

## CRWRI-UA.815.004: INTRODUCTION TO FICTION & POETRY

Instructor: Alanna Weissman, aw2458@nyu.edu  
Spring 2020, MW 11 a.m. – 12:15 p.m., Room TBD  
Office Hours: Weekdays before 3 p.m., by appointment

*“Trust your blue pencil, but don’t forget the red one. Make the essential count. Allow your fear. Give yourself permission. You have something to write about.” —Colum McCann*

### OVERVIEW

Why do we read and write, and what draws us to our favorite stories and poems? What makes a particular piece of writing effective, and how can we use that knowledge to improve our own creative work?

The aim of this class is to introduce you to the genres of fiction and poetry, and to help you become better readers and writers. By the end of the semester, you will have a grounding in basic literary terminology and close reading, and be prepared to pursue your own creative writing at the intermediate level. Our focus will be primarily on contemporary literature; we will read a diverse array of writers active today and in the recent past, and historical examples may be used for added context. Video, audio, images, and guest speakers may be introduced to enhance our understanding of the works we read.

### STRUCTURE

This class will meet for 75 minutes, twice a week. The first half of the semester will be devoted to fiction, and the second half to poetry. With the exception of the first few class sessions for each genre, Mondays will be craft days and Wednesdays will be workshop days.

***On craft days:*** We will discuss the assigned readings. Craft days will be arranged by theme or literary device, but that should only be a jumping-off point; you are encouraged to think broadly and draw connections between the various works we read throughout the semester.

***On workshop days:*** We will be focusing on your writing (more on this below). You will be workshopped twice: once for a piece of fiction, and once for a poem or group of poems.

### ASSIGNMENTS

***Readings:*** On craft days, you must read the assigned pieces for that day—typically three short prose pieces or about 10 poems, depending on where we are in the semester. These readings will be available on NYU Classes; other texts may be distributed in person for in-class or take-home exercises. For readings uploaded to our site, which will be the majority of the texts, print out the pieces and mark them up—active reading is important, and you will need to refer to your hard copy during class discussion. I reserve the right to adjust the readings at any time during the semester.

**Response papers:** For the aforementioned readings, write a 1-2 page (250-500 words) response to the pieces. This is not about what you do or don't like, but about how the pieces function on a literary level—pay particular attention to structural and stylistic elements, and place the works in conversation with each other. Print out these responses and bring them in on the day we discuss the relevant readings; you may refer to them during the class discussion to help guide your commentary, but they must be turned in to me by the end of each craft day.

**Workshop:** This is the fun part—your own original creative writing! We will read three students' pieces per workshop. For fiction, turn in 2,000-5,000 words—either a short story, several flash fictions, or an excerpt from a longer piece (if the latter, please also include a few sentences describing the excerpt within the broader context of the full work). For poetry, turn in a poem or group of poems totaling no fewer than 10 lines and no more than five pages. You are responsible for printing 16 copies of your submission and bringing them to class **one week** before the date of the workshop itself. When reading others' submissions, please *handwrite* notes and line edits on your copy of the story, which you will hand back to the author at the end of class.

**Critique letters:** As part of workshopping your peers' writing, you must write a roughly 1-page (approx. 300 words) critique letter on each submission. More on workshop etiquette is below, but broadly: be kind, and don't focus on what you "like" or "don't like"—give feedback on what is or isn't effective in literary terms, and suggest potential ways to improve weak points. Our in-class discussions and your reading responses will help you learn what makes effective writing in terms of structure, language, character, plot, etc., and these are the elements you should focus on. Like the response papers, you may use these during workshop to guide discussion, but you must turn in two hard copies—one to me, and one to the recipient—at the end of class.

**Portfolio:** This will be your final project, in lieu of an exam, to be printed up and turned in to me on the last day of class. Your portfolio must include the following:

**Personal statement:** A reflection on the semester in 1-2 pages (250-500 words). This can include your process as a writer, how your work has progressed throughout the semester, thoughts about what we've learned, exercises or readings you especially enjoyed, etc.

**First drafts:** The fiction and poem(s) you turned in for workshop.

**Revisions:** New versions of your workshop pieces, incorporating the feedback you received. **This is mandatory.** While you are not required to act on any given piece of feedback, your overall changes should be substantial.

**Wild card:** A new short story or poem(s)—your choice—above and beyond your workshop submissions. The same word/page counts apply, though this piece may be expanded from one of our in-class or take-home writing exercises, if you'd like.

**Miscellany:** Any take-home writing exercises that have been assigned over the course of the semester.

**Pop quizzes:** They will not be a regular part of this class, but they may be administered. There will be no exams for this class.

**Extra credit:** There are three opportunities for this:

**Attend a reading:** New York is one of the literary capitals of the world. Take advantage of it! Many free public readings are offered throughout the city, including by NYU's own creative writing program. To show me you attended a reading, write a 250-word summary of what you saw and heard, and maybe even talk to the author or get a book signed.

**Memorize a poem:** You can choose which poem you'd like to memorize, but it must be at least 15 lines long, and you will recite it to me from memory during office hours.

**Submit your writing to a literary journal:** This is your introduction to the life of a professional writer; it will probably result in rejection (most submissions do!), but uncertainty, rejection, and publicly sharing one's work are all big parts of the writing life. I am happy to help you craft a query letter and select a journal that might be a good fit (such as NYU's own *West 10th!*), and I will want to see proof of your submission.

All written assignments must be turned in on time. Except in the event of a documented emergency, late work will not be accepted.

## GRADING

You will be graded not on talent or the quality of your writing, but on your effort and engagement with regard to each component of this class:

**Written work:** 40%. Your workshop submissions and response papers are thoughtful, correctly formatted, meet the required word/page counts, contain minimal grammatical errors, and are turned in on time.

**Participation:** 35%. This includes your critique letters, participation in class discussions, and pop quizzes. You have done the reading, come to class prepared, and your written and verbal critiques are courteous and constructive.

**Portfolio:** 25%. All elements of the portfolio are present, the personal statement shows effort, and revisions are substantial and show attentiveness to the feedback you received.

**Extra credit:** 5% each, for a total of 15% if you do all three.

## ATTENDANCE

You are permitted one unexcused absence, and it cannot be the day of your workshop. Starting with the second unexcused absence, your grade will drop a fraction of a letter (e.g. an A becomes an A-, an A- becomes a B+) for every missed class. Barring documented emergencies, being absent is not an excuse to turn in work late; it must instead be emailed to me by 12:15 p.m. on the day it would otherwise be due.

I will begin teaching promptly at 11 a.m., so please be on time to class. If you are up to 10 minutes late, you will be marked tardy, and two instances of tardiness will equal an absence. If you are more than 10 minutes late, you will be marked absent.

## WORKSHOP ETIQUETTE

***What to expect:*** The person being workshopped may be asked to read aloud from their piece. We will then go around the room twice, first sharing one aspect of the piece we thought was especially strong and one area we think could be improved, and then will open the floor for broader roundtable discussion of the piece. The person being workshopped must remain silent until the end, at which point they will have the opportunity to pose questions to their peers.

***When you are workshopping someone else:*** Criticism is fine (and important!) but it should be respectful and constructive. Please be kind and generous with your feedback. **No personal attacks whatsoever.** Again, instead of focusing on “good” or “bad” or what you do or don’t like, focus on whether or not certain choices the writer has made work well in the context of the piece, and if not, explain why and offer suggestions on how to improve them. Where possible, point to specific places in the writing to illustrate your point. Comments should be tailored to the piece and non-personal to the author; for example, when discussing in class or in critique letters, say “the narrator” instead of “you” (with reference to the author). In addition to the critique letters, please mark up your classmates’ manuscripts by hand—make note of passages that are effective, passages that aren’t, vivid images, memorable phrases, snappy dialogue, and anything else that might be helpful to the author. Trust and goodwill are essential in a workshop, so please do your best to make this a friendly, collegial space, and do not share or discuss your peers’ submissions outside of this class.

***When your writing is being workshopped:*** Except when reading from your work or asking questions at the end, please remain silent during discussion. Take notes on what your classmates are saying, and think of questions about your work that you’d like to pose to the group at the end. **Please do not be defensive!** I know being workshopped can be stressful, but we are here to make your writing the best it can be, and constructive criticism is an essential part of that process.

## A NOTE ON CONTENT

Literature helps us confront the most difficult parts of life, and good writing should challenge us and make us uncomfortable. Pieces we read and write this semester may address racism, sexism, homophobia, addiction, abuse, physical and mental illness, death, and other troublesome issues. Please approach these subjects with the utmost sensitivity and respect, and if you are struggling to engage with a particular topic, do not hesitate to reach out to me—I want this class to be a welcoming space for everyone.

## STUDENT WELLNESS POLICY

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.

## **FORMATTING**

Except for poems, all assignments should be double-spaced with 1-inch margins, in a 12-point serif font such as Times New Roman or Cambria, printed single-sided and stapled in the upper left-hand corner. Any written assignments more than one page in length should be paginated and have your name on each page.

## **CONFERENCES**

You are strongly encouraged to meet with me during office hours at least twice; a week or so after your workshops is usually a good time, as we can talk about the feedback you received and how you want to incorporate it into your work, but I am happy to meet at any time during the semester to discuss our classwork, writing as a career, or any questions you might have.

## **PLAGIARISM**

Don't do it. There is a zero-tolerance policy, and I will be required to fail you for the course and report you to the university. Besides, this is a creative writing class—now is the time to let your own unique voice shine!

## **FOOD & DRINK**

Permitted, but nothing overly loud, messy, strong-smelling, or otherwise distracting. Please refrain from eating while your classmates are reading aloud from their own work.

## **TECHNOLOGY**

Unless needed for accommodations (see below), please no cell phones, laptops, iPads, Kindles, or any other electronic devices. We will be engaging with the written word in print form; please give our texts your undivided attention, and take notes by hand.

## **DISABILITY DISCLOSURE STATEMENT**

Academic accommodations are available to any student with a chronic, psychological, visual, mobility or 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.

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  
Website: <http://www.nyu.edu/csd>

## POTENTIAL SUPPLEMENTAL TEXTS

Selections from the following, to be distributed as handouts:

Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*  
Stephen King, *On Writing*  
Verlyn Klinkenborg, *Several Short Sentences About Writing*  
Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*  
Colum McCann, *Letters to a Young Writer*  
Alexander Chee, *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*  
Janet Burroway, *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*  
Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*  
Edward Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love With Poetry*  
Matthew Zapruder, *Why Poetry*  
M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (I highly recommend you buy this book)  
Norton anthologies of fiction, poetry, and poetic forms

## SCHEDULE

Please come to class having read the specified works **on the day for which they are listed**. So, on February 3, for instance, you must have read Otsuka, Moore, Hemingway, and Wolff, and bring in your response paper on those pieces.

Monday, January 27: Introductions & Housekeeping

Wednesday, January 29: Form & Structure; Mock Workshop

**Note: These are the only preassigned readings for which no response paper is due.**

Edward P. Jones, "The First Day"  
Jesse Lee Kercheval, "Carpathia"  
Etgar Keret, "Fungus"  
Mock workshop story and sample critique letter (handout)

Monday, February 3: Point of View & Narration

Julie Otsuka, excerpt from *The Buddha in the Attic*  
Lorrie Moore, "How to Become a Writer"  
Tobias Wolff, "Bullet in the Brain"

Wednesday, February 5: Tone & Tension

Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery"  
David Foster Wallace, "Incarnations of Burned Children"  
Donald Barthelme, "The School"

Monday, February 10: Setting & Character

Jhumpa Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven"  
Tim O'Brien, "The Things They Carried"  
Cynthia Ozick, "The Shawl"

Wednesday, February 12: Fiction Workshop

Monday, February 17: Presidents' Day – No Class

Wednesday, February 19: Fiction Workshop

Monday, February 24: Symbolism & Allegory

Joyce Carol Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"  
Amy Hempel, "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried"  
Aimee Bender, "The Rememberer"

Wednesday, February 26: Fiction Workshop

Monday, March 2: Bildungsroman

Alice Munro, "Red Dress—1946"  
David Quammen, "Walking Out"  
Jamaica Kincaid, "Girl"

Wednesday, March 4: Fiction Workshop

Monday, March 9: Genre & Voice

Karen Russell, "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves"  
Alexander Weinstein, "Saying Goodbye to Yang"  
George Saunders, "Pastoralia"

Wednesday, March 11: Fiction Workshop

Monday, March 16: Spring Recess – No Class

Wednesday, March 18: Spring Recess – No Class

Monday, March 23: Sound, Rhyme & Performance

Willa Carroll, "Erratica"  
William Blake, "The Lamb"; "The Tyger"  
Paul Muldoon, "The Old Country"  
Kay Ryan, "Still Life With Lemons, Oranges and a Rose"; "Bait Goat"; "Winter Fear"  
Gwendolyn Brooks, "We Real Cool"  
Edward Hirsch, "Fever"  
Sierra DeMulder, "Today Means Amen"  
Allen Ginsberg, "Hum Bomb"

Wednesday, March 25: Meter & Scansion

John Milton, excerpt from *Paradise Lost*  
William Shakespeare, excerpt from *Troilus and Cressida*  
David Rakoff, excerpt from *Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish*  
Emily Dickinson, "Because I could not stop for Death"; "Hope is the thing with feathers"  
Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses"

Monday, March 30: Form & Structure – Sonnets

William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 18"  
Petrarch, "Sonnet 131"  
Pablo Neruda, "Sonnet LXVI"  
E. E. Cummings, "[i carry your heart with me(i carry it in)]"  
Edna St. Vincent Millay, "I shall forget you presently, my dear"  
Claude McKay, "If We Must Die"  
Terrance Hayes, selections from *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*

Wednesday, April 1: Poetry Workshop

Monday, April 6: Form & Structure – Refrain, Villanelles & Pantoums

Edgar Allan Poe, "Annabel Lee"  
Sylvia Plath, "Mad Girl's Love Song"  
Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art"  
Dylan Thomas, "Do not go gentle into that good night"  
Theodore Roethke, "The Waking"  
A. E. Stallings, "Another Lullaby for Insomniacs"

Wednesday, April 8: Poetry Workshop

Monday, April 13: Form & Structure – Free Verse

Sharon Olds, “Ode of Girls’ Things”; “Ode to My Sister”  
Robyn Schiff, “Dyed Carnations”  
Cecilia Llompart, “This Is What Happens”; “Interludes”; “(Considerations)”  
Yusef Komunyakaa, “The Towers”  
Tommy Pico, selections from *IRL*  
Billy Collins, “Marginalia”

Wednesday, April 15: Poetry Workshop

Monday, April 20: Form & Structure – Prose Poems & Hybrid Forms

Wallace Stevens, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”  
Ada Limón, “During the Impossible Age of Everyone”; “The Quiet Machine”;  
“The Noisiness of Sleep”  
Maggie Nelson, selections from *Bluets*  
Jenny Xie, “Visual Orders”  
Ocean Vuong, “Immigrant Haibun”; “Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong”; “On Earth We’re  
Briefly Gorgeous”

Wednesday, April 22: Poetry Workshop

Monday, April 27: Identity & Resistance

Maya Angelou, “Still I Rise”  
Audre Lorde, “Power”  
Morgan Parker, “Beyoncé on the Line for Gaga”; “13 Ways of Looking at a Black Girl”;  
“Delicate and Jumpy”  
Marwa Helal, “poem for brad who wants me to write about the pyramids”  
Luci Tapahonso, “That American Flag”; “The round-roof hooghan”  
Danez Smith, “The 17-Year-Old & the Gay Bar”; “every day is a funeral & a miracle”;  
“not an elegy”

Wednesday, April 29: Poetry Workshop

Monday, May 4: In-Class Reading & Writing Exercises; Revisions

Wednesday, May 6: In-Class Reading & Writing Exercises; Revisions

Monday, May 11: Portfolios Due; Celebration!