

ENGL2221.04: Introduction to Creative Writing
Eric Weiskott
Fall 2023, W 11:30am-1:55pm
Office hours: T 10:00-11:00am (Stokes S407) or by appointment

An introductory course in which students will write both poetry and short fiction and read published examples of each. We will experiment with the formal possibilities of the two genres and look at what links and separates them. The course is workshop-based, with an emphasis on steady production and revision. Through exercises and/or open and directed writing assignments, students will produce a portfolio of short fiction and poetry.

This section of Intro to Creative Writing emphasizes analytical reading of literature as a powerful stimulant to creative production. The good writer is, first of all, a good reader whose writing responds to the contemporary literary landscape and to the inheritance of literary history.

REQUIRED TEXTS (available at the BC Bookstore)

Allison Adair, *The Clearing* (Milkweed, 2020)
Victoria Chang, *Dear Memory: Letters on Writing, Silence, and Grief* (Milkweed, 2021)
Edgar Garcia, *Skins of Columbus: A Dream Ethnography* (Fence, 2019)
Vladimir Nabokov, *The Stories* (Vintage, 2008)
Solmaz Sharif, *Customs* (Graywolf, 2022)
Prageeta Sharma, *Grief Sequence* (Wave, 2019)
Elizabeth Willis, *Alive: New and Selected Poems* (New York Review Books, 2015)

RECOMMENDED TEXTS (available at the BC Bookstore)

Joy Harjo, *An American Sunrise* (Norton, 2019)
Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Graywolf, 2014) (O'Neill Library has a digital copy, but for the full effect you have to hold it in your hands)

SCHEDULE

Why write?: Creative living

Aug 30 Chang, *Dear Memory*
 Chang, "Barbie Chang's Tears"
 (poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/90672/barbie-changs-tears)

Short fiction: Ekphrasis

Sept 6 *Dear Memory*, cont'd
 Lerner, "The Polish Rider"
 Nabokov, "La Veneziana"
 *Creative assignment: Notes toward a short story (A-L last names hand in on Canvas)

Poetry: Dreams

(Sept 10) *Pieces to be workshopped due on Canvas by 6:00pm

- Sept 13 Garcia, *Skins of Columbus*
 *Workshop
 *Creative assignment: A poem evoking a (real or invented) dream (M-Z hand in on Canvas)

Short fiction: Thought experiments

- (Sept 17) *Pieces to be workshopped due on Canvas by 6:00pm
 Sept 19 Viet Thanh Nguyen lecture at Harvard (Sanders Theatre, 6:00pm)
 Sept 20 Nabokov, "A Matter of Chance"
 Nabokov, "Spring in Fialta"
 *Workshop
 *Response 1 due (1 p.)
 (Sept 24) *Pieces to be workshopped due on Canvas by 6:00pm
 Sept 27 Butler, "Bloodchild"
 Nabokov, "The Visit to the Museum"
 *Workshop
 *Creative assignment: Draft (partial or complete) of a short story set in an experimental world (A-L hand in on Canvas)
 Sept 28 Event celebrating deposit of poet Rhina P. Espaillat's papers with the Burns Library, featuring poet Dana Gioia (O'Neill main reading room, 5:30pm)
 [recommended: Rhina P. Espaillat (poetryfoundation.org/poets/rhina-p-espailat)
 Espaillat, "Bilingual/Bilinguë" (poetryfoundation.org/poems/46542)
 Dana Gioia (poetryfoundation.org/poets/dana-gioia)
 Gioia, "Insomnia" (poetryfoundation.org/poems/46413)]

Poetry: The politics of belonging

- (Oct 1) *Pieces to be workshopped due on Canvas by 6:00pm
 Oct 4 Sharif, *Customs*
 *Workshop
 *Creative assignment: A poem in the form of Sharif, "The Master's House" (not handed in)
 (Oct 8) *Pieces to be workshopped due on Canvas by 6:00pm
 Oct 11 Rankine, excerpts from *Citizen*
 (poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/56848)
 Rankine, "[Some years there exists a wanting to escape]"
 (poetryfoundation.org/poems/57799)
 [recommended: read all of Rankine, *Citizen*, instead]
 *Workshop
 *Creative assignment: Revision of a poem (M-Z hand in on Canvas)

Short fiction: Perspective

- (Oct 15) *Pieces to be workshopped due on Canvas by 6:00pm
 Oct 17 Nguyen lecture at Harvard (Sanders Theatre, 6:00pm)
 Oct 18 Nabokov, "Terror"

Yamamoto, "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara"

*Workshop

*Creative assignment: A short story set in an experimental world (not handed in)

Poetry: Grief

- Oct 19 Adair, Krysten Hill, and DeMisty Bellinger reading from the Emily Dickinson House in Amherst, MA (6:00pm, free webcast)
([preregister: emilydickinsonmuseum.org/phosphorescence-october-2023](https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/phosphorescence-october-2023))
[recommended: Krysten Hill (poetryfoundation.org/poets/krysten-hill)
Hill, "Nothing" (poets.org/poem/nothing)
Bellinger, "IV: You Are" (ariadnemag.com/demisty-bellinger)]
- Oct 25 Adair, *The Clearing*
Allison Adair (Boston College) visit
*Response 2 due (1 p.)
- Nov 1 Prageeta Sharma (poetryfoundation.org/poets/prageeta-sharma)
Sharma, *Grief Sequence*
Prageeta Sharma (Pomona College) visit
*Creative assignment: A prose poem channeling strong feelings (A-L hand in on Canvas)

Poetry: Genealogy

- (Nov 5) *Pieces to be workshopped due on Canvas by 6:00pm
- Nov 8 Joy Harjo (poetryfoundation.org/poets/joy-harjo)
Harjo, "An American Sunrise"
(poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/92063)
Harjo, "Becoming Seventy"
(poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/143935)
Harjo, "How To Write a Poem in a Time of War"
(poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/143934)
Harjo, "Redbird Love" (poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/143933)
Harjo, "Tobacco Origin Story, Because Tobacco Was a Gift Intended To Walk Alongside Us to the Stars"
(poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/143932)
[recommended: read all of Harjo, *An American Sunrise*, instead]
*Workshop
*Creative assignment: An 'unpoem' that is intentionally terrible
- Nov 9 Ben Lerner in conversation with Scott Reznick and Kalpana Seshadri: "Erring Together: Some Notes on Distortion, Art and Others" (Higgins 300, 7:00pm)

Short fiction: Process

- (Nov 12) *'Unpoems' due via Google Forms by 6:00pm
- Nov 15 Boucher, "Trout Heart," with appended interview
Boucher, "The Word Party"

(exactingclam.com/issues/no-7-winter-2022/the-word-party)

*“Unworkshop”: ‘unpoems’ read aloud anonymously

Chris Boucher (Boston College) visit

*Creative assignment: Draft (partial or complete) of a short story told from an unlikely perspective (M–Z hand in on Canvas)

[A recommended Irish poetry interlude

Nov 17 Seamus Heaney conference: “The Craft” and “The Critics and the Poets” panel discussion featuring Boston College faculty poets (3:00pm, Connolly House)

Heaney, “Blackberry-Picking” (poetryfoundation.org/poems/50981)

Heaney, “Digging” (poetryfoundation.org/poems/47555)

Short fiction: Process, resumed

(Nov 26) *Pieces to be workshopped due on Canvas by 6:00pm

Nov 29 Matson, “Convention Center”

Matson, “Manger” (pangyrus.com/fiction/manger)

*Workshop

*Creative assignment: Revision of a short story (not handed in)

*Discussion post due on Canvas (responding to Espailat, Adair *et al.*, or Heaney events)

Poetry: Lyric life

(Dec 3) *Pieces to be workshopped due on Canvas by 6:00pm

Dec 5 Nguyen lecture at Harvard (Sanders Theatre, 6:00pm)

Dec 6 Willis, *Alive*, pp. 121–81

[recommended: read all of Willis, *Alive*]

*Workshop

*Response 3 due (1 p.)

Dec 15 *Portfolio due (1–2 pp. [statement] + 5–10 pp. [poems] + 8–15 pp. [prose fiction])

GRADING

Participation (including Discussion post) 10%

Portfolio, 1–2 pp. (statement) + 5–10 pp. (poems) + 8–15 pp. (prose fiction) 70%

Responses, 1 p. 20%

OBJECTIVES

You will complete a portfolio of original poetry and short fiction and acquire a command of contemporary published work in both genres. A premise of this syllabus is that the good writer is a good reader. Each unit forefronts a different lived context for or instigation to the act of writing, including politics, loss, and dreams. The ultimate goal is the integration of careful reading and courageous writing with living: to make the creative life livable for yourself.

ASSIGNMENTS

Three one-page papers respond analytically, descriptively, or reflectively to assigned readings in contemporary poetry and fiction. It is OK to use “I” and speak personally in these papers. The lone Discussion post reacts to one of the virtual or on-campus live events with contemporary poets (Espaillat/Gioia in September; Adair, Hill, and Bellinger in October; or Irish poets on Heaney in November); or to one of the Nguyen lectures (September, October, or December). Students are required to attend one of the four mornings/evenings of poetry and encouraged to attend more than one, or all four! A sequence of creative assignments explores the affordances of poetic and short story form, with built-in opportunities to revisit drafts. The creative assignments, due on Canvas on Wednesday evenings in rotation between two halves of the class, receive constructive feedback but no grades until the end of the semester, when students turn in the final portfolio containing both poetry and short fiction. Each student receives feedback directly from me on three of nine creative assignments. The portfolio is accompanied by a one- to two-page prefatory statement. You might use the statement to note inspirations, process, and form and to reflect on your path through the course, including your sense of what is most successful in your finished work as well as areas you want to work on in the future.

WORKSHOPS

Although this course places more emphasis on analytical reading than some creative writing workshops, most weeks we will set aside classtime to read and discuss one another’s writing as a class. The environment of these discussions should be respectful, constructive, as well as exacting. The goal is to guide the revision of work in progress and help the author imagine the forms it could take in the future. It is the writer’s role to listen carefully. When receiving feedback, try to resist the urge to reduce responses to “this is good writing” / “this is bad writing.” To do that would be to miss what is valuable about the workshop process: the chance (all too rare!) to hear from real readers midway through your creative process. We will discuss three to four students’ work per class so that each student has their work workshoped by the whole class at least twice. On workshop weeks, you are to post your writing as a .DOC, .DOCX, or .PDF attachment to a Discussion post on Canvas by Sunday at 6pm. This deadline is strict, out of respect for your classmates’ time: late submission could result in a lower participation grade. Send one poem or up to ten pages of prose. The ‘unpoems,’ poems intentionally terrible or opposite from your ideal aesthetic, are submitted and read in class anonymously to maximize creative freedom. They are not workshoped, but we can think of them as the common property of the class. Often some startling, usable lines come out of this exercise!

CONFERENCING

Each student is invited and required to meet with me one-on-one twice: once before Halloween, and once after Halloween but by December 8 at the latest (one week before the portfolio is due).

CREATIVE WORK AND GRADING

Creative writing in this class is graded primarily for its intrinsic quality as literature and secondarily for the light it throws onto your understanding of key terms and styles of contemporary poetry and short fiction. Literary composition is an art that can be honed. Like other arts, it is subject to aesthetic judgment. I do reward effort and risk-taking, and never want to penalize you for taking a

creative risk. Still, the final grade will reflect the quality and polish of your finished writing. A grade of straight A represents that your writing is close to publishable. If you are taking this course to boost your GPA, don't! Overall, I'm looking for evidence that you're taking your work seriously, that you're engaged in the writing process, and that you've revised with the intention of discovering new possibilities for your poems or stories. Thus I do factor in my knowledge of past iterations of your work. I will tend to be more impressed by the portfolio that bespeaks intensive revision and rethinking than one that is kind of coasting along with the same good-enough poems and good-enough prose that a student had at his or her command at the beginning of the semester.

PARTICIPATION

Students are expected to attend each class having completed the assigned reading, including peer writing to be workshopped and exemplary poems, stories, and books by modern and contemporary authors. Students should come to class prepared to actively discuss the language and rhetoric of the assigned texts and to workshop one another's own writing. This is a discussion-based class, and you typically will not need laptops or smart phones.

FYI: SPRING 2024 SOLMAZ SHARIF LECTURE

Solmaz Sharif will visit campus for a two-day residency on April 25-26, 2024. I had hoped to welcome her in the fall, but her schedule was full. If you are interested in being among a small group of undergraduate writers who meet with Sharif on the morning of April 26, please let me know.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Boston College places great value on academic integrity (bc.edu/bc-web/schools/mcas/departments/political-science/undergraduate/academic-integrity.html). I have a zero tolerance policy for intentional plagiarism. All quotations or paraphrases of sources must be cited parenthetically or in a footnote (examples: libguides.bc.edu/c.php?g=44446&p=281300).

ACCESSIBILITY

If you are a student with a disability seeking accommodations in this course, please contact Kathy Duggan, (617) 552-8093, at the Connors Family Learning Center regarding learning disabilities, or Paulette Durrett, (617) 552-3470, in the Disability Services Office regarding all other types of disabilities.

TITLE IX MANDATORY REPORTING

Please be aware that as a Boston College faculty member, I am obligated to report to the Student Affairs Title IX Coordinator any case of sexual misconduct that any student discloses to me.