Matt Randal O’Wain

CURRICULUM VITAE

**EDUCATION**

University of Iowa

M.F.A., Nonfiction Writing Program, Department of English, May 2015

University of North Carolina at Asheville,

B.A. Literature and Language, Summa Cum Laude, May 2012

**TEACHING AND PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Assistant Teaching Professor, Creative Writing Department, 2019-present

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Lecturer, Creative Writing Department, 2016-2019

West Virginia Wesleyan, Low-Residency MFA

Faculty, Creative Writing Department, 2018-2019

Creative Nonfiction Magazine, Online

Personal Essay Seminar, 2018-Present

Federal Correctional Institution, Medium Security, Beckley, West Virginia

Creative Writing, 2018-present

Warren Wilson College

Visiting Writer, Creative Writing Department, Fall 2017

Carnegie Hall Performing Arts Center

Instructor, Creative Writing, 2015

University of Iowa

Teaching Fellow and Graduate Instructor, Magid Center for Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Writing, 2014-2015

University of Iowa

Teaching Fellow and Graduate Instructor, Department of English 2012-2015

**HONORS**

2019 Nominated for a Pushcart by QU

2019 Nominated for a Pushcart by Master’s Review

2019 Nominated for a Pushcart by Zone 3

2019 Winner of Fiction Award from Zone 3

2018 National Endowment of the Arts, Teaching Fellow in Creative Writing, FCI Beckley

2017 Audience Choice Award UNO Film Festival, *Arrow of Light*

2017 Official Selection at Oxford Film Festival*, Arrow of Light*

2016 Official Selection at Pontchatrain Film Festival*, Arrow of Light*

2016 Official Selection at Memphis Indie Film Festival*, Arrow of Light*

2014 Recipient of the W.R. Irwin Award for Excellence in Teaching at The University of Iowa

2014-2015 Recipient of a University of Iowa Teaching Fellowship at the Frank N. Magid Center

for Undergraduate Writing

2013 Nominated, Outstanding Teaching Assistant, University of Iowa

2012-2015 Recipient of a University of Iowa Teaching Fellowship in General Education

Literature

2012 Recipient of a University of Iowa Teaching Fellowship in Creative Nonfiction

2012 Departmental Distinction, English, University of North Carolina at Asheville

2012 Distinction as Undergraduate Research Scholar, University of North Carolina at Asheville

2012 Recipient of The University of North Carolina Outstanding Community Service Award,

University of North Carolina at Asheville

2012 Winner of Carl Sandburg Award for Poetry

2011 Recipient of a Summer Travel Grant from the UNC Asheville Undergraduate Research

Committee

2011 Recipient of The University of North Carolina William Comfort Scholarship for

Excellence in Creative Writing

2010 Winner of the Oculus Award for Screenwriting

2009 Winner of the Thomas Wolfe Award for Fiction

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**Books in Nonfiction**

*Meander Belt: essays,* University of Nebraska Press, American Lives Series, 2019

*Light Bearer,* In-Progress

**Books in Fiction**

*Hallelujah Station and Other Stories,* Autumn House Press*,* September2020

*Lesser Nighthawks: a novel,* In-Progress

*Nonfiction*

“The Picturing Will,” *Iowa Review* (Fall 23)

“Forward,” *Travel Writing in an Age of Global Quarantine*: An Anthology (2021)

“Mirrored Mezzanine,” *Oxford American* (October 08, 2019)

“Barking Hours,” *Hotel Amerika* (Spring 2019)

“Halfway Between,” *York Literary Review* (Spring 2019)

“Rock and Roll High School,” *Little Patuxent Review* (Summer 2018)

“Dear Brother,” *StorySouth* (Spring 2018)

“Like a One-Eyed Cat,” *The Oxford American,* (Summer 2015)

“Superman Dam Fool,” *The Pinch* (Winter 2015)

“The Junk Trade,” *Guernica Magazine* (Fall, 2014)

“Arrow of Light” in *The Oxford American* (Winter, 2013)

“Thirteenth Street and Failing,” (Issue 10.1, *Redivider,* 2012)

“Rain Over Memphis,” *Crazyhorse* (Issue #81*,* 2012)

*Fiction*

“Hallelujah Station,” *ZONE 3* (2019)

“Luces,” *Master’s Review* (2018)

“Rembrandt Behind Windows,” *QU* (2018)

“Thinning,” *Dime Show Review* (Spring, 2018)

“Shadow Play,” *Booth Journal* (Issue #7, 2014)

“The Observer,” *Dock Street Press* (Winter,2014)

“Deciduous,” *Blood Lotus* (Winter, 2013)

“Heads Down,” *Hobart* (Issue #13, 2012)

“Surface,” *decomP* (November 2011)

*Stage and Screen*

*Arrow of Light* (2016)

*Carousel*  (2008)

*Hallelujah Station (2023)*

**COURSES TAUGHT:**

UNC CHAPEL HILL, English 138 Introduction to Creative Nonfiction (18 students per term): This course provides a survey of the various forms of creative nonfiction, offering students a wide range of reading material as well as a chance to write and workshop three original essays.

UNC CHAPEL HILL, ENGLISH 130 Intro to Fiction (18 students per term): In this course, students read and write in five units focused on style including: character, landscape, dialogue, detail/description, and plot.

UNC CHAPEL HILL, ENGLISH 206 Intermediate Fiction (18 students per term): This course builds off form and stylistic tools taught in intro but allows the students creative movement with fewer controlled constraints on how and when to use technique and craft. Simply, my students progress as critical and creative readers as well as writers.

UNC CHAPEL HILL, ENGLISH 208 21st Century Essay (18 students per term): This course focuses exclusively on creative nonfiction published within the last ten years. I choose new books each semester and read them concurrently with the students for the first third of the semester. We work from prompts each class, as well. Throughout the second third we workshop original essays.

UNC CHAPEL HILL, ENGLISH 404 Advanced Creative Nonfiction (15 students per term): This is a workshop-based course provided for graduating seniors interested in further developing their craft in creative nonfiction in all forms, giving space for journalism, memoir, lyric essay, etc. I treat this differently than my Intermediate courses. We still workshop full length essays, but I spend the first two-thirds focusing on syntax by students read their work out loud to the group and allowing the group to verbally acknowledge when the sentences or paragraph didn’t work.

UNC CHAPEL HILL, ENGLISH 208 Radio Essay (18 students per term): This intermediate course focuses on radio as a literary art form, moving from soundscapes to narrative essay, and contemporary podcasts. Students write and record all revisions of their work and final productions are played on WXYC Radio.

UNC CHAPEL HILL, INDEPENDENT STUDY W/ Julie Kim on her Thesis Yellow

UNC CHAPEL HILL, INDEPENDENT STUDY W/ Emma Gerden on the short story

UNC CHAPEL HILL, CSTART W/ SamLevi Sizemore on “A (Queer) Survey of Nonfiction Comics

**LECTURES and INTERVIEWS:**

NC Writer’s Network

Spring 23 Conference CNF Workshop “The Fantastical Fact: Object, Research, and Obsession in Memoir”

Hindman Settlement School

Summer 23 Conference CNF Workshop “The Fantastical Fact: Object, Research, and Obsession in Memoir”

“Our Memories, Our Words.” Lecture to be given at Hollins University’s Tinker Mountain Writing Workshop. Summer 2020.

“Personal Narratives.” Lecture given at Gettysburg College. October 2019.

“Family Narratives.” Lecture given at Virginia Festival of the Book. Spring 2020.

“On the Personal Essay.” Lecture given at the North Carolina Writers Network. Spring 2020.

“Meander Belt and Southern Stories.” *The State of Things*. NPR. Interview given in January 2020.

“New Narratives in the South.” Lecture given at The Southern Independent Booksellers Association. September 2019.

“The Raw and Honest Truth of the South.” *Debutiful*. Interview given in October 2019.

“On the Business of Writing.” *Zero Point Fiction.* December 2019.

**“**The Father Never Goes Away.” *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. Interview given in Fall 2019.

“A Truth Accuracy Could Never Achieve.” *The Millions*. Interview given in Fall 2019.

“The Working-Class South.” *Electric Literature*. Interview given in Fall 2019.

“Author Chat with M. Randal O’Wain.” *WREG News Channel Memphis.* Interview given in Fall 2019.

“The Thacker Mountain Radio Hour Featuring M. Randal O’Wain.” *The Thacker Mountain Radio Program.* Lecture given November 2019.

Exhibitions and performances in 2019 and 2020

**I gave performances and recitations from *Meander Belt* at the following venues from 09/10/19 through 05/28/20**

* Malaprop’s Bookstore, Asheville, NC
* Scuppernong Books, Greensboro, NC
* Flyleaf Books, Chapel Hill, NC
* Lemuria Bookstore, Jackson, MS
* Square Books, Oxford, MS
* Park Row Books, Charlotte, NC
* McIntyre’s Books, Pittsboro, NC
* Quail Ridge Books, Raleigh, NC
* Fountain Booksore, Richmond, VA
* Taylor Books, Charleston, WV
* Orca Books, Olympia, WA
* Powell’s Books, Portland, OR
* Green Apple Books, San Francisco, CA
* Book Soup, West Hollywood, CA
* University of North Carolina Asheville, Asheville, NC
* Third Place Books, Seattle, WA
* McNally Jackson, New York, NY
* Bird in Hand/ Ivy Bookshop, Baltimore, MD
* Old Town Books, Alexandria, VA
* Center for the Study of the American South, Chapel Hill, NC
* Novel Bookstore, Memphis, TN
* White Whale Bookshop, Pittsburgh, PA

**Research Statement**

Over the past four years I have been drafting two books simultaneously. One is a novel titled Lesser Nighthawks that focuses on the fictional town of Lenoir, a hospice town with a diminished population and no industry beyond corporate chains. At the center of the novel is the Marshall family, fractured by tragedy, and a wealthy DC artist with a villainous vision of cinema verité.

My nonfiction book more adeptly applies to a research statement.

In 2017, while carving a flower garden out of a sunny spot in the thirteen-acre forest on my land, I saw something miraculous, something I had not known to anticipate: glowing wood. There was a fallen and quite decayed cherry tree that I cut into lengths for a split rail fence. I stacked the usable logs and left the rest to clean up the next day. When dusk passed into night, the forest floor and the lengths of wood glowed. Bluish green. A real and living light that vibrated with presence. Since then, I have read about bioluminescence, of course, but because my mind is not trained in the sciences, I needed to explore adjacent avenues of thought to understand the nuances of my book-in-progress. I doubt I will ever fully grasp the chemical nature of bioluminescence and so I am always on the lookout for stories that will help guide me, and ideally the reader, through what I’ve learned about this mysterious occurrence. So much of my experience that evening in 2017 as I held the glowing pulp in my hands was about binaries: faith and skepticism, depression and joy, light and dark, decay and life, refuse and the reusable. I’ve called on many different academics, artists, musicians, and poets as I’ve researched my way into writing this book: Leonard Cohen is there, as is Caravaggio and Rothko; the Old Testament God is there alongside Milton’s Satan; post-humanism and post-naturalism; eco criticism sits nicely next to architecture and urban geography. All paired with how and why fungus, bacteria, and animals luminesce.

There is also a physical component to my investigations. For years I have searched the forest for rotting logs that appeared as pulpy as the tree I’d cut into lengths. This was wrong, as I recently learned from Francis Bacon’s study of bioluminescent wood. “No wood hath been yet tried to shine that was cut down alive but such as was rotted both in stock and root while it grew.” A part of the tree must still be alive. And that was the case with my fallen cherry because at the trunk saplings grew in bushy sprigs. Now I look for this combination of rotting limbs attached to living trees.

It is not the wood that glows but mycelium of fungus thriving off this interplay of decay and life. Bacteria works in a similar way. Recently, I traveled to the Philosophical Society to read the only English translation that exists of Thomas Bartholin’s *De Luce Animalium*. *On the Light of Animals* was the first known attempt at a comprehensive study of animal light that began one evening in Montpelier when Bartholin witnessed a rack of lamb glowing in a market. He was not the only one to have witnessed this phenomenon. Aristotle writes about bioluminescence in dead fish and there are accounts from Civil War physicians of glowing wounds in humans. In the 16th Century, one of Robert Boyle’s servants came to his bedroom upset and afraid because there was meat glowing in the larder. He had her bring the rack to his chambers and he spent the rest of the night in experimentation. He even ate part of glowing meat and read passages from Philosophical Transactions by the light. The bacteria thrived in areas where the meat was pre-putrescent.

In the Indian Ocean there is an island of glowing bacteria written about in many ship captains’ memoirs, including Columbus’ diaries.

I traveled to Discovery Bay, Jamaica, near the town of Falmouth where there is a lagoon perfect in temperature and nutrients for miniscule dinoflagellates to thrive off mangrove decay and the confluence of fresh water and the sea. The moon was new and so no light interfered when I eased into the water. My toes lit up blue and then my ankles, blue to my waist. It felt as if I were held aloft by light. It felt like magic, something more than mere chemistry or biology. The abundance of living organisms, the abundance of light, felt too miraculous to fully comprehend. I told myself to pay attention, to mark each turn in the experience and yet I was overwhelmed by the inexplicable nature of glowing water. I wanted to hold both the joyful sensation and the intellectual engagement in my mind, but it was impossible.

And this is the premise of *Light Bearer.* I do not wish to explain away the biological and chemical functions of bioluminescence. I do not wish to write from a place of knowledge gained and then returned to a reader. I want to explore the subject from this place of “not-knowing” and capture, as best I can, the shock of discovering and engaging with the inexplicable.

**Teaching Statement**

My pedagogy is rarely static because the talents, abilities, and worldviews of my students are always changing, but there is one constant in how I teach creative writing: craft. I believe that student writers are discovering ways to consider content in many of their other classes and so my focus is to teach them how something striking, say, that they’ve read recently might look when powered through their own ways of being in the world. I often remind my students that the human being is stupidly complicated and that no one person will experience a singular moment the same. I want them to learn to consider peculiarities as an advantage in both fiction and nonfiction.

Even though my contract is in both nonfiction and fiction, and even though I write books in both genres, I consider the pedagogy for each quite independently. I taught intro, intermediate, and advance CNF Fall 2022, and so I will start with CNF.

I love my Intro to CNF course. It is perhaps the only course that I feel is settled, for now.

I have them begin reading and writing memoir. They work in small groups and follow constraints that teach them how to read and critique peer work compassionately, yet effectively. From here I move on to the lyric essay with an assignment titled 13 Ways of Looking where they choose a subject and must write about the subject using 13 unique anecdotes from research. Memoir and the “I” is often disallowed. Finally, to play with feature journalism, I have them write a niche profile about an unlikable celebrity. Once all the small assignments are finished, three groups are created and must choose one piece of writing from a different group to adapt into a new form of media. Video essay is the favorite medium, but I still try and convince groups to choreograph a dance.

Memoir is relatively self-explanatory, but I try and control the vastness of memory by requiring students to use techniques we’ve discussed, primarily, how to use symbol and sensory to details to imbue objects and ideas with emotion. My favorite prompt comes from an essay TS Eliot wrote when he was excoriating Hamlet. Hamlet, he said, was a failed play because without symbol or object-oriented images on the stage the play was just a man-child ranting. He said all art needed an objective correlative. I tell my students that when accessed the craft of imbuing object/description with a correlating emotion is sorcery. Magic. In a certain sense, the objective correlative is how I structure most of my classes.

Although 13 Ways of Looking is based on fact, the goal is to find anecdotal research that also tells stories to the reader on many different levels, including fact as metaphor and the objective correlative. I remind my students that the I is inherent in the essay because the genre always rebounds back to the writer. I remind them that if we all wrote 13 Ways of Looking at Ravens the tone and emotional resonance given to each fragment of research would resonate in a way unique to the writer. What Samuel Johnson called “the loose sally.”

What I’ve learned over the years teaching CNF is that writers come to the genre thinking that they must have an explosive story, one of adventure or tragedy, but I don’t believe this is true and I have felt over the years that we lose talented essayists because personal travails are privileged over insight. In my opinion, if an essayist can learn to trust the lyricism of their writing and how this connects back to their voice and persona then everything from Beyonce to identity politics is open for experimentation.

In Advanced, I spend the first two-thirds of the semester focused on the shapes of sentences and paragraphs. Music, I call it, because we are often missing a beat in the measure of an idea or scene, or we are riffing too long. At the start, we create a lexicon based on what each student feels are most important to them when reading and writing. No two terms can be used twice. This is our reference guide. We read handouts about syntax, and then, every class two students bring in an excerpt of two-pages and read out loud once. The class responds using the lexicon. The writer reads the excerpt a second time, and at any moment someone is “bumped from the continuous dream” they are allowed to say “stop” at which point they must explain why they were bumped: word choice, sentence structure, narrative, essayistic concept. I call exposition Above the Shoulders and narrative On the Body. It is a joy to watch the writing tighten up by the time we enter workshop in the final third of term. The only drawback at this point, which I do not know how to fix, is that ultimately, I become a voice in their heads defining the work. I do not like this, personally. I want them to be wild animals, but I do not see a way around it yet.

One last thing on Advanced. I ask students to create a prompt and lead a generative writing session at the beginning of each class, so that they can of a slight understanding of what it means to facilitate a group of writers. It is my favorite activity, especially when they must confront the wall of silence during share-time.

Finally, fiction. The ways I design my fiction courses are different because unlike the essay where the writer is never disassociated from the text fiction has trained the reader to ignore the author for better or worse. I believe that strong fiction, no matter if it is genre fiction or literature, is created through a firm understanding of craft and technique. I do not see, pedagogically, why a story about monsters in outer space should require a different tool kit than the New Yorker story about a domestic upset in New England.

For this reason, Intro is all about the pillars of fiction: character, landscape, detail/description, narrative/exposition, and dialogue. I do not have my intro classes workshop in large groups. I constrain how they respond critically to fellow writers and keep them in small groups throughout the semester.

Intermediate, in my mind, is the place to expand on how to respond to creative work. I tell my students that response letters and in-class feedback is more important for the readers than it is for the writer. I want them to understand that feedback is not guaranteed forever and that most writers must learn to define their flaws for themselves. If the reader can define why something is not working in someone else’s story then hopefully they can come to define the same problem in their own work.

This, I think, is the foundation of my pedagogy. If I can teach my students to come to their work with an understanding of craft technique, a belief in their unique mind, and an ability to read critically, then I have been successful. Like most of my colleagues, I gauge this outcome based on a revision and two letters in my upper-level courses: a letter of intent at the start of the term and a reflection at the end of the term alongside the revision. I take these seriously and use them to continue to evolve and refine my courses.

**REFERENCES**

Daniel Wallace (director)

Creative Writing Department

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Greenlaw Hall, CB #3520

Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3520

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308 English-Philosophy Building

Iowa City, Iowa 52242-1492

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