Creative Writing: Introduction to Fiction and Poetry  
(CRWRI-UA.815.009)

Instructor: Willie Watt  
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Time: Monday/Wednesday 11:00am-12:15pm  
Phone: 936-447-0859  
Location: Bldg: SILV Room: 509  
Office Hours: By Appointment

“A professional writer is an amateur who didn’t quit.” — Richard Bach

“Talent is cheaper than table salt. What separates the talented individual from the successful one is a lot of hard work.” — Stephen King

Course Overview:
There has perhaps been no other point in history when the act of writing—of sitting down before a blank page and ignoring all other distractions—has been more difficult. Facebook, Twitter, Netflix, Hulu…all these (and many others) contend for our time and attention in ways writers of the past couldn’t have imagined. But there has also never been a time when writing has been more important. Writing enables us to make sense of the world around us, of the chaos both internal and external we find ourselves collectively navigating. In this course, we’ll discuss not only the craft of fiction and poetry, but also the strategies, routines, and rituals necessary to becoming disciplined and goal-oriented students of the craft. Through reading and writing the works of published authors, as well as one another’s submissions, we’ll come up with creative ways to hold our feet to the fire as artists. In short: this class is just as much about becoming a writer as it is about learning to write.

Workshop:
Writers will submit to workshop one week in advance so the class has ample time to read and analyze the submissions. The first round will be fiction submissions, the second round we’ll do poetry. During the third round, students will be free to choose between a second fiction or poetry submission. Everyone will submit at least once in both fiction and poetry.

- Short stories should be 7-15 pages
- Poetry should be 3-10 pages (multiple short poems is fine, but no more than 3 poems per submission)

Depending on class size, we will workshop two to three students per workshop. Each submission will be discussed for roughly 25-30 minutes. I will begin each discussion with a breakdown of what I feel are the strengths of the piece, before opening the floor to a more general discussion of what the class feels is working in the story/poem. After that, I’ll solicit opinions about what could be improved in the revision process. During this time, the writer being workshopped should listen carefully, take notes, and speak only if there is a specific question that might help us more thoroughly respond to the piece. At the end of the session, the writer will be asked to speak for a couple of minutes about the workshop and ask any questions that may have arisen.

Having a story critiqued—especially if the writer has poured a lot of blood, sweat, and tears into the process—is always a difficult thing. It is easy to fixate only on the negative
feedback and ignore the positive. In this class, we will strive to create a safe, friendly, and uplifting environment in which encouragement and support of our fellow writers is paramount. We will, of course, be honest and forthright about the aspects of a submission we feel could be improved. But unnecessarily mean, demeaning, or otherwise hurtful comments—especially if they are of a personal nature—are strictly prohibited. Likewise, the writer being workshopped is expected to be thoughtful, gracious, and open to constructive criticism. One final note on comments in workshop: if I feel that the discussion is spiraling away from useful critiques—for example, if the discussion is headed in an unproductive direction—I will do my best to reel things back to a harmonious and useful place. Together, we will navigate through the semester with the assumption that, by the end, we will all have become better writers, readers, and humans.

**Response Letters:**
Everyone is expected to write a 1-3-page response letter for each workshopped short story or poem, due no later than the day after workshop (our workshop days are on Monday, so this should be written and submitted by the end of Tuesday at the latest). The letter should be typed, double-spaced, and in 12-point font. The letter should outline first what is working in the story, followed by suggestions for improvement, capped off by a short, encouraging summary of your thoughts.

It can be easy to get lazy about this part of the course. Try hard to be as specific as possible with your feedback. What parts excited you? What parts felt like they dragged? What is the story trying to do and does it achieve those goals? It is very important not merely to say **how you would revise the piece.** Instead, try to discern **what the writer was trying to accomplish, then assess to what degree they’ve succeeded in their aspirations.** As in workshop, err on the side of generosity and encouragement over sharp criticism in your letters. Even the most thorough and well-intentioned criticism can ruin someone’s confidence, and that is not what we’re interested in in this class.

Two copies of each response letter should be printed out: one for the writer and one for me. If printing isn’t possible, email is fine. It’s very important not to get behind on your feedback. For every late response, ten points will be taken off your grade for that letter. I also reserve the right to deduct points for feedback I deem lazy, incoherent, or otherwise in bad faith. I will inform you promptly if this is a problem.

**Readings:**
The list and schedule of all required readings can be found at the end of this syllabus. Each **assigned story or poem must be read prior to the start of the class day on which it is assigned.** The majority of the readings will be relatively short so that we have plenty of time to read, analyze, and discuss the workshop submissions. We will also be reading one short novel, which the class will have two weeks to get through.

The process of selecting works for a syllabus is, by its nature, restrictive. It can’t help but barely scratch the surface of what is out there. The stories and poems in this course were chosen because they demonstrate, in one way another, an exemplary use of craft. As with workshop submissions, we’ll discuss the ways in which the piece is working for us as readers, as well as the ways in which it does not live up to its full potential. It is impossible to break down all the mechanics of a given story/poem, but that does not preclude us from having a lively, opinionated discussion on the works of published authors.
Attendance and Participation:
Attendance is mandatory in this class. Without a full roster of students to discuss the readings and submissions, the workshop format cannot function. If you cannot make it to class due to an emergency, please let me know as far in advance as possible so you are not marked absent. One unexcused absence won’t affect your grade, but for each subsequent unexcused absence 10% of your attendance grade will be docked. Arriving fifteen minutes or later after the start of class will also be noted. Two such tardy arrivals will count against you as an absence, so make sure to have a plan on class days for arriving on time.

Showing up, however, is only half the equation. Participating in discussions (both for the readings and for submissions) is expected and required. To receive full marks, students must speak up every day in class. You’re not expected to have some genius insight, or to make a brilliant observation. A thoughtful question is just as valuable as a smart comment. Just make sure to be involved in the discussions every day and you’ll be fine.

Final Portfolio:
Final portfolios will be collected the last day of class. They should consist of three things:

- Revised versions of all short stories and poems workshopped over the course of the semester.
- A compilation of all response letters.
- A 500-1000 word essay comparing and contrasting two of the assigned readings (this can be two short stories, two poems, or one of each). The style of this essay should be personal in nature. I’d like to see you discuss what you’ve learned from these works, as well as how you plan to implement these strategies in your own writing going forward.

Alternatively: Instead of the essay, you may turn in additional prose or poetry. The finished product should constitute a small book. This can be a novella, a series of short stories, or a collection of poems, totaling 25 pages or more. You may not reuse pieces already workshopped in this class. Students who choose this route must also turn in a short, one-page plan outlining how they intend to incorporate what they’ve learned this semester in their own writing.

Final portfolios should reflect the body of work you’ve completed over the course of the semester. It is meant to be both a snapshot of all your hard work, as well as a thoughtful retrospective on how you’ve grown as an artist and reader. I’m extremely flexible in regard to formatting, and I encourage creativity and personal expression in this project. Portfolios should either be turned in physically the final day of class or emailed to me no later than midnight the previous evening.

Extra Credit:
Unexcused absences cannot be made up, but up to 3 missing or late response letters can be fulfilled by turning in a short essay about the workshop submission in question. These essays should be 3-5 pages in length, and thought of as a deeper, more thorough analysis of the piece. They should be emailed to both the writer and me prior to the last day of class.
Additionally, there will be random pop quizzes throughout the semester about the reading(s) for that week. This ensures that students are keeping up with the assigned short stories and poems. Incorrect answers will not count against your grade, but a maximum of 5% extra credit is available for those who score well.

Grading:
Grades are, by their very nature, imperfect. I’ll do my very best not to reduce your effort, commitment, and enthusiasm to an ultimately insignificant number. If you submit original work, turn in responses in a timely manner, and show up to class ready to discuss the readings and submissions, you’ll get an A. I’m not here to make distinctions between writers. I’m here to teach you what I know, provide a safe space in which to make stories and talk about literature, and facilitate a group of peers who will read and appreciate your work for years to come. In other words, **the caliber of the writing itself is not up for grading**. Writing is a subjective, imperfect art, and it’s not up to me to decide if it is good or bad. I’ll always give you my honest opinion, but it’s important to keep in mind that it is only that: an opinion. Don’t let criticism discourage you. We all started somewhere. With all that out of the way, however, the breakdown of your grades is as follows:

- **Workshop Submissions** — 20%
- **Response Letters** — 30%
- **Attendance/Participation** — 30%
- **Final Portfolio** — 20%

As mentioned above, up to three missing or late response letters can be made up with short essays. An additional 5% in Extra Credit is available via random pop quizzes, for a possible final grade of 105%.

Office Hours:
Office hours are available by appointment, either over zoom or (safely) in person. My schedule is flexible, but please email me a few days in advance so we can work out an appropriate time. It is highly encouraged that each student meet with me at least once over the course of the semester, but multiple meetings is fine as well. I’d love to chat with you about any concerns you might have, as well as more general discussions about the readings, books in general, or the practice of writing. I can be reached via email or cellphone (texting is fine), or we can discuss possible meeting times before or after class. If it is convenient, in-person office hours can be held prior to the beginning of class or once we are done for the day.

Plagiarism:
Inspiration comes in many forms, and often from other writers. But there is a sharp difference between inspiration and plagiarism. Plagiarism in any form will not be tolerated in this class. Full stop. No exceptions. If I find that you have stolen from published works or your classmates, you will be reported to the department, then dropped from the class. The whole reason we’re here is to create original works of art. Just don’t do it.

If you are struggling to meet a deadline and find yourself tempted to pass off someone else’s work as your own, please reach out to me instead. I’ll happily give you an extension (within reason).
Electronics in Class:
An occasion might arise when the use of cellphones or computers is useful. Looking things up and finding references and sources at a moment’s notice is a wonderful tool—one that our pre-internet predecessors would have loved to access. However, outside of these special circumstances where it is beneficial to the class, the use of electronics during the two-and-a-half hours a week in which we are together is prohibited. I encourage notetaking but ask that you do me the small favor of taking them down on paper. If I catch you scrolling through Instagram or perusing text messages during class, I will call you out. There will only be a few of us in the room so it won’t be difficult. Please: just put it away until the end of class.

If for any reason you require the use of electronics to participate in class, please let me know and an exception will be made.

Student Wellness Policy:
Literature inevitably deals with difficult and thorny subject matter. It is unfortunately the case that a character’s misfortune is almost always more interesting than their fortune. The assigned readings will touch on these topics throughout the semester, so if you have any specific reservations please let me know in advance so I can plan around your needs accordingly.

Unless otherwise noted by the writer, all characters within the short stories and poems submitted will be assumed fictional. However, it is the nature of writing that the personal life of the author inevitably bleeds through onto the page. If a piece you are planning to submit contains possibly triggering material—such as sexual assault, suicide, severe depression, etc.—please send an email informing the class beforehand. If you are uncomfortable reading such material, please let me know and accommodations will be made.

Take your mental health seriously. These are chaotic and trying times, and writing is no substitute for professional help. NYU offers many free services to support you, including the Wellness Exchange. You can reach them at a private hotline, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The number is 212-443-9999. Please don’t hesitate to ask for help if you need it.

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 (address below):

NYU’s Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities: 726 Broadway, 2nd Floor New York, NY 10003-6675 4

Telephone: 212-998-4980

Voice/TTY Fax: 212-995-4114

Web site: http://www.nyu.edu/csd

Course Schedule:

Week 1—
1) Mon 2.1: Introductions; syllabus overview; class expectations (how workshops function, how to be a generous reader, notes on craft)

2) Wed 2.3: Read *A Temporary Matter* and *Sexy* by Jhumpa Lahiri; Craft Lesson—character, expectations, and exaggeration; finalize workshop roster

**Week 2—**
3) Mon 2.8: Read *A Model World* and *The Little Knife* by Michael Chabon; Craft Lesson—anatomy of a scene, backfill, and pacing; first submissions due

4) Wed 2.10: Read *Trilobites* by Breece D’J Pancake and *Chango* by Oscar Casares; Craft Lesson—setting, minimalism, and writing what you know

**Week 3—**
5) Mon 2.15: Workshop #1 (fiction)

6) Wed 2.17: Read *Emergency* and *Car Crash While Hitchhiking* by Denis Johnson; Craft Lesson—voice, tone, and compression

**Week 4—**
7) Mon 2.22: Workshop #2 (fiction)

8) Wed 2.24: Read *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* and *In Persuasion Nation* by George Saunders; Craft Lesson—immersion, callbacks, and humor

**Week 5—**
9) Mon 3.1: Workshop #3 (fiction)

10) Wed 3.3: Read *Hell is the Absence of God* and *The Tower of Babylon* by Ted Chiang; Craft Lesson—genre, worldbuilding, and imagination

**Week 6—**
11) Mon 3.8: Workshop #4 (fiction)

12) Wed 3.10: Read *Lesbos* and *Daddy* by Sylvia Plath; Craft Lesson—language, imagery, and provocation

**Week 7—**
13) Mon 3.15: Workshop #5 (poetry); (beginning of second round of workshops)

14) Wed 3.17: Read *Having a Coke With You* by Frank O’Hara and *The Empty Glass* by *Louise Gluck*; Craft Lesson—sentimentality, confession, and inspiration;

**Week 8—**
15) Mon 3.22: Workshop #6 (poetry)
16) Wed 3.24: Read first half of Less by Andrew Sean Greer (up to the chapter “Less French” on page 129)

**Week 9—**

17) Mon 3.29: Workshop #7 (poetry)

18) Wed 3.31: Finish reading Less by Andrew Sean Greer; Craft Lesson—character 2.0, metafiction, and loving the reader

**Week 10—**

19) Mon 4.5: Workshop #8 (poetry)

20) Wed 4.7: Read The Dark Collects by Ben Lerner, and Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror by John Ashbery; Craft Lesson—abstraction, symbolism, and “difficult” poetry

**Week 11—**

21) Mon 4.12: Workshop #9 (fiction and poetry); (beginning of third round of workshops)

22) Wed 4.14: Read Song of Myself by Walt Whitman and Howl by Allen Ginsberg; Craft Lesson—epic poetry, political poetry, and free-verse

**Week 12—**

23) Mon 4.19: Workshop #10 (fiction and poetry);

24) Wed 4.21: Read Floating Bridge and Comfort by Alice Munro; Craft Lesson—realism, interiority, and memory (time jumping)

**Week 13—**

25) Mon 4.26: Workshop #11 (fiction and poetry)


**Week 14—**

27) Mon 5.3: Workshop #12 (fiction and poetry)

28) Wed 5.5: Read chapter 10 “Out of Body” in A Visit from the Goon Squad (pp. 186-207) and Forever Overhead by David Foster Wallace; Craft Lesson—identity, sensory immersion, and triangulation

**Week 15—**

29) 5.10: Final Portfolios due; debriefing; congratulations and farewells.