

True stories, well told.

# CREATIVITY NONFIC TION GAMES

*The Power of Play*



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**72**

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**PLUS:** Insider versus outsider perspectives in immersion projects; lessons from video game audience research; the Mexican game Lotería as writing prompt; Procrastination Bingo; and more



Experiments in nonfiction

# EXPLORING THE BOUNDARIES

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## The Fake MFA Syllabus

GEOFF MARTIN

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*At the end of a miserable day, instead of grieving my virtual nothing, I can always look at my loaded wastepaper basket and tell myself that if I failed, at least I took a few trees down with me.*

—DAVID SEDARIS, *ME TALK PRETTY ONE DAY*

### Introductory Remarks:

Congratulations! You quit your teaching job, left the city, and now find yourself camped out on other people's furniture in a rental house in Western Massachusetts. And since you've gone and lost US work authorization during the move, making money is illegal (but living off your spouse's salary is not). Welcome to your yearlong writing retreat.

Some ancillary tips up front: housework may not be wage work, but it's still work—earn your keep. Learn to bake: free bread appears on page 1 in your great-grandmother's guide to cheaper living. But remember, this ain't culinary school. You're here to write.

By all means, announce your admittance to the Fake MFA in Creative Nonfiction to your family and friends and frenemies, your old work colleagues and worried in-laws. Say to them, *I'm going to write full-time for the year*, then mumble, *Or at least I'm gonna try*. Hedge your bets—that's fine. What matters is saying it aloud until you very nearly believe it yourself. In other words, declare your intentions. Speak it from your root chakra. The accompanying fear of squandering the year will drag your ass out of bed on jobless Wednesdays in mid-winter. You're living the artist's dream. You know that, right?

**Mission Statement:** If not now . . .

**Program Description:**

Following a two-part structure, you will 1) write every day and 2) read promiscuously for guidance.

Writing: Aim for at least 300–500 words a day. If you fall short, pick up the day's slack by editing five pages of drafted work. If cloud-words are forming, pray for rain but don't write to wet exhaustion. Or do, but suffer the consequences of a sleepless night and three subsequent days pacing the cage. Since there's no graduation in this program, there's no graduation *requirement* either, but the goal—your goal—is to finish the year with a baker's dozen of drafted essays, experiments, and reviews, all of which circle back into childhood or dig down into land history or spill out into the Great Lakes region. You're on retreat, but find a way to write your way home.

Reading: Create three distinct bookshelves. Call them streams and, every day, wade into one or two of them. Your teaching faculty are in Stream I, "Writers on Writing." They're floating by on dinghies, so drift alongside and beg for guidance. They'll pull you downriver a ways. Stream II, "The Best Of," is full of canons and counter-canons, litmag issues and archives, and all those prize-winning "must-reads." This stream is full of unexpected bends and chutes. It's a marvelously good ride with the weirdest of guides, but be warned: stay in these waters too long, and you'll never get out. Stream III, "Reading for Your Writing," is the essential work that shapes your thinking self on the page. No matter how personal your essays, you are in the world. Read about that world.

**Accreditation and Credit Hours:** LOL

**Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs):**

At the end of the Fake MFA program, the student will be able to:

- Adopt a writerly aspect
- Identify five to seven regularly jabbering local birds
- Employ assorted rhetorical tools to varying degrees of success
- Apply the mantra that drafting is practice, that one *must* write before one reads

- Assimilate secondary sources in ways that feel like breakthroughs but are in fact just lazy
- Demonstrate a nascent sense of the known unknowns of the publishing world
- Acknowledge that the better way might have been to pay for a real MFA

**Resources for Student:**

- Submittable.com
- Your friend Derek's incisive editorial eye
- All those inside-baseball conversations on the *Longform Podcast*
- The nearest legit MFA program's speaker series

**Plagiarism:**

Write your own words. Sure, David Shields has penned a remix manifesto to clever, inventive thievery, but you're not him. There may be nothing new under the sun, but your syntax and style and passion are still your own. Grow your voice.

**A Word on Technology:**

Word-processing skills are essential for success in this program.

Paradoxically, you should get offline but stay on Twitter. Take a hatchet to the connective tissue of social media. App-control your email, and avoid the news—at least through morning. Since nothing you write today will be adequate to the rupture of this era, wake up in your relative seclusion and preserve the remnant privilege of opting out for a while. Call it self-care. Which is more or less true. Your writing depends on it.

But get up on Writer Twitter. Follow authors, journals, and editors. See submission calls. Worry at the rage of the Twittersphere and marvel at its kindnesses. Feel less alone. Peek only in the afternoon, and refrain, more often than not, from tweeting. When you start scrolling mindlessly, power down. Wade back into one of your book streams. Better yet, pick up the pen.

**Topical Outline:**

Summer Session I:

July: *Diving In (to Submittable)*

Begin with Phillip Lopate's *To Show and to Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction*—consider the history of personal narrative, the ethics of the genre, its lyric possibilities. Seek out some Stream I writers who candidly admit to struggle and self-doubt. Be surprised at this anguished literary legacy, and feel some nascent kinship. Spend a few days decorating your slant-ceilinged space. Say you'll start writing next week. Meanwhile, stumble into Submittable and get lost in the hundreds of venues that *want your words* but have slush piles six months deep. Be immediately overwhelmed. Close your laptop and continue unpacking the paper trail of your life.

August: *The Freakout*

Six weeks in, find yourself mired in the Bog of Panic, that testing ground of your Protestant God, who primarily values a good, hard day's work—not, mind you, whatever *this* is you claim you're doing. Annie Dillard, wearing a pair of hip waders over in Stream I, graciously counsels that "a schedule defends from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days." It's good advice that you just didn't take. Abandon all daily writing. Go rafting down Stream II with Eula Biss instead. Marvel at the deftness of her prose, and then feel utterly blocked. Avoid your journal for weeks.

Fall Semester:

September: *Desk Time*

Listen to C. when she presses *The Artist's Way* into your hands. She only wants what's best, which, in this case, is for you to Manage the Angst. Commence writing "Morning Pages" with gusto, the hungry grasping of the spiritually starved. This morning journal will become your one consistency for three hundred days. Call it what Julia Cameron calls it: the Creator's gift.

October: *Heading for Home*

Read words that emanate from your home ground, your third stream, headwatered in Ontario. Circle back around with Daniel Coleman, Isabel Huggan, and Alicia Elliott as guides. Ride Karen Solie's travelogue poetry through suburban Ontario. Reread John Terpstra's *Falling into Place*, which, years ago in Hamilton, had surprised you by what literary nonfiction could endeavor to convey. Think about how the shape and history of land marks the contours of a life, how writing can trace topographic lines on a map of many homes.

November: *Expanding the Range*

Discover the surprising fact that your house has no thermostat, only a hopper that slowly augurs out a day's worth of wood-pelleted flame. Move your desk to the living room. Make a third coffee by noon. Find yourself peeing every half hour while staring at the pink plastic pregnancy test C. has left by the sink. The one with two blue lines. Acknowledge a braided feeling of excitement, nervousness, and trepidation. Wonder what college tuition will cost in twenty years, and then fret about the salability of your words. Distract yourself with afternoons paddling various lyric essay meanders and dendritic branches of reportage, scene, and dialogue. Discover Didion and Ehrlich and Gornick. Read Roxane Gay and Leslie Jamison. Go *Riverine* with Angela Palm.

December: *The Hot Seat*

Realizing half a year's nearly gone, burn pen streaks of insipid prose across the page. Doctor that up as a second draft. Drain blood to the head in shoulder-stand position.



Slice, mend, revise into a third draft, and send it around by email. Collect feedback, acknowledge the critiques, and file it away—incubation is easier than the task of the final push. Proclaim that it's aging, like wine, but worry that it's getting corked instead. Out in Stream II, watch how these writers end their essays with such expert evocation, that sudden striking of the gong. For Christmas, ask for literary magazine subscriptions but receive instead an emergency shovel for the trunk of your car. It's for digging, your brother-in-law says. For when you get stuck.

#### Spring Semester:

##### January: *Several Deaths of the Author*

Return after a week away, spent bedside while your grandfather slips off in the cancer ward, to find ice in the toilet tank. The pregnancy, too, has slipped away. Feel the world contract to the smallest of essentials, the felt margins and substance of life.

Priority one: get the stove going, get it blowing flame and heat in the midst of loss.

Priority two: journal mourning into eulogy. More pen strokes on the narrative map.

##### February: *Experimental Tributaries*

Despite heavy snow, stumble up frozen reaches of the watershed: Jenny Bouilly splicing footnotes from blank pages; Barrie Jean Borich making autogeography out of the Midwest; *Bending Genre* with its collection of strange artifacts. Flashing strokes of *Brevity* and the aura of *River Teeth's* Beautiful Things. Shake your head at how something so small can say so much. Be offered \$30 for a short article, income that would credit against your coffee expense at least but which still raises the question: how do you define "getting ahead" in a freelance economy? Recall the easy way in which a salary once seemed to quantify your worth.

##### March: *A Year Is a Long Time*

You're still four snowstorms away from any daffodil's defiant appearance. Return to Baldwin, and follow the precision of his mind across the page; see how his ink trails fire. Settle in with McPhee, the godfather of blocked structure and crafted intention. Follow the needle of your own response to his pacing, and see how you're being expertly played. You'll never get to Princeton, but here he is in Stream I casting off library copies of *Draft No. 4* from his canoe. You're not writing much, but C. is pregnant again, so there's that.

##### April: *Playtime*

Find yourself floating down unexpected canals and riding locks to new lake surfaces. Return to Stream III, and thumb through books on Agent Orange and Christian mysticism and the geology of clay formation, emanations—all—that haunt the edges of your homeground essays. Shoehorn facts and cut phrasings into the half dozen documents tiling your screen, splicing off sections and writing to fill the gaps.

Just follow your nose. There's something here about sandbox play. Acknowledge that you will always be, in some intrinsic way, your six-year-old self—at least as curious, as demanding, as naïve.

Summer Session II:

May: *The Plateau and the Faraway Hills*

Meet a submission deadline with only minutes to spare. Feel giddy. Attend a writers' conference, your one "big-ticket" credit card expense during the year, and immediately sense that you've reached a new plateau. The steady ground is nice treading, for a change. Drive back all night through the Appalachians and the Berkshires in time to hear the baby's heartbeat, which sounds through the Doppler like some sonorous marching of six hundred soldiers. Post-conference, log whole afternoons scrolling online features and longform essays. Look through craft binoculars at the ravines and ranges ahead, and realize there are still many hills to climb. You knew this, of course, and the challenge is as enticing as it is discouraging. Writing, you realize, is a good trip and a bad drug.

June: *A Year Is No Time at All*

Try to push to completion several more partial pieces. Pretend that this program has a final thesis project, but come up short regardless. Spend time crawling back through the drafted essays and gathered fragments, those Morning Pages and your reading journals—twelve hundred pages of penned scrawl from across the year. Very little has found its way to publication, but you've got something more now: a working discipline, a writing practice. You've learned to sit, waiting for the magic to strike, but more crucially, you've learned to keep moving the pen even when it is clear there's no magic in the offing. That, right there, is enough—enough for one year at least. There's no degree waiting at the end, this being a *fake* MFA after all, but there is now a lifetime of practice ahead, a nascent craft to shape to the given seasons, the who-knows-of-whatever's next. So be ready. Keep writing. ■