

English 490 Senior Seminar in Creative Writing

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Objectives and Description:

The student will engage in a variety of creative writing exercises and assignments. One of our most powerful tools, after reading good work by published writers, is the peer critiquing of your work. Students will gain an understanding of genres and the boundaries where genres blur (as in the prose poem or performance poem). We will discuss theories of creativity, but students will find their own methods rather than follow a formula.

Students will attend functions on and off campus to further stimulate creativity and awareness of the place of the writer in our culture. See below.

Undergirded by a personal journal and self-directed readings, the main work of the course will be the students' discovery and exploration of creative sources in their own memory, experience, and imagination. Students will learn to tap into their own creative sources, intensify their reading and critiquing of the work of others in the sharpening of xxxxxxwn talent, and gain the tools needed to turn out at least a few good pieces of writing.

To the creative "inspiration" will be added the hard work and discipline of revision, vocabulary-building, and critiquing the work of others. Constructive critiquing of the work of others in small groups is an important part of the course, and students must conduct themselves with integrity and sensitivity in the groups. Ideally, the student will come away from the class with a sharpened appreciation of the creative process and with a heightened insight into the workings of the language, including metaphor and other types of figurative language. Remember, too, that a glimmer of inspiration may bear fruit [please pardon the mixed metaphor!] at some time in the future. Learning the discipline of revising will help you develop your creative talent in the future.

One good CW text by Addonizio and Laux has been ordered; 402 people have it already. Recommended with be Dorriane Laux, "Smoke." You'll plan to buy two or three more books as your interests dictate.

The first week, we will set up a plan based on what you have already done (bring some samples) as individuals, and the direction you want to go in. As time goes on, you may team up with others to critique each other's work, but we will still work mainly as one group. I will be around 5 days, so I can spend time with you individually (especially if I don't have to teach froshcomp!)

At the same time, I'll be giving prompts in different areas for a few weeks, with the genre somewhat open. For example, we'll do a travel piece or piece on "place" (yes, Hamtramck can count, or crossing the bridge to Windsor) in a couple of genres. You can try both a poem and a short informal essay, a story or a prose poem on some destination.

As a seminar, this course will require students to make a presentation, conduct the critiquing workshop for the day, and provide a "prompt" or assignment, to be started in class, based on the insights gained in the study of that poet.

As with Enl 402, the advanced poetry CW class, you will be taking over the discussion more and more as time goes on, as seminars dictate. For those of you who teach or plan to teach, this can be invaluable.

The goal I have in mind for most of you--at least the measurable goal--is a body of work of whatever kind that can be used 1) as a portfolio (along with previous work) for submission if you apply for an MFA in writing at some point, 2) a group of poems or stories or a potpourri of genres which could be considered for publication as book or 3) a group of pieces which will each have enough polish to be sent out individually for publication.

For those seeking publication now, we'll have some specific sessions on doing this--including your buddies helping you ADDRESS AND STAMP the stuff you send out. Lots of us get stalled at that point in the process. E-mail submissions are fine, too. If you don't care right now about being published nationally, you can go in your own direction. The same is true for performances. We'll try to get out into the coffeehouses a bit, and give our own reading on campus or elsewhere, but that is an "outward" move, and we will need to keep going inward to keep writing well.

So I'll be encouraging you to stretch a little, but also to pursue a direction you have in mind--like fiction, maybe very very short fiction, longer poetry, prose poetry, a collection of poetry that has a title and may even end up with some generalized themes (For example, Dorriane Laux ("Laundromat") has a new book, "Smoke," which starts with poems about loving to smoke, some about the death of a loved one, family life and love stuff, then ends with two knock-out poems about insects mating all the time all around us, this buzz going on outside while we live our lives.

Students will write a Personal Statement of the sort usually required for graduate school applications.

Course Requirements:

Reading of texts as assigned; writing and revising about forty pages of poetry, fiction, or other work.

Attendance at three or more local poetry readings, museum, theater or cultural festivals as agreed upon in class, a visit to the Detroit Art Institute and Wright Museum. See attached

schedule of readings and events and ways to fulfill this requirement. We will attend one or two events together if possible.

The journal includes a reading section (responding to works you read) and your own freewriting and other informal writing.

Please note that every week you will be given a writing "prompt" -- something to get you started on a creative venture. The piece of writing you produce, whether poetry, fiction, or drama, is due the next class; poems must be complete, while stories and dramatic scenes may be done part by part.

You are strongly encouraged to submit your best poem to the Dudley Randall Student Poetry Competition, and to consider as well submitting an appropriate piece of writing to the Women's Studies Writing Competition. The deadlines are in Winter, so save your work with this in mind. Our student literary journal, [sic], will take submissions sometime this semester.

For this class we arrange a formal reading of your best work, open to the public. You should also try to go to the "We've Got the Word" reading at Grounds for other CW classes.

Some of us may get involved with Slam/Performance poetry as well.

Policies and Procedures:

No amount of hard work can guarantee an "A" in a creative writing class. The class is set up, according to a long tradition in the English Department, so that anyone who works conscientiously, attends class regularly (2 cuts permitted), and turns in good efforts, will receive a respectable grade based on process as well as product. "A" grades are given to students whose work shows talent, originality, and discipline (discipline involves hard work, serious revising, and attention to poetic and literary forms). I will give checks, check pluses, and check minuses as well as verbal comments which will keep you apprised of your progress without my having to slap a grade on your work. The midterm grade will reflect the work turned in, and also your class and small-group participation.

The final grade is based on class participation (10%); journal (3%); attendance at one U of D Mercy Theater Company play, and two other events on or off campus to be discussed in class (2%); and your final writing portfolio (85%).

An additional note about grading: In a sense, it is antithetical to the poetic process for the student to work in order to get a high grade; on the other hand, it is natural for poets to hope for appreciation of their poetry. The instructor's intellectual integrity requires some rigor in the grading process. Thus, students must prepare for disappointment if they seek an "A" as the only acceptable acknowledgement that they have talent, have worked hard, or have grown a great deal.

Here is a thumbnail sketch of the way CW grades have been given:

D Student has missed class frequently and/or failed to turn in work.

C Student has some skill or talent, but has missed class frequently, failed to revise thoroughly, and/or not contributed to the growth of classmates.

Student has grown a bit, but has not put in much effort; or student has missed two or three classes or failed to turn in assignments; or student has lots of talent but has missed several classes, even if for serious personal reasons.

B Student has attended all required classes, has grown a great deal, has

contributed to the growth of others and has achieved some good creative efforts.

B+ Student has talent and skill and has achieved some very good writing, as well as contributing to the growth of others.

A top-notch student has achieved a lot, shows talent and promise, and has been in class and contributing to the work of others.

A The same as the student with an A-, but represents the instructor's

judgment about the talent and actual achievement of the student.

A Final Note to Students:

Our development as writers requires a safe atmosphere and trustworthy companions. If you do not wish to, or do not feel capable of, accepting the people in your class and the material they may choose to write about, please drop the class. Also, you must be prepared to share most of your work (see me if something very private emerges from a writing assignment which you don't wish to share with the class) and hear responses from your classmates and from me. Respect for each other is rooted both in the Mission of the University and in the creative process itself.

Plagiarism is unusual in a class like this; nonetheless, I will mention that any work submitted that is demonstrably not your own creative effort will receive a grade of zero.

Attendance policy: You are permitted only one absence. I subtract 2 pts from your class participation grade for each class missed after this. Your group needs your active and reliable presence when their work is being discussed. Absences may also indirectly affect your grade, as will failure to turn in work, and to earnestly revise it.

A Further Note on Method and Content: Writing is usually considered to be a solitary act; part of the creative process which you will be exploring in this class entails private experience. Yet a crucial part of creative writing classes is the group or peer critique. Almost all published poets and writers use, or have used, a group to help them hone and polish their work. Thus you must be prepared to share your writing with the class as a whole and/or your small group. Your class

participation grade will depend in part on your generosity in commenting on your classmates' work.

In addition to your active presence and feedback, you are expected to treat any personal information (whether fictionalized or autobiographical) implied or made explicit in your classmates' writing as confidential. The group meetings must feel safe for all members if creativity is to flourish. Although most of our comments will underscore what is positive in your work, you'll need to listen without defensiveness to all of our comments if you are to benefit from them.

About possible changes to the syllabus: Much of what occurs in the class will depend upon you and your classmates—what they bring to the class in terms of experience and insight, what they develop in the context of our discussions. As a consequence, I may make slight changes in the schedule depending upon how the class is progressing. A second reason that flexibility may be required is the possibilities for guest poets and writers to visit the class or the availability or relevance of a film to our work.

Note: I won't give details on the prompts since the element of spontaneity is important. If you have your own "engine" running on themes for your writing, go forward with that, but also do the prompts I give each week as creative "calisthenics."

Week 1

Some housekeeping:

Please e-mail me at aol to establish the best e-mail for you. I'll set up a listserver, or we can just use group addresses to communicate as a class.

English/CW needs to establish a little outfit (aka student organization) so we can go wangle money for events this year. If we as a program commit to investing money in having poets visit, we build the possibility of poets actually being able to support themselves as poets! We'll talk briefly about this.

Everyone here needs to submit a Portfolio—for acceptance as a CW major, or simply to get into this class. The folder is approved by the CW Committee (O'Gorman, Rombes, Weatherston, me). See CW Program hand-outs or the English website.

Now to work: Bring some of your past writing if possible. No matter what else we do all semester, I will give a prompt and a fair bit of time to take off with it.

Brain prompt (you'll find out in class).

(Try out, during the week, a second genre for this prompt.)

We'll look at some poems in Addonizio and Laux's Handbook and in Smoke.

Week 2

We'll look at what you wrote since the prompt. Thinking about genre, from non-fiction to poems to short story to prose poem to performance poem. Using your work, we'll try re-writing your own or a classmate's writing in another genre.

Establishing writing partners (e-mail and other means)

Prompt.

Venues for publication (even if you don't think you are ready, it's good info). For next week, visit a good bookstore (independents like Book Beat and Apple Book Center deserve our support, but you may need to hit a

Borders for this). Writer's or Poet's Market are ponderous but useful tomes (about \$30). The main DPL has good poetry small-press journals. Have a list of 3-10 journals you might submit to, with addresses.

Week 3

Your Proposal for your semester's work is due. Include:

Rationale {ex., I have four poems on the broad topic of memory; I want to continue writing in this vein and complete a chapbook/ I want to submit a short story for publication and work on two more stories/ I want to prepare a portfolio for graduate school}

Schedule

Objectives, specific and broad

Tools {journal, e-mail to class writing partner(s)}

Writers I have identified whom I will read.

See or speak to me individually during the week about the author you are interested in following up on.

Film snippets on poets.

Week 4

Begin oral presentations on a specific author who is a model/inspiration/interest for your work.

Presenter _____.

The week before your assigned presentation, provide the class with a packet of readings by the author you have in mind. Prompt.

Prompt.

Week 5

Publication discussion. Editing considerations.

Responses (if e-mailed, bring me a copy) to the first presenter. Critiquing of all work.

Presentation: _____

Week 6

Responses for Week 5 presenter due. Critiquing of recent work.

Presentation _____. Prompt.

Week 7

Possible guest speaker. Presentation _____.

Venues for performance and publication.

Critique of current work. Prompt (probably by presenter).

Week 8

Presentation _____ Critique. Prompt. Film.

Week 9 Guest speaker on collaborations with music and art. Prompt and critiquing.

Week 10

Workshop on publishing your work. Bring stamps, best copies of all your work. Prompt and critiquing.

Week 11

Presentation _____ Prompt and critiquing.

Week 12

Planning a performance. We'll select work for the Big Reading (anyone have a better name?)
Reading this week or next!

Week 13

Those applying to grad schools and others: query letters, personal statements, assembling of portfolio, writing samples. Bring your research on MFA programs. Portfolio due by Thursday of this week.

Week 14

Portfolio returned, with copies kept for the department for CW majors.