Creative Writing: Introduction to Fiction and Poetry

Session: Summer 1
Course: CRWRI-UA.815.006
Course Logistics: Mondays and Wednesdays, 1:30 pm to 4:40 pm
[insert location]
Instructor: Scott Gannis
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Office Hours: By appointment.

“There’s a kind of humor that is bigger than a giggle, bigger than a laugh...I’m talking about satire and irony. Satire and irony make people laugh. But they’re serious and multidimensional in a way that earnestness often just can’t be, and to discount them is to be blind to the possibility of serious art that’s funny.”
— Matthew Rohrer

“You have to ask yourself two questions: Who am I? And how may I become myself?”
— Paul Beatty, The Sellout

BASIC COURSE SPIEL
Can tragic writing be funny? Can funny writing be tragic? How might we transform personal experience into serious, or seriously funny, writing? The aim of this course is to learn the introductory elements of poetry and fiction by interrogating humor as an artistic coping mechanism. In this class, we will read poems, stories, and novel excerpts that range from hilarious to miserable (and often both at once). Along the way, we will watch some stand-up comedy, embark on a journey of self-discovery (maybe), and wrestle with the literary status quo which tells us serious art can't or shouldn't be funny. When it’s all over, we will have read a lot, written a lot, and learned how to approach the acts of writing and reading with the deliberation, attention to detail, and discipline required of well-crafted fiction and poetry.

Wait, that sounds...different! Which is scary! Bah!
Like, do we have to be funny to succeed in this course? Are we going to write humor here?

No and No. Unless you want to. Reading funny-ish texts seems a swell way to accomplish our central goals: to familiarize you with how fiction and poetry workshops operate, and to prepare you for any upper-level creative writing classes you might take later.

How do fiction and poetry workshops operate? How will you prepare us for any upper-level creative writing classes we might take later?
Fiction and poetry workshops are a collaborative and process-oriented space where we all work together to help each other improve. This improvement will prepare you for the future. But wait! There’s more!
The first half of our classes will be dedicated to craft lessons¹. The goal here is to read strategically and learn tricks of the trade. So: keep a journal with your responses to each reading (a paragraph or two each, needn’t be polished); these will be turned in at the end of the term.

After we talk all that out, we’ll take a ten minute break and move-on to workshopping and/or in-class writing exercises. This should prepare us for the future, etc.

**Workshop Expectations**
We are here to write urgently, honestly, and bravely. Or something. What that something is will depend on your level of engagement and our ability to foster a safe and supportive environment that respects each other’s identities and creativity. Workshop is an inherently vulnerable experience and can be harrowing for even the crustiest old grey beards (e.g., your instructor).

- Our guiding principle is not whether we liked or disliked a piece². Instead, we should focus on our experience as a reader. The things that stunned us, tickled us, made us jealous. Or the stuff that confused us, felt vague, left us unsatisfied.
- We should always open with what worked. Writers learn just as much from discussing their strengths as they do discussing their weaknesses.
  - Sometimes, this might mean we want to see more of a certain element because the writer does it well. Maybe more jokes. Maybe more pathos. Maybe more nouns.
- Always try to keep the focus on the text, not the writer. Remember, we should describe our experience as readers. When we veer into “You did this,” we leave a discussion of craft analysis and enter a murkier personal territory that isn’t very productive (and might lead us into trouble).
  - The corollary: we will undoubtedly use autobiographical material in here. A writer kvetching about “how this really happened though!” also drags us away from the task at hand: to workshop the piece with our craft tools, not to workshop the autobiographical and/or true events underneath.
- The workshop is a safe and sacred place. It can be intimidating, yes, but a healthy and supportive workshop environment can create lifelong friendships. Really. We must:
  - Be Present (**electronic devices should be silent and out of sight**).
  - Be mindful of power, voice, and privilege (talk to me if you have questions).
  - Be committed to doing our best work for one another (i.e., read submissions at least twice; mark-up/line-edit prior to workshop; accept feedback even if you disagree with it; rise & grind; try to maintain/develop a “growth” mindset).

**Nuts, Bolts, Other Building Materials**
Please bring **16 copies of submissions to the class prior to your workshop date**. That’s a lot of paper. But this is how we do things. Or at least how I do things. Don’t miss your deadlines! If

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¹ I will supply all reading materials so you don’t have to spend money. Please bring copies of all readings to class. These will be supplied as PDFs in a Google folder or via email. I might also hand stuff out in class. What we read will depend on what we like, so anticipate some course corrections. I’m a pretty rigid organizer (i.e., a worrier), but prepare yourself mentally; our readings and needs will probably diverge from the syllabus at times.

² In fact, I might very well banish that word from our workshops.
you do without a valid explanation, you will drop an entire letter grade. Seriously. In other words, if you are being workshopped on Monday, June 5th, please have your copies, suited-and-booted, by Wednesday, May 31st. We’ll iron out a schedule in the first week of class.

Peer Critiques
Prior to workshop, please write a single-spaced page for each workshopee in letter form. Discuss what worked for you (and didn’t) in that submission. Bring two copies. One for me and one for the writer. This will help you gather your thoughts. Nonetheless, interpretations change before and after workshops, so don’t sweat it if you end up disagreeing with yourself. I do that all the time. We will discuss this with more detail in class. As always, ask me for help if you need it.

Attendance
Be here. Preferably early. I know New York, especially in the summer, can be hectic and sweaty and smelly, but the expectation is that you will show up on time, prepared, and ready to work for one another. Even if you’re sweaty/smelly. You are allowed one absence without it affecting your grade. Anything beyond one absence without a reasonable excuse will drop you a full letter grade. I’ll use a three strike system for tardiness: first a warning, second a partial grade deduction (i.e., A- becomes B+), third a full letter deduction (i.e., B+ becomes C+). If punctuality is going to be an issue and you already know it, let’s talk as soon as possible.

Participation
As someone with Social Anxiety Disorder (great trait for teaching, by the way!), I know speaking up in class can be tough for some people. And getting called on by the instructor can just create more anxiety. Still, because this course is predicated on sharing feedback and open discussion, the expectation is that we all chip in to craft conversations, discussions, and workshops. If you have concerns about this, let’s talk. I understand. Let’s work together.

Plagiarism
Let’s not go there. You’ll be reported. The consequences will be severe.

Health and Wellness
The whole idea of this course is to investigate and write about our lives, to turn personal experience into fiction and poetry (and maybe laughter). Still, I know that heavy subject matter might have a way of crossing over into cries-for-help. If I suspect someone is struggling, I will reach out, check in, and do my part to set you up with professional services if necessary. The mentoring component of this course is something really, really important to me, so let’s talk if you’re having a hard time. I’ve been there. I am there. Talk to me.

Meeting With Me
You are expected to meet with me outside of class at least once this term. Failure to do so will impact your participation grade. I sleep very little and don’t mind gamboling across NYC, so let’s find a time and place that makes it relatively easy on both of us. Feel free to meet more than

3 TARDINESS IS DEFINED AS BEING 10 OR MORE MINUTES LATE!
Please, seriously, I’m pretty laid-back, and this is a tough city to navigate, but bursting in late is really disrespectful when our class hinges on discussion and active engagement and mindfulness.
once. In fact, I encourage it. I want to be there for y’all. I gave out my number for a reason, but please don’t drunkenly call me or sell my info to Telemarketers. Unless you want to. It’ll affect your grade though.

**50 Shades of Grades**
If you were anything like me as an undergrad (poor things!), you are obsessed with your grades. I get that. I do. I remain obsessed with my grades even as a graduate student. However, my general philosophy is that if you meet expectations, work hard, and help build us into a tightknit and intimate community, you’ll land around a B+/A-. Talent does not have a lot to do with success as a writer at the Intro level, but hard work does. If you meet with me multiple times, pour yourself into peer critiques, ask for additional reading assignments and/or stand-up to watch, or make it clear you want to improve, you’ll float into the A conversation. I have no problem giving everyone A’s; I also have no problem giving everyone C’s. FYI: The workload will increase over the term, so prepare for that. You and I can always discuss assignments ahead of time.

- **40% Attendance/Participation/Preparation**
  - Contributing to discussions, workshop letters, reading assignments, being a good community member, meeting at least once with me

- **40% Writing**
  - 2 poems (any length)
  - 1 flash fiction (500 words or less)
  - 1 short story (5-15 pages)
  - Writing exercises

- **20% Final Portfolio (More details to come...don’t worry yet)**
  - All writing exercises; reading journals (1-2 paragraphs unless specified otherwise)
  - 1 revised poem
    - This means that you will deliberate over workshop comments and letters, consider my feedback, and meditate on/make changes your workshop submission
  - Revise your longer short story
    - Same principles as with the poem
  - 500 words explaining what you did or didn’t do, and why, for each of your revised submissions (i.e., 2 explanation letters)
    - Most of writing is rewriting; everything about writing should be deliberate. The goal of the portfolio is to demonstrate that you are thinking about your pieces strategically and that every detail, every word, every image is there for a reason.

**A Note On Course Content**
I’ve gone back-and-forth about employing trigger/content warnings and have opted against it. Some of what we will read, watch, or listen to contains serious material. I am a white, cisgender man who is consciously attempting to curate a variety of voices, narratives, and experiences, but my list is far from perfect or representative. If you have concerns about particular subject matter or issues of representation, let’s talk. I want everyone to feel safe, supported, and heard.
Week 1

MONDAY 5/22: Introductions, Syllabus Overview, “I Remember” and vulnerability

In class:
- Get to know each other; What excites you? What scares you?
- Discuss workshop etiquette/classroom expectations/letters/reading responses
  - Iron-out workshop schedule
- Read some writers’ tricks of the trade
- Read and discuss: “I Remember” by Joe Brainard
- In-class exercise: write your own “I Remember” poem

Assignments
Read:
- “The House” by Warsan Shire; “Sleeping Arrangement” by Saeed Jones; “A Story About the Body” by Robert Haas; “The Colonel” by Carolyn Forche
- “VOLLEYBALL IS AN AWESOME SPORT AND YOUR MOTHER AND I ARE GETTING A DIVORCE” by Peter Bognanni

Write:
- Practice letter for Peter Bognanni (treat this like a real workshop but bring only 1 copy)
  - Line-edits! Read twice! Prepare to share what worked/didn’t.
- Journal responses to assigned readings
- OPTIONAL: Finish/expand your “I Remember” exercise

WEDNESDAY 5/24: Sensory details; Writing through pain; Practice workshop

In class:
- Wrap-up “I Remember” conversation; specificity/vulnerability/writing concretely
- Discuss Shire, Jones, Haas, and Forche
- Mock workshop of Peter Bognanni (who has a book coming out in September)

Assignments
Read:
- Workshop submissions from GROUP 1 (for Wednesday)
- “Howl” by Allen Ginsberg; “My Father Sings, To My Embarrassment” by Sandra M. Castillo; “Dope” by Amiri Baraka; “M.A.A.D City” by Kendrick Lamar (listen, too!)

Write:
- GROUP 1 writes 1st poem (to be submitted no later than Monday at 1:30 PM)
- EVERYONE: sit in one place (subway, park, Bobst, etc…) for 20 minutes and simply observe; be present, write snippets of interesting dialogue you overhear, pay attention to what people are wearing/how they move; write at least 10 physical/sensory details you notice
- Workshop letters (bring 2 copies!); journal responses to assigned reading
Week 2

**MONDAY 5/29: MEMORIAL DAY (NO CLASS)**
- Receive workshop submissions from GROUP 1 via email (by 1:30 PM)
- GROUP 2 should have poem ready for submission Wednesday (16 hard copies)
- Be ready to get after it on Wednesday!

**WEDNESDAY 5/31: Rhythm, Music, Rants, Explosions, Pace, Voice**

*In class:*
- Discuss Ginsberg, Castillo, Baraka, and Lamar
  - Flow, anger, transformation, shame, rawness, laughter
  - Listen/watch Ginsberg and/or Baraka performance
- Workshop GROUP 1
- Handout GROUP 2 poems

**Assignments**

*Read:*
- Workshop submissions from GROUP 2
- “Poetic Forms” packet (compiled from Poets.org); this is dense so give yourself plenty of time to chew it over; we will discuss it extensively

*Watch:*
- “Hilarious” by Louis CK

*Write:*
- GROUP 3 writes poem
- EVERYONE; Write a rant or lyrical explosion like Ginsberg, Lamar, CK, etc.
- Workshop letters (bring 2 copies!); NO JOURNALING FOR THESE READINGS
  - However, you are required to write 500 words on Louis CK
    - Do you think poetry seeps into this stand-up special? How does CK compare to Ginsberg, Baraka, Lamar, and Castillo? If poetry is all about exactitude of words, and stand-up is all about economy of words, does that mean poetry and stand-up are...kinda the same? Is this comedy special serious art?
Week 3

MONDAY 6/5: Forms, functions, content; prose poems vs. sonnets, elegies, ghazals; lyrics

In class:
- Discuss “Poetic Forms”
  - Do we like form poetry? What’s gained? What’s lost? Do limits help or hurt creativity?
  - As a class, go over “Hip Hop Ghazal” by Patricia Smith; “138” by Shakespeare
- Workshop GROUP 2 poems
- Handout GROUP 3 poems

Assignments
Read:
- Workshop submissions from GROUP 3
- “This Be The Verse” by Philip Larkin; “Sonnet Isolate” and “Triple Sonnet of the Plush Pony” by Anne Carson; “The Milk One” by Anthony Madrid
  - Consider how all of these do or do not follow the forms we discussed in class

Write:
- GROUP 1 writes poem #2 (using, or consciously skewering, a poetic form we discussed in class or you found on your own AND/OR surprising the reader in some other way)
- Workshop letters (bring 2 copies!); journal responses to assigned readings

WEDNESDAY 6/7: Forms, functions, content (pt. 2): when keeping it real goes wrong?

In class:
- Discuss Larkin, Carson, and Madrid
  - Why did they follow, or not follow, the rules? How do these poems compare to what we’ve read so far? What do you prefer? Why?
  - What is up with Larkin? What is he doing with this lyric poem?
- Workshop GROUP 3 poems
- Handout GROUP 1 poems

Assignments
Read:
- Workshop submissions from GROUP 1
- “Dream Song #14” by John Berryman; “Changeling” by Hieu Minh Nguyen; “The Toy-Maker” by Russell Edson; “Good Hair” by Sherman Alexie; “Hot Ass” by Jennifer Knox
  - Pay attention to imagery, absurdity, and surprises

Write:
- WEIRD THING HERE: GROUP 2 and GROUP 3 writes poem #2 (using, or consciously skewering, a poetic form we discussed in class or you found on your own AND/OR surprising the reader in some other way)
- Workshop letters (bring 2 copies!); journal responses to assigned reading
Week 4

MONDAY 6/12: Formal confusion, imagery, weirdness, twists
In Class:
- Discuss Berryman, Nguyen, Edson, Alexie and Knox
  - What form are these poems anyway?
  - Watch a plastered John Berryman perform Dream Song #14
  - Watch “Bonnaroo Drug Confessions” by Chris Gethard
- Workshop GROUP 1 poems
- Handout GROUP 2 and GROUP 3 poems

Assignments
Read:
- GROUP 2 and GROUP 3 poems
- No other reading!
Write:
- Workshop letters (bring 2 copies!)
- BE ADVISED: GROUP 1 will be writing a 500 word short story for 6/17 (Saturday!)

FYI: We will conduct workshop almost all of class next time; there were various ways we could make the transition to fiction, and this is how we’re going to do it. I appreciate your flexibility.

WEDNESDAY 6/14: Slouching Towards Short Stories!
In class:
- Workshop GROUP 2 poems
- Workshop GROUP 3 poems
- Watch “OCD” by Neil Hilborn; watch “Dear White America” by Danez Smith
- Read aloud: “Car Crash While Hitchhiking” by Denis Johnson
  - How does Johnson combine the beauty of poetry with the narrative of fiction?

Assignments (REMEMBER THAT SATURDAY IS OUR MAKE-UP CLASS!)
Read:
- “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid; “Boys” by Rick Moody; “Denis Johnson’s Perfect Short Story” by Jeffrey Eugenides
- “That Crafty Feeling” by Zadie Smith
Write:
- A few sentences about a time things felt out of control. What was happening around you? What was your mental state? How did this situation resolve itself? Did it?
  - FYI: You won’t share this with anyone other than me
- BE ADVISED: GROUP 1 will be writing a 500-word short story for 6/17 (Saturday!)
- Journal responses to assigned readings
SATURDAY 6/17: A Heavy Craft Day! How to write with tension; how to build to a climax

In class:

● Discuss Kincaid, Moody, Eugenides on Johnson
  ○ What makes these stories similar to poetry? What makes them different?
    ■ Consider word choice, attention to detail, and plot
    ○ Do you agree with Eugenides? Is Johnson’s story “perfect”?
● Discuss “That Crafty Feeling”
● Discuss the basic shapes of stories
  ○ Exposition, rising action, climax, resolution
  ○ Watch: Vonnegut lecture
● Prepare you to write The Big One (5-15 page short story that’s coming soon)
● Writing exercise: a scene where two people argue and someone wins
  ○ Consider: a story can have movement without all that much happening
  ○ Consider: internal change over time
● Handout GROUP 1 500-word short story

Assignments

Read:

● GROUP 1 story
● First two chapters of “The Ask” by Sam Lipsyte
● Selected quotes on short stories and plot
● “Thoughts on Fiction” essay by Darin Strauss

Think:

● About your strengths as a writer
● About how Sam Lipsyte and others might agree/disagree with Zadie Smith

Write:

● GROUP 2 writes a 500-word short story
● GROUP 1 should start working on their 5-15 page short story for 6/21
● Workshop letters (bring 2 copies!): journal responses to assigned readings
Week 5

MONDAY 6/19: Voice, Diction, Punch, Tone, Dialogue
In class:
  ● Discuss “The Ask” and how it compares to Denis Johnson
    ○ Would Lipsyte agree with Smith? Would George Saunders agree with Lipsyte?
      What makes a story captivating anyway? What makes a story a story?
    ○ What’d you make of Darin’s thoughts?
  ● Workshop GROUP 1 500-word story
  ● Handout GROUP 2 500-word story

Assignments
Read:
  ● GROUP 2 500-word story
  ● “Escape from Spiderhead” by George Saunders; “Happy Endings” by Margaret Atwood

Write:
  ● Everybody should be working on their 5-15 page short story
    ○ GROUP 1 will hand theirs in on Wednesday! That’s soon!
  ● Workshop letters (bring 2 copies!); journal responses to assigned readings

WEDNESDAY 6/21: Point of view; weird plots; no plots; internality; themes
In class:
  ● Discuss Saunders and Atwood
    ○ Why did I group these very strange stories together? What rules do they break?
      What themes do they explore? What’s up with POV? How can material this dark
      be this funny? Or is it?
  ● Workshop GROUP 2 500-word story
  ● Handout GROUP 1 5-15 page story

Assignments
Read:
  ● GROUP 1 5-15 page story
  ● “Good Old Neon” by David Foster Wallace; “Williamsburg Bridge” by John Edgar Wideman
    ○ This is a lot of reading, so don’t procrastinate. I know I’m pushing you hard.

Write:
  ● 300-500 words each on “Good Old Neon” and “The Semplica Girl Diaries” as your
    reading reaction!
    ○ Consider this basic question: what the hell is going on here?
  ● Workshop letters (bring 2 copies!)
WEEK 6

MONDAY 6/26: Time; consciousness; monologues
In class:
● Quick discussion: two of the most intense and weird short stories I’ve ever read
  ○ What is happening with time? How do Wallace and Wideman utilize everything we’ve discussed thus far? Or do they? How do they pull-off this audacity? And what’s up with these endings?
● Workshop GROUP 1 5-15 page story
● Handout GROUP 2 5-15 page story

Assignments
Read:
● GROUP 2 5-15 page stories
● “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” by Flannery O’Connor

Bring in:
● A poem, story, play, or other literature-ish work of art you’d like to share with the class
  ○ This is optional.

Write:
● Workshop letters (bring 2 copies!); reading journal
● Start working on your revisions and portfolio compilation if you haven’t already

FYI: We will conduct workshop in the first half of class next time.

WEDNESDAY 6/28: What does it all mean? Amusing ourselves to...life?
In class:
● Workshop GROUP 2 stories
● Discuss what might be the greatest American short story we have
● Read “Good Bones” by Maggie Smith; Read “American Poetry” by Louis Simpson; feel sad that this our last time together
● Share anything you brought in
● Celebrate a great term. We pushed each other hard and hopefully learned a lot.

Assignments
Read:
● Lots of poetry and fiction for the rest of your life, regardless of your career goals or major
  ○ You’d be shocked to learn how literature will change and impact you.

Write:
● Final portfolio
  ○ One revised poem; One revised 5-15 page story; 500 word explanations of revisions; reading journals; all writing exercises
  ○ Email to me by [insert deadline]