

Creative Writing: Introduction to Fiction and Poetry through Pop Culture (CRWRI-UA.815.013)

Tuesday–Thursday: 0800–0915

Location: TBD

Instructor: Jas Easterly

Contact: jte264@nyu.edu

Office Hours: By Appointment

OBJECTIVE

We will be studying creative writing using pop culture (or, for our purposes, think, pop literature) to inform our questions and answers. I'll be sampling the abundant trove of film, television, theater, music, art, etc. and inviting you to suggest from your own favorite works in any form to deal with concepts and techniques that apply just as much to fiction and poetry as other popular media. We'll be close reading, slowing down videos, replaying tracks, freezing the images, and discussing the course material as a means to develop your creative writing.

Through the lens of pop culture, we'll be using a two-prong approach. Craft lessons will examine the components and techniques of writing fiction and poetry. What makes successful fiction and poetry? What constitutes success? Since this is an introductory class, we will be attempting to cover a survey of the creative writing landscape rather than going in depth. You will be putting craft lessons into practice in your own writing and participating in workshops where you will submit your own work and edit and critique the work of your fellow classmates.

COURSE STRUCTURE

Each class will be a combination of craft lesson and workshop. Tuesday craft lessons will concern fiction and Thursday lessons poetry.

MATERIALS

I will supply all assignments, reading and other media, through NYU Classes or by printout to be handed out during class.¹

In terms of reading material, we will not be consuming entire novels, although I encourage that behavior. Because of our limited time, and mindful as I am of your out of class workload, I will

¹ The assignments will including readings from the texts described below which I had initially intended to be required.

Eavan Boland and Mark Strand, eds., *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*. W.W. Norton, 2001.

Alice LaPlante, *The Making of a Story: A Norton Guide to Creative Writing*. W.W. Norton 2010.

My belief was and still is that these two textbooks will prove useful to your writing long after the class is finished. I highly recommend purchasing them. Both are available new for less than \$15; please see me if financial issues inhibit your purchase.

attempt to select works, or discrete portions of works, of such a length that allow you to spend most of your time in this class on actual writing, yours and your classmates’.

ORIGINAL WORK

All the work you submit should be original work written specifically for this class – not a piece of recycled writing. If you have an existing piece you would like to revise in place of one of your submissions, you must get my approval first.

ATTENDANCE

Only one unexcused absence will be permitted. Each subsequent unexcused absence will result in a grade decrease: A becomes A-, A- becomes B+, and so on.

This is an 0800 class, and it may surprise you to learn that we will start at 0800. When I was an undergraduate, any morning class would have been unthinkable. Be that as it may, attendance is mandatory. Not arriving on time is arriving late: 0801 is late. More than two instances of lateness will count as an unexcused absence. 0815 is very late—being very late more than once will count as an unexcused absence.

Given the crumbling transportation infrastructure in New York City and the vicissitudes of life, there may be times when you have an acceptable excuse for being late or absent. If you find yourself in this situation, please do me the courtesy of sending me an email to alert me that you are running late or will be absent.

GRADING

Everyone in this class is capable of receiving an A.

Your grade **will not** depend on the quality of your writing but participation, commitment, and improvement. By participation, I mean showing up to class. By commitment, I mean engaging the reading and writing with a positive attitude. Improvement will be an inevitable consequence of participation and commitment.

Your grade **will** be contingent on doing the readings and assignments, participating in class discussion, submitting your own work for workshop and critical responses to the submissions of your classmates—all in a timely fashion.

- Class Participation: 30%. While some people feel more comfortable speaking in class than others, it is important that everyone contributes to the discussion. For workshops, each person will be required to provide verbal feedback before we plunge into general discussion. When we discuss published work, I may ask one or two students to read their written responses. If talking off the cuff unnerves you, I encourage you to use this opportunity to share your ideas with the class. If you are finding it difficult to speak in class, please come see me during office hours or send me an e-mail.
- Writing Assignments: 50%. This includes workshop submissions, critiques, and written responses to the reading assignments. I will be looking for evidence of your attention and effort. Have you tried to engage with the material? Are you taking creative risks, pushing yourself into unknown territory? Are your critiques thoughtful and considerate?
- Revised Portfolio: 20%. On the last day of class, you will submit revisions of one of your stories and two of your poems, along with a critical reading response (1-2 pages) to one of the reading assignments. Revisions will not be graded on how much of the class

critique you end up utilizing, but rather that significant improvements in the work are apparent.

Part of the problem in assigning a grade based on an evaluation of writing is that your work will likely be a moving target rather than a final draft. Also, I'm not comfortable with the level of subjectivity involved in that kind of assessment. Perhaps you have an ear for the work of Krapotkin and generate work that evokes the same talent of this completely fictitious author or poet. However, if I am allergic to the work of Krapotkin, I may not assign your work the value it deserves. For these reasons, your grade will not be a measure of the quality of your writing (although I am sure that it will very good).

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

The school's policy on academic integrity can be found online at <http://cas.nyu.edu/content/nyu-cas/cas/academic-integrity.html>. Academic integrity is a broad umbrella. In the context of this class, honesty and plagiarism are the most relevant concepts.

HONESTY

Dishonesty will not be tolerated, *e.g.*, giving dishonest reasons for being late or absent is a violation of academic integrity.

PLAGIARISM

There is absolutely no reason to submit work that is not your own. Not only is plagiarism very easy to spot; the benefit is minimal, and the consequences are brutal. So—don't do it. If for some reason you cannot complete an assignment by its deadline, let me know ahead of time (at least 24 hours' notice, please), and we will work something out. That is a far, far superior solution than submitting work that is not your own. There is a zero-tolerance plagiarism policy for both academic papers and creative pieces. All instances of plagiarism will be reported to the department, without exception. As for work just plain written by somebody else, don't even think about it! This is obviously unacceptable and will be reported to the University and the appropriate disciplinary actions will be taken.

TECHNOLOGY

This is a low-tech class. All reading will be available in hardcopy, either in the books you purchase or handouts or the pieces posted to NYU Classes. Therefore, not only are cell phones, laptops, and all other electronic devices not allowed (unless otherwise instructed—I'd prefer not to have people using e-readers, but if that truly presents a problem, please let me know), they won't be needed. Make sure to print copies of the assigned reading and workshop pieces that we will be discussing.

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 please register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980 (address below):

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>

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.

CRAFT LESSONS

Craft lessons will look at our reading material and address what works (or doesn't) in these pieces and why. We will also do writing exercises to practice techniques and develop inspiration. Though I have selected the reading material in part because of its appeal, you are free to voice your dislike of an assigned text (although I hope that will not be the case) on the condition that you (1) finish the assignment and (2) identify and be prepared to discuss the reasons for your dislike of the text.

WORKSHOP STRUCTURE

Each workshop we will consider the submissions of three students. You will be split into five groups. Fiction submissions should be between 8-12 pages double-spaced with size 12 font, Times New Roman. (Approximately 250 words per page.) Poetry submissions should be 3 poems at a time. Make sure to include a header or footer with your name and page numbers.

Submissions to workshop are rarely finished products and should be treated as works in progress. Our workshop will assess the submissions based on aesthetic criteria derived from our study of the craft. Among the workshop models we'll be using are:

- The Traditional Model (the writer remains silent while the class discusses the submission).
- "The Hallelujah" (singing only praise of the writing and what's working really well).
- "The Quickfire" (fellow students only get a minute to comment on the submission).
- "The Family Reunion" (students offer tough-love and blunt critique to the submission).2

When sending a piece of writing to your classmates, you'll indicate what kind of workshop structure you want, so your fellow classmates can respond to your work in the way that is most helpful for you.

SUBMISSIONS

Over the course of the semester, everyone will workshop two poems and two stories and one piece in a genre/form of the student's choosing. The sequence of the types of pieces is a matter of choice for the student. Pieces for workshop will be distributed by email to me and every

student in the class, poetry on the Saturday before workshop and fiction on the Thursday in advance.

RESPONSES

On the day of the workshop, you must prepare written feedback for each writer (minimum of 300 words, typed). Print two copies of each response, one for the writer and one for me.

You must also prepare line edits on each submission. Read the piece once straight through. If you are considering a poem, read it out loud. Then read it a second time, marking up the copy with a pen or pencil. Mark the manuscript where you have questions or particularly enjoyed something in the work. Identify the three images or sections you remembered the most. This is a good test to see where the writing is strongest. We will be discussing these moments in class. These copies will be given to the author at the end of class, to help them revise.

Your feedback should follow the following pattern: 1) what you notice about the piece; 2) where, how, and why these elements serve the piece; and 3) where, how, and why, these elements undermine the work or could be made stronger.

In drafting your feedback for fiction consider the following:

- What is the plot? Is there a plot? Is it clear what is happening? Were you ever confused?
- How is the structure unfolding (organization of the plot/how it is being told)? Is anything missing?
- Who are the different characters in the story? What is their role?
- What point of view is this being told from? How is that affecting the story, and your reading experience?
- What are people saying? How does the dialogue add to the story?
- Think about the style of the narration—the "voice" of the piece. Is it consistent? What is it adding to the story?
- How is the setting used? Does it add/subtract anything to the characters or story?
- Why do you think this story is being told? What is it all about?
- A good approach is to write down 2-3 of the BIGGEST questions you have, to help the author determine the major weak spots, then try to come up with some suggestions of how they might approach solving the issues you've pointed out. In other words—don't just tell a writer what's wrong with their manuscript. Come up with a way to fix it.

In drafting your feedback for poetry consider the following:

- What is the form of the poem? How does the poet use lines and space in the poem? What is the meter or rhythm, if any?
- What words fuel the poem? A poem is not a scratch and sniff, but what emotional or sensory perceptions do the poet's words prompt—images, sound, texture, smell, taste? Are there other associations created by the poet—historical, cultural, psychological, etc.?
- What is the syntax of the poem? Consider the consequences of the poem's punctuation and grammar (or lack thereof) What is the poem's speed and pacing?
- What is the tone of the poem? What are its themes? What do you believe the poet trying to say and, more importantly, why do you believe that is the poet's intention?

Finally (and most importantly) whether you are responding to fiction or poetry, as Parker Tarun, another instructor, puts it:

Listen to your emotions while reading a piece and then ask yourself what on the page makes you feel that way. Don't resort to platitudes (e.g. "Adverbs are bad"). John Updike has a good precept for feedback: Consider what the author is trying to do. Do not fault them for what they do not try. Your job is to help your classmates honor their voices. Anything you read in this workshop is confidential and not to be discussed with friends or family.

ETIQUETTE

Our workshops will be based on trust, support and respect. Consider the Golden Rule. We will discuss our classmates work with the same respectful tones that we would want our own work considered.