

# CREATIVE WRITING: INTRODUCTION TO FICTION&POETRY

## CRWRI-UA.815

SPRING 2019

Instructor: Gbenga Adesina

Monday/Wednesday:8AM-9:15AM

Email: gea257@nyu.edu

Classroom: Room BOBS\_836

Office hours: By appointment

*"I have walked three nights in the last city you breathed in, trying to read everything"*  
—Aracelis Girmay

## Overview

Welcome. What a joy to have you.

Quick question: What does laughter sound like in your language? How do you capture the emotions and aliveness of the humans around you ( real or imagined) and precisely lay them on the page like a finely wrought work of craft (sculpture, stone masonry, etc)?

I think of writing, often, in terms of work of hands. A thing finely, patiently, and with much alertness, crafted. In a way, this is the goal of this class.

This class aims then to give you a solid foundation in creative writing and reading. How to write articulate, convincing and deeply felt creative pieces( short stories, poems, novellas, essays etc.) and how to read a work of literature and see, like connecting map lines, the logic of beauty with which it was made. This is called reading like a writer. And it's a very core component of class.

Together, we will create a kind, inspiring and safe space, and within that space we will pursue our class objective through craft, and workshop sessions. We will study the old, high art (Shakespeare, John Keats, Toni Morrison etc.) but we will also pay great attention to contemporary writers and artists working in our lifetime and the new ways they continue to enlarge the genius of what it means to make excellent art.

I hope you are as excited as I am about our class. See you. Joy

## General Structure

\* **CRAFT CLASSES:** This will be on Mondays, and is a crucial part of our sessions together. We will focus on the assigned materials. It is important that you read these materials before class, make notes and be prepared to discuss and offer your views if called on. We will dig into the things in between the lines, we will learn how to track and see the blueprints of a piece of writing, and how we can use some of those same tools and blueprints in our own writing. This, I believe, is the secret of all great writing. As the course title suggests, we will focus on poetry and prose forms but we will also be interested in what we can learn from other forms( songs and song lyrics, visual art and even tweets and blog posts etc.). After each craft class, you will be required to do an imitation of one of the stories or poems

discussed or to write a short essay(one page) on the craft lessons you got from some of the discussed pieces. This will be due the following Sunday by 7pm.

### **\*MATERIALS:**

I have gone a great length to provide links to all the materials we'll be studying in class. Check the course schedule. It is important that you study these materials before class.

**\*Workshop Sessions:** This is the lifeline of our class. It will happen on Wednesdays. This is where you will put into use the blueprints and tools you glean from the workshop. This is also where you will learn how to be a good and productive member of a creative commune. We will have generative writing sessions using prompts and other creative means. We will also have sessions where you will be required to bring in original writing. All members of the class will pay quality attention to a work being workshopped and will strive to give helpful feedback. You will be divided into groups on the first day of class and we'll work out a workshopping schedule for all the groups. If your work is to be workshopped on a given Wednesday, then you are required to submit that work to me and your classmates latest by the preceding Sunday(7pm).

### **MORE NOTE ON WORKSHOP:**

Also **PRINT OUT** your copy of the materials to be workshopped (yours or/and that of your colleagues before class). Always write your written response to the submitted works before class and make two copies (one for the student being workshopped and one for me). Response must start with attention and well considered views. Begin, I suggest, with what is working in the writing, with a brief description of your idea of the work (the form, works by other writers it reminds you of etc.) and then your suggestions on how to make it better. This must be done in goodwill, utmost decency and camaraderie.

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

### **WEEK ONE**

**Monday, January 28th:**

**We are going to introduce ourselves, set house rules, workshop schedules, go over the semester plan, expectations, requirements etc.**

**We are going to have a brief, "Why do you write?" session**

**And perhaps a writing exercise.**

### **A LITTLE NOTE:**

This class, being the first, we will not have a full discussion of the materials below. But I have provided them, so that if you so wish you can study them on your own. Here are brief historical sketches and materials in literature (and life) in which a young writer or an artist makes the decision to write, and insights from great writers on writing and creativity.

There are also materials produced by some greats in their youth ( and how those works were crucial steps either as beginners or writers in the intermediate stage).

### Materials:

#### WHEN THEY WERE YOUNG LIKE US

- \* Letters to a Young Poet (first letter).      \* An Imitation of Spenser by John Keats (age 19)  
by Rainer Maria Rilke.
- \* How to Become A Writer by Lorrie Moore.      \* I thought That I Could not Be Hurt by  
Sylvia Plath (age 14 )
- \* Eight Letters to a Young Writer (1st) by Teju Cole      \* On the Joy of Living by Sylvia Plath  
(age 17)
- \* Zadie Smith and Jeffrey Eugenides' Interview on Writing.      \* A City's Death by Fire By  
Derek Walcott (age 18)
- \* You in America by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.      \* Digging by Seamus Heaney (age 25)  
(at early short story, age 24)

**Wednesday, January 30th:**

#### General Class Workshop

#### WEEK TWO

**Monday, February 4th:**

#### CRAFT CLASS: SENTENCES

**Sentences are the live-wire of writing. When they are greatly done, the reader feels the flux in their body. It's benign electricity. We find a piece of writing compelling largely because the sentences are compelling. So why do we young writers often lock up our sentences like things in a cage? How can we free our sentences up? How do you curate the elements of tone, mood, energy, diction, live, humor, flow, and a signature voice through the facility of the sentence?**

### Materials:

#### CORE READING

- \* Girl by Jamaica Kincaid.      \* The Wild Iris by Louise Gluck
- \* A Hunger Like None Since by Teju Cole.      \* He Wishes for the Clothes of Heaven by W.B. Yeats
- \* Their Eyes Were Watching God(excerpt)      \* American Pastoral(excerpt) by Phillip Roth  
by Zora Neale Hurston.

- \* Watching Spider-man in Santo Domingo by Junot Diaz. Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong by Ocean Vuong. \*Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong(video)

### **ADDITIONAL READING**

- \*53 of the Best Opening Sentences in Literature
- \* Beloved( excerpt) by Toni Morrison. \*Fragment by Sappho
- \* \* The New Intelligence by Timothy Donnelly

### **Wednesday, February 6th Workshop**

### **WEEK THREE**

**Monday, February 11th:**

### **CRAFT CLASS: OUTGROWING CLICHES**

**Maturing as a writer is finding ways to sidestep and subvert cliches. Cliches are walls that hem us within the borders of a narrow world.They drain your writing. The reader yawns repeatedly. Writing a good sentence is the process of individuation. Cliche is you ceding power and accepting powerlessness in your craft. So how do you blast through that narrow wall? How do we transcend not just cliché words and sentences, but also cliché perception, cliché seeing, cliché being, cliché rhythm and tone in our writing?**

#### **Materials:**

- \* The Huntress by Sofia Samatar \* Brand New Ancients by Kate Tempest(videos)
- \* When I Consider the African-American \* People Like That Are the Only People Here  
by Terrance Hayes by Lorrie Moore
- \* Why Do We Hate Cliches (New York Times). \*Avoiding Cliches (WritersDigest)
- \* David Foster Wallace's Commencement Speech. \*Wishing Well by Gregory Pardlo  
at Kenyon University(video)
- \*From Black Maria by Aracelis Girmay

### **Wednesday, February 13th: Workshop**

### **WEEK FOUR**

**Monday, February 18th**

### **CRAFT CLASS: ATTENTION AND DESCRIPTIVE GENIUS**

The opposite of cliché is willful and sustained attention. Both physical and verbal. The singularity of your attention and descriptive power enliven your writing. As young writers, how do we take our first steps on this lifelong journey?

**Materials:**

- \* The Fish by Elizabeth Bishop.
- \* I Go Back to May 1937 by Sharon Olds.
- \* The Gift by Li-Young Lee.
- \* Austerlitz (excerpt) by W.G. Sebald
- \* The Guest by Albert Camus
- \* The Shipping News(excerpt) by Annie Proulx
- \* A Poem in Which I try to Express My Glee at the Music My Friend Has Given Me by Ross Gay

**Wednesday, February 20th:  
Workshop**

**WEEK FIVE**

**Monday, February 25th**

**CRAFT CLASS: OUR PAIN AND THE PAIN OF OTHERS**

We will discuss grief, melancholy, loneliness, and alienation in literature. We will also discuss estrangement, ethical loneliness, violence, trauma, and how are they embed in literature across canons and traditions. The idea here is to make us sensitive young writers who can articulately write about our own pain and the grief and pain of others.

**Materials:**

**CORE READING:**

- \* Notes of A Native Son by James Baldwin
- \* Unsteady by X Ambassadors
- \* Fugue of Death by Paul Celan.
- \* Kingdom Animalia by Aracelis Girmay.
- \* Warsaw Shire(Video)
- \* In Bed by Joan Didion
- \* I Explain a Few Thing by Pablo Neruda

\*Divine Wrath by Adelia Prado (tr by Ellen More Watson). \*Colosseum by Jericho Brown.

**ADDITIONAL READING**

- \* \* Explaining the Attempt to the Doctors, Beginning with Two Lines From Darwish by Leila Chatti
- \* Upon Reading That Eric Dolphy Transcribed Even the Calls of Certain Species of Birds by John Murillo
- \* Angel Nafis by Angel Nafis. \*
- \* The Empathy Exam( excerpt) by Leslie Jamison

**Wednesday, February 27th -Workshop**

**WEEK SIX**

**Monday, March 4th**

## CRAFT CLASS: Excursions in Poetry

We will consider: Elements of poetry ( Prosody, Forms, Line breaks, stanza and sub genres within poetry etc). We will also consider a brief history and evolution of poetry in the Western Canon (across epochs and eras), and how this intersects with other global canons; our place as young writers in writing within and against these canons and traditions.

### Materials:

- \* The Epic of Gilgamesh (first page).
- \* Ovid's Metamorphosis(first page).
- \* If no Love is...by Chaucer
- \* Lyrical Ballads( excerpt, first part) by William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge
- \* The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock by T.S. Eliot
- \* Pastoral by William Carlos Williams.
- \* One Art by Elizabeth Bishop
- \* Dreams by Laughston Hughes
- \* The Double Image by Anne Sexton
- \* Light of the World by Derek Walcott.
- \* Black Berry Picking by Seamus Heaney
- \* American Sonnet Terrance Hayes
- \* liad by Homer(first page)
- \* Dante's Inferno(Canto I)
- \* Love's Secret's by William Blake
- \* Song of Myself XLVIII by Walt Whitman
- \* Canto I by Ezra Pound
- \* The Candle, A Saint by Wallace Stevens
- \* Epilogue by Robert Lowell
- \* We Real Cool by Gwendolyn Brooks
- \* Won't You Celebrate with Me by Lucille Clifton
- \* Canary by Rita Dove
- \* Other People's Comfort Keeps Me Up At Night by Morgan Parker

## Wednesday, March 6th: Workshop

### WEEK SEVEN

Monday, March 11th

### CRAFT CLASS: Excursions in Prose

Central elements of good prose ( language, structure, arc, flux and motion, clarity, complexity, style, energy, mood, tone, voice etc). A brief history of the genre and types (fiction, non fiction, new journalism, memoir, etc).

A brief treatise on the historical debates on the difference between prose and poetry.

### Materials:

- \* Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert.
- \* David Copperfield (excerpt) by Charles Dickens.
- \* The Old Man and the Sea(excerpt) by Ernest Hemingway
- \* The Invisible Man(1st chapter) by Ralph Ellison
- \* Temporary Matter by Jhumpa Lahiri
- \* The Necklace by Guy De Maupassant
- \* The Snake by John Steinbeck
- \* The Washington Square by Henry James(1st chpt)
- \* The Enigma of Arrival by V.S. NaipaulA
- \* Inscape by Yaa Gyasi

**Wednesday, March 13th**  
Workshop

**WEEK EIGHT**

**March 18-24**

**Spring Break (See you next week)**

**WEEK NINE**

**Monday, March 25th:**

**CRAFT CLASS: LOVE AND HEARTBREAK**

**We love, we hurt. Our lives are are bound by the intractable pull of the human heart. This experience is perhaps the most universal of the human interior. How can we write movingly, with freshness, empathy, and unwavering honesty about this interior landscape? What can we say about love and heartache that the love songs have not already said? Well, a lot, I assure you.**

**Materials:**

\*The Glass Essay by Anne Carson.

\*Tenderness by Stephen Dunn

\*Sonnet XVII by Pablo Neruda

\* Sonnet 116 by William Shakespeare,

\* An excerpt from Corelli Mandolin by Louis. De Bernieres

\* The Breakup Museum by Leslie Jamison.

\* They Can't Take That Away From Me by ELLA FITZGERALD AND LOUIS ARMSTRONG

\*On the Loves of Others Hannah Black

\* Love in the Time of Cholera (excerpt) by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

\* Bird Song by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

\* Love After Love by Derek Walcott

\* I Gotta Find Peace of Mind by Lauryn Hill

**Wednesday, March 27th: WORKSHOP**

**WEEK TEN**

**Monday, April 1st:**

**CRAFT CLASS: CHARACTERS AND CHARACTERIZATION**

**Humans, in reality, are complex, layered, and multiple. They should be no less in the stories we create.**

**Materials:**

- \* Two Soldiers by William Faulkner
- \* Sula (excerpt on pg 77) by Toni Morrison
- \* Half of A Yellow Sun (excerpt, first chapter) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.
- \* Dream Song 76 by John Berryman
- \* Self Portrait as A Door by Donika Kelly.
- \* The Return by Phillip Levine
- \* The Remembrance of Things(excerpt) by Marcel Proust
- \* Orlando (excerpt) by Virginia Woolf
- \* Corelli's Mandolin by Louis de Bernieres
- \* Winter Stars by Larry Levis
- \* A Certain Chinese Encyclopedia by Sarah Howe
- \* Open City (first chapter) by Teju Cole
- \* The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka

**Wednesday, April 3rd: WORKSHOP**

**WEEK ELEVEN**

**Monday, April 8th:**

**CRAFT CLASS: THE STORY AND VOICE OF A PLACE**

**The best of writing is atmospheric. You feel, see, smell and ear everything in the invented world of the writing. The high mark is transport.**

**How do we write compelling portraits of a place (physical, invented or even the internal landscape of a mind)?**

**Materials:**

- \* After the Race (in the Dubliners) by James Joyce
- \* One Hundred Years of Solitude (excerpt) by Gabriel Garcia Marquez
- \* The Lazarus Project(excerpt) by Aleksander Hemon
- \* The Road Not Taken by Robert Frost
- \* From Summer Somewhere by Danez Smith
- \* The Road (excerpt) by Cormac McCarthy
- \* The Sorrow Gondola 2 by Tomas Transtromer
- \* Ibadan by J.P. Clark
- \* Ithaka by C.P. Cavafy
- \* Rootless and Ledger by Jenny Xie

**Wednesday, April 10th**

Workshop

**WEEK TWELVE**

**Monday, April 15th:**

**CRAFT CLASS: METAPHOR**

**Metaphors are the rocket of words. They make meaning and emotions travel and penetrate consciousness at a deeper level. How do we construct effective metaphors?**

**Materials:**

- \* Archaic Torso of Apollo by Rainer Maria Rilke.
- \* Written by Himself by Gregory Pardlo
- \* In Praise of Darkness by Jorge L. Borges
- \* A Prayer for the Unflummoxed Beaver by Kei Miller

- \* The Lazy River by Zadie Smith
- \* Five Short Stories by Lydia Davis
- \* Gustave Mahler's Symphony No 1 (the 1st 20 minutes by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra)
- \* Bodak Yellow by Cardi B(clean version)
- \* Casket Pretty by Noname.
- \* Halleluyah by Leonard Cohen  
performed by Jeff Buckley

**Wednesday, April 17th**  
Workshop

**WEEK THIRTEEN**  
**Monday, April 22nd:**

**CRAFT CLASS: CREATIVE SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

**The world is in turmoil. The old forces of good and evil are at loggerheads, and we are, simply by being, implicated in this epic human struggle. There, really, is no neutrality. But art is art first.**

**How then can we do the radical work of empathy and justice in our writing without giving in to grandiosity and cant? Is the answer perhaps the pursuit of universal human emotions in our writing?**

**We shall look at materials that will demonstrate to us moral clarity, artistic bravery and social engagement with the world while not sacrificing excellent artistry.**

**Materials:**

- \* Musee des Beaux Arts by W.H. Auden
- \* Monet's Waterlilies by Robert Hayden
- \* In Jerusalem by Marmoud Darwish
- \* God Has Pity on Kindergarten Children  
By Yehuda Amichai
- \* Letter to the Local Police by June Jordan.
- \* The Husband Stitch by Carmen Maria Machado
- \* The Border: A Double Sonnet  
by Alberto Rios
- \* Power(excerpt) by Naomi Alderman
- \* In The Pain Cavern by Maggie Nelson
- \* Bad Feminist by Roxanne Gay
- \* A Most American Terrorist by  
by Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah
- \* Half of A Yellow Sun(short story) by Chimamanda  
Ngozi Adichie
- \* Abecedarian Requiring Further Examination of Anglikan Seraphym Subjugation of a Wild Indian Rezervation by Natalie Diaz
- \* Alright by Kendrick Lamar
- \* This is America by Childish Gambino
- \* If We Run And They Kill Us, So Be It. But We Have To Run Now.  
by Sarah A. Topol

**Wednesday, April 24th:**  
**Workshop**

**WEEK FOURTEEN**  
**Monday, April 29th**

**CRAFT CLASS: Let's Change the World!**

**Hybrid genres, collapsing the walls of genres, the migration of literature into digital spaces, a brief history of technological revolutions and how literature shape-shifted with it; the re-imagination and redefinition of the page, futuristic writings etc**

**Materials:**

\*Courting the Peculiar, (a series of essays, sound texts and performances on Creative Nonfiction) with Barrie Jean Borich, Ames Hawkins, and Kate Bradford.

- \* Mary Cappello by Heir to Ambiguity.
- \* Don't Let Me Be Lonely(excerpt) by Claudia Rankine
- \* Teju Cole's Short story written in "real time". through 35 Retweets on Twitter
- \* Arbor for Butch (a Pecha kucha) by Terrance Hayes
- \* Bluets (excerpt) by Maggie Nelson
- \* Bird Woman by Pemi Aguda
- \* An Approach by Roger Lewinter

**Wednesday, May 1st:**  
**Workshop**

**WEEK FIFTEEN**  
**Monday, May 5th**

**CRAFT CLASS: Let's Change the World!**

Continuing with hybrid genres, reimagining and reversing canonized works, erasures and writing into the empty spaces , "dislocating language into meaning" etc.

**Materials:**

- \* Superstar: An Excerpt from Spectacle by Susan Steinberg
  - \* Book of Isaiah part1 by Anne Carson
  - \* Zong(excerpt) by Nourbese Phillip
  - \* Inaugural Poem(Redacted) by Jayy Dodd
  - \* George Saunders on Experimental Story
  - \* From Reaching Guantanamo by Solmaz Sharif
  - \* Aubade With Burning City by Ocean Vuong
  - \* Reverse Eurydice by Rowan Ricardo Phillips
  - \* Odyssey ( first page of the translation by Emily Wilson
- \* I'll bring a copy of the box-book NOX by Anne Carson to class

**Wednesday, May 6th**  
**Workshop**

**Monday, May 13th**  
Final class presentations. Food. End of the semester!

**Final Portfolio:**

At the end of the semester, in lieu of final exam:

\*You will submit a portfolio of revised, edited and well crafted poems, short stories, essay, novel excerpts etc. It must not be less than 10 pages.

\*You will also submit a two page essay on craft lessons outlining the blue prints and craft principles you have learned in the course of the semester, how they have impacted your writing and how you intend to keep using them in your work.

\*Finally, you will submit an artistic statement and goal trajectory outlining where you see yourself and your creative work( the projects or ideas you'll like to pursue or have achieved) in the next 1 year, 3 years, 5 years, 10 and 15 years.

**DOCUMENTS/TYPESET:** All assignments, works, portfolios etc that has to be typed must be in Times New Roman, 12 font and double spaced.

**Preparation and Participation:**

It is essential that you read all the assigned materials before class and be prepared, if called on, to share your ideas and views. Participation, let me affirm to you again, will be central to the success of the collaborative project our class will be. You are an important and valuable part of this project. It is important that you talk in class and make valuable contributions during craft and workshop sessions. The highest percentage of your grade will come from this. Punctuality, decency, full, undivided attention while in class is all part of this.

**\*SAFE SPACE**

Our class will be a forte of decency, camaraderie, integrity, intellectual rigor and respect for human dignity. We will acknowledge one another and be of great value in the commune. No bullying, no continuous interruption or talking down of another person. No uncouth, foul or triggering language. Even when we are handling volatile materials, we will do it with all sense of historical responsibility and great sensitivity.

**\*Office Hours:**

You are required to have at least one meeting with me during my office hour in the course of the semester. You are however encouraged to come for a couple of meetings before the semester ends. All of these meetings will be by appointment through email.

**\*Grading:**

Participation 40%

Final Portfolio 40%

Recitation 10%

Extra Points (10 points)

- Attending a Literary Event in the city and writing a short report about it

**\*Recitation:**

You are encouraged to memorize a poem, excerpt of a story or an essay etc. It should be a minimum of 15 lines. We will have a student recite a piece every Monday before the class commences. Every member of the class will participate in this before the semester ends.

### **\*Guiding Principles**

**Student Wellness Policy:** We deeply care. If there is a hint relating to extreme stress, suicidal ideation, depression, isolation, murder, sexual assault, or severe mental distress in the work you submit, I will take that as a cue to contact you. If not, I advise that you send me an email explaining any background stories or ideas behind it and how to appropriately approach it in class, especially in a workshop. Please do reach out to me, if there is something you need to talk about. I'll also guide you to the NYU Wellness Center.

### **Disability Disclosure Statement:**

NYU has a great policy as regards disability. 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 also please register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980.

NYU's Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities 726 Broadway, 2nd Floor  
New York, NY 10003-6675

Telephone: 212-998-4980

Voice/TTY Fax: 212-995-4114

Web site: <http://www.nyu.edu/csd>

### **Plagiarism:**

NYU disapproves of plagiarism. It's unethical and jeopardizes your prospect. Desist from it.

### **Attendance and Punctuality:**

Attendance is key. You are expected to attend every class. Except for emergencies( in which case, you are advised to email me), absence will be penalized. Endeavor to come to class on time. I know it's an early morning class, but we can all do this. Repeated tardiness will be penalized. Absence from class and tardiness will affect your grade adversely. You don't want that.

**Late Assignments:** Deadlines are important. Endeavor to meet them.

**Eating or Disruptive behavior in class.** Don't. You will be penalized. (Except for occasional and unobtrusive beverage and snack).

**Technology:** Phones are not allowed. Laptops are okay for the sole purpose of consulting the assigned materials during class.