

THE ART OF STORYTELLING

* provisional syllabus - subject to change *

Introduction to Prose & Poetry

Spring 2022 CRWRI-UA 815
Monday & Wednesday: 8:00-9:15am
Christopher Whitehead (clw428@nyu.edu)
Office Hours TBD

“Some people could look at a mud puddle and see an ocean with ships.”

- Zora Neale Hurston

OVERVIEW

In this course we will explore all forms of storytelling.
Fiction. Poetry. Creative Non-fiction. And everything in-between.

One of the best storytellers I know is my father. He would come home everyday from his blue collar job, take off his work boots, and plop himself on the couch. We'd gather around him as we would a campfire, my mother, my siblings, and me and we'd wait. Before long he'd stand up and ask us if we could believe what happened to him at work today. He asked us this everyday and we'd say, almost in unison, "What happened?" Before long he'd be mesmerizing us in story. Pacing, pointing, pausing, raising his voice, whispering. Usually about how some guy at work pissed him off.

Why do we tell stories? And what makes a story good? This is what our objective is in this class. Maybe some of you are fiction writers. Maybe there will be poets. What I hope is that by the end of this class my hope is that you will all be storytellers.

We will write. We will read. We will nurture the imagination. We will discuss the approach to the page. We will savor language. We will marvel at simplicity. In this course we will immerse ourselves in the craft of writing and storytelling.

CLASS STRUCTURE

Readings - subject to change

Assigned excerpts, poems, and short stories include:

Excerpts:

The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison

A House for Mr Biswas, V. S. Naipaul

Beasts of No Nation, Uzodinma Iweala

The Warmth of Other Suns, Isabel Wilkerson

Invisible Ink, Toni Morrison

Poetry is not a Luxury, Audre Lorde

Mules and Men, Zora Neale Hurston

Another Manhattan, Donald Antrim

Text to be purchased/have for class:

The Nickel Boys, Colson Whitehead

The only book that I'm requiring you to purchase is The Nickel Boys, by Colson Whitehead. For the most part we'll be reading excerpts of novels, memoir, and poetry rather than the full text. We'll examine tension and how it builds on the page.

MONDAYS - Craft day. In addition to discussing the readings we'll be writing in-class every Monday. Come ready to write!

WEDNESDAYS - Workshop day. Come ready to discuss your own or your peer's work!

WORKLOAD

There are four types of work you'll be graded on in this class.

1. Reading and responding to the reading
2. Submitting your own work to be workshopped by the class
3. Workshopping your peer's work and responding with a critique letter
4. Final Portfolio

1. Reading and responding to the reading

I will upload PDFs to the brightspace site or print out the assigned stories/poems. We will discuss readings in the Monday craft class one week from when the reading is assigned. Reading responses will be due every Monday. These should be 1-2 pages, Times New Roman, double spaced. Please print this out and bring it to class for me to grade.

We will read multiple short pieces or poems per week, but only one response will be due. Think deeply about what you have read and respond to the following:

- What you think the story/poem is doing regarding the theme of the next craft class.
- What you found particularly effective or ineffective
- What elements of craft you see at work across the reading.
- Lines that resonated
- And anything else you'd like to mention!

2. Submitting your own work

Each student will submit three pieces during the semester, one for fiction, one for poetry, and one of your choice. We will split up into A, B, C, and D groups and submit on a rotating schedule.

Submissions will be assigned on Day 1 and you will be expected to submit on the Wednesday before your workshop. This gives everyone ample time to read your work and give useful feedback. Please print one copy for everyone in the class and bring it to class on your workshop date.

Short Story Requirements:

- 12-16 pages
- 12-point Times New Roman
- Double-spaced
- Pages must be numbered

Poetry Requirements:

- Should not exceed 4 single spaced pages
- 1-4 poems
- 12-point Times New Roman
- Formal experimentation is acceptable within reason

3. Workshopping your peer's work and responding with a letter

Students are required to submit responses to their classmates' work (1-2 pages, 12-point Times New Roman, double spaced). Please print two copies of each response, one for the submitters and one for me. Responses should include the following:

1. What you remembered most about the piece.
2. Biggest overall questions you have about the piece.
3. Suggestions of how to resolve one of those questions.

Refer to the **“HOW TO WORKSHOP” & “HOW TO CRITIQUE”** sections at the end of the syllabus for full expectations here.

4. Final Portfolio

At the end of the semester, you will submit a portfolio of the pieces you have workshopped and written in class. These pieces should include edits based on the feedback you received. You don't have to change everything, but you should be putting thought into how your piece can improve based on the critique you received. Put the effort in.

You will also submit a 1-page Introduction outlining the changes you've made and why you think the piece benefits from the changes.

Office Hours (by appointment)

Communication is key. Every student is highly encouraged to see me at least once over the course of the semester, especially to discuss workshop stories. Socially-distanced in-person or Zoom meetings are fine! I will provide hours soon!

Attendance

You will be allowed one unexcused absence during the semester — though not on a week when you're being workshopped (if you need to reschedule your workshop, please contact me as far in advance as possible). After that, absences will result in the reduction of your letter grade by a third (A to A-, A- to B+, etc). Considerable tardiness (say, 30+ minutes) will count as absence.

Late Work Policy (General)

- Extensions: If you email me ahead of time for an extension on one reading response or a critique letter, I will give you an extension of one week. You can get extensions on two separate occasions without it affecting your grade. After two occasions, it will count as late work.
- Late Work: Any work that you turn in late without giving me notice, or after having already used your allowance of extensions. This will result in the reduction of your letter grade by a third (A to A-, A- to B+, etc).

Late Work Policy (Workshop)

- Late Story/Poem: If you are late turning in a workshop with no prior communication of these circumstances, or if you're just late because you're late, it will result in the reduction of your letter grade by a third (A to A-, A- to B+, etc). Please, please don't do this. It is extremely inconsiderate of everyone's time and not productive for you, either. You will know when you're submitting on the first day of class so prepare accordingly

GRADING

Class Participation: 40% (Let's have a good time folks)

Your voice is in the discussion.

You're putting effort into weekly in-class writing activities.

Your letters and responses are thoughtful.

If you find it difficult or intimidating to speak in class, please shoot me an email or meet with me during office hours. I can make accommodations here.

Writing Assignments: 40%.

- 1 Fiction Submission
- 1 Poetry Submission
- 1 [Choose your own] Submission
- Critique Letters & Reading Responses

Note: You are being graded largely on the effort and care you show your work, not how "good" it is. "Good" is completely subjective, while hard work is almost always evident. I would rather you take creative risks and invest wholeheartedly in your piece than try to turn in something very safe and polished.

Final Portfolio: 20%.

- All stories and poems, with edits
- 1-2 page Introduction

PLAGIARISM

Don't do it. Plagiarized work will receive an automatic zero and will be reported to the department. Read NYU's Academic Integrity Guide here:
<https://liberalstudies.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/liberalstudies/academics/academic-integrity-guide.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

Unless we see explicit evidence that the speaker of a workshop piece 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.

HOW TO WORKSHOP

First and foremost every draft has imperfections. Don't expect that your work is "done" just because you've submitted. The imperfections in your drafts are not imperfections in you as a writer/person. In reality, very few writers get from first to final draft on natural talent alone.

The writers who can take criticism, edit and work hard are the ones who succeed.

I say that to say two things:

1. Don't take workshop personally.
2. Don't get personal in workshop.

Your first considerations when editing someone else's work:

- What do I think the writer is trying to do?
- How can I help them better achieve what I think they're trying to do?

Critique is not about what *you* would do, it's about helping the writer do what *they* want to do better.

Give constructive and thoughtful feedback by asking thoughtful questions (not impulsive or not well thought out questions).

Edit and suggest, don't rewrite. Everyone has different tastes. Focus more on word choice, structure, clarity, plotting and so on, rather than suggesting wholesale plot or language overhauls. Again, it's not about you.

HOW TO CRITIQUE

All critique letters should respond to:

1. What you remembered most about the piece.
2. Biggest overall questions you have about the piece.
3. Suggestions of how to resolve one of those questions.

Start with the positive. Tell the author when the story is working and why (keeping structure and literary elements in mind, more than what you liked and didn't like personally).

Move into suggestions and questions. Especially important: when was something unclear, and why? Was it the language? The plot? Did you ever "fall out" of the story? Again, don't be judgmental, but don't be afraid of constructive criticism. This information helps the author immensely in future edits.

Example ideas if you don't know what to say:

- Are the characters believable?
- Do they act with consistency and have strong individual voices?
- Can you "see" the setting? If not, why do you think that is? Has it been described too little or too much? Are characters moving through it in inconsistent ways?

- In the case of poems, how are they using the structure to enhance communication of images/ideas? Are those images and ideas clear? Are they impactful?

Provisional Readings (Subject to Change)

	Craft Mondays		Workshop Wednesdays
Monday, January 24	Introduction Giving Feedback/Revision Grouping A, B, C, D	Wednesday, January 26	The Art of Storytelling Group A submit DUE: Mules and Men: Introduction & pg. 28-34 The Site of Memory - 233-245
Monday, January 31	Beginnings DUE: Jazz, first page, Toni Morrison House for Mr Biswas, pg. 15-30	Wednesday, February 2	FICTION Group A workshop Group B submit
Monday, February 7	The power of an image DUE: Short Story, Another Manhattan Watch: Lynda Barry The answer is in the picture	Wednesday, February 9	FICTION Group B workshop Group C submit
Monday, February 14	Setting and World-Building in Fiction DUE: Bluest Eye, 33-37 The Hunter's Wife	Wednesday, February 16	FICTION Group C workshop Group D submit

Monday, February 21	no class	Wednesday, February 23	FICTION Group D workshop Group A submit
Monday, February 28	Creating tension DUE: Warmth of Other Suns, 47-71 Start reading Nickel Boys	Wednesday, March 2	POETRY Group A workshop Group B submit
Monday, March 7	Character and imagination DUE: We Real Cool, Gwendolyn Brooks Dinosaurs in the hood, Danez Smith Mother to Son, Langston Hughes Beasts of No Nation, 1-11	Wednesday, March 9	POETRY Group B workshop
Monday, March 14	no class - read Nickel Boys	Wednesday, March 16	no class - read Nickel Boys
Monday, March 21	I'm not a biter, I'm a writer (paying homage, inspiration) Come ready to write!!	Wednesday, March 23	Nickel Boys review Group C submit
Monday, March 28	The Spoken Word (Performance poetry) DUE: Carvens Lissant - Beauty Part 3 Shihan - this type love Langston Hughes, I, too	Wednesday, March 30	POETRY Group C workshop Group D submit

Monday, April 4	<p>Dialogue/Form/Invisible Ink</p> <p>DUE: Terrence Hayes - the golden shovel Zadie Smith, Miss Adele Amid the Corsets Toni Morrison, Invisible Ink</p>	Wednesday, April 6	<p>POETRY</p> <p>Group D workshop Group A submit</p>
Monday, April 11	<p>Revision pt 2: Fire writing & crystalizing Writing exercise</p>	Wednesday, April 13	<p>FICTION/POETRY</p> <p>Group A workshop Group B submit</p>
Monday, April 18	<p>Endings</p> <p>DUE: Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery" Bluest Eye, 81-93</p>	Wednesday, April 20	<p>FICTION/POETRY</p> <p>Group B workshop Group C submit</p>
Monday, April 25	<p>Curve Balls</p> <p>DUE: 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain' Alice Munro The Art of Losing,</p>	Wednesday, April 27	<p>FICTION/POETRY</p> <p>Group C workshop Group D submit</p>
Monday, May 2	<p>Poetry is not a Luxury</p> <p>DUE: Poetry is not a Luxury That Crafty feeling, Zadie Smith</p>	Wednesday, May 4	<p>FICTION/POETRY</p> <p>Group D workshop</p>
Monday, May 9	Class reading and party!		