

Creative Writing: Introduction to Poetry & Fiction

Semester: Spring 2019
Course Code: CRWRI-UA.815.023
Mon/Wed 12:30 – 1:45 PM
Location: TBA
Instructor: Elaine Chou
Contact: ehc350@nyu.edu
Office Hours: Wed 2:00 – 4:00 pm

OVERVIEW

The objective of this class is two-fold: first, to introduce you to the craft aspect of both poetry and fiction. Together, we will deconstruct what makes a poem or a piece of fiction work. What are the devices and techniques the poet/author is using? Secondly, this class will introduce you to the workshop model, where you submit your own work for peer critique. Hopefully, the craft aspects you learn will transfer over to your own writing. The first half of the semester will be devoted to poetry, the second half to fiction. Mondays will be devoted to craft (with in-class writing exercises), while Wednesdays will be devoted to workshop.

Please note that laptops, cell phones and tablets are not allowed in class.

READINGS & RESPONSES

Each week, you will read **two poems or two short stories**. The reading list has been selected to reflect a diverse range of voices, backgrounds and forms. When you first read the piece, let yourself get caught up in it as a reader. When you read it for the second time, this is where you put on your “writer” glasses: read with an eye for structure, language, voice, character, plot, setting, etc. What makes this piece effective? Why? How does it reach its objectives? In other words, what made you be swept into the story’s artifice when you first read it as a reader?

Each Monday, **submit a response for the assigned reading**. These should be three paragraphs long, single-spaced. Analyze and deconstruct what makes each piece work (or what doesn’t work) and lastly, compare the two pieces to each other. Note that these responses should not be about “liking” or “disliking” the story. What are the craft lessons you can take away from it?

In lieu of having to purchase books, all readings will be made available electronically on NYU Classes. **Please print them out, mark them up as you read and bring them to class.**

WORKSHOP

For fiction, the submission length is **10 to 20** pages maximum. For poetry, it’s **3 to 6** pages (whether you submit one poem or several is up to you). Submissions should always be **double spaced, size 12 font and paginated**. Submissions must be printed out with enough copies for everyone and handed in **one week prior** to the day of your workshop. If your work includes extreme violence or sexual assault, please include a content warning at the beginning.

Each student will be workshopped **three times**: one set of poems and two short stories. Students will be put into four different workshop groups. I strongly suggest finishing a piece **a week before you must submit it**; that way, you can spend a few days away from it, revise it, and catch any typos before turning it in. As for “old” work, if you have already workshopped a piece and consider it finished, the piece most likely will not benefit from workshop.

When it is your turn to go, the traditional workshop rule is to remain silent. We will discuss when and if this “rule” should be broken. After your workshop, you may ask the class questions. It’s a good idea to come to class with **one or two** questions you’d like to ask. Although it’s natural to feel defensive about your piece, avoid justifying your decisions during this time.

Workshop etiquette is essential to making workshop a productive experience for all involved. It should go without saying that the kind of criticism we are giving to the writer is constructive criticism. Like your reading responses, it should not concern us whether or not we “like” or “dislike” a piece. In fact, **please refrain from using the words like, dislike, love and hate** during workshop. The reasoning behind this is that once these words have been introduced into the workshop, students begin measuring and comparing their story or poem’s worth.

First, we will discuss **what makes the piece work**. What were the piece’s notable strengths? For example, for poetry: Were the images precise and vivid? Was the structure rhythmic? Were the emotions well evoked? For example, for fiction: Was the setting vivid and detailed? Was the language precise and evocative? Were the characters fleshed out and memorable?

Next, we will discuss **how the piece can be the best version of itself**. It’s important not to try to *change* the piece into something it isn’t. After all, our personal tastes are all different and subjective. The goal of workshop is to look at a piece through new perspectives that aren’t the author’s. We all have “blind spots” and when you’ve looked at your own writing for many hours, it’s hard to obtain any distance from it, to get outside of it and look at it with a more objective POV. This is where your peer readers come in.

Rather than go around the room and read a list of your individual concerns, workshop works best as a **group discussion**. For example, if someone brings up world building in a story, this is the moment for everyone to join and discuss it.

If someone’s work unintentionally has sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist etc elements, this may be discussed in workshop. You are encouraged to speak up or you can always see me after class. Please note that being “called out” is not an attack on someone’s character, simply an act of care. We are all rooting for each other to create the best work that we can before it goes out into the world to be read by the general public. That being said, workshop is not a space for debating an author’s politics. For example, if a story is about a woman getting an abortion, this is not a space to discuss if abortion is right or wrong.

Note: Please do not interrupt each other. When introducing your thoughts, try to use I-focused language like, “I thought this part was unclear” versus “This part was totally unclear.” It’s also important that people are given equal access to discussion. If you speak for an unusually long amount of time, repeatedly throughout class, this takes away other students’ ability to speak.

WORKSHOP LETTERS

For each workshopped piece, **bring two printed copies**: one for the student and one for me. Letters should be four paragraphs long (single spaced).

Always begin your letters with “Dear Student’s Name” and sign off with a formal greeting such as “Sincerely.” Since workshop can be an extremely vulnerable space because we are opening up our work for critique, letters must be written **thoughtfully, generously and professionally**.

As with the workshop itself, begin with a full paragraph on **what worked** in the piece. Afterwards, choose a total of **three things you think the piece could improve on**. Even if you believe there are more than three things, you must choose the three that feel the most necessary. Remember to provide evidence and explanations for your constructive criticisms. For example, don’t simply write, “The main character felt undeveloped to me”; follow it up with examples of why you felt this way. It’s a good idea to reference specific lines or page numbers. In short, write the quality of letter that you would like to receive.

Manuscripts Comments: In addition to your letter, please mark up the manuscript. Remember not to try to change the voice or style of the writer. Editorial suggestions (deletions, word choice, syntax etc) can be helpful in *moderation*. Instead, note sentences that moved you or that you thought were well written. Note also the places of confusion or any questions you have. Grammatical & spelling corrections can be helpful to the writer, but aren’t obligatory.

FINAL PORTFOLIO

At the end of the semester, you will submit a final portfolio of the revised three pieces you have workshopped. **These three pieces must have significant revisions**. If you choose to do the extra credit assignment, please include it in the portfolio. Create a cover page by choosing a title and an image for your portfolio that you feels captures what you’ve created here.

GRADING

Reading responses – 20%
Workshop pieces – 30%
Workshop letters – 10%
Class participation – 20%
Final portfolio – 20%

Plagiarism of any kind is not tolerated. Any instance of plagiarism will be reported to the university and appropriate disciplinary action will be taken.

EXTRA CREDIT

Choose a poem **or** short story from the Suggested Reading list (see below). Write a poem (3 to 6 pages) or a flash fiction piece (under 1500 words) that emulates the structure and form of the piece—but not the content matter. If you have any questions on this, please ask me.

ATTENDANCE

You are permitted two unexcused absences. Your grade will be reduced by 1/3 of a letter for any additional unexcused absences. If you arrive more than 20 minutes late, it will be considered an absence. If you cannot come to the two make-up classes, this will not count as an absence.

OFFICE HOURS

I encourage you to come to office hours three times a semester. An ideal time to come is after you have been workshopped so we can discuss how your experience was and if you have any concerns or questions.

DISABILITY DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Academic accommodations are available to any student with a chronic, psychological, visual, mobility, learning disability, or who is deaf or hard of hearing. Students should register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980, or at 726 Broadway (2nd floor) or at www.nyu.edu/csd.

STUDENT WELLNESS POLICY

Unless there is explicit evidence in workshop that the speaker of a work is the writer themselves, we assume the speaker is fictional. However, certain content relating to murder, depression, suicide, sexual assault, or severe mental distress, such as seems to be a possible cry for help, will likely prompt the instructor's attention. 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.

READING LIST

“Poplar Street” Chen Chen
From *Citizen*: “You are you in the dark, in the car...” Claudia Rankine
“A Small Needful Fact” Ross Gay
“Nightstick [A Mural for Michael Brown]” Kevin Young
“To the Man Who Shouted ‘I Like Pork Fried Rice’ at Me on the Street” Franny Choi
“Speak Now, or Forever. Hold Your Peace” Patricia Smith
“Kissing in Vietnamese” Ocean Vuong
“Saguaro” Javier Zamora
“Anna May Wong Has Breakfast At Tiffany’s” Sally Wen Mao
“Dinosaurs in the Hood” Danez Smith
“Backwards” Warsan Shire
“First Language Lesson” John Yau
“Filipino Boogie” Jessica Hagedorn
“Lines Composed at 34 North Park Street, on Certain Memories of My White Grandmother Who Loved Me and Hated Black People Like Myself” Shane McCrae

Recommended poetry reading: “The United States Welcomes You” Tracy K. Smith. “The Master’s House” Solmaz Sharif. “How I Got That Name” Marilyn Chin. “Alternate Names for Black Boys” Danez Smith. “Nature Poem” Tommy Pico. “100 Bells” Tarfia Faizullah. “Self-Portrait With & Without” Chen Chen.

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“The Interpreter of Maladies” Jhumpa Lahiri
“Child’s Play” Alice Munro
“Off” Aimee Bender
“David” Maxine Beneba Clarke
“Exteriors” and “Interiors” Kathleen Collins
“Intimation” Alexandra Kleeman
“Heads of the Colored People: Four Fancy Sketches, Two Chalk Outlines and No Apology”
Nafissa Thompson-Spires
“Fable” Charles Yu
“Me and Miss Mandible” Donald Barthelme
“How to Become a Writer” Lorrie Moore
“Average Joe” Judy Budnitz
“The New Boyfriend” Kelly Link
“Hitting Budapest” NoViolet Bulawayo
“The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary” Ken Liu

Recommended short fiction reading: “Happy Endings” Margaret Atwood. “Girl” Jamaica Kincaid. “Belles Lettres” Nafissa Thompson-Spires. “Five Short Stories” Lydia Davis (on Five Dials). “Especially Heinous” Carmen Maria Machado. “Orientation” Daniel Orozco. “Ogres of East Africa” Sofia Samatar.

SCHEDULE

Note: Our class begins one week later (the first week of February versus the last week of January). There is therefore no class on January 28 and 30. Two make-up classes will be scheduled. The provisional make-up class dates are: May 13 and May 15.

WK	DATE	IN CLASS	HOMEWORK
1	Feb 4	Review syllabus.	Read Chen Chen and Claudia Rankine Come prepared ready to discuss
	Feb 6	Practice workshop Submissions due from group 1	Critique workshop group 1 Read Ross Gay and Kevin Young Write reading response
2	Feb 11	Discuss assigned readings: <i>Dedication</i> Writing exercise	Read Franny Choi and Patricia Smith Write reading response
	Feb 13	Workshop group 1 Submissions due from group 2	Critique workshop group 2
3	Feb 18	Discuss assigned readings: <i>Incident</i> Writing exercise	Read Ocean Vuong and Javier Zamora Write reading response
	Feb 20	Workshop group 2 Submissions due from group 3	Critique workshop group 3
4	Feb 25	Discuss assigned readings: <i>Motif/Conceit</i> Writing exercise	Read Sally Wen Mao and Danez Smith Write reading response
	Feb 27	Workshop group 3 Submissions due from group 4	Critique workshop group 4
5	Mar 4	Discuss assigned readings: <i>Re-imaginings</i> Writing exercise	Read Warsan Shire and John Yau Write reading response
	Mar 6	Workshop group 4 Submissions due from group 1	Critique workshop group 1
6	Mar 11	Discuss assigned readings: <i>Repetition</i> Writing exercise	Read Jessica Hagedorn and Shane McCrae Write reading response
	Mar 13	Workshop group 1 Submissions due from group 2	Critique workshop group 2
Spring Recess: March 18 – 24			
7	Mar 25	Discuss assigned readings: <i>White space</i> Writing exercise	Read Jumpha Lahiri and Alice Munro Write reading response
	Mar 27	Workshop group 2 Submissions due from group 3	Critique workshop group 3

8	Apr 1	Discuss assigned readings: <i>Memory</i> Writing exercise	Read Aimee Bender and Maxine Clarke Write reading response
	Apr 3	Workshop group 3 Submissions due from group 4	Critique workshop group 4
9	Apr 8	Discuss assigned readings: <i>Voice</i> Writing exercise	Read Kathleen Collins and Alexandra Kleeman Write reading response
	Apr 10	Workshop group 4 Submissions due from group 1	Critique workshop group 1
10	Apr 15	Discuss assigned readings: <i>Point of View</i> Writing exercise	Read Nafissa Thompson-Spires and Charles Yu Write reading response
	Apr 17	Workshop group 1 Submissions due from group 2	Critique workshop group 2
11	Apr 22	Discuss assigned readings: <i>Experimental form</i> Writing exercise	Read Donald Barthelme and Lorrie Moore Write reading response
	Apr 24	Workshop group 2 Submissions due from group 3	Critique workshop group 3
12	Apr 29	Discuss assigned readings: <i>Humor</i> Writing exercise	Read Judy Budnitz and Kelly Link Write reading response
	May 1	Workshop group 3 Submissions due from group 4	Critique workshop group 4
13	May 6	Discuss assigned readings: <i>Speculative</i> Writing exercise	Read NoViolet Bulawayo and Ken Liu Write reading response
	May 8	Workshop group 4	
14	May 13	Discuss assigned readings: <i>Revisionist writing</i> Writing exercise	Work on your final portfolios
	May 15	FINAL PORTFOLIOS DUE TODAY	

Group One

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4. _____

Group Two

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Group Three

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Group Four

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