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Introduction to Fiction and Poetry Workshop

CRWRI-UA.815.001

M/W 5:30 PM - 8:40PM (session 2); July 6 - Aug 16

The big picture: Our goal is to have fun while learning craft tools that will make us stronger writers. Fun, wait, isn't this a class? It is. As writers we often forget the fun part—the magic part. Our class will consist of exercises designed to put the magic into writing, while learning different craft tools—repetition, humor, magical realism, writing from a child's POV—and more.

This is a writing intensive course. There will also be a lot of reading. The assignments are designed to challenge you and introduce ways to make your writing memorable. You will workshop three times: a set of poems, a short story, and a piece cultivated from our in-class exercises.

Our goal is to become stronger writers without becoming paralyzed by this person:



The Inner Critic

Wednesday, July 7

Writing what we know

Reading: Selections from Joe Brainard's *I Remember*

The great thing about writing with the same phrase for each graph—"I remember"—is that it takes away some of the legwork (and anxiety).

In-class exercise: Write a piece where every paragraph begins with "I remember." Cull from what you know but feel free to invent the details.

Second in-class exercise: "I remember COVID-19." Write a piece about your memories from the pandemic.

To discuss: Ways of remembering. Ways of slaying your inner critic: Write fast, write about dreams, switch up mediums, write an email.

At-Home Assignment: Polish your “I remember” exercises.

Monday, July 12

You can do magic (and metaphor)

Metaphor is a way of elevating what’s familiar and making it awesome. For instance: you feel small around your boss. A realistic way of rendering that would be to describe the scene using familiar detail. A metaphorical way would be to use an actual metaphor—feeling small—and making it real. When your boss starts yelling at you, you start to shrink—literally. Or when your boyfriend’s mom grills you. Or maybe you’re just so mad you turn into a literal ball of fire. Or you get anxious and guess what: there’s an earthquake in your stomach. The metaphor isn’t just unusual for the sake of being unusual: it’s revealing, illuminating something about character.

Reading:

“Moth,” by Joanne Comito
 “The Rememberer,” by Aimee Bender
 “Argyle Nights,” by Paul Beckman
 “The Land of Pain,” by Stacey Richter

In-class assignment, to be completed and revised at home: Write a prose poem or flash that conveys a character’s emotion through one literalized metaphor.

Wednesday, July 14

Flash fiction and prose poetry: using compression to say more

Sometimes it’s not WHAT we say but what we omit that gives a piece its power. Here we’ll learn how to use white space—or what’s off-page—and to whittle language down to its most essential. We’ll also learn how to listen for music in our work—repetition, rhythm, voice—and to include vivid, unusual detail.

Reading:

“On Mondays, Francesca Takes the Stairs,” by Cami Park
 “Reflections, While Sitting in Traffic,” by Jaquira Díaz
 “Let’s Say,” by Julia Strayer
 “The Shawl,” by Cynthia Ozick
 “Salvador, Late or Early,” by Sandra Cisneros
 “We Wanted More,” *We the Animals*, Justin Torres

Assignment: Write a prose poem using repetition and one striking image.

Four students to submit their “I remember” piece for workshop.

Monday, July 19

We can innovate by getting creative with our form. We can write poems and stories as lists, as second person entreaties, as instruction manuals:

“Seven Items in Jason Reynolds’ Jacket Pocket, Two Days After His Suicide, As Found by his Eight-Year-Old Brother, Grady,” by Robert Swartwood

“Three Things You Should Know About Peggy Paula,” by Lindsay Hunter

“Note to Sixth-Grade Self,” by Julie Orringer

Dear Wigleaf, by Dina Relles

At-Home Assignment: Write a prose poem or flash fiction as a list, a how-to, or a triptych (in three parts).

Four students to workshop their “I remember” piece.

Five students to bring in poems to be workshopped

Wednesday, July 21

The poetry of objects: using the object as a gateway

Sometimes we don’t know where to begin with a poem and a familiar object can open up a lens, or help us tell a familiar story—love, heartbreak, illness—in an unfamiliar and inventive way.

Reading:

“The Room of My Life,” by Anne Sexton

“Rain,” by Kathy Fish

“Stone,” by Charles Simic

“Breaking the Pig,” by Etgar Keret

“Hatched,” by Nicole Rivas

Five students workshop poems

Five students bring in poems to be workshopped

Monday, July 26

Writing from a child or teenager’s POV: This can be awesome. For one thing, kids see things that adults often don’t give them credit for. And for another, they usually render it in a cooler and more inventive way.

Reading:

“Salvador Dali Eyes,” by Douglas Campbell

Twins, by Marcy Dermansky (chapter 1)

“The Long Hall,” by Stacey Richter

“Never-Never Time,” “Heritage,” by Justin Torres (from *We the Animals*)

Assignment: Write a flash piece from a child’s POV—what are some things that your character notices that an adult wouldn’t?

Five students workshop poems

Five students bring in poems to be workshopped

Wednesday, July 28

Home: the poetry of place

How do we make a place and the people in it resonant and vivid?

Reading:

The House on Mango Street, by Sandra Cisneros (selections)

“Texas, 2003; Texas 1969; Leaving Texas,” by Greta Wilensky

“I Hate New York,” by Carrie Murphy

Assignment: Write a poem about a place. Anthropomorphize this place into an actual character/person. (i.e. Las Vegas as a surprisingly meek showgirl, London as a reluctant socialite). Go against some of the tropes we might expect.

Five students workshop poems

Five students bring in stories to be workshopped

Three students to bring in innovative form piece for workshop.

Monday, August 2

Five students workshop stories.

Three students workshopped for innovative form pieces.

Five students bring in stories to be workshopped.

Wednesday, August 4

The Funny-Sad Thing (n): the ability to write about profound/sad/heart-wrenching things in a way that’s deceptively simple—and funny.

Reading:

“This Person,” by Miranda July

“Fable,” by Charles Yu

Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert (short passage)

It's Kind of a Funny Story, by Ned Vizzini (selected chapters)

Assignment: Write a flash about the worst thing that's happened to a character—ever—using humor.

Five students workshop stories

Five students bring in stories to be workshopped

Three students bring in poetry of place piece for workshop.

Monday, August 9

Five students workshop stories

Three students workshop poetry of place piece.

Homework: Read “Flash From Scratch: A Revision Exercise,” by Nancy Stohlman

Five students bring in child's POV piece for workshop OR poetry of objects piece.

Wednesday, August 11

Five students workshopped (child's POV or poetry of objects).

Editing and submitting:

The greatest (and most terrifying) advice I ever read about revision was to rewrite a draft—from scratch. That's right. This means not even looking at the original. How is this even possible, you might ask. Well, according to Nancy Stohlman, when we rewrite—without cheating—we'll remember the best and most powerful lines of the original. We'll reincorporate them. And then we can compare the two and take what's best.

Submissions: How do we submit to literary journals, and when do we know something is ready to submit?

Last day of class! You did it!

Book List:

The House on Mango Street, by Sandra Cisneros

Twin Study, by Stacey Richter

We the Animals, by Justin Torres

It's Kind of a Funny Story, by Ned Vizzini

Things to Know:

Workshop assignments: You'll be workshopped three times—four poems (six-page maximum), one story (1,500 to 3,000 words), and one piece drawn from an in-class exercise. All work should be typed in Times New Roman 12 pt font and double-spaced. Bring one hard copy for me and one for each of your classmates. Email me an electronic copy as well.

Workshop assignments will be due one week before your workshop. Each student will be workshopped for roughly 20 minutes.

Critique Letters

Your responses to student work should begin by highlighting a piece's strengths. Please structure your critiques this way:

Dear (student's name),

An opening paragraph about what you admired.

A second paragraph containing a striking line or image.

Two to three paragraphs containing a constructive critique, done kindly and with respect. These can include passages about what you most remember, what you would like to see tightened, elements you think could be fleshed out and explored, language that wasn't clear or could have a stronger cadence, characters that you would like to be made more dimensional.

You will email me a copy of your critique two days before the student's workshop (by noon) and bring in a hard copy for both me and the student. You will also write notes and line edits on the student's work. You'll staple your letter to the front.

Reading: Each week there will be assigned reading based on a theme and craft tool. Come to class ready to discuss. I'll be grading you on participation and preparedness. We'll have days geared more toward poetry and others toward fiction, but sometimes I'll include both—as fiction writers we can steal tools from poets and vice versa.

Weekly creative writing assignments: I'll be giving you writing prompts that come from the material and techniques discussed. You'll write a flash fiction (500 – 1,000 words) or a poem. The goal won't be to write something flawless but to draw on the material and techniques discussed. Email these to me by noon on Sunday in a Word file. Label the file: Your Name_Creative Writing Exercise.

Office Hours: Please make an appointment with me for office hours. I would like to meet with you at least once after your first workshop.

Attendance: Attendance is required. After one undocumented absence you will need to provide a doctor's note or other official documentation. More than one undocumented absence will result in a grade deduction. One lateness (10 minutes or more) will count as a half absence. In other

words, if you are more than 10 minutes late twice it will count as an unexcused absence. Four latenesses count as a second absence, etc.

Your grade will decrease by a half letter with each unexcused absence: an A becomes an A-, etc. Your grade includes participation, which will also be affected if you're absent.

Lateness: All assignments must be handed in on time. Late assignments will affect your grade. For each day an assignment is late (creative writing exercise, workshop piece, critique letter) you will lose half a grade for that assignment (an "A" becomes an "A-," etc.).

Grading:

Class participation (20 percent):

Participation and doing a careful read of the assigned material are critical to your grade. If you feel more comfortable, feel free to read aloud from written notes or from your peer critiques.

Critique letters, weekly creative writing assignments (60 percent):

You won't be graded on a subjective measure of talent but on your engagement with the work. Have you been thoughtful in your peer review? Have you used the assigned pieces and craft tools as springboards for your work?

Please edit your pieces for typos and spelling/grammatical errors: these will affect your grade.

Final portfolio (20 percent):

Your workshop pieces for the semester, with revisions.

Plagiarism: Don't do it. If you are having trouble coming up with an idea or formulating a piece speak to me and I'll help guide you. Plagiarism will not be tolerated and will be reported per NYU policy.

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 8 726 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.

This syllabus is subject to change.