

## **Creative Writing: Introduction To Fiction & Poetry, Spring 2019**

CRWRI-UA.815.006

Tuesday/Thursday 12:30 - 1:45 pm

Instructor: Sarina Romero

Office Hours: Friday 10 am - 12pm, or by appointment

Contact: [srr450@nyu.edu](mailto:srr450@nyu.edu)

“To know that one does not write for the other, to know that these things I am going to write will never cause me to be loved by the one I love (the other), to know that writing compensates for nothing, sublimates nothing, that it is precisely *there where you are not*—this is the beginning of writing.”

-Roland Barthes, from *A Lover's Discourse*

“And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt.”

-Sylvia Plath, from *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*

### *Course Overview and Objectives*

We will explore (mostly) contemporary short stories and poetry from a writer's perspective; we will read with a keen eye on not just what a poem or story is about, but how exactly the poem or story makes its meaning. As writers it is crucial to read, read, read, and write and write often. Our reading list is in no way comprehensive or chronological, and instead offers us a wide range of style, voice, genre and form, and will provide the foundation of generative writing exercises and our class discussions. The aim of this course is to allow us to begin to identify formal qualities in works of poetry and fiction in order to analyze how an a writer's formal choices serve (or subvert) the work. We will deepen and sharpen our vocabulary to discuss our and other's writing, we will engage seriously and compassionately with our and our classmates' work, and our assigned readings in class, and we will provide generous and respectful written feedback for our peers. Most importantly, this course will offer a space to delve into our obsessions, idiosyncrasies, voices, and questions that encircle and inform our writing. If, as James Baldwin asserts, “the purpose of art is to lay bare the questions hidden by the answers” we will, as artists and writers, approach this class with grit, grace, and an open and hungry mind; we will read voraciously and we will write, revise, and write again.

### *Structure*

The first half of the semester will be dedicated to short stories, and the second half to poetry. Our week will always be divided into two formats.

On Tuesdays, our “craft” days, we will begin class with a 10-15 minute free write based off of prompts influenced by the assigned reading (more on this shortly). The rest of the class time will be devoted to our discussion of the readings in regards to particular choices and techniques the author has made, and how these choices inform our encounters with the work, as

readers and as writers. By midnight on Monday please email me *either* 3- 5 writing prompts that directly respond to either a formal craft or thematic theme from the assigned reading, *or* a healthy paragraph response to the work that addresses the qualities, and elements you noticed, and how these impacted your time reading the text(s). At the start of Tuesday's class I will give you a collected version of all of your prompts, which will jumpstart our writing and discussion for the day. Please note that for our poetry half of the semester I will assign all the poetry readings from our reader (and handouts I provide) in class. If you're absent be sure to email me, or a friend for the assignments for that week.

On Thursdays we will workshop your short stories and poems. Over the course of the semester everyone will workshop two short stories and two (sets of) poems. Five students will be workshopped each Thursday for fifteen minutes. You will distribute your pieces one week in advance of your workshop. **When it is your turn to hand out your story or poem please come prepared with printed copies for everyone. You may not email your work.** Every Thursday you must come to class with written feedback for each writer being workshopped that day. See attached for specific guidelines for your letters. **Please print two copies of your letter, one for the writer and one for me.**

### *Assignments*

**Workshop Submissions:** Short stories should be between 5-10 pages and double spaced. For our poetry workshops you may submit 1-3 poems depending on their lengths. If you want to submit only one poem to dedicate all our attention on it, by all means, or if you want our attention on a few short ones that's fine, too. What I care about most is that you feel you are getting the most out of our time together, and I trust your intuitions and preferences. If you have particular questions feel free to email me before your due dates.

### **Weekly Informal Responses:**

-By midnight on Monday email me 3-5 writing prompts you extract from our readings for that week, or a paragraph as mentioned above.

-Type up whatever draft/free write you started during our in class writing time and hand that in every Thursday. This way regardless of if you're being workshopped or not you will always get my eyes and small notes on your writing. Drafts are special creatures—we learn from failing big across the page and trying out everything regardless of you thinking it's bad or good! Let's think of this as weekly exercise for our writing muscles.

**Written Response to Fiction/Poetry Reading:** Once during the semester you are required to attend a reading! NYU has a spectacular reading series, and as it were this city is one of the best for readings. I will give you information about our reading series and other cool ones happening around town. Please type up a one-two page response about who you went to see read, and your general impressions/wonderings/experiences of attending and hearing the pieces aloud (versus on the page).

**Final Portfolio:** A final portfolio that includes notably revised versions of your workshopped pieces will be due on our last day of class, May 9th. Please included your original copies with my notes, as well as a letter to me about how you have come to know yourself as a writer and reader, as well as what you want to continue to cultivate, let go of, draw nearer towards, etc. in your writing.

### *Lastly*

You are required to bring and keep a notebook! I will not look through it, but it's crucial for class, and, personally, I highly recommend you write in it every day.

You are required to meet with me once at the start of the semester, and once in April. However I encourage meeting often as this will allow us to talk about your work, the readings, etc. in greater depth. If my office hours conflict with your schedule email me—I am more than happy to find another time that works for us both.

### *Required Texts*

Fiction Reader & Poetry Reader (Unique Copy Center, 252 Greene Street)  
Dept. of Speculation by Jenny Offill  
Bluets by Maggie Nelson

### *Grading*

- 40% Ongoing Creative Work ( 4 workshop submissions; weekly free write submissions)
- 40% Participation (informal weekly responses to reading; formal response to attending a reading; feedback letters for workshopped peers; active participation in class discussions and critiques)
- 20% Final portfolio

### *Policies*

#### **Attendance**

This class is only possible by way of our collective discussion and active participation. As such, your presence is paramount—both physical and mental—since you can only participate in a conversation by being present! More than one unexcused absence will result in a grade drop for each following absence (i.e. an A becomes an A-, a B- becomes a C+, etc). An absence can be officially excused by a letter from a physician, any other similarly official note, or discussing with me in person *at least a week in advanced* of an extenuating circumstance.

The time we have together is crucial; I promise to respect your time and ask that you respect your classmates' and mine. More than three instances of lateness (15 minutes late, or more) will count as an unexcused absence.

### **No Tech Zone**

Just paper, pens, & pencil, please. Unless there's a special circumstance that you explain to me before class no laptops, tablets, or phones.

### **Plagiarism**

You may read the school's policy on plagiarism online. Plagiarism is grounds for severe disciplinary action and will be reported to the department. If for some reason you cannot complete an assignment by its deadline please talk to me beforehand, and we will work something out. This will always be a much better solution than submitting work that is not your own.

### **Disability Disclosure**

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 please register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980.

### **Student Wellness**

Unless we see 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.

### *Class Schedule*

- Week One*      **Tuesday, 1/29** - Intro & Logistics  
                    **Thursday, 1/31** - "Shitty First Drafts" by Anne Lamott, "My Impasses" by Maureen McClane, Excerpt from *Tiny Beautiful Things* by Sheryl Strayed, Excerpt from *Letters To a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke
- Week Two*      **Tuesday, 2/5** - from, *Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You* by Alice Munro  
                    **Thursday, 2/7** - Workshop Group A. **Group B distribute stories.**
- Week Three*    **Tuesday, 2/12** - "A Temporary Matter" by Jhumpa Lahiri  
                    **Thursday, 2/14** - Workshop Group B. **Group C distribute stories.**

- Week Four*     **Tuesday, 2/19** - “Escape from Spiderhead” and “The Semplica-Girl Diaries” by George Saunders  
**Thursday, 2/21** - Workshop Group C. **Group A distribute stories.**
- Week Five*     **Tuesday, 2/ 26** - “This Thing Around My Neck” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and “How to Be an Other Woman” by Lorrie More  
**Thursday, 2/28** - Workshop Group A. **Group B distribute stories.**
- Week Six*       **Tuesday, 3/5** - from *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, by Sherman Alexie and “Never Marry a Mexican” by Sandra Cisneros  
**Thursday, 3/7** - Workshop Group B. **Group C distribute stories.**
- Week Seven*    **Tuesday, 3/12** - Guest lecture by Clare Schneider on *Dept. of Speculation*  
**Thursday, 3/ 14** - Workshop Group C.
- Week Eight*    **Spring Break**
- Week Nine*     **Tuesday, 3/26** - *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson. **Group A distribute poems.**  
**Thursday, 3/28** - Workshop group A. **Group B distribute poems.**
- Week Ten*      **Tuesday, 4/2** - In-Between  
**Thursday, 4/4** - Workshop Group B. **Group C distribute poems.**
- Week Eleven*   **Tuesday, 4/9** - Image / Metaphor / Simile  
**Thursday, 4/11** - Workshop Group C. **Group A distribute poems.**
- Week Twelve*   **Tuesday, 4/16** - Prosody / Diction / Syntax / Line  
**Thursday, 4/ 18** Workshop Group A. **Group B distribute poems.**
- Week Thirteen* **Tuesday, 4/23** - Forms; Identity, Geography, Myth Making  
**Thursday, 4/25** Workshop Group B. **Group C distribute poems.**
- Week Fourteen* **Tuesday, 4/30** - Influence; Stealing / Erasing / Appropriating  
**Thursday, 5/2** - Workshop Group C.
- Week Fifteen*   **Tuesday, 5/7** - Radical Revision Hands on Workshop  
**Thursday, 5/9** - Portfolio due & potluck! Reading! Celebration!

## WORKSHOP ETIQUETTE

### SOME THOUGHTS

- \* Start your commentary with the work's strengths. We can be quick to point out the places in a piece that need work, but we learn from highlighting our strengths, as well. We will actively practice describing what the piece is doing, what is working, how and why.
- \* Often times a positive comment can exemplify a negative one, for example: "There are vivid descriptions on page 2, and I'd love to see more in this section on page 3."
- \* Our collective goal is to help each story and poem become its best self. We will practice being able to appreciate a work of writing, irregardless of if it aligns with our personal aesthetic tastes. Sometimes what we want from a piece is not (!! ) what the piece needs.
- \* We also practice, whenever possible, to speak about the story, or poem in front of us versus the writer. "You did/said/meant this" is much harder to hear and hold space for than "the story did this/ The speaker said this/ The poem asks this." We cannot read the author or poet's mind and know their intentions with certainty. But! We *do* know how we read and understood the story.

### THE LETTER

You will write a letter to each student writer whose work we are discussing. Please remember to bring TWO printed copies of your letter to class. Since you will have written this letter before we workshop it can help guide your feedback you give in class. The letter should be respectful and written with generosity of attention and care. In addition I highly recommend writing on the actual piece and handing that back to the writer with your letter, too.

- \* Start with what worked and why (be specific!)
- \* If aspects are unclear try telling the writer exactly what you read, or what you got confused by without passing judgement on it. This is one of the most useful pieces of feedback to receive!!
- \* If you're feeling stuck about what to write here are some ideas to consider:
  - Address the piece's language: What is the author doing with the sound of her words? The syntax? Her diction? What seems to be the tone or voice of the speaker?
  - What about the characters? When did they feel bright, believable, lucid? What about them felt unbelievable, flat, or stereotyped?
  - What images struck you? Where there too many? Too little?
  - Do you notice any music or rhythm in the piece?

### DISCUSSION

- \* To begin each critique we will go around the room and each person will say one thing they liked/ was interested in/ thought held the most heat in the piece. We will practice pointing to the particular, and explaining why on a craft level we loved what we loved (versus saying something was "really, really amazing").
- \* We then will open up our conversation to places where we had questions, were confused, what we wanted more/less of, etc.
- \* The writer will listen during the critique; she will then have an opportunity to ask her own questions that we can in turn answer.
- \* It's so, so important we keep in mind that our main and most important priority is to show up for each other to be able to be as helpful to the writer and piece as we can be.