

Introduction to Creative Writing
CRWRI-UA.815.009
Monday & Wednesday 12:30-1:45
Location TBD
Instructor: Anna Godbersen
asg637@nyu.edu

Course Overview

This class is an introduction to the practice of poetry and prose writing. Most humans are intuitive storytellers and instinctive and creative in their use of language. When we begin to write, we employ these skills naturally, but in order for our writing to have meaning for readers, we must develop craft and technique, honing and making intentional our unique voice and vision. (As Kurt Vonnegut has it in his rules for writers, we must learn “to use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel that their time was wasted.”) In this class we will read works by masters of both genres and pieces by some of the most exciting writers working today. Reading our forebears and contemporaries is the best way to understand what is possible when we set out to make art with words. We will do writing prompts and exercises in order to generate new pages and escape tropes and old habits. As the semester moves on, the class will become more focused on workshopping, which will help us refine and develop our own particular interests and abilities. My aim is for you to come away with a sense of your personality as a writer and your taste as a reader, and with a road map for building your own body of work in the years to come.

Readings

The readings in a class like this cannot possibly be comprehensive. They were chosen to inspire your own writing and to prompt you to continue reading with range and curiosity. All readings will be posted to the class page. **Please print them, read before class, and bring hard copies with you when we meet.** Some of these pieces deal with tough subject matter. It is my belief that one of the most important functions of art is to address that which would otherwise be incomprehensible. For this reason, I’m not going to give trigger warnings for readings, but please know that I care about you. If there’s anything you want to talk about, anything that may be especially difficult for you to discuss in a group setting, please reach out to me outside of class.

Workshop

You will be workshopped three times over the course of the semester—once for poetry, once for fiction. You can choose the genre of your final workshop submission. Criticism, even the constructive kind, can be tough for many of us. Often we hear criticisms more negatively than they were intended. But workshop is how we find out what is on the page versus what is in our minds. It is an invaluable tool to improve our work and clarify our intentions. This is vulnerable-making work, but it is also a way to deal with the most weird and challenging aspects of existence. So be kind to each other. Be honest. Be curious.

Submissions

Short fiction should be 5-15 pages double-spaced in Times New Roman font, size 12. Poetry submissions should include 3 poems at a time. **Make sure to include a header or footer with**

your name and page numbers. You should submit your pages **one week before your workshop.** (So the Monday before if you're being workshopped on Monday, Wednesday before if you're being workshopped on Wednesday.) It's crucial that you submit your work on time. Your submissions can be uploaded via NYU Classes.

How to Workshop

The writer will listen and takes notes while their piece is workshopped. We begin with what is working. As readers, please identify three elements of a piece that stuck with you after you finished reading. Be ready to share those elements in class. We do this to get a handle on what the work has going for it and what it is about. Then we will turn to constructive criticism. Please identify three things that confused you, that you thought might be missing from a piece, places where your attention lapsed. While we want to avoid prescription, please be generous with ideas for how the writer can better realize their vision. Remember that you are not doing the writer a favor by reading their work. **They have offered their work to the group so that we can all learn from its successes and failures** and become more skillful and adept in our writing, better at avoiding common errors, and more broad-minded when it comes to the art.

Workshop Responses

You are responsible for writing a one page response for each student submission. This should be a typed, 250 word letter where you outline what's working and what isn't working in the piece. Look at the elements of craft and be as specific as possible. What is the tone of the prose? What images grabbed you? What was unclear, what was missing? What suggestions do you have for ways in which the writer can improve the piece? **You must print out the letter and bring two copies to class: one for the writer and one for me.**

Midterm paper

This will be an informal 1-2 page meditation on a few of the readings we have discussed (at least one poem and one short story), what you learned from them, and how you view your goals as a writer—what interests you, what challenges you, what would you like to be able to learn how to do? **Due 3/25**

Final Portfolio

At the end of the semester, you will submit a final portfolio that includes: one piece of flash fiction (1-3 pages) based on our in-class writings, one longer short story (5-15 pages), which will be a **meaningful revision** of what you submitted for your fiction workshop, and five poems, including one of the following forms (sonnet, villanelle, ode, ghazal), one haiku, and one **meaningful revision** of a poem you submitted for workshop, along with two other poems in a form of your choice. You will also include your personal **Rules for the Road**. This will be a list of 7-12 guidelines for your writing life, mixing the aesthetic and the practical. (Ex: Adverbs are strictly verboten; begin every day with ten minutes of free associative writing; keep a journal of

ten things you noticed in the course of a day; have no friends who doubt in poetry.) These may be bits of wisdom that you gleaned from established writers, and should include specific takeaways from readings we've done over the semester, but please put them in your own words and give attribution where appropriate. On the last day of class, you will present these rules and recite a poem of at least ten lines that you have memorized (not one of your own). These presentations are required parts of your portfolio. **Due on the last day of class.**

Grading

Attendance & Participation (discussions, workshop, in class exercises): 40%

Writing Assignments (submissions, peer responses and midterm paper): 30%

Final Portfolio: 30%

Attendance

Attendance is extremely important and counts toward your final grade. If you arrive more than 10 minutes late, it will count as an absence. You are permitted one unexcused absence. After that, each absence will lower your grade by ten percent. An excused absence is allowed with a doctor's note.

Electronics

Cell phones, laptops, and all other electronic devices aren't allowed during class. Make sure to print copies of the assigned reading and workshop pieces that we will be discussing. Bring a notebook and pen for writing exercises and to take notes. A good workshop depends on a sense of community and trust. Let's all be present together for this small part of the day.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is strictly forbidden. Why would you do it? Don't do it. If you're caught, you will fail this course. It is theft—you are stealing from a compatriot, but also from yourself. If you are tempted, go get a copy of Tobias Wolff's *Old School*, read immediately.

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 register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at [212-998-4980](tel:212-998-4980), or at 726 Broadway (2nd floor) or at 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.

Office Hours

You are welcome to come talk to me throughout the semester about any issues during office hours which will be held Friday, 2-4, in Bobst Library.

Schedule

How should we read and what should we write?

Introductions, practicalities and intentions

M 1/27

Richard Bausch "Letter to a Young Writer"
Yusef Komunyakaa "Negative Capability"
From "Song of Myself"

W 1/29

James Baldwin "Sonny's Blues"
Adriene Rich "Diving into the Wreck" and "Power"

M 2/3

Jhumpa Lahiri "Hell-Heaven"
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie "The Danger of a Single Story"

Advice from Toni Morrison & Tobias Wolff

W 2/5

Carolyn Forché "The Colonel"
Muriel Rukeyser "Poem (I lived in the first century of world wars)" and "Efforts at Speech between two people"

Advice from: Richard Hugo & John Gardner

Who gets to speak?

Character, characterization and voice
Consciousness, the body, vocabulary, personal history

M 2/10

Natalie Diaz “A Woman With No Legs”
Anton Chekhov “The Student”
Carson McCullers “The Jockey”
George Saunders “Sticks”

W 2/12

Jenny Zhang “We Love You Crispina”
Sharon Olds “First Boyfriend”

W 2/19

“[Changeling](#)” by Hieu Minh Nguyen
Grace Paley “Goodnight and Good Luck”
Jamaica Kincaid “Girl”
James Joyce “Araby”

Practice Workshop

Advice from James Wood & Hannah Tinti

Story

What happens, and in what order? Set up and release of information

M 2/24

John Cheever “The Five-Forty-Eight”
Louise Erdrich “Fleur”
Robert Hass “A Story About the Body”

W 2/26

Frank O’Connor “Guests of the Nation”
Natalie Diaz “My Brother at 3 a.m.”

Workshop 1 Group A

Advice from Kurt Vonnegut

Structure

Shapes, constraints, old forms, new life

M 3/2

Tim O’Brien “The Things They Carried”
Edwidge Danticat “Without Inspection” and “Children of the Sea”

W 3/4
Writing prompts
Workshop 1 Group B

M 3/9

Sylvia Plath “Mad Girl’s Love Song”
Yusef Komunyakaa “Ghazal, After Ferguson”
Odes from John Keats, Sharon Olds, Pablo Neruda

W 3/11

Sonia Sanchez “Haiku and Tanka for Harriet Tubman”
Matthew Rohrer “Poem Written with Basho [A photograph]”
Haikus of Basho

Workshop 1, Group C

Advice from Mary Oliver

Memory

Unreliability and the treasures of the subconscious

M 3/23

Excerpts from *The Remains of the Day*
Excerpts from *Another Brooklyn*
Excerpts from Joe Brainard *I Remember*

W 3/25

Workshop 1, Group D

Midterm Paper due

Place

How do details create setting, how does setting create character and image?

M 3/30

Edward P. Jones “Lost in the City” and “The First Day”
Richard Hugo “Degrees of Gray in Phillipsburg”
Tess Gallagher “Black Silk”

W 4/1

Elizabeth Bishop "At the Fishhouses"
William Carlos Williams "The Red Wheelbarrow"

Workshop 1, Group E

Advice from Julie Orringer and Nicole Dennis-Benn

Newsbringing

How can we make lasting art that engages with a transitory culture?

M 4/6

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie "The Arrangements"
Deborah Landau "Soft Targets"
W.H. Auden "September 1st, 1939"

Workshop 2, Group A

W 4/8

Curtis Sittenfeld "The Prairie Wife"
Frank O'Hara "The Day Lady Died"

Workshop 2, Group B

Listing

A useful and ancient trick to keep in your back pocket

M 4/13

Susan Minot "Lust"
Carmen Maria Machado "Inventory"

Workshop 2, Group C

W 4/15

Kenneth Koch "One Train May Hide Another"
excerpts from *Leaves of Grass*

Workshop 2, Group D

Myth, Magic and Reality

What lies beneath the surface of our world

M 4/20

Viet Dinh “Lucky Dragon”
Selections from Louise Glück

Workshop 2, Group E

W 4/22

John Cheever “The Enormous Radio”
Terrance Hayes “Cocktails with Orpheus”

Workshop 3, Group A

Advice from Joy Williams

Vision and Revision

M 4/27

Raymond Carver “Beginners” and “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”
Early and final drafts of Sylvia Plath poems

advice from Jane Smiley

Workshop 3, Group B

W 4/29 Revision exercises

Workshop 3, Group C

Rules for the Road

What kind of stories will we tell?

M 5/4

Weike Wang “Omakase”

Workshop 3, Group D

W 5/6

Rachel Eliza Griffiths “Heart of Darkness”

Workshop 3, Group E

M 5/11

Recitation of memorized poems and reading of your personal Rules for the Writing Road
snacks