



## Get Real: Writing Ambitious Nonfiction

Nonfiction Fest 2024  
Lighthouse Writers Workshop  
Instructor: Erika Krouse

**Class description:** Some subjects feel impossible, but we're compelled to write about them anyway. Family, politics, religion, trauma, addiction, physical/mental illness, climate change, racism—any ambitious topic can slam a writer headfirst into writer's block or self-doubt. How do we write our most difficult stories without triggering a migraine, or writing drunk (not recommended), or constantly fistfighting our inner critic? In this generative, process-oriented class, we'll use tangible techniques to write about those big, difficult subjects without losing our peace of mind in the process. Writers can expect examples, discussion, and writing exercises.

**Note:** we will *not* be sharing or reading aloud any writing we do during this class, so please feel free to dive as deeply into your writing as you can.

### Introduction

*Your silence will not protect you.*  
— Audre Lord

You don't have to know the meaning of life to write ambitious nonfiction. If that were true, libraries would be empty. Writers often understand very little about their subjects, which is why we're writing, exploring, researching, and discovering new perspectives and angles. We question what it means to be human, and we investigate those questions to the fullest.

Or sometimes, we don't.

I recently did a visiting teaching gig at an MFA residency. The students were very skilled writers, and we had deep conversations at mealtimes, but their nighttime readings baffled me. Writers who had recounted important and interesting experiences over sandwiches now read aloud from essays bemoaning a mole on their face, or about a bad first date with a rando they never saw again, or a twenty-minute piece about a flower garden. Sometimes,



*"Don't talk to me about suffering—in my spare time, I'm a writer."*

toward the end of the reading, the mole or date or garden would contain an oblique reference to something more serious and meaty. But no more than a few words into that deeper territory, the author would skitter away again, retreating up the snout of a daffodil or something.

I was mostly dismayed that I had planned poorly; my class was about language, which was the last thing these students needed. Their language was great; they hid behind style. But pretty words are the least of writing. Writing is about courage, and writing nonfiction is also about recklessness and guts, even when your own words and topics terrify and intimidate you.

It takes a lot of hubris to write, especially since people often become writers because they've been silenced in their lives. To write is to say, "Sit down, shut up, and listen to what I have to say" (but nicely). And if you write a book, you're essentially monologuing for ten hours. Why would someone listen to that? Because you have important things to say. So let's investigate what those things are!

### *Exercise: You're Gonna Die Someday*

According to medical experts, your life will probably end. So it's time to write your most ambitious stories, the stories you're not quite sure how to tell.

1. List everything you can think of that's been important or interesting to you about your life. You can draw from any and all of the following:
  - Experiences, events, and situations.
  - People you've had strong feelings for or against.
  - Jobs or roles you've had.
  - Feelings and dilemmas.
  - Family stuff.
  - Power struggles.
  - Romantic relationships.
  - Complicated relationships.
  - Places you've lived/visited.
  - Aspects of your identity.
  - Secrets (yours or other people's).
  - Things that terrify you.
  - Weird shit that has happened to you.
  - Accomplishments.



- Injustices
  - Stories you could never tell.
  - Stories you have no idea *how* to tell.
  - Anything else that has brought meaning to your life, positively or negatively.
2. If you have time, pick the item that generates the most heat for you, and free-write on it. Don't ponder; there's no time for that (see title above). Just write!

### Let Your Freak Flag Fly: The Personal as Universal

*Write the story only you can tell.*  
 —[Ironically, nobody knows who said this]

This is the greatest paradox in all of literature: the more specific the written event or experience, the more universal it feels. This is true and nobody knows why. The reverse is also true. If you write about something we have all experienced (a blue sky, a dog barking), we're bored. If it's unusual (a blue dog, a barking sky), we're engaged. Our imaginations begin to search for comparisons in our own experience, no matter how peripheral. Right now, I'll bet you're thinking of a blue/bluish dog you've encountered or imagined.



However, you may be thinking, “What’s unique and specific about me? I’m just a tax preparer/busboy/last descendant of the royal house of Zogu.” Oftentimes, writers don’t even know what’s interesting or unique about them. That’s why we explore!

Excerpt from *West with the Night*, a memoir by Beryl Markham

[What you need to know: Beryl Markham was the first human being to perform a solo flight across the Atlantic. She barely made it, landing her plane in mud after the engine completely died.]

You can live a lifetime and, at the end of it, know more about other people than you know about yourself. You learn to watch other people, but you never watch yourself because you strive against loneliness...

Being alone in an aeroplane for even so short a time as a night and a day, irrevocably alone, with nothing to observe but your instruments and your own hands in semi-darkness, nothing to contemplate but the size of your small courage, nothing to wonder about but the beliefs, the faces, and the hopes rooted in your mind—such an experience can be as startling as the first awareness of a stranger walking by your side at night. You are the stranger.

Excerpt from the essay “The Land of Darkness,” by Suki Kim, author of *Without You, There Is No Us: Undercover Among the Sons of North Korea’s Elite*

[What you need to know: the author lived as a teacher for 6 months with 270 North Korean males in a military compound. She is the only known writer to have lived undercover in North Korea.]

Because I identify with fear, I turned out to be, as much as one can be, well suited to pursue North Korea and to bear each frightening day there as if I were a researcher at a laboratory working on a case...The dark stopped being dark for one illuminating second at a time, and even if night returned each time to blacken the sky completely, the darkness that followed was never quite the same.

There is no full circle, tidy conclusion, or simple solution to any of this. I am still scared of North Korea. My inbox is full of unread emails. Mornings are hard, and I try to avoid reading breaking news from above the thirty-eighth parallel, which is inevitably negative; two Americans from the school where I was undercover are being held hostage by the regime. When I finally do glance at the news, I don’t look at photos because I am afraid that I might see the faces of my students, which would make me tumble and lose my precarious balance.

Sometimes I still fear that it will all come to haunt me one day, that someone sent by the Great Leader will find me while I am traveling somewhere far away from home, and that I will either be taken back to Pyongyang or be punished for writing about what they did not want revealed. But each time my mind goes there, I stop myself, and though it is not clear where my thoughts retract to, there is often a lull; for a brief moment I am numb, and fear cannot get to me.

### *Exercise: The Story Only You Can Tell*

1. Look at your list from the exercise above and see if any of the items on it feature experiences that are unique to you. Is there an event/experience there that you feel nobody could ever understand or know?
2. Free-write on it. Instead of trying to make it relatable, make it completely unique to you. Go into the specifics—how it felt, looked, sounded, smelled, tasted, etc. Let the specifics transport us to the more universal space of empathy.



### **The F-word: On Family**

*I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes.*  
—Maxine Hong Kingston

Even Beaver Cleaver had issues. The reason family is a topic so ripe for expansion is that it’s always, by nature, ambitious and universal and complicated. Most people have families with all the requisite love and pain, and if you don’t have a family, you have that pain, too.

*Mixed feelings* are the bread, butter, and jam (and peanut butter and Nutella) of narrative, but they're particularly potent when you're talking about family. Because everyone can relate! Why is your love tinged with fear? Why do you feel such longing for your parents when you're away, but every holiday, you can't wait to leave? Mixed feelings determine most family dynamics, and also inspire some of the most gripping writing in literature.

Excerpt from *Brothers and Keepers*, a memoir by John Edgar Wideman [CW: murder]

My youngest brother, Robby, and two of his friends had killed a man during a holdup. Robby was a fugitive, wanted for armed robbery and murder. The police were hunting him, and his crime had given the cops license to kill. The distance I'd put between my brother's world and mine suddenly collapsed. The two thousand miles between Laramie, Wyoming, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, my years of willed ignorance, of flight and hiding, had not changed a simple truth: I could never run fast enough or far enough. Robby was inside me. Wherever he was, running for his life, he carried part of me with him.

Excerpt from *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, essays by Maxine Hong Kingston [CW: suicide]

"You must not tell anyone," my mother said, "what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born."

Excerpt from *Why be Happy When You Could be Normal?* a memoir by Jeanette Winterson

When my mother was angry with me, which was often, she said, "The Devil led us to the wrong crib."

The image of Satan taking time off from the Cold War and McCarthyism to visit Manchester in 1960—purpose of visit: to deceive Mrs. Winterson—has a flamboyant theatricality to it. She was a flamboyant depressive; a woman who kept a revolver in the duster drawer, and the bullets in a tin of Pledge. A woman who stayed up all night baking cakes to avoid sleeping in the same bed as my father. A woman with a prolapse, a thyroid condition, an enlarged heart, an ulcerated leg that never healed, and two sets of false teeth—matt for everyday, and a pearlised set for "best."

### *Exercise: Memories*

1. Write a list (again with the lists!) of 3-10 of your most potent family memories. They can be memories from your childhood, or recent memories, or memories from an important, difficult, or vivid time in your life. They may include a particular family member, a house/apartment, an interaction, a place in nature, an object, a weather event, a toy, a holiday, a ritual, a state of mind...Be sure to also include your first memory.
2. Choose one of those memories, and write the scene as vividly and completely as you can. *Use your five senses*: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch. Slow down and evoke it fully.
3. If you have time, move to another memory from your list.

## The Supernova: From “Me” to “We”

*You can make the dream bigger than the night.*  
—Yiddish proverb

Sometimes we start with one story, and we discover that it's another story, a much larger one. It's like we thought we had bananas in our bag, but once we opened it up, thirty monkeys jumped out. And that's good! Very good! The question is, what do you do when it happens? The answer: you let the monkeys take over. They will anyway.



*“This is boring. Want to find some kids and start Rome?”*

Excerpt from “The Suicide Catcher,” an essay by Michael Paternini. [CW: suicide.]

[What you need to know: the narrator is a reporter researching a profile piece on Mr. Chen, a man who spends every day posted at a high bridge, preventing people from jumping off. The profile takes a bizarre turn when a random man tries to jump off the bridge right in front of the lone reporter, who abandons his journalistic role to grab the man and save him, before Mr. Chen runs back and takes over.]

I couldn't even pretend. My hands, which rarely shake, were shaking. And I floated from my body, watching Mr. Chen and Fan Ping walk ahead, watched—from some high, hovering angle—as Mr. Chen placed the man on a bus and Fan Ping squished down the aisle in his disintegrating shoes and took his place by the window, looking straight ahead. The bus gurgled, backfired, then lurched forward, gone in a plume of gray smoke. That's when some part of me came tumbling back down to myself. I turned and strode back out on the bridge to the spot where Fan Ping had readied to die. I came to the railing, peered down once more to the dark, roiling waters, and felt as if I might regurgitate my lunch noodles.

There would have been no way to survive that fall. And for some reason, standing there, I felt a sharp pang of loss, though no one had been lost. I felt I'd been a step too late, though I'd been one step ahead. It wasn't Fan Ping I was thinking about; it was all the other lives—within me and disparate from me—that had been lost. Yanking Fan Ping from the railing hadn't offered a stay of any kind; instead, it brought death nearer...

...There's nothing to do now, says Mr. Chen, but wait for him to come back. Rest assured, he'll stop Fan Ping. Even as he's recently saved a father, and a few students, and a woman with a psychiatric problem. He knows what Fan Ping looks like. In broiling heat and blowing monsoon, he's out there, ever vigilant, waiting in his double duck-bill, scanning the crowd for Fan Ping—and all the others, too, who might possess thoughts of a glorious demise. He assures me he'll be waiting for them all—and you and me, as well—binoculars trained on our murky faces, our eyes sucked downward, trying to read the glimmer off the surface of the river below.

The only question remains: Can he reach us in time?

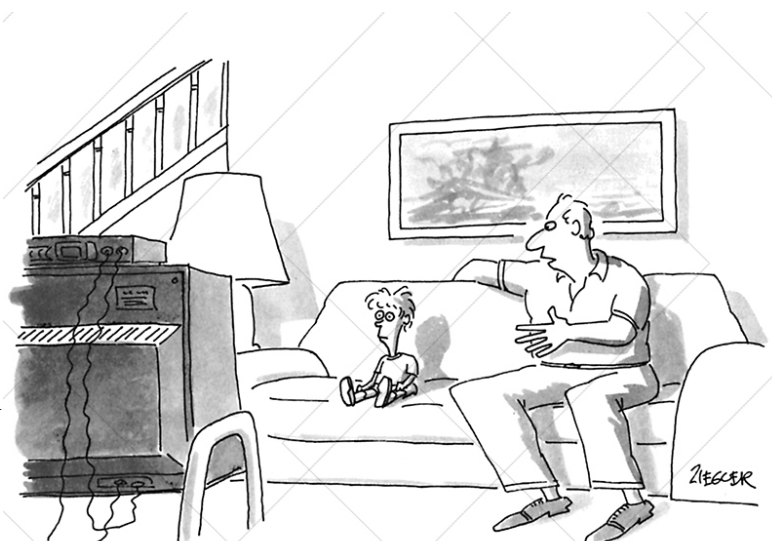
*Exercise: Well Begun is Half Done*

Look at some of the writing you've done so far in this class, and circle any moments that are ripe for symbolism, or that can be expanded to apply to the larger human condition, to all of us. Free write on some of those moments, and see if you can change the focus from "me" to "we." What does it do to the writing when you go universal?

**The Terrible Truth**

*Artists are people driven by the tension between  
the desire to communicate and the desire to hide.*  
— Donald Woods Winnicott

Difficult content makes ambitious stories. The harder it is to tell a story, the bigger it feels. However, many authors get tripped up on this difficulty, understandably. They want to tell a difficult and perhaps traumatic story, but they don't want to re-traumatize themselves, or return to an emotional place that they only narrowly escaped the first time.



*"You see? Once more, Wile E. Coyote is restored swiftly and miraculously to health.  
His potential trauma has been trivialized, and we are yet again amused."*

Sometimes the solution is to abandon that rigid "show, don't tell" mandate, and just...tell. Don't feel like you have to describe pain in excruciating detail. It's very likely that nobody wants or needs that, especially you. Instead, you can just write the facts, and let your reader do all the feeling and evoking.

Excerpt from *Heart Berries*, a memoir by Terese Marie Mailhot  
*Indian Condition*

I was a teenager when I got married. I wanted a safe home. Despair isn't a conduit for love. We ruined each other and then my mother died. I had to leave the reservation. I had to get my GED. I left my home because welfare was making me choose between my baby's formula or oatmeal for myself. I chose neither, and used one check for a ticket away. That's when I started to illustrate my story and exactly when it became a means of survival. The ugly truth is that I lost my son Isadore in court. The Hague Convention. The ugly of that truth is that I gave birth to my second

son as I was losing my first. My court date and my delivery aligned. In the hospital, they told me that my first son would go with his father.

“What about this boy,” I said, with Isaiah in my arms. “They don’t seem interested yet,” my lawyer said. I brought Isaiah home from the hospital, and then packed Isadore’s bag. My ex-husband Vito took him, along with police escorts. Before they left, I asked Vito if he wanted to hold his new baby. I don’t know why I offered, but he didn’t kiss our baby or tell him goodbye. He didn’t say he was sorry, or that it was unfortunate. Who wants one boy and not another?

It’s too ugly—to speak this story. It sounds like a beggar. How could misfortune follow me so well, and why did I choose it every time? I learned how to make a honey reduction of the ugly sentences. Still, my voice cracks.

Excerpt from *Twelve Years a Slave*, a memoir by Solomon Northrup

Having been born a freeman, and for more than thirty years enjoyed the blessings of liberty in a free State—and having at the end of that time been kidnapped and sold into Slavery, where I remained, until happily rescued in the month of January, 1853, after a bondage of twelve years—it has been suggested that an account of my life and fortunes would not be uninteresting to the public.

Excerpt from *Mean*, a memoir by Myriam Gurba (CW: Violence. This one is harsh—we won’t read it aloud, but you’re welcome to read it on your own.)

She crawls. Wet palm prints lengthen behind her. Blood smears her clothes. It makes dark Rorschachs on various surfaces.

Hard-packed dirt rubs her knees.

The man in white stands beside her. Blood dapples his T-shirt. He kicks her. She flips onto her back. He slides a knife out of his pocket, takes a step, and stands so that he straddles her waist. He lowers himself onto her chest, squats, and leans toward her face. He presses his blade to her skin and slides it along her cheekbone. Black oozes from the slit. Wrecking her makes him feel like she belongs to him. We may feel that because we are privy to the wreckage she belongs to us too, but she does not.

*Exercise: Guided meditation and free-write—if we have time!*

This is an open-concept guided meditation to get you relaxed, open your mind, and lead you safely through more turbulent waters. Just so you know what’s ahead, this is the plan for the guided meditation:

1. Body scan and relaxation.
2. You’ll approach a doorway, and on the other side of the doorway is the difficult scene you want to approach. You can close the door anytime you want, or observe from the open doorway—the choice is yours. Like a reporter on the sidelines, just concern yourself with observing the facts—what is happening, moment by moment.
3. Free-write and just list anything you observed from the (figurative) doorway.
4. When you’re ready to “return,” look up and notice two things, look down and notice two things, and do the same for your left and right. You can tap your legs and arms, and/or rub your feet against the ground to help yourself feel like you’re really here, back in the real world.



*Shorter exercise: Just the Facts, Ma'am*

1. Take ten deep breaths at your own pace. Yes, ten.
2. Look at the clock and set a mental timer for 4-5 minutes. You can stand anything for five minutes!
3. List all the facts of the difficult experience, one after another. Don't worry about fancy language or pretty metaphors or engaging your reader or showing nuance. Just say what happened, and let the facts stand for themselves. If you find your stress rising, repeat Step 1.
4. After five minutes, make another ten deep breaths at your own pace. Look around and ground yourself in the room. You did it!

### Conclusion

Congratulations! You did wonderful, brave work. Please expand upon the exercises you began here, and see where they lead. See how big you can go!

