

RHE 345: NATURE WRITING

A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depths of his own nature.

--Henry David Thoreau

Sierra Club founder and nature writer John Muir describes his sojourn in the wilderness this way: "Going out, I found, was really going in." This course invites students to write about their own wilderness immersion experience, in prose and poetry, and to learn strategies for improving this writing through the workshop mode of instruction. The focus of the course, then, will be the intersection of writer and place; the place is the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, on the US and Canadian border in northern Minnesota. At more than one million acres, and home to healthy populations of wolves, bear, bobcats, moose, otters, eagles and loons, among others, the BWCAW is the largest wilderness tract in the eastern United States. We'll consider the idea of wilderness—as a place, a concept, and a state of mind—through the lens of environmental writers and poets across generations, including Thoreau, Snyder, Erdrich, Leopold, Dillard, Oliver, Berry, Wright, Niedecker, Sanders and Olson. The BWCAW is a unique landscape that offers students a wilderness laboratory for studying the history, biology, geology, ecology and anthropology of the region, and then uniting those fields with their own deeply personal wilderness experience, culminating in original creative works of prose and poetry. While "going out" together, students will also have the solitude and individual exploration necessary for "going in."

After some practice canoeing around the Field Station, we will take two excursions into the BWCAW, a three-day "primer" and an extended eight-day trip. The wilderness excursions are the heart of this class. Your cooperation, patience, persistence and fitness will be tested. The excursions also invite unique challenges in terms of course structure and writing output. There will be ample opportunity for observation, contemplation and note-taking. How much reading and writing we can get done while travelling in the wilderness remains to be seen. Because of the length of the excursions, the days before and after our trips will be chalked full of reading and writing. Other excursions include a trip to Sigurd Olson's Listening Point cabin and his house in Ely, as well as a second trip to Ely to meet and hear stories from with local first nations members.

REQUIRED TEXTS: *Norton Book of Nature Writing*, College Edition. Finch and Elder, eds.
 Listening Point. Sigurd Olson
 The Granite Pail. Lorine Niedecker
 Absentee Indians. Kimberly Blaeser
 Thoreau at Walden. John Porcellino
 Selected Poetry reader

PREREQUISITE: None

REQUIREMENTS:

1. Original Poetry: Students will write and revise four-five poems in different modes, at least two of which will focus on their wilderness excursions. In order to prepare for these, we'll read and discuss different styles of poetry from the course reader. 20 percent.
2. Original Prose: Students will write and revise two original prose works of roughly 7-8 pages each and one shorter "sudden" essay. These prose works may take the form of one personal essay and one short story, or two personal essays in different styles. We will also explore writing that is more scientific in nature, requiring research and reportage. We will read several different writers with differing approaches to these forms. In general, at least one of these prose works must focus on your wilderness excursions. 30 percent.
3. Reading and analysis: Students are expected to read and consider carefully each of the assigned texts. They should come to daily class meetings prepared and ready to join discussion. Students will take turns acting as discussion leaders. 20 percent.
4. Participation: Includes active engagement and cooperation in all aspects of the class, including the workshop and excursion. 20 percent.
5. Wilderness Journal: Students will keep a daily writer's journal, in which they try out new forms and techniques, as well as taking notes on daily experiences and readings. Some of these creative "seeds" may grow into class assignments. 10 percent.

Workshops: This course will utilize the workshop mode of instruction where writers utilize feedback from their peers as well as their professor. We will learn and practice workshop etiquette as an essential part of the course.

CONTESTED WILDERNESS:

For many students in this class, the trip to the BWCAW will be their first experience in a designated wilderness area. While the region might look "pristine" and "unspoiled"—adjectives often used to describe wilderness areas—the landscape was in fact completely denuded by logging more than a century ago. Though the 1964 Wilderness Act protected the BWCAW, it is still a contested space. Motorboats careen along the invisible boundary to the park. On the road to Ely, MN, students will see yard signs for and against Twin Metals mine, a Canadian and Chilean mining interest with plans to open a new sulfide ore mine north of the Laurentian Divide, draining into the BWCAW.

ENVIRONMENTAL CITIZENSHIP:

When Lyndon Johnson signed the Wilderness Act on September 3, 1964, he said famously. "If future generations are to remember us with gratitude rather than contempt, we must leave them more than the miracles of technology. We must leave them a glimpse of the world as it was in the beginning, not just after we got through with it." It is imperative for environmental citizens of this generation to realize that their birthright needs their protection. But why would citizens be

moved to protect that which they have never seen firsthand? Rachel Carson states convincingly, “If you know wilderness in the way that you know love, you would be unwilling to let it go.” This class will afford students an intimate experience with a wilderness area; it will also empower them with empirical, conceptual and creative tools necessary to understand it and write about it convincingly so that others may understand this place and love it as well.

NATURE WRITING AND BWCAW EXCURSION CHECKLIST

For the class, you will need:

- Notebook and pens

- Course texts

- Laptop if you have one