

Creative Writing: Introduction to Fiction & Poetry (CRWRI-UA.815.007)

Instructor: John Maher

e-mail: jm4496@nyu.edu

phone: (315) 506-2595

TR (Tuesday/Thursday) 12:30–1:45

Room: 194 Mercer St., Rm 208

Office Hours: By appointment.

Overview// *What is this class?*

This class is a brief introduction to Creative Writing as a collegiate discipline. Though it will involve a fair amount of reading and writing, this class will introduce you to a discipline that is distinct from English, Comparative Literature, etc. – rather than reading texts in order to study (or argue) their social, cultural, or historical context, this class will develop your ability to write thoughtful, animate poetry and fiction, and teach you the particular methods of reading as a writer.

Goals// *Why are we here?*

Our goals are quite simple: to hone our skill as both writers and readers-who-write, and to learn how to thrive in a Creative Writing class at the undergraduate (and later graduate) level. I also encourage each of you to bring your own creative and academic goals into the class, and to assist each other in developing and reaching those goals.

Structure// *How does this all work?*

The class will be divided between two sections: Craft and Workshop. On Craft days, we will (having all read the assigned texts) discuss published poems and works of fiction *as writers* – these classes will be an opportunity to develop your creative ear and eye so that they may better serve you when you apply them to your own writing. On Workshop days, we will read poems and fiction submitted by the class. While we will discuss these pieces with similar intellectual care, we will also adopt a kind and constructive Workshop etiquette.

Craft//

Discussion//

We will spend each Craft class discussing the stories and poems that were assigned. Everyone is expected to have read all the texts, and to engage in discussion with the rest of the class about the piece(s) in question. Thoughtful discussion does *not* consist of whether you liked or disliked a piece – instead, please detail *why* you liked or disliked that piece. Or, speak to some resonance or relationship you found between that piece and another; or describe a theme you think you've found embedded in the text; etc. What we're trying to do in a Craft discussion is to figure out how to explode and reassemble a piece – we want to know what every paragraph, sentence, and comma is doing, how it's doing it, and how we might adapt those techniques to our own work.

Assignments//

You are expected to hand in a 1-2 page response (12 point font, double-spaced, stapled or one two-sided sheet of paper) to the assigned readings at

the start of every Craft class. How you structure this response is completely up to you. Maybe you want to write about the syntax and grammar of a piece; the voice, structure, themes, etc. If we have read multiple pieces (this will usually be the case), then you could put two (or more) pieces in conversation with each other. I encourage you to be both creative and precise with your responses. These should not, however, be responsive pieces of fiction or poetry. I also discourage you from focusing too greatly on the historical or social context of a piece. These are *Craft* responses – just like our Craft discussions, these should be opportunities for you to show me how you think a piece is working (whether it's working well or poorly). You will *not* be graded on whether I agree with your argument – instead, you will be graded on how cogent and well-constructed your argument is.

Presentations//

At some point during the semester, everyone will do one Craft presentation. This will entail giving a short presentation (no shorter than 5 minutes, no longer than 10) on a piece of poetry or fiction. Like your regular Craft assignments, the structure of this presentation is up to you. While you are free to use visual or auditory aids, handouts, etc., you can also feel free to simply speak to the class. If you will be using some technological device, please let me know what you'll need at least 48 hours before your presentation (e.g. a screen, speaker, etc.) Like your Craft pieces, these presentations will be graded on how well your argument is structured, not on its length or your proficiency use of technological aids.

Workshop//

Poetry//

Our first three workshops will be poetry workshops, in which you will all submit between (1) and (3) poems to the class. As poetry is often a more fluid form than fiction, I will refrain from putting forth any specific prohibitions on length. Please don't take advantage of this latitude – it is obviously not appropriate to submit a single couplet, nor is it any more or less appropriate to submit a series of epic poems. If you think your poems are too long (or short), please alert me before your submission. During workshop, I will ask that the poet being workshopped remain silent. The poet should be taking detailed notes during the workshop, and once the workshop has ended, will have a brief Q&A period during which they are free to ask or explain any aspect of the piece they wish. Despite the freedom that poetry requires, I will specify that poems must be clearly delineated from one another – please do not have two separate poems share the same page. Also, all poems must have the poet's last name in the upper right corner. As you read the poems of your classmates, please be sure to provide line notes on your printed copy and a letter of feedback, both of which will be given to the poet at the end of the workshop. Please **print** your feedback letter and **attach it** to your printed copy. However, please also **e-mail me** a copy of that letter with the poet's last name in the subject line (e.g. Smith Feedback Letter). As we prepare for our first workshop, we will discuss how to make line notes and compose feedback letters in greater detail, and examine examples of helpful and unhelpful feedback.

Fiction//

Twice during the semester, everyone will submit 8-16 pages of fiction to be workshopped by the class. There are no restrictions in terms of content – I encourage you write about whatever you'd like, and to experiment with both form and content. Some of you likely have pieces you'd like to workshop that are longer than 16 pages, maybe even a complete draft of a novel. If that is the case, you will be allowed to submit a 16-page excerpt, with a brief (no more than 500 words) cover letter giving the class any context the section might need. Please restrict the contents of this letter to descriptive context rather than apologetics – do not, for example, point out what you think is or isn't working on a Craft level, and do not try to anticipate potential criticisms readers might provide. If you decide to use one of your submissions on an excerpt, then your other submission must be an original, complete work of short fiction that has been written specifically for the class. Just as in our poetry workshops, the author of the discussed piece must remain silent, so that the piece may speak for itself. Fiction should be submitted **in the following format**: 12-point font, double-spaced, 1" margins, with the author's last name and current page number in the upper right corner. If you are writing a piece that requires some deviation from that format (which is perfectly acceptable), please let me know before submission day. And, as we do in our poetry workshops, please provide both line edits and a feedback letter to the author (print one for the author, and e-mail one to me).

Final Portfolio//

In lieu of a final exam, you'll be asked to provide a portfolio of work on the last day of classes for me to peruse. The portfolio should contain (in the following order): all of your written craft assignments (originals or copies of what I've marked up and handed back to you), my response to your craft presentation, and all of your workshop submissions (again, w/ my written feedback, originals or copies). You will also be required to include a substantial revision of either a single fiction submission or both poems. This portfolio will be discussed in an office hour appointment during finals week. Rather than independently making appointments, I will provide a sign-up sheet during the last week of classes with a list of availabilities.

Office Hours//

During the semester, you are expected to schedule and attend (2) office hours: the first must be within (7) days after your first fiction or poetry workshop (up to you), while the second must be at least 48 hours after you have submitted your final portfolio. You are welcome to schedule additional office hours whenever you'd like and I have availability, and they needn't be so focused – if you'd like to spend 30 minutes talking about dogs or Spider-Man, I'll happily do so. However, office hour requests on your own work or course texts will take priority (in that order). To request an office hour, please do so via e-mail (jm4496@nyu.edu), writing your primary concern in the subject line (e.g. "Fiction Submission 2", "Craft Presentation", "Forever Overhead", etc.) and two availabilities (time and date) in the body of your e-mail. Face-to-face meetings are preferred, but office hours over the phone can also be arranged. You are guaranteed 30 minutes for each office hour appointment – whether we can speak longer depends on my schedule (the sole exception being your final portfolio appointment, which will be 45 minutes long).

While you ought not feel obligated to make an office hour if you don't feel the need to do so, I encourage you to, so that I can get a fuller sense of your thought process as a reader and writer and provide you with more insightful feedback.

Attendance// *What happens if I don't show up?*

Regular attendance is absolutely crucial to the functioning of this course – without it, the whole effort falls apart. Considering our very reasonable time slot, I expect you to show up on time and prepared for every one of our classes. Of course, mistakes happen, and you will be provided (1) unexcused absence for the duration of the course, no questions asked (not valid on days you are scheduled to be workshopped). Any additional absences will result in a drop of final your letter grade (e.g. A to A-). If you are more than 10 minutes late, you will be docked half of an unexcused absence; more than 15, and that will turn into one full unexcused absence. If you have some regular, extenuating circumstance – maybe your previous class ends at 12:15 and is on the other side of campus, or you're coming/going from/to an internship at the beginning/end of class – then alert me to that fact *as soon as possible*. An excused absence – flu, family problems, etc. – will hopefully never be taken, but will be granted if you provide some documentation (e.g. a doctor's note). And of course, if you have any advance notice of an absence – excused or otherwise – please contact me as soon as you know (even if you're contacting me 5 minutes before the start of class).

Grading// *How will you grade my work?*

There is *nothing preventing* everyone in this class from receiving an A so long as the expectations detailed below are fulfilled.

30% Participation

As a member of this class, you are expected to be fully present and to offer your thoughtful and honest opinions on both the published works we read and the fiction and poetry of your peers. This entails: coming to each class prepared and on time (e.g. having read the day's texts and bringing a copy with you); handing in your craft assignments on-time; engaging in critical and polite discussion about the text in front of you; providing written and oral feedback for your peers; scheduling and attending the (2) required office hours. If I feel you are falling short in any of these areas, I will let you know privately via e-mail. If you receive such a message at any point during the semester, please don't take it as a rebuke – I not only want you to perform to the best of your ability and get everything you can out of this class, I also want you to receive the best grade you can.

35% Craft and Workshop Submissions

Correctly submitting your craft assignments and fiction/poetry is vital to the workshop element of this course. By “correctly,” I mean: the text is submitted by the agreed upon deadline in the agreed upon format; the text is formatted as described in the above Structure section; the text is within the page range (1-2 double spaced pages for craft assignments, 8-16 double spaced pages for fiction, no more than 3 poems per submission).

35% Final Portfolio

As a reminder, your final portfolio should contain (in the following order): all of your written craft assignments (originals or copies of what I've marked up and handed back to you), my response to your craft presentation, all of your workshop submissions (again, w/ my written feedback, originals or copies), and a substantial

revision of either a single fiction submission or both poems.

Etiquette// *How am I expected to behave?*

In short: as an adult. Whether in workshop, craft discussion, or office hour, I expect each and every one of us to comport ourselves as adults, which means treating both ourselves and one another with respect at all times. This is particularly important in workshop – no matter what you may privately think about another student’s work, think carefully before you word your criticism. Consider: Is what I’m about to say respectful? Is what I’m about to say helpful? Have I given my comment the appropriate thought and care that the recipient of it deserves? These are questions that we will discuss before we begin the first workshop and, with practice, answering them will quickly become second-nature. In the event that you do make a mistake and issue a comment that you feel was inconsiderate, I expect you to, again, behave as an adult – own your mistake and apologize. If you are on the *receiving* end of a disrespectful comment, I *also* expect you to behave as an adult – don’t respond to disrespect with disrespect, and please accept genuine apologies graciously. These expectations are not purely prohibitive: as adults, I expect you to write and discuss stories with adult themes and content, and to voice any objections and disagreements you might have with me or your peers. In other words, this is not a lecture: I do not necessarily expect you to agree with my analysis of a text, and encourage you to offer your own contrary interpretation of a story or poem if you have one. I do, however, expect you to respect my role as instructor of the class and the thought I have put into this syllabus and reading list. **Disrespect of any kind toward anyone will not be tolerated.** If we can all meet these expectations, I can guarantee that this will be an excellent experience for all of us. And if you have any questions about these expectations, please contact me.

Plagiarism// *What happens if I get caught cheating?*

Obviously: bad news. You’ll receive a zero on the assignment in question, and you’ll be referred to the college for disciplinary action. And do remember that it’s 2017: it’s *remarkably* easy to get caught these days. And why would you even think to plagiarize? This might be the one course you take in which passing someone else’s work off as your own offers *no material benefit*. You’re not only wasting the time of everyone in the class (yourself included), but also needlessly risking your academic career. If at *any* point you feel so much pressure that you’d even think to plagiarize work, please contact me.

Calendar//

N.B. The texts are to be read **by their according dates** – e.g. you are expected to show up having **already read** (and maybe even written your craft assignment on) “Pigeon Feathers” on 10/10. All readings are subject to change, though I will do my best to give at least two weeks notice if I’ve decided to alter the schedule.

Week 1// 1 The world is all that is the case.

9/5 – Syllabus, Q&A, and General Housekeeping; Workshop and Craft Presentation Schedule

9/7 – D.H. Lawrence, “Why the Novel Matters”; R.M. Rilke, “Letters to a Young Poet” (Selections)

Week 2// Romantics (or; Songs from the TB Ward)

9/12 – Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ozymandias”; William Wordsworth, “The Solitary

Reaper”; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Eolian Harp”

9/14 – John Keats, “To Autumn,” “Ode to a Nightingale,” “Bright star...” “This living hand...”

Week 3// Famous — Dashes

9/19 – Emily Dickinson, “This World is not Conclusion (373),” “I dwell in Possibility – (466),” “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain, (340)”; Sylvia Plath, “Daddy,” “The Snowman on the Moor”

9/21 – Poetry Workshop 1

Week 4// The Ones You Read at Graduation

9/26 – Dylan Thomas, “Fern Hill,” “And Death Shall Have No Dominion”; John Ashbery, “Civilization and Its Discontents”

9/28 – Poetry Workshop 2

Week 5// That’s the Joke

10/3 – Dorothy Parker, “Resumé,” “A Certain Lady” Philip Larkin, “An Arundel Tomb,” “Faith Healing,” “Days,” “This Be The Verse”

10/5 – Poetry Workshop 3

Week 6// Getting Crafty

10/10 – *Seinfeld*, “The Merv Griffin Show”; Ellen Collet, “The Art of the Police Report”; John Updike, “Pigeon Feathers” OPTIONAL: Donald Barthelme, “The School” & George Saunders “The Perfect Gerbil”

10/12 – Fiction Workshop 1

Week 7// Teen Angst

10/17 – Michael Chabon, “The Little Knife”; David Foster Wallace, “Forever Overhead” OPTIONAL: Tao Lin, *Shoplifting From American Apparel*

10/19 – Fiction Workshop 2

Week 8// The Characters and Events in This Book Are Fictitious...

10/24 – ZZ Packer, “Brownies”; Lorrie Moore, “People Like That Are the Only People Here” OPTIONAL: David Foster Wallace, “Good Old Neon”

10/26 – Fiction Workshop 3

Week 9// I Can’t Believe I Ate the Whole Thing - Pt. 1

10/31 – Alexandra Kleeman, *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* (first half)

OPTIONAL: Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

11/2 – Fiction Workshop 4

Week 10// I Can’t Believe I Ate the Whole Thing - Pt. 2 (Midterm Grade and Evaluation)

11/7 – Alexandra Kleeman, *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* (second half)

OPTIONAL: George Saunders, “Bounty”

11/9 – Fiction Workshop 5

Week 11// The Metaphor is the Message

11/14 – Angela Carter, “The Company of Wolves”; Gabriel García Márquez, “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World”; Hayao Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*

OPTIONAL: David Lynch, *Eraserhead*

11/16 – Fiction Workshop 6

Week 12// The Page is a Flimsy Membrane

11/28 – Donald Barthelme, “Manual for Sons”; Jorge Luis Borges, “The Circular Ruins,” “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*”; *EarthBound*, Giygas Fight OPTIONAL: Charlie Kaufman, *Adaptation*

11/30 – Fiction Workshop 7

Week 13// Writing and Rewriting

12/5 – Raymond Carver, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”;

Nathan Englander, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank”

12/7 – Fiction Workshop 8

Week 14// The End is the Beginning is the End

12/12 – NO CLASS (Legislative Day, Monday schedule)

12/14 – Fiction Workshop 9; Class Postmortem and Q&A; Portfolio to be handed in.

FAQ//

Will I be graded on my talent?

See the grading section above – but in a word, *no*. Your final grade will reflect whether you met the expectations that have been outlined in this syllabus, not your natural skill as a writer or editor. If Marcel Proust were in this class and never handed in his workshop letters, he’d get a C. Remember what I wrote earlier – there’s absolutely nothing preventing every student in this class from receiving an A.

Can I use my laptop/tablet in class?

During Craft lessons, yes—if you have a digital copy of the reading or would like to take notes on a black rectangle, I’ll allow you to bring one in. Note that this rule is subject to change if I feel that this privilege becomes widely abused. However, there will be *no* digital devices on anyone’s desk during workshop.

Are the optional readings really optional?

Completely. I won’t discuss optional readings in class, and you will be at no disadvantage if you decide to not read any of them. The texts in question are on the syllabus simply because I think they not only appropriately complicate the other readings for the week, but are also examples of excellent work in their own right. You can, however, feel free to discuss optional texts with me during an office hour or write about them in your weekly craft assignments, either alone or with/against another piece.

Can I eat lunch in class?

I would prefer you not eat during class—it can make a mess, noise, etc. However, I also realize that we will be meeting at approximately lunch time, and that some of you might have schedules that prohibit you from getting food before or after class. If you fall into this category, then please bring something discreet—a banana, some yogurt, etc. Please don’t come in with fresh lobster and a bib. I would also encourage each student to bring in water, especially during workshop, as we’ll be speaking quite a bit.

Should I call, text, or e-mail?

Depends on what you need. Unless we’ve scheduled an office hour over the phone, there’s no reason to call me – it’s in both of our interests to have a paper trail so that we can hold each other to our respective appointments, and have a record of what we’ve agreed on w/r/t scheduling, projects, submissions, etc. (it is not unforeseeable that you or I forget that you’ve changed your presentation date or something like that). So this question really boils down to text or e-mail. In that case, I’ll propose the 5-Minute Rule – i.e. do you need me to see that information within 5 minutes? For example, if you’re running late to class/an office hour, that’s information I need to see within 5

minutes – please text. But if it’s something you’d like me to read, consider, and respond to in the evening, please send it over e-mail. Note that this rule isn’t for my convenience or to screen you all out – separating information in this way makes it far less likely that I will miss something you’ve sent me, and also makes it easier for me to access our exchanges throughout the semester.

Can I switch workshop dates with another student?

Yes, but only under the following conditions: you and the other student *both* need to send me e-mail confirmation that you’ll be switching at least 24 hours before distribution day. And of course, once work has been distributed, there will be *no* switching.

Can we read X instead of Y?

As I wrote earlier, the reading list/schedule portion of this syllabus is subject to change. If you know of a poem or piece of fiction that you think should be on the reading list, I welcome and will carefully consider any suggestions. These suggestions, however, should be made in the first half of the course.

Can my friend come to class?

While I’d love to be able to accommodate any friends, family, or acquaintances who are curious about our class, the answer to this is a hard **no**. This is for a few very important reasons: 1) All NYU CWP classes – even at the graduate level – have very carefully determined enrollment caps. Exceeding those caps makes it difficult to manage a class, and inhibits the time each student gets to discuss their work and that of their peers. 2) This is a class in which we’ll be likely be discussing and writing about deeply personal experiences. This requires a certain level of trust we provide in one another when we submit and discuss our work. This trust does *not* extend to observers or auditors of the class. In the spirit of this same trust, I will ask you to specifically *not show work written by your peers to anyone outside of this class for any reason*. A workshop submission is to be read by the people in that workshop only (the sole exception being if the writer gives explicit permission).

X student’s submissions/comments are making me uncomfortable. What should I do?

As detailed in the Etiquette section, members of the class will be treated as adults and extended the appropriate respect. So, if another student is making you uncomfortable through their comments or submissions, consider that to be a disagreement between two adults. If you feel comfortable approaching that student (privately or via e-mail) and expressing your concerns or discomfort, I encourage you to do so. However, if you do *not* feel comfortable approaching that student – for *whatever* reason – then please alert me (again, privately) so that I can address the situation accordingly. This extends also to the student-instructor relationship – if any texts I assign or any comments I make in class make you at all uncomfortable, I encourage you to respectfully let me know. Additionally, if there are any sensitivities you are aware of that might make you uncomfortable with texts we might read, please alert me to them at the start of the semester – I put this responsibility on you because we will be reading student responses and creative work in this class, the contents of which I cannot (and would not presume to) predict.

I’m freaking out over mid-terms/finals/my roommate...

Not a question, but very much a valid concern. If you think your mental health and wellbeing is affecting your class performance, please let me know (this is, by the way, all you need to say – I will not ask for details you do not choose to share) and I will do what I can to alleviate any unnecessary stress that this course might be causing. And remember that the NYU Wellness Exchange Hotline

can be reached 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at (212) 443-9999.