

Creative Writing: Introduction to Fiction & Poetry (CRWRI-UA.815.001)

MW: 9:30 AM - 10:45 AM

Room: TBD

Office Hours: By appointment

Instructor: Maria Lioutaia

Email: ml5681@nyu.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This class is an introduction to Creative Writing. That means you will be doing a lot of writing! You will also be doing a lot of reading, though keep in mind this is *not* a comparative literature class. You won't be analyzing the social context of a story, say, or writing essays on the meaning of a particular poem. Rather, you will be breaking stories and poems down as writers, which means studying the way these pieces use language, tension, syntax, voice, stakes, structure, and so on, and how you can employ these techniques in your own writing. Much of the course material will be veering away from the classical work you might have studied in your English classes, and swerve more towards the strange, the modern, the experimental. There is an emphasis on reading living writers.

You will also be writing your own stories and poems, experimenting with form and language, and helping each other's writing through critiquing and workshopping your classmates' work. Remember—and this is important—**you will be graded based on effort, participation, and your willingness to learn, not on talent or expertise.**

By the end of the semester, you will, hopefully, be curious and thoughtful readers and brave writers. You will learn how to have fun with your writing, to experiment, to write weird and wild and honest work.

STRUCTURE:

Mondays are Craft Days: we will explore the craft of writing poetry and fiction. This will involve discussing readings and any supplementary interviews, lectures, or video selections uploaded to our class website. We will break down the pieces to see why they're working (or not working) and how those techniques can be adapted to your own writing. Everyone is expected to have read all the texts, and to engage in thoughtful discussion with the rest of the class about the piece(s) in question.

There will also be a brief in-class writing exercise on that week's topic, to allow you to experiment right away with what you just learned and keep your writing muscles limber.

Wednesday are Workshops: we will workshop your original writings.

Throughout the semester, you will each be workshopped twice for your poetry, and twice for your fiction. Are you a fiction writer intimidated by poetry, or a poet frustrated by fiction? Not to worry—the point of this class is to experiment and to push your own artistic boundaries. What you will produce may surprise you. I will split the class into 3 groups for workshop, meaning you will each be workshopped once every 3 weeks. I strongly suggest you highlight your workshop weeks on your syllabus, put them into your calendar, and otherwise ensure you know ahead of time when you're being workshopped.

On days you are not being workshopped, you are expected to be engaged, generous, and insightful colleagues by participating in the discussion about the work of your classmates.

WORKSHOP ETIQUETTE / EXPECTATIONS:

Those being workshopped must submit their work by 11:59pm on the Saturday prior to class. Late work without prior arrangement with me (and without proper justification for lateness) will not be accepted.

In workshop, we will discuss the work of our classmates as writers. It is vital that you have read their work thoroughly. You are required to a) speak in class during the discussion, and b) present your colleagues with a typed and printed critique letter and line notes on their piece.

Line notes: You are each expected to print off your classmate's story or poem that's being workshopped, and to mark it up with line notes. We will go over in detail in class what makes for effective, useful line notes. You are to hand back this marked-up copy to your classmate at the conclusion of the workshop.

Feedback Letter: You are expected to present your classmates with, at minimum, 300 words of typed and printed critique. Provide reasoning and suggestions for improvement with your critique. This will prepare you for in-class workshop discussion and hone your skills of revision. Please print your feedback letter and attach it to your printed copy of the work. No handwritten letters. You are also required to print a copy of the feedback letter for me and hand it in to me in class. During our first Craft class we will discuss how to compose feedback letters and will examine examples of helpful and unhelpful feedback.

Submission format: For poetry, whatever spacing you wish, but 12pt. serif font (Times New Roman, Georgia, Garamond are all standard and welcome). Each poem presented on a separate page. Your name and page #s in the upper-right-hand corner of each page. I will refrain from putting forth any specific prohibitions on length of work submitted. Please don't take advantage of this latitude – it's obviously not appropriate to submit a single couplet or haiku, nor is it appropriate to submit a 100-

stanza epic poem. If you think your poems are too long (or short), please alert me before your submission.

For fiction, 8-14 pages, double-spaced, 12pt. serif font, 1" margins, your name and page #s in the upper-right-hand corner of each page. Some of you likely have pieces you'd like to workshop that are longer than 14 pages, maybe even a complete draft of a novel. If that is the case, you will be allowed to submit a 14-page excerpt, with a brief (no more than 500-word) cover letter giving the class any context the section might need. Please restrict the contents of this letter to descriptive context rather than discussing your own work on a craft level or trying to anticipate potential criticisms. 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.

There are no restrictions in terms of content—I encourage you to write about whatever you'd like, and to experiment with both form and subject matter. However, refrain from pieces that directly reference the class or your classmates.

When you are being workshopped, please remain silent and take extensive notes. Write down everything that is said—it's hard being in the hot seat, and you might not remember or process all that's been said until after the fact. After the workshop, you will have a few minutes to ask any questions to the class that might not have been covered during the discussion. Most importantly, listen. Really listen. It's not your turn to talk. Your writing speaks for itself. It is inevitable to feel fragile during workshop, but think of it this way: having a room full of smart readers giving your piece undivided attention and care is an extremely rare, valuable gift. Don't waste it being defensive, apologetic, or aggressive. That being said, if anything that happened in class made you in any way uncomfortable, come talk to me right away, I'm here to listen and to help.

How to workshop your classmates: Always remember that the goal of a workshop is not to make your classmate's piece into something you would write, but to help the author make it the best version of what they want it to be. That is the first step of critiquing—to understand what the author wants this piece to be, where they want it to go, and then to help them get it there. Think of yourself and the author as draft horses pulling the same weight together, heading in the same direction.

In workshop, and in your critique letters, we will begin by discussing what IS working in a piece, and how. As class policy, we will refrain from using terms such as "loved," "hated," etc. You can discuss what you found particularly effective, where your attention flagged and why, what fascinated you, in which passages you craved more detail, what felt confusing, vague, or yet-undeveloped. Keep the focus on the text, not the writer, and give a craft-based account of your reading experience. Above all, always be respectful, and mindful of power, voice, and privilege. Disrespect of any

kind toward anyone will not be tolerated. Understand the vulnerability that comes with submitting your work for others to read and comment on, and don't take advantage of it. Speak your thoughts, but also allow room for others to speak—let's not have one of those workshops where a couple voices dominate the conversation or negate the opinions of others. In workshops, some of the most fruitful results can come from differing opinions, from collaborative contradiction. We're working as a team to improve the piece being workshopped.

Entering a workshop means entering a pact with your classmates, a promise that you will put your best effort into the work of others to help them grow as writers. But don't assume that the only benefit you will receive is when you're being workshopped—some of the greatest, truest learning you will experience is when you are thoughtfully analyzing a classmate's story or poem.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

I am going to do my best not to make you buy a lot of (or, ideally, any) books. I will give printouts or send links/PDFs in lieu of purchasing books whenever possible.

OFFICE HOURS:

During the semester, you are expected to schedule and attend (2) office hours: the first must be within 1 week after your first workshop, the second must be within 1 week of any of your other three workshops. You are welcome to schedule additional office hours whenever you'd like and I have availability. During these meetings, I will be able to get to know you and your writing goals in greater detail than in our normal class sessions. To request a meeting, please do so via e-mail (ml5681@nyu.edu). You are guaranteed 30 minutes for each appointment.

POLICIES:

Attendance: This is maybe the only class you'll take in which your presence and your effort is integral to the experience of your classmates. Therefore, everyone is required to attend every class. You're allowed one unexcused absence (however, NOT on days you are scheduled to be workshopped). After that, each unexcused absence will lower your final grade by a letter (A to B, etc.) Of course, emergencies happen. If one does, just email me and we can discuss on a case-by-case basis.

Tardiness (arriving more than 10 minutes late) is also taken seriously. If you're tardy three times that counts as one unexcused absence. In a class like this, where we are sharing and discussing personal work, being absent or tardy can be very disruptive and hinders the workshop environment.

If you have some regular, extenuating circumstance, then alert me to that fact as soon as possible. And, of course, if you have any advance notice of an absence—excused or otherwise—please contact me as soon as you know.

Plagiarism: Don't. You'll receive a zero on the assignment in question, and you'll be referred to the college for disciplinary action. It's utterly pointless, anyway: this might be the one course you take in which passing someone else's work off as your own offers no material benefit. Again: *you are not being graded on talent*. Don't waste our time, don't risk your academic career. If at any point you feel so much pressure that you'd even think to resorting to plagiarism, please contact me.

Late Work: Late work will not be accepted unless you have made previous arrangements with me and have appropriate need for additional time.

Technology: No laptops, phones, tablets, iPads, iPods, or any other electronics will be allowed in class unless otherwise instructed. Make sure to print a physical copy of your readings ahead of time.

Food: Snacks and drinks are allowed, as long as they're discreet. Please don't eat while people are discussing sensitive subjects or reading work.

Difficult Material: Unless we see explicit evidence in workshop that the speaker of a work is the writer themselves, we will assume the speaker is fictional. However, if the nature of your work is particularly disturbing, such as containing murder, depression, suicide, or severe mental distress, such as seems to be a possible cry for help, I will email to ask if you are okay. Please send an email putting this work in context before submitting work, especially for workshop, that may be interpreted as such. If you do feel you need someone to talk to at any point in the semester, please feel safe to reach out to me and I can guide you to the NYU Wellness Center. And remember that the NYU Wellness Exchange Hotline can be reached 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at (212) 443-9999.

GRADING:

Class Participation, Attendance, Office Hours (25%)

What we are attempting to do in this class is communicate—with the world through our writing, as well as with each other. It's never easy, but the life of an artist is to keep trying. This class relies on discourse, on the active and generous participation of every person. Therefore, your attendance and engagement in the class is a major factor in your mark. This means completing your assigned readings, being present in class physically and mentally, and being a collaborative classmate.

Workshop submissions and Craft Exercises (30%)

This includes the correct submission of all of the written work you are expected to complete for this class: your scheduled workshop work and the craft exercises completed in class. Correct submission means: the text is submitted by the agreed-upon deadline in the agreed-upon format (see Workshop Expectations section).

Workshop Critique (20%)

This includes your participation in your classmates' workshops, as well as the line notes and critique letters you provide to your classmates (and, a copy of the critique letters to me). Even if you are absent during a given workshop, you are still expected to provide your classmate with a critique letter and line notes of their work.

Portfolio (20%)

In lieu of a final exam, you will provide a portfolio of work on the last day of classes for me to read. The portfolio should contain all of your written craft assignments and all of your workshop submissions. You are also required to include a substantial revision of either a single fiction submission or both poetry submissions. This portfolio is a demonstration of your accomplishments! It should be in a presentation folder, no spiral bound notebooks or manila folders. Final portfolios will be due at the beginning of the last day of class (Wednesday, December 12).

Why I Write Assignment (5%)

You will be required to write a short personal essay (2-3 pages, 12pt serif font, double-spaced) reflecting on your experience with writing, specifically why you write and what you hope to gain from this class. This will give me deeper insight into you and your goals for this class (and will also be instructive for you).

Extra Credit (up to 10%)

I will occasionally post upcoming readings and other literary events on the class website. If you attend one of those during the semester and give me a 500-word response to it, I will award you extra credit.

CALENDAR:

The texts are to be read by their posted dates – e.g. you are expected to show up on Monday, September 10 having already read “Shitty First Drafts.” 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

W/9/5—Syllabus, workshop etiquette, Q&A, general housekeeping
Homework: Why I Write Assignment

WEEK 2

M/9/10: What are we doing here?

[“Shitty First Drafts”](#) by Anne Lamott

[“Workshop is not for you”](#) by Jeremiah Chamberlin

[“The Talent of the Room”](#) by Michael Ventura

[“How to Become a Writer”](#) by Lorrie Moore

“Home improvement: Revision as Renovation” by Benjamin Percy

W/9/12—Workshop: Group A

WEEK 3

M/9/17: Voice in Poetry

“IRL” by Tommy Pico

Selected poems from “The Joy of Missing Out” by Ana Božičević

Selected poems from “There are more beautiful things than Beyonce” by Morgan Parker

Selected poems by Hanif Abduqarrib

W/9/19—Workshop: Group B

WEEK 4

M/9/24: Spoken Word

YouTube video links and sound files TDB (slam poetry and spoken word poetry)

W/9/26—Workshop: Group C

WEEK 5

M/10/1: Dark Humor in Poetry

“Dinosaurs in the Hood” by Danez Smith

“When I grow up I want to be a list of further possibilities” by Chen Chen

Excerpt from “New American Best Friend” by Olivia Gatwood

Excerpt “Grief Performance” by Emily Kendal Frey

Excerpt from “Henry Kissinger, Mon Amour” by Conor Bracken

Excerpt from “Witch Hunt” by Juliet Escoria

W/10/3—Workshop: Group A

WEEK 6

M/10/8: Fall recess, no classes scheduled

T/10/9: Legislative Day—classes meet according to a Monday schedule

Lyric Poetry

(TBD) by Sharon Olds

[“Confession”](#) and [“The White Poet Wants to Know Why I Don’t Write More Arab Poems”](#) by Leila Chatti

“On Kindness” by Aracelis Girmay

(TBD) by Dorianne Laux

W/10/10—Workshop: Group B

WEEK 7

M/10/15: Hybrid Texts

Excerpt from “Bluets” by Maggie Nelson

Excerpt from “Citizen” or “Don’t Let Me Be Lonely” by Claudia Rankine

Excerpt from “Autobiography of Red” by Anne Carson

W/10/17—Workshop: Group C

WEEK 8

M/10/22: Speculating about the Speculative

“Flesh and Blood” by Helen Phillips

“[All Summer In A Day](#)” by Ray Bradbury

“Reeling for the Empire” by Karen Russell

Master’s Review [discussion of the strange](#)

W/10/24—Workshop: Group A

WEEK 9

M/10/29: Worldbuilding (Real and Imagined)

Handout of story and poem excerpts

Excerpts from “Annihilation” by Jeff Vandermeer

“Engineering Impossible Architectures” essay by Karen Russell

“Move Mountains: Activating Setting” essay by Benjamin Percy

W/10/31—Workshop: Group B

WEEK 10

M/11/5: Form and Structure

“[Chicxulub](#)” by T.C. Boyle

“[You Can Find Love Now](#)” by Ramona Ausubel

“The Inventory” by Carmen Maria Machado

“Consider the Orange: Meaningful Repetition” by Benjamin Percy

W/11/7—Workshop: Group C

WEEK 11

M/11/12: The Short of it (Flash Fiction)

“[Collective Nouns for Humans in the Wild](#)” by Kathy Fish

“[Space Man](#)” by Kathy Fish

“[Going North](#)” by Andrew Mitchell

“Dinosaur” by Bruce Holland Rogers

“Scooter” by Meredith Alling

“The Three “L”s You Need to Make Lovely Little Fictions” by Tara Laskowski

W/11/14—Workshop: Group A

WEEK 12

M/11/19: Stakes and Escalation

“Children” by Helen Phillips

“Skin” by Roald Dahl
“The Dinner Party” by Joshua Ferris
“The School” by Donald Barthelme
“The Perfect Gerbil” essay by George Saunders
“[Incremental Perturbations](#)” essay by John Barth (excerpts)
W/11/21—Student Thanksgiving Recess, no classes scheduled

WEEK 13

M/11/26: Character and Motivation

Excerpts from “Fifteen Dogs” by Andre Alexis
“The New Boyfriend” by Kelly Link
“Sea Oak” by George Saunders
“Off” by Aimee Bender
“Character Motivation” essay by Aimee Bender

W/11/28—Workshop: Group B

WEEK 14

M/12/3: Time

“What is Behind” by Tomiko Breland
Additional Readings TBD

W/12/5—Workshop: Group C

WEEK 15

M/12/10: Beginnings

Handout of excerpted openings

W/12/12: Endings (Last class! No workshop, a short final craft lecture instead)

“Animal Crackers” by Hannah Tinti
“Endings: Parting Is Such Sweet Sorrow” by Elissa Schappell
Your portfolio is due at the beginning of class.