones 2 points, and weak ones 1 point. One point will be deducted for responses turned in late.

**Field/Place Notebook:** Keep a notebook or journal, and divide it however you choose into two sections. In one section, you'll record your personal observations, meditations, and reflections on issues that the readings make you consider. The other section will be designated as a "place journal." Here, you'll record your optional Service Learning field notes, "place entries," and illustrations of the natural and cultural history you observe this semester. These entries are very likely to come in handy as you prepare your final project

and presentation. Use Hannah Hinchman's book on place journals to help you get started with your own.

**Essays:** Essays will be assigned as the semester progresses. The first paper will be a short critical paper in which you examine theme and structure in one or more of the assigned readings. For the second essay you will try your hand at nature writing or, alternatively, environmental nonfiction on a current, regional issue. In all paper assignments, please number your pages. In the upper right hand corner of the first page, type your name, the date, the course, and the assignment number. No title page is necessary. (I will encourage you to copy your work onto both sides of the page to conserve paper). All papers should have a title, centered, on the first page. Papers are due at the beginning of class. One half a letter grade will be deducted for each class meeting that a paper is late.

**Final Project:** This project will be based upon your optional Service Learning, Field Notebook, reading, and research. We will discuss possible topics and approaches to this project. The formal part of this paper should be typewritten, double-spaced, and stapled together in the upper right hand corner.

**Participation:** The success of any course depends, in large part, on the willingness of the participants to attend class, to read assigned materials, to share their observations with others, and to respond respectfully, openly, and critically to the comments of others. I expect everyone who chooses to take this course is eager to respect and abide by these ground rules.

**Pop Quizzes:** There will be five unannounced quizzes throughout the semester. They will be short answer and essay format and based upon the assigned reading.

**Final Presentation:** Formats for student presentations will be discussed. Topics will reflect your interests, and will be based upon your final Research Project.

**Attendance:** See "Participation," above: more than three absences will adversely affect your final grade.