Intro to Creative Writing
T/Th 8 am-9:15 am
CRWRI-UA.815.013
Professor Amanda Larson (akl395@nyu.edu)
Office Hours: By Appointment

“When you’re writing, you’re trying to find out something which you don’t know. The whole language of writing for me is finding out what you don’t want to know, what you don’t want to find out. But something forces you to anyway.”

—James Baldwin

Course Description:
Welcome! Over the course of this semester, students will develop an understanding of how the act of writing is, beyond a creative act, a way of understanding the language of the world around us. Students will achieve this understanding through developing a regular creative practice, and through studying the works of contemporary writers whose canon of work we are joining by writing our own. I believe writing, and especially creative writing, is a necessary, useful, and cross-disciplinary skill. By the end of the semester, my goal is that each student will see themselves as a writer, and they will feel proud of the work that they produce.

Course Structure:
Tuesdays will be craft classes, and when creative assignments are due. In these classes, we will closely analyze works of modern literature, taking note of what tactics these writers use and applying them to our own creative work. My professor in undergrad once said that there was no such thing as genre: there is only the short-form, and the long-form. We will start with the “short-form,” and focus primarily on the craft of the sentence, before we combine those sentences to create long-form work.

Thursdays will be workshop, and when feedback is due. We will likely divide the class into two or three groups, in order to give everyone ample workshopping time. Students will have discretion over what they will workshop. Though creative assignments must be completed each week, I only want students to workshop pieces that are useful and interesting to them. We will talk more about the guiding principles of workshop in our first class. However, it is important to note that the practice of writing is, fundamentally, the practice of empathy.

Writing assignments (responses to the prompts) must be completed each week. These prompts will be specific in their expectations, and I expect to see at least one piece of writing that adheres to all of those outlined. Again, the responses to the prompts are not what needs to be workshopped. If you do not love what you wrote for the assignment, don’t worry. You can workshop something else; however, I do expect all students, regardless of whether or not they are workshopping, to put in a clear effort into the assignments they turn in each week. I expect the piece that you workshop to be well thought-out, and not created on the fly. I believe that writers must write regularly in order to hone their impulses, the way that athletes will go to the gym. I highly encourage you to write every day, even if it’s just in the Notes app on your phone.
Grading Breakdown:

30% Class Participation. Your participation in this class, and attendance, is key. This grade involves verbal comments made in workshop, and in-class discussion over the pieces we read. 10% of this grade consists of written feedback. Students must make written comments that demonstrate a clear sense of intellectual attention given to each piece, and that relate to multiple areas of the piece. We will go over guidelines for how to provide constructive written feedback in the first class, including examples of constructive feedback I have received on my own work.

10% Office Hours. I would like for each student to come see me twice a semester during office hours. This is just a good opportunity for me to get to know you, your writing, and to do one-on-one consultations about your writing, which I love doing.

40% Completion of Assignments. Each student must complete a writing assignment each week. When we focus on poetry, these will be poems, and when we focus on prose, these will be writing exercises and/or your story. Please email me your assignment each week, even if you are not workshopming.

20% Final Portfolio. Each student will complete a final portfolio, consisting of several finished and revised creative pieces. We will go over the principles of revision in class.

Readings:

I will make all readings available via NYU Classes. No books need to be purchased for the class; however, I’ve occasionally found it easier for physical copies of the books to be used as a reference.

We will explore writing from all genres.

Class Policies:

Attendance: Students can have one unexcused absence per semester, no questions asked. However, please let me know in advance. If you miss a class where you are workshopping, you will forfeit your time in workshop, and will be unable to make it up. With all other absences, please have an excuse. Your final grade will drop 5% with each unexcused absence. Students are given a grace period of being five minutes late. Three lates that occur outside of the grace period will count as an absence.

Technology: No cell phones or laptops in class, save for accommodations. Unless this class is on Zoom, in which case, all technology is not only allowed, but necessary.

Format: All pieces of writing should be submitted in Times New Roman, 12 point font.

Plagiarism: Do not plagiarize. I will know. It will be graded as an automatic zero and reported to the department.

Content: No topic is off limits in this class. In workshop, we will refer to the writer of the piece as “the speaker,” which is a vital, and ethical, distinction to make. That being said, hate speech, of any kind, will not be tolerated in this class. Please be kind to each other.
A Note on the Circumstances:

Covid-19 is an incredibly hard and challenging time. I aim for this class to be one that improves your experience of this time. Should you have any difficulty completing the assignments, or feel like you will turn one in late, please talk to me. I am willing to grant extensions for students who express needing one in advance.

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. Website: http://www.nyu.edu/csd

Provisional Course Schedule

Week One: Introductions and Practice

1/28

Introductions and Reviewing the Syllabus
Mock Workshop of Cory Booker's Poem

• Questions: What are some of your favorite writers? What does constructive criticism of writing look like?
• Required Readings:
  o On the Shame of Being a Writer, by Chuck Palahniuk
  o Autobiographia Literaria by Frank O'Hara
• Assignment: Go around your life. Make a list of things you overhear. Write a poem using one of them. Syllabus email.

Week Two: Modern Poetry and the Internet

2/2

Discussion: Crush by Richard Siken
DUE: Syllabus email. Overheard poem.

• Questions: What does it mean to panic on the page? What is Siken’s ultimate project, and how does he achieve it?
• Required Readings:
  o Crush by Richard Siken
  o “Poetry is Not a Luxury” by Audre Lorde
Week Three: Sound Logic

Discussion: Alternate Meaning through Sound

DUE: Poem

- **Required Readings:**
  - “Alcatraz,” by Sharon Olds
  - “In the Loop,” by Bob Hicok
  - “Boy Breaking Glass” Gwendolyn Brooks
  - Ada Limón
  - “What I Should Have Said,” by Joy Harjo

- **Questions:** How can sound be used to convey a meaning that is different from what is being said?

Week Four: Syntax & Show Don’t Tell

Discussion: Syntax as a Mode of Power

DUE: Poem

- **Required Readings:**
  - Beginning of *Normal People* by Sally Rooney
  - “Mock Orange” by Louise Glück
  - “Lana Turner has Collapsed!” by Frank O’Hara
  - “The Chasm” by Suji Kwok Kim
  - “New York Poem” by Terrance Hayes

- **Questions:** How does syntax create and establish who has power in writing?
Week Five: Repetition

2/23

Discussion: Repetition
**DUE: Poem**

- **Required Readings:**
  - “The Seven Devils” by Marie Howe
  - “Look” by Solmaz Sharif
  - “The Meaning of the Shovel,” by Martin Espada
  - “Half-Light” by Frank Bidart
- **Questions:** Why is repetition important? How does repetition create a mood, or a theme? Can repetition establish rules?

2/25

**WORKSHOP**
**DUE: Feedback**

Week Six: White Space and Line

3/2

Discussion: Poetry as Visual Art
**DUE: Poem**

- **Required Readings:**
  - “The High Priestess of Soul’s Sunday Morning Visit to the Wall of Respect” by Morgan Parker
  - Letter poems by Solmaz Sharif
  - Excerpt of *Ghost Of* by Diana Khoi Nguyen
  - Excerpt of *Good Stock, Strange Blood* by Dawn Lundy Martin
- **Questions:** How does white space change the meaning of a poem? How is a poem a piece of visual art? How does white space alter our use of breathe?

3/4

**WORKSHOP**
**DUE: Feedback**
**Week Seven: Prose Poems & Micro-fiction**

3/9

**Discussion: Creating a Scene and the Beginnings of Narrative**

**DUE: Poem**

- **Required Readings:**
  - *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* excerpt by Claudia Rankine
  - “Wahpanica” by Layli Long Soldier
  - “A Story About the Body” by Robert Hass
  - “The Colonel” by Carolyn Forché
  - “Macho” by Margaret Ross
  - “Borges and I” by Jorge Luis Borges

- **Questions:** How do prose poems employ imagery differently from linear ones? What do they do that linear poems do not? How does a scene change when described in a prose poem, versus a linear poem? What can micro-fiction teach us about narrative?

3/11

**WORKSHOP**

**DUE: Feedback**

**Week Eight: Fragmented Contrast**

3/16

**Discussion: Creating Tension through Fragments**

**DUE: Prose poem**

- **Required Readings:**
  - *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson
  - Excerpt from *Weather* by Jenny Offill

- **Questions:** Is *Bluets* different from a prose poem? How so? How does Nelson alternate between the “high” and the “low” register? How would Offill’s book be different if it wasn’t written in fragments?

3/18

**WORKSHOP**

**DUE: Feedback**
Week Nine: Nonfiction Details

3/23

Discussion: Curating the Details of Our Lives
DUE: Feedback

• Required Readings:
  o “Red Stories from a Red Planet” by Chelsea Hodson
  o “My Silent Childhood” by Maureen Sun
  o “Notes of a Native Son,” by James Baldwin

• Questions: How do we choose what details to write about?

3/25

WORKSHOP
DUE: Feedback

Week Ten: The People

3/30

Discussion: Building a Character, which is really a Person
DUE: Essay

• Required Readings:
  o “People” by Alex Dimitrov
  o “Gretel in Darkness” by Louise Glück
  o “Where are you going, where have you been?” By Joyce Carol Oates
  o Excerpt from *Luster* by Raven Leilani

• Questions: How does Connie change throughout Oates’ story? What constitutes a point of view?

4/1

WORKSHOP
DUE: Feedback
Week Eleven: Conversation

4/6

Discussion: What should we say, and what should we not?
**DUE: Story/Character exercise**

- **Reading Before Class:**
  - “Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway
  - Excerpt from *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck
  - “The Gate” by Marie Howe
  - Essay on Dialogue by Rachel Lyon
  - Beginning of *The Idiot* by Elif Batuman

- **Questions:** How does dialogue change the stakes of the story? How does it reveal someone’s motivations?

4/8

**WORKSHOP**
**DUE: Feedback**

Week Twelve: World Building

4/13

Discussion: Conveying the values of a setting
**DUE: Writing Exercise/Short Story**

- **Required Readings:**
  - Beginning of *The Idiot* by Elif Batuman
  - Beginning of *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison

- **Questions:** What details are prioritized? How do the details of the setting come together to create a voice?

4/15

**WORKSHOP**
**DUE: Feedback**
Week Thirteen: Narrative

4/20

Discussion: How We Create Narrative
DUE: Writing Exercise/Short Story

• Required Readings:
  o “Emergency” by Denis Johnson
  o “The Weirdos” by Ottessa Moshfegh
• Questions: How do we create and reveal a problem within a story?

4/22

WORKSHOP
DUE: Feedback

Week Fourteen: Revision and Endings

4/27

Discussion: Principles of Revision
DUE: Writing Exercise/Short Story

• Reading Before Class:
  o Excerpt from My Year of Rest and Relaxation by Ottessa Moshfegh
  o Excerpt of The Idiot by Elif Batuman
  o Excerpt of Sylvia by Leonard Michaels
  o Toni Morrison’s Red Table Interview
  o James Baldwin’s Paris Review Interview

• Questions: How do we go back and improve our writing? What does it mean for a work to be “done”? How do we create an emotional conclusion?

4/29

WORKSHOP
DUE: Feedback

Week Fifteen: The Actual End

5/4

Last day! Class Reading.
Final Portfolios Due at 11:59 PM.