CRWR 211-A: Introduction to Poetry Syllabus

This document is a contract. It is the student’s responsibility to read it and keep it somewhere accessible for reference. Failure to read the syllabus, keep it, or remember its stipulations will not excuse student’s failure to adhere to its policies.

Instructor: Caylin Capra-Thomas
MWF 11:10-12
Office Hours: Corbin 349, Mondays, 10-11, Fridays 12:15-1:15 and by Appointment

Introduction

Many people feel alienated and intimidated by poetry. They associate it with their erratic 9th grade English teacher who rarely brushed her hair and made them recite painful, halfhearted versions of Robert Frost while she stomped out an iambic pentameter with the scuffed sneakers under her floral mumu. (Sorry, Mrs. Brandon!) Or maybe they associate it with stock images of even more erratic and unkempt professors, largely out of touch with their environment, thumbing yellowed pages in a cloud of pipe smoke and cat fur while the world outside spontaneously combusts.

Many people also report feeling panic-stricken when they encounter a poem, fearing that the purpose of poetry is to “get it,” and, worse, to have something to say about it. I remember showing my brother a poem I liked (Sandra Beasley’s “Vocation”) and his response: “I read it, but I’m not sure what to say about it. I’ll get back to you tomorrow.” Get back to me tomorrow? I didn’t give him homework. I gave him a poem- a poem that weighed in at a whopping 162 word count. (Yes- I just Googled “Vocation,” then copy-pasted it into a word doc in order get that precise number.)

The good news is that you can read a poem just to read a poem, or to appreciate it for the feeling it gives you, even if you’re not 100% sure about what it “means.” The first poem I was able to appreciate without totally “getting it” was Jack Gilbert’s “Finding Something.” It begins, “I say the moon is horses in the tempered dark / because horse is the closest I can get to it.” (It has also got a pretty great ending, but I’m likely to have you read it at some point, so I won’t spoil it.) I read that first line and carried it around like a rock in my brain-shoe for days. How could the dark be tempered? What have horses got to do with the moon? Didn’t matter. Those lines gave me shivers.

As poets in this course, you will be expected to “have something to say” about many poems, but this isn’t because I want to bore you, bully you, give you “busywork” or make you feel inferior. It’s because I assume that you registered for this course out of an interest in learning a little bit more about poetry than the casual appreciator, and because you are interested in writing your own poems.
In order to do this, we must read poems (gasp!) and carefully consider them, so we can better understand how to execute our own poetic intentions.

I hope you walk away from this course with a manuscript of work you feel good about, but truthfully, my most deep-down hope for you is to meet a poem that makes you shiver some.

Welcome to Poetry.

**Course Overview**

The goals of this course are to foster an understanding of and appreciation for poetry as:

- **People** (the poets we’ll read and the poets we are)
- **Process** (inventing, reading, writing, editing, discussing, appreciating)
- **Ideas** (those within the poems themselves, those we come up with about each other’s poetry, and those that exist about the craft)
- **Dialogue** (poems in conversation with capital-P Poetry, contemporary context, historical context, and our classroom context)
- **Things** (product, exquisite object.)

Thus the course’s objectives and goals will focus on:

- Personal **inquiry** into contemporary poets and poetry (Reading and book projects)
- **Craft** (Techniques, forms, elements of poetry)
- Exploration of **creative process** (Absorbing, mulling, writing, revising)
- **Analysis** of personal and peer work, ability to reflect on personal and peer work
- **Discussion** of peer and established poets

**For this class you will need:**

1. Internet access
2. Printer access
3. A small, separate notebook for jotting down ideas / images / whatever
4. A class notebook for notes and in-class exercises
5. A place to keep copies of your peers’ work, your own work, and feedback (folder or binder)
6. To buy or borrow 3 collections of poetry by 3 separate authors. (Extra Karma Points for purchasing these books from a local, independent seller, like Shakespeare & Co. or Fact or Fiction!)
7. I dislike the number 6 so I added 7. There is no 7th thing you need for this class, though. Maybe just an open mind.

**In this class, you will be expected to:**

1. Show up. Pretty basic. See the attendance policy for more information on how not showing up will affect your grade.
2. Complete reading, writing, and homework assignments on time. Late work will not be read, and it will receive neither credit nor feedback.
3. **Print** poems and written assignments, unless otherwise specified.
4. Participate in online and in-class workshops of your peers’ work in a manner that is **mindful, courteous, and well-considered**. See attached “Workshop Code of Conduct and Ethics” for more information.
5. Write and revise poems. (Duh.)
6. Attend mandatory conferences at the midway and final points of the semester.
7. Again, I dislike the number 6.

**Grade Breakdown:**

*Participation: 50%*

*Book projects: 30% (10% each)*

*Final manuscript: (20%)*

I don’t think I’ve ever heard of a creative writing class in which students were graded on the “quality” of their work. What I think is “good” in poetry might not be what the next person thinks is good. “Good,” particularly in the mercurial genre of poetry, is nebulous and subjective, which makes it nearly impossible to assess fairly for a grade. Thus, the bulk of your grade in this class rests on your ability to approach and complete the work assigned to you with care and consideration, and to treat the work of your peers in the same manner.

**Nutshell version:**

Show up. Read. Write. Take it seriously. Be nice.

**The Fine Print:**

*Participation* in this course consists of attending class **prepared and on time**, writing poems that are assigned, revising poems when assigned, journaling and in-class writing exercises, actively and vocally contributing to online and in-class workshops, giving well-considered and courteous feedback for your peers, serving as a workshop leader when assigned, completing readings and contributing to their discussion in class and online, completing other written homework as assigned, and attending mandatory conferences.

*Book Projects:* You are expected to become intimately acquainted with **3 collections of poetry by 3 different authors**. You will demonstrate this acquaintance in 3 different assignments.

**Book Project # 1:** Written response (due late September, specific date TBD) 2-3 pages, book-inspired / self-devised prompt + 1 imitation poem

**Book Project # 2:** 5 minute presentation, staggered October 1-24

**Book Project # 3:** Imitation manuscript with 1-2 page introduction, due mid November.

You will receive detailed instructions for all of these assignments as they come up.

While there’s no designated “midterm,” we will hold **midterm conferences** to discuss your work so far. This will be a relaxed affair, but failure to show up will result in a lower participation grade.
The same goes for **final conferences**, which will be held in advance of your turning in your final manuscript.

**Final Manuscript:** Your final manuscript for this class will consist of 12-15 poems, ⅔ of which will be revised, accompanied by a 2-3 page introductory discussion of your work.

**Workshop Code of Conduct and Ethics**

The more poetry we read, the more we might discover that we’re all just big, fleshy bags of feelings. Let’s be mindful and respectful of each other’s differences, opinions, and choices, on the page and off.

**The Golden Rule: Kindness, Courtesy, and Respect**

You might begin to feel a pressure to voice a criticism just for the sake of having some kind of feedback to give. *Remember that there’s a difference between constructive criticism and being a jerk.* This is why workshop leaders are important: having at least one person who’s done a really thorough read of the poem and has remarks and discussion ideas prepared ensures that our discussion of each poem is *constructive*, which is to say meaningful and of use to the poet. While I will also do my best to ensure a productive and constructive environment, if anyone ever feels like the discussion of a particular poem is becoming unproductive, or feels we are lingering too long on a minor detail, please do speak up and change the direction of the conversation. We’re all here to support each other as writers, and a whole-group effort towards this support is really important.

Sexist, racist, homophobic, or otherwise hateful or discriminatory remarks will not be tolerated.

**A few additional workshop tips:**

1. If there is an “I” in a poem, we refer to that “I” as “the speaker.” Even if Gerald wrote the poem, we will not assume that Gerald is the person speaking in the poem. There are several reasons for this. First of all, it might not be! (For example, I went through a phase where I wrote a lot about cannibals. Occasionally, I used the first person in these poems, but I pinky swear that I have never eaten another human.) Next, allowing some distance between the identity of the poet and the identity of the speaker ensures that discussions about poems do not wind up being discussions about the poet’s personal life. It allows us to write from a place of vulnerability, take risks, and put something on the line without worrying about what our peers will think.

2. When a poet’s work is being discussed, he or she will remain generally silent until the end of the discussion, at which point he or she may ask additional questions or say his or her piece. When we hear other people discussing our work, our first instinct is often to try to confirm or deny their assessment, or to jump in and clarify any misunderstood intentions. This does not serve the class, and it does not serve the poet. One of the major benefits for the poet is hearing a reader’s thought process aloud- how a reader encounters that work *without* the poet’s explanations. (Remember, the way we encounter poetry is usually alone.) Furthermore, I’ll be the first to admit that my intentions in a first draft are often murky at best, and listening to others try to crack it open often illuminates as much for me as it does for them.
However, if, as a poet whose work is being discussed, you feel like the conversation is becoming unproductive or veering massively off-course, feel free to voice a simple, friendly nudge in the right direction. Something like, “OK. I’ll definitely think about ___(using a different word here, taking away this comma, changing the title, etc.) but I’d like to move on.”

3. **Please, please, please take seriously the work of your peers.** If it’s your turn to lead the discussion of another person’s poem, it is massively important that you come prepared to do so. If you show up to that workshop empty-handed, without your guiding questions, topics for thoughtful discussion, a summary of your own reading of the poem, elements you think are important to the poem’s effort, and where you think the poem needs work, **I will be endlessly irritated, disappointed in you as a student and a human being, and the next time I bring snacks to class you certainly won’t get any.** I know it sounds harsh, but you’ll be disrupting the sense of community in our classroom, in addition to breaking my heart and the heart of the poet who was expecting to get a thoughtful reading of his or her poem.

### Attendance Policy

In order to get anything out of this class, you must be present. Thus, I will tolerate no more than 3 “freebie” absences without automatically lowering your grade by 1 letter.

Additionally, I will not tolerate lateness that is excessive either in degree or frequency. It is disruptive and disrespectful of my time. When you arrive late, I will note the time at which you arrived. If I notice a trend develop, I will alert you as to its development. If your sum total of minutes missed amounts to a full class period, your tardiness will count as an absence.

When you are absent, it is your responsibility to contact me for the homework assignment. “But I wasn’t here on Friday!” will not fly as an excuse when you don’t have your poem on Monday. If you know you’ll be absent in advance, it’s your responsibility to contact me to get the assignment early, so that you’ll be able to turn it in on time.

Basically, the more effort you make towards transparency and courtesy (letting me know what’s going on as soon as possible, going out of your way to get assignments or coming to office hours to discuss anything you missed) the more amicable I’ll be.

### Plagiarism Policy

When you use another writer’s words or ideas without attributing them, you’re committing a serious academic offense. However, the way we attribute another person’s words is different in a poem than if we use them in a paper or piece of critical writing. If you want to use a quote in your poem, put it in “quotes” or *italics*, and make a note of it on the copy you turn in, and we’ll figure it out together.

It seems absurd to have to tell you not to directly copy another poet’s poem, but: do not directly copy another poet’s poem. (Stranger things have happened.) If you do so, you’ll suffer the full academic consequences.