

Introduction to Prose and Poetry

Spring 2022

Section: CRWRI-UA.815.016

Instructor: Michelle Canales Butcher

Time: Monday/Wednesday 2:00 - 3:15 PM

Email: mjb9273@nyu.edu

Office Hours: By appointment

“In grad school I had grown suspicious of conventional literary beauty, wary of what I thought of as, for example, the literary triple descriptor: “Todd sat at the black table, the ebony plane, the dark-hued bearer of various glasses and plates, whose white, disk-shaped, saucer-like presences mocking his futility, his impotence, his inability to act.”

Christ, I had come to feel, just say it: “Todd sat at the table.”

Or better yet, cut that, too. Why do we need to know that Todd is sitting at a table? Let me know when Todd actually does something. And it better not be “raising a cup to his lips” or “pausing thoughtfully to let Randy’s insight fully inform him.

I was feeling a little cranky back then, re prose.”

– George Saunders

CivilWarLand in Bad Decline, 1996

“Author’s Note,” 2012

Course Overview

This course serves as an introduction to the craft of poetry and prose. We will look at a variety of forms, styles, methods, and modes of storytelling from texts both contemporary and modern. We will consider the strengths and failures, the similarities, and the departures, of traditional and Avant Garde techniques. More importantly, we will examine language—both written and visual—how does it move us emotionally, intellectually, aesthetically? Through this course, we will establish ourselves as readers and observers foremost. Then, we will turn to *process* to identify how these texts inform our work as writers.

Class Structure

On **Mondays**, we will focus on craft and technique. In class we will discuss the assigned readings, films, or episodes. We will identify the strengths and weaknesses of these texts and consider how they can inform our own writing. On occasion, we will employ in-class writing prompts and exercises related thematically to our assigned readings.

On **Wednesdays (Starting February 2, 2021)**, we workshop the poems or stories submitted the prior week. Every student will submit at least three times over the course of the semester. During workshop, you will treat your fellow classmates with respect and attentiveness. This is a safe space. I have a zero-tolerance policy for instances of competition or pomp in the workshop environment. If you are rude to your classmates, I will kindly ask you to leave.

Required Texts

Copies of the required texts will be shared and uploaded to the class site each week. It will be your responsibility to print out your own copy and bring them to class for our discussions.

Course Requirements

Reading Responses: The assigned readings are crucial for our Monday class discussions. To that end, you will write a 2–3-page response to the readings preferably in the style of a *Close Reading*. Choose a sentence from each assigned text and examine how it serves as a concentration of the whole narrative or poem. Assign *meaning*. What is the author’s aim? Do they achieve it? Though, please note, this is not merely an exercise of “aboutness.” From a craft perspective, identify what makes the sentence come alive. How does the author accomplish this? What techniques are employed? **Responses will be due by 7 pm on Sunday evenings.**

Workshop Submissions: Every student will submit material for workshop. Once for poetry, once for fiction, and a third time in the genre of your choosing. Workshop submissions are due Wednesdays, a full week prior to your workshop date. This ensures that everyone has ample time to read workshop pieces (at least twice through) and write their critiques. Submissions should be 12-point Times New Roman font. Fiction manuscripts should be double-spaced.

You are expected to write a 1–2-page, double-spaced response letter to each student’s submission that week. Please bring two hard copies of that response to class (one for your classmate, and one for me). This letter should include constructive feedback about what the author aims to achieve and how they go about achieving it. In what ways are they successful? What should they focus on in revision? Please include specific feedback on *what*, if anything, is not working in the piece along with an explanation for *why*.

Final Portfolio: At the end of the semester, you will submit a portfolio of the pieces you have workshopped for class. These pieces should demonstrate a meaningful attempt at revision based on edits you received in class, feedback from office hours, or choices your psychic finessed out of you (so long as they are useful). Regardless of the source, these revisions should be substantial. In addition to the revised pieces, you will submit a one-page review that details the changes you made and your reason for making them.

Grading

20% Attendance
15% Participation
15% Reading Responses
30% Workshop (submissions & letters)
20% Final Portfolio

In most cases, late work will automatically count as a zero (including late workshop submissions, letters and reading responses).

Workshops

During workshops we will discuss your writing and offer feedback. You will have at least three opportunities to be workshopped over the course of the semester:

- One submission of 3-5 pages of poetry (no more than three poems total)
- One submission of 8-15 pages of fiction (or no more than two flash fiction pieces in the same page range)
- A third submission of either fiction or poetry, following the same rules and page limits (This should not be a revision of previous submissions)

Again, if you are being workshopped, you will be responsible for e-mailing the class one week in advance. Submissions should be 12-point Times New Roman font. Fiction manuscripts should be double-spaced.

Participation

You are expected to participate regularly in class. The more engaged people are in the discussion, the more everyone will get out of this class. Observe your own reactions to the assigned texts. Take notes so that you can refer to these during discussion. Arrive curious about the thoughts and perspectives of your classmates. While every student may not participate, or contribute in the same manner, you are expected to be an attentive, respectful listener. Please do not interrupt or talk over your classmates. Your thought can wait. *Even Beyonce let Michelle and Kelly have a solo from time to time.* Listening is an underrated aspect of participation.

Attendance

You are expected to arrive to class on-time. If expect to miss class for a legitimate reason, please email me in advance or as soon as possible. Otherwise, each absence counts as a 5% loss on your total grade (i.e., one unexcused absence costs you a quarter of your attendance grade). Arriving to class fifteen minutes late counts as a tardy. Two late entrances will be counted as one absence.

Plagiarism

All instances of plagiarism will be reported to the department. Please read NYU's Academic Integrity Policy here: <https://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/academic-integrity-for-students-at-nyu.html>

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 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

The Wellness Exchange's private hotline (212-443-9999) puts students, staff, and faculty in touch with a qualified professional. This hotline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The NYU Health Center, located at 726 Broadway (3rd and 4th floors), offers virtual services as well as walk-ins. **Anxiety and depression may accompany the discipline of creative writing. You do not have to work through mental health issues alone.** 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.

Sharing writing is a vulnerable act. **Unless the writer tells us otherwise, we will assume the speaker is fictional and address the material accordingly.**

Certain content—such as that relating to murder, depression, suicide, sexual assault, or severe mental distress—could be interpreted as a cry for help. Such instances would prompt the instructor's attention to the student's wellbeing. If your work could conceivably trigger such a response, please send an email placing this work in proper context before submitting the work to the class.

READING SCHEDULE

(Introductions) Jan 24

Flannery O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Art"
Workshop Etiquette & Review Syllabus

January 26 (Craft & Narration)

Zadie Smith, "That Crafty Feeling,"
George Saunders, Craft essay and prose strategies in narration
Annie Dillard, excerpt from *The Writing Life*

January 31st/February 2nd – Form & Structure

George Saunders, "Sticks"
Jhumpa Lahiri, "A Temporary Matter"
Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man is Hard to Find"
Marie Howe, "Magdalene"
Donald Barthelme, "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel"
Group A Workshop

February 7 & 9 – Form & Structure

Ocean Vuong, “Seventh Ring of Earth”

Donald Barthelme, “The School”

Noah Baumbach, *The Meyerowitz Stories*

Terrence Hayes, “The Golden Shovel”

Group B Workshop

February 14 & 16 – Voice

Lorrie Moore, “The Jewish Hunter”

Roberto Bolaño, excerpt from *By Night in Chile*

Ada Limón, “The Contract Says We’d Like the Conversation to be Bilingual”

Group C Workshop

February 21 & 23 – Voice

Martin Scorsese, Scenes from *Raging Bull*

Jonathan Safran Foer, excerpt from *Everything is Illuminated*

Javier Marias, excerpt from *Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me*

Group D Workshop

February 28th & March 2nd – Dialogue

Don DeLillo, excerpt from *White Noise*

Cheers, “Pilot”

Seinfeld, Season 2, episode 3

Lorrie Moore, “You’re Ugly Too”

Group A Workshop

March 7 & 9 – Perspective

George Saunders, “Puppy”

William Faulkner, excerpt from *As I Lay Dying*

Lorrie Moore, “Paris”

Michelangelo Antonioni, scenes from *L’Avventura*

Group B Workshop

March 14 & 16 - Spring Break**March 21 & 23 – Techniques of Interiority**

Ernest Hemmingway, *In Our Time* “Big Two-Hearted River Parts I and II”

Anton Chekov, “The Cherry Orchard”

Michelangelo Antonioni, Scenes from *L’Eclisse*

Group C Workshop

March 28 & 30 – Techniques of Interiority

Ingmar Bergman, *Persona*

Eduardo C. Corral, “Poem After Frida Kahlo’s Painting The Broken

Column”

Group D Workshop

April 4 & 6 – Hybrid Texts

Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red*

Benjamin Labatut excerpt, *When We Cease to Understand the World*

Group A Workshop

April 11 & 13 – Place

Martin Scorsese, Scenes from *Taxi Driver*

Woody Allen, Opening scenes from *Manhattan*

Henry Dumas, “The Bone Ark”

Walt Whitman, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”

Group B Workshop

April 18 & 20 – Character

ZZ Packer, “Brownies”

Lorrie Moore, “People Like That are the Only People Here”

Shirley Jackson, from *The Lottery and Other Stories*: “The Daemon Lover”

Alice Munroe, from *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*: “The Bear Came Over the Mountain”

Group C Workshop

April 25 & 27 – Satire or Speculation?

George Saunders, “Offloading for Mrs. Schwartz”

Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, “The Era”

George Saunders, “Pastoralia”

Octavia Butler, excerpt from *The Parable of the Sower*

Group D Workshop

May 3 & 5 – In Transit

Said Sayrafiezadeh, “Audition”

Shirley Jackson, from *The Lottery and Other Stories*: “Witch”

Nathan Englander, “The Tumblers”

Don DeLillo, excerpt from *Libra*

Class reading