

**Creative Writing: Introduction to Fiction & Poetry**  
**CRWRI-UA.815 | Fall 2017 | Section 4 M & W 8AM-9:15AM**  
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**Classroom: Bobst, LL148**  
**Office hours: By appointment**

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*"The best moments in reading are when you come across something – a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things – which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours."* Alan Bennett, *The History Boys*

### **Course overview**

The structure of the course is simple: for the first half of the semester we'll focus on fiction, and in the second poetry. Then in each class we'll focus on two core activities: (1) examining the **craft of fiction or poetry** (as appropriate) and (2) **workshop**.

#### **1. Craft of fiction/poetry**

In this part of the course we will be reading in a highly particular manner: not as scholars or literary critics, but as writers. The aim is to learn to recognize the tricks and delivery systems at work in great modern novels and poems so that we can apply them in our own writing - not for merely cold technical reasons, but because we hope to join that 'chain of hands' referred to by Alan Bennett.

With that in mind, our reading will be very wide. It'll of course encompass both fiction and poetry, but also a diverse range of styles and approaches within those two disciplines. On the fiction side, for example, we'll read everything from humor to hyperrealism to gothic horror.

#### **2. Workshop**

The second major component of the course is the 'workshop'. This is where we'll discuss fiction and poetry produced by members of the class. I'll go into further detail on the workshop method when we meet in September. For now, it's enough to emphasize that all discussions of each other's fiction/poetry will be conducted in a comradely spirit of generosity. I don't mean in the sense of unqualified praise - that wouldn't help the writer in question - but of teasing out what effects we think the writer sought to achieve with his or her submission, and what we admire about the draft in its current form. Finally, we'll reflect on the ways in which the relevant draft might be revised to bring it even closer to the writer's original vision.

Please note that it will be critical to the success of the workshop (and a matter of respect to your classmates) that you read all submissions carefully and arrive at class prepared to discuss them. For my part, I will do my best to ensure that:

- everyone has the opportunity to contribute to the conversation, and
- a positive and appropriately sensitive atmosphere prevails in the room.

**Students can expect to be workshopped four times over the semester - twice for fiction and twice for poetry.** In addition, each student will submit a one-page note (300 words) of constructive feedback to each person being workshopped. This note will be presented at the workshop to the relevant individual whose work is under discussion, and a copy of the same note will also be handed in to me.

### **Who we'll be reading**

The core readings for the **fiction and poetry** strands are described below.

- ***Fiction:***
  - The anthology text for the semester will be *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*. This text covers a great range of masterly American prose, from the 'minimalism' of Raymond Carver and Ernest Hemingway to the naturalism of Annie Proulx and Junot Diaz to the humor of Lorrie Moore and Amy Hempel, as well as the surrealism of Donald Barthelme and Shirley Jackson. These stories will be supplemented by occasional extra readings, some of which will be British comic/tragicomic authors: P.G. Wodehouse, Zadie Smith, and Alan Hollinghurst. (I should confess that I'm a Brit.) All of the supplemental readings, however, will be *fun*, and all of them will be uploaded to NYU Classes or circulated via email, so you won't need to make any additional purchases.
  - For our craft discussions we'll occasionally refer to John Yorke's *Into the Woods*, a lively and accessible overview of the core elements of narrative storytelling from Greek tragedy to *The Godfather*. Also essays by, and interviews with, a range of authors from E.M. Forster to Jonathan Franzen to Zadie Smith. **Note:** Purchase of this text is not required but recommended.

**Assigned text:** *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories* (2nd edition), edited by Joyce Carol Oates, Oxford University Press, 2012

### **Recommended reading (non-assigned):**

1. *Into the Woods: A Five-Act Journey Into Story*, John Yorke, The Overlook Press, 2015

2. *The Penguin Book of the British Short Story: II: From P.G. Wodehouse to Zadie Smith*, edited by Philip Hensher, Penguin Classic, 2017

- ***Poetry:*** Our destination will be modern American poetry, including that of artists associated with NYU's distinguished writing program. We'll arrive there by way of a certain genius Elizabethan, not to mention French romantics, English cynics, and Nobel Prize winners from the Caribbean as well as the United States. Poets will therefore include: Shakespeare, Baudelaire, T.S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson, Philip Larkin, Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop, Derek Walcott, Terrance Hayes, John Ashbery, Sharon Olds, Ocean Vuong, Bob Dylan and more.

**Assigned readings:** No course text to purchase. All poems will be made available on NYU Classes or by email.

**The important fine print**

Having discussed the key aims, structure and readings of the course, below is some further information on practical matters. **Please note that this syllabus is subject to minor addition/amendment between now and September.**

**Grading:**

Marks for this course will be awarded as follows:

- 40% - Writing your own works of fiction and poetry
- 20% - Delivering written and spoken feedback on the work of your fellow writers
- 20% - Reading the assigned materials and discussing them in class
- 20% - Being punctual, maintaining a near-perfect attendance record, and submitting your assignments on time

**Formatting requirements, timing and length of workshop submissions:**

- **Formatting:** Submissions must be in 12-point Times New Roman, double spaced, with one inch margins, and emailed to the class as a .doc or .docx file. Please also number the pages - this is very helpful for in-class discussion of your work.
- **Length of workshop submissions:**

- For **fiction** you should submit between five and 20 pages. If your work is closer to five than 20 pages the quality of its sentences will be marked more rigorously.
- For **poetry** the notion of limits is more complex, so there will be no minimum or maximum number of words/pages. Instead you're asked to submit 3 to 5 poems that have been worked on and refined to the best of your creative ability.
- **When to send submissions:** You will email this work to the class a week before you are to be workshopped. (So if you are to be workshopped on Monday, the 17th you must email the class on Monday the 7th, by 11:59 PM.) Please note that submitting work late inconveniences your classmates and will adversely affect your final grade.

Laptops, e-readers:

Laptops and e-readers are allowed, to give you convenient access to our weekly reading. If they threaten to limit our ability to focus, however, they will be banned.

Office hours:

Office hours are by appointment. I'd like everyone to meet with me **at least once** during the semester, preferably after your first workshop. More than one office hour visit is not only permitted but absolutely encouraged.

Plagiarism policy:

Please don't cheat, it will mean you receive an 'F' grade. Quoting T.S. Eliot's comment about the practices of great poets won't work as a defence.

Attendance policy:

Attendance is expected in every class. More than one unexcused absence will result in a one-mark loss to your final grade. For example, an "A" will become an "A-," a "B-" will become a "C+," etc. Two or more instances in which a student is significantly late to class (15+ minutes) will count as an absence. If you expect to have issues getting to class on time, please speak to me. Excused absences owing to a medical or other emergency circumstance must be accompanied by a doctor's (or other official) note.

Last but not least ... policy on food:

Since we'll be meeting at 8 a.m., caffeinated drinks, croissants etc. may be consumed. Please do so discreetly, however, and without distracting your classmates.