

The Radical Art of Storytelling (Introduction to Creative Writing: Poetry and Prose)

Instructor: Emma Zimmerman

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Course Number: CRWRI-UA.815.010

Semester: Fall 2021

Class Times: T/Th 9:30 AM - 10:45 AM

Office Hours: Time and place TBD

“Make up a story... For our sake and yours forget your name in the street; tell us what the world has been to you in the dark places and in the light. Don't tell us what to believe, what to fear. Show us belief's wide skirt and the stitch that unravels fear's caul.”
— Toni Morrison, *The Nobel Lecture In Literature, 1993*

Texts: Course reading packet; *A Poetry Handbook*, Mary Oliver; *Heavy*, Kiese Laymon; *Black Nature*, ed. Camille T. Dungy; *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Anne Lamott.

Objective: The main objective of this class, and my hope as your instructor, is that you will learn to read and think like writers. It is one thing to pick up a book—to lose yourself in a story and all of the emotions portrayed by a writer's hand. It is another thing entirely to consider *how* and *why* that writer wrote what they wrote. In this class, we will focus on craft, literary technique, and style, all the while considering how these elements add up to successful literature. Overall, I hope this class makes you notice the beauty, pain, and nuance that exists in this world and wonder how best to put it on a page. I hope you see that there are stories everywhere.

Structure: For the most part, Tuesdays will be craft classes, and Thursdays will be workshops.

Craft Class: On Tuesdays, we will start each class with an in-class writing exercise. We will then discuss the readings due that day. Our discussion will focus on writers' literary techniques. How do these writers do what they do? How do they use structure to portray themes and emotions? What rules do they follow or break? How can we use their techniques in our own writing?

Workshop: On Thursdays, we will workshop each other's writing. On the Tuesday before your workshop, you must bring in **16 printed copies** of your piece, to be workshopped on Thursday. You will be workshopped a total of two times this semester, in a total of two genres. You must choose a different genre for each workshop. In other words, if your first workshop submission is in fiction, your second workshop submission must be in either poetry or nonfiction. More on workshop at the end of this syllabus.

COURSE EXPECTATIONS

Attendance: 20% Your presence—both physical and mental—is paramount to your success in this class and the rapport we hope to build in this space. More than one unexcused absence will result in a reduction in your letter grade (example: A- to B+). We have a mere hour and fifteen minutes together, and yet, there is so much to do! It is important that you are on time to class. More than three instances of lateness will count as an unexcused absence.

Class Participation and Workshop Critiques: 20% For each workshop, you will mark up your classmates' submissions. You will also write a critique of each submission (at least 2 paragraphs). You will consider, how does this writer use literary techniques and structure to convey meaning? What is successful? What is less successful? Please arrive with 2 copies of your written critique, one for the writer, and one for me.

Submissions: 20% Every Tuesday before your Thursday workshop, you will bring in 16 copies of your workshop submission, for your classmates and me. Workshop is the crux of the class, so I hope you take these seriously while using them as a time to learn and practice new literary techniques! More on workshop at the end of this syllabus.

Reading Responses: 10% Every Tuesday, you will write a 1-2 paragraph journal response to the readings. These responses may be hand-written or typed. In this response, you may answer one of two questions. 1. How does a writer use literary techniques to portray meaning? 2. How do the literary techniques compare or contrast between two of the readings? At the end of the semester, you will turn in all of your reading responses, bound together in some way.

Final Portfolio 30%: Your final portfolio will include your two submissions, revised versions of each submission, and a third submission. The revised versions will take into account my comments and the comments of your peers. The third piece can be in any genre (poetry, fiction, or nonfiction). It may build on an in-class writing exercise or be something entirely new. Your final portfolio must be bound together in some way: binder, folder, paper clips, shoelace, what have you.

Office Hours: I encourage you to meet with me during office hours at least once during the semester. Send me an email to secure an appointment time, although you are welcome to just drop by.

Electronics in class: Electronics are not allowed in class. Please keep phones, tablets, laptops, *etc.* away during class. In the rare case that electronics may be used for an in-class exercise, I will let you know.

A note on plagiarism: Don't do it. Don't even think about it. If you turn in work that you did not complete, you will receive a failing grade for the course. You will also meet with a higher academic authority and be subject to NYU's academic policy. Beyond the formal ramifications, plagiarism is cheap. The type of person who cheats is not the type of person you want to be, nor the type of person I want for you to be.

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.

NYU's Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities
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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 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.

"There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."
--Maya Angelou, poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist

Schedule

Thursday, September 2nd

Welcome!

Introductions, syllabus review, workshop schedule, in-class writing exercise

Tuesday, September 6th

Craft of Poetry: stanzas, lines, and rhymes

Reading Due: Selections from *A Poetry Handbook*, Mary Oliver; "Theme for English B," Langston Hughes (packet); "Harlem," Langston Hughes (packet); "Do not go gentle into that good night," Dylan Thomas (packet); "Wild nights – Wild nights," Emily Dickinson (packet); "We Real Cool," Gwendolyn Brooks (packet).

Thursday, September 9th

Craft of Poetry: forms

Reading Due: Handout on sonnet, sestina, and villanelle (packet); *Shall I Compare Thee to a Summers' Day?*, William Shakespeare (packet); *Sonnet*, Billy Collins (packet); *One Art*, Elizabeth Bishop (packet); *Mad Girl's Love Song*, Sylvia Plath (packet); *sestina for a black girl who does not know how to braid hair*, Raych Jackson (packet).

Tuesday, September 14th

Craft of Fiction

Reading Due: Selection from *Writing Fiction*, Janet Burroway (packet); "Cat Person," Kristen Roupenian (packet); "Cell One," Ngozie Adichie (packet).

Thursday, September 16th

Craft of Creative Nonfiction

Reading due: Selection from *Creating Nonfiction: A Guide and Anthology*, Becky Bradway and Doug Hesse, page 3-32 (packet); "Pain Scale," Eula Biss (packet); "Consider

the Lobster,” David Foster Wallace (packet); “Burls,” Bernard Cooper (packet).

Tuesday, September 21st

Point of view

Reading due: “Interstellar,” Rebecca McClanahan (packet); “A Small Place,” Jamaica Kincaid (packet); “The Other Nate Marshall,” Nate Marshall (packet); “How to be an Other woman,” Lorie Moore (packet).

Thursday, September 23rd

Nature and Place

Reading due: Selections from *Black Nature*; “Getting Along with Nature,” Wendell Berry (packet)

Group 1 workshop submission due

Tuesday, September 27th

Group 1 workshop

Thursday, September 30th

Nature and Place

Reading due: Selections from *Black Nature*; “And of Clay are we Created,” by Isabel Allende, translated by Margaret Seyers Peden (packet)

Group 2 workshop submission due

Tuesday, October 5th

Group 2 workshop

Thursday, October 7th

Writing into Tragedy

Reading Due: “The Day Lady Died,” Frank O’hara (packet); “USA V. Cuba,” Hanif Willis-Abdurreqib (packet); “Jakarta, January,” Sarah Kay ([watch](#)); “The Fourth State of Matter,” Jo Anne Beard (packet).

Group 3 workshop submission due

Tuesday, October 12th

Group 3 workshop

Thursday, October 14th

Writing into Tragedy

Reading due: “Let’s Go to the Videotape,” by Fiona Maazel (packet); “Two men arrive in a Village,” by Zadie Smith (packet).

Group 4 workshop submission due

Tuesday, October 19th

Group 4 workshop

Thursday, October 21st

Writing love, writing heartbreak

Reading due: “Mothers,” Carmen Maria Machado (packet); “My Son Wants to Know who his Biological Father is,” Blas Falconer (packet); “The Love of my Life,” Cheryl Strayed (packet).

Group 5 workshop submission due

Tuesday, October 26th

Group 5 workshop

Thursday, October 28th

Writing the self

Reading due: *Heavy*, Kiese Laymon, part 1

Group 1 workshop submission due

Tuesday, November 2nd

Group 1 workshop

Thursday, November 4th

Writing the self

Reading due: *Heavy*, Kiese Laymon, part 2

Group 2 workshop submission due

Tuesday, November 9th

Group 2 workshop

Thursday, November 11th

Words as Resistance

Reading due: “Still I Rise,” Maya Angelou; “Won’t you celebrate with me,” Lucille Clifton; “At last the new arriving,” Gabrielle Colvocoressi; “Facing It,” Yusef

Komunyakaa; “Art of Resistance: Chorus,” on *Call Your Girlfriend* podcast ([listen](#)).

Group 3 workshop submission due

Tuesday, November 16th

Group 3 workshop

Thursday, November 18th

Words as Resistance

Reading due: “High-functioning” and “Perdition Days,” Esmé Weijun Wang (packet); “Letter from a Region in my Mind,” James Baldwin (packet).

Group 4 workshop submission due

Tuesday, November 23rd

Group 4 workshop

Thanksgiving Recess

Tuesday, November 30th

Inventive Genre

Reading due: “Migrate,” Elizabeth Graver (packet), “Black Box” Jennifer Egan (packet); “Paper Menagerie,” Ken Liu (packet).

Thursday, December 2nd

Writing on Writing

Reading due: *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott, part 1

Group 5 workshop submission due

Tuesday, December 7th

Group 5 workshop

Thursday, December 9th

Writing on writing

Reading due: *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott, part 2

Tuesday, December 14th

Last Class!

Friday, December 17th

Final Portfolio and Journal entries due

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live.”
— Joan Didion, writer and journalist

Workshop

1. Class Submissions

For each submission, you will derive an assignment from a reading. You may choose a reading from class, or an outside reading. On your assignment page, you will write the title and author of that reading, and list five techniques that author used, that you must follow as well (we will practice this in class). I hope that, through this exercise, you will realize the ways in which structure and literary technique can act as tools to bring about meaning. Listening to and learning from others is a radical (and necessary) thing!

- If you are up being workshopped on Thursday, you will bring in **16 copies** of your submission on Tuesday. Your submission will include the assignment page, followed by your piece to be workshopped.
- You must choose a different genre for each workshop. In other words, if your first workshop submission is fiction, your second workshop submission must be either poetry or nonfiction.
- Prose submissions (fiction or nonfiction) must be 7-10 pages long, double spaced.
- Poetry submissions must be 2-6 pages long, double spaced. Poetry submissions can include one or two poems.

2. Critiques

For each workshop, you will mark up your classmates' submissions. You will also write a critique of each submission (at least 2 paragraphs). You will consider, how does this writer use literary techniques and structure to convey meaning? What is successful? What is less successful? **Please arrive with 2 copies of your written critique, one for the writer, and one for me.**

- When writing critiques, remember we are ALL here to learn
- Include comments on what was effective and what was less effective, citing specific quotes, page numbers, *etc.* when possible.
- There is a way to provide constructive criticism while remaining kind and respectful. Use language such as “the writer did X, which was/was not effective because Y” rather than “I liked X” or “I didn’t like X”

3. Revisions and Final Portfolio

This will include your two original submissions, including assignment page and written piece; a revised version of each of your two submissions; and a third submission.

- For the revised submissions, you are welcome to stray from the assignment page.
- For the third submission, you do not need an assignment (unless you want to make one!)
- Page requirements (7-10 pages for prose, 2-6 pages for poetry) apply for the third piece as well.
- Final portfolio must be bound together in some way: binder, folder, paper clips, shoelace, what have you.