Creative Writing: Introduction to Fiction and Poetry

Spring 2021
Section: CRWRI-UA.815.003
Instructor: Derek Ayeh
Time: Monday/Wednesday 8:00 - 9:15 AM
Email: dda281@nyu.edu
Office Hours: By appointment

Course Overview

This introductory course is designed to encourage and refine your skills in writing fiction and poetry. Ideally, it will also help you improve your reading abilities, both for workshop pieces and published fiction and poetry. Successful literature is varied—writers employ form, language, style and other elements of writing in diverse ways. So, we will approach every reading with an open mind and focus on identifying what succeeds. Hopefully, in the process we’ll also learn more about what makes us fall in love with a line, a moment, a character.

Required Texts

Mary Oliver, A Poetry Handbook

For all other readings, I will email PDFs or links.

Class Structure

Mondays we will tackle topics related to craft. Readings will always be assigned a week in advance. In class, we’ll review the various readings and occasionally other media, discuss the strengths of the work, and search for valuable lessons we can bring to our own writing. We’ll also occasionally do writing prompts and exercises related to the readings. Wednesdays starting February 10 will be dedicated to workshop. We will workshop three pieces each class. Workshop submissions will be submitted a week in advance via email.

Course Requirements

Reading Responses: It’s important that each week we complete the assigned readings and come prepared for class discussions on Mondays. To ensure that the readings are taken seriously, each week you are responsible for writing a 350-500 word reading response based on the assigned texts for that Monday. Responses will be due on Sundays at 7 PM. These responses are largely free form; I’m mainly curious about your reactions to the readings. You can write about what you liked or disliked, themes present in a particular piece, or how you feel two or more pieces relate. When writing about likes/dislikes, provide justification for your views. Occasionally, I may ask that your response focuses on a particular text, but that does not mean you cannot also respond to another reading from the same week that interested or moved you.
Workshop Submissions: Everyone will submit three times to workshop. Once for poetry, once for fiction, and a third time when you choose which genre you’d like to submit in. **Workshop pieces are due Wednesdays, a week in advance of your workshop.** This way we ensure that everyone has ample time to read workshop pieces and write their critiques.

Final Portfolio: At the end of the semester, you will submit a portfolio of the pieces you have workshoped for class. These pieces should have been meaningfully revised, based on edits you received in class and/or decisions you made after gaining a better understanding of the story you are trying to tell. In addition to the revised pieces, you will be required to submit a one page introduction that reviews the changes you made and your justifications for making certain changes and rejecting others.

**Grading**

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

In most cases, late work will automatically count as a zero (including late workshop submissions, editor’s letters, and reading responses). If you expect that you will be unable to submit for workshop on time, you are responsible for informing me ahead of time (which means well before class).

**Workshops**

During workshops we will discuss your writing and offer feedback. You will have three opportunities to be workshoped 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 (cannot be a revision of one of your previous submissions)

If you are being workshoped, you will be responsible for adding your manuscript to the class Google Drive one week in advance (they should be uploaded prior to the start of class the day they are due). Submissions should be 12-point Times New Roman font. Fiction manuscripts should be double-spaced.

Everyone is responsible for providing line edits in the shared Google Doc (make sure you have the Google Doc set to “Suggesting” mode). In addition, you should email the writer a separate, one-page editor’s letter. This letter should highlight both the strengths of the text and suggest key revisions that will benefit the writer. **Editor’s letters should be sent via email before class**
When writing your editor letter, include questions you have about the text. Also, try to speak to how the text can better capitalize on its strengths. Remember to be positive and give constructive criticism! And make sure to include me on your editor letter emails so that I have a copy.

**Participation**

Be ready to speak your mind in class. Remember, there are no correct answers. We should all come interested in each other’s thoughts and perceptions of the readings, both for craft and workshop. I’m also uninterested in you forcing yourself to make your thoughts fit the topic or theme listed in the syllabus for a particular class. Arrive with your own thoughts. When you read, search for what you find valuable.

**Attendance and Tardiness**

Come to class and arrive on time. If you are expecting to miss class for an urgent/emergency reason, please email me before class (or as soon as you are able, if not possible before class). Otherwise, each absence counts as a 5% loss on your total grade (meaning one unexcused absence is a loss of a quarter of your attendance grade). If you are fifteen minutes late to class, it will count as a tardy. Every two tardies 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**

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.

Readings

January 25 – Introductions
Review syllabus

January 27 – On writing
Zadie Smith, “Ten Rules for Writing Fiction”
Jericho Brown, “Prayer of the Backhanded” & “The Art of Words” (video)
George Saunders, “False Starts” (video)

February 1 & 3 – Imitation, Form, & Structure
Oliver, A Poetry Handbook, “Imitation”
Danez Smith, “crown” & “Trees” (video)
Robert Olen Butler, “Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot”
Jhumpa Lahiri, “A Temporary Matter”

February 8 & 10 – Point of View (Workshop begins)
Oliver, A Poetry Handbook, “Workshops and Solitude”
Jamaica Kincaid, “Girl”
Eve Ewing, “to the notebook kid” & “I saw Emmett Till this week at the grocery store”
Tobias Wolff, “Bullet in the Brain”
Group A Workshop

February 15 (President’s Day) & 17
Oliver, A Poetry Handbook, “Revision”
Group B Workshop

February 22 & 24 – Character
John Updike, “Pigeon Feathers”
Jade Jones, “Today You’re A Black Revolutionary”
Group C Workshop

March 1 & 3 – Meter
Oliver, A Poetry Handbook, “The Line”
Maya Angelo, “Still I Rise”
John Milton, Paradise Lost (selections)
Group D Workshop

March 8 & 10 - Tension
Herman Melville, “Bartleby, The Scrivener”
Edwidge Danticat, “Without Inspection”  
*Group A Workshop*

**SPRING BREAK: March 15 through March 21**

**March 22 & 24 – Form & Free Verse**  
Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*, “Some Given Forms” & “Verse that is Free”  
Terrance Hayes, *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*  
Gwendolyn Brooks, “Sonnet-Ballad” and “We Real Cool”  
Yusef Komunyakaa, “Camouflaging the Chimera”  
Fatimah Asghar, “Smell is the Last Memory to Go”  
*Group B Workshop*

**March 29 & 31 – Voice & Tone**  
Poetry Unbound podcast “A Poem to Notice Openings and Closings”  
Langston Hughes, “I, Too”  
Denis Johnson, “Emergency”  
George Saunders, “Jon”  
Craig Santos Perez, “Halloween in the Anthropocene”  
*Group C Workshop*

**April 5 & 7 – Identity**  
Ada Limón, “The Contract Says We’d Like the Conversation to be Bilingual”  
Jacqueline Woodson, “genetics”  
*Group D Workshop*

**April 12 & 14 – Violence**  
Tim O’Brien, “How To Tell A True War Story”  
Ocean Vuong, “Seventh Circle of Earth”  
*Group A Workshop*

**April 19 & 21 – The Heart**  
Jenny Zhang, “Why Were They Throwing Bricks?”  
Hilary Mantel, “The Long QT”  
William Butler Yeats, “When You Are Old”  
*Group B Workshop*

**April 26 & 28 – Fantasy, Dystopia, New Worlds**  
Indians of All Tribes, “The Alcatraz Proclamation”  
Porpentine Charity Heartscape, “Mask of Zelda: Dark Eternities”  
Nana Kwame-Adjei Brenyah, “Zimmer Land”  
*Group C Workshop*

**May 3 & 5 – Music, Spoken Word, & Performance**  
Lindsay Young, “Queerphobic”
Hanif Abdurraqib, “Ode to Biggie Smalls, Ending in Gold”
Andrea Gibson, “Orlando”
Gil Scott-Heron, “No Knock”
Outkast, “Aquemeni”

*Group D Workshop*

**May 10 – Last Day**

Final thoughts
Class reading