Intermediate Fiction Workshop, Spring 2014 (CRWRI-UA 816.003)
Mondays, 6:20pm-9:05pm
BOBS 837

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Office Hours: #312 Writer’s House
Monday, 5-6:20pm

“Still and all, why bother? Here's my answer. Many people need desperately to receive this message: I feel and think much as you do, care about many of the things you care about, although most people do not care about them. You are not alone.” – Kurt Vonnegut

Course Description: Welcome to Intermediate Fiction! This class will explore the craft of fiction in three different ways. The first will be brief talks that address a different element of craft in each class. The second will be by reading and dissecting (like writers!) a broad range of contemporary fiction, from experimentalists like Etgar Keret, Deb Olin Unferth, and Aimee Bender, to whip smart traditionalists like Edward P. Jones and Lucia Berlin, to subtle post-modern visionaries like Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, Junot Diaz. We’ll use poetry, plays, photography, dance pieces, non-fiction, short short stories, and anything else that tricks us into being smarter than we are. The third and most important component of the class will be workshopping student work with this question in mind: where do I think this writer/story is trying to go? We will tailor our critiques toward the idea of helping the writer get there. We will have surprise guests by professional writers. We will eschew the idea that there is one way to write fiction. We will seek out the joy in our work and the work of others and will cultivate our personal, idiosyncratic voices. We will eat cookies during the last class.

Required Texts:
- Additional handouts
- A binder large enough to hold your semester’s work
- Photocopies or printouts for workshop

Assignments:

Reading

Each week we will read and discuss a story or novel excerpt from our course packet, not like literature majors but like fiction writers. That is to say we will determine how the writer achieved their effects by mining their sentences for craft gems and tips. You will be expected to read each work carefully and come to class prepared for a spirited discourse.

Original Stories
Each student will be required to submit work twice during the semester. Submissions can be one story or several shorter stories, not exceeding 15 pages. If you have a longer story, just let me know and we will adjust accordingly. **Stories should be double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12 point font, with page numbers.** Stories are due one week prior to your workshop date and you are required to pass out enough copies for each member of the class. During the first class, we will determine the schedule of submitting.

**Workshop Critiques**

You will be expected to read each of your fellow student’s submissions carefully, making comments on the line. Then, you will write an informal “editorial letter,” a page or so long, to the writer, beginning with what is working well in the story, before transitioning to what is working less effectively. Please see “Rules of Thumb For Workshop” below for exact guidelines. You will bring in two copies of each letter to class, one for the workshopped writer, and one for me. Handle your fellow students’ work with the care you would like your work to receive.

**Craft Exercises/ Writing Prompts**

No fun staying on the sidelines! Each class will conclude with a period of time dedicated to responding to the issues of craft that come up during lecture and workshop by trying our hand at different types of writing: dialogue-only stories, setting descriptions, character monologues, flash fiction, etc…

**Event Review**

You are lucky enough to be attending school in the world’s literary capital! Every night the city teems with literary events. You will be expected to attend one literary event during the semester and write a one-page response paper. This paper will be due in your final portfolio.

**Final Portfolios**

**DUE: TBA**

Your final portfolio will include:

1. Both (or all of) your original work from the semester, thoughtfully revised using your own creative compass in addition to the comments made by your fellow students and me. Include copies of the original draft with my comments.

2. All of the craft exercises from the semester.

3. Event Review
Grading:

Grades will be weighted as follows:

**Participation in discussions: 35%**

This class is run like a workshop of adults and is generated by your thoughts and creativity. Attendance, coming to class prepared to participate, and timely submission of assignments is mandatory. If you must miss a class, you are expected to email and let me know. More than one unexplained absence will result in a half-grade deduction. Habitually late students will also begin to receive half-grade deductions. As in, a B will be reduced to a B-. Just, come to class. It’ll be fun.

**Final Portfolio: 65%**

Plagiarizing:

There are few things I respect less than people who try to pass another writer’s work off as his/her own. It is mean, insulting, and boring. Thankfully, you will be so inspired by class discussion that you will be too excited to produce your own work to plagiarize! Those rare souls who decide plagiarizing makes sense will be reported without exception. Please see NYU’s student handbook for more details.

**RULES OF THUMB FOR WORKSHOPPING STORIES**

**WHEN YOU ARE SUBMITTING:**

Format – **12 point Times New Roman font, DOUBLE-SPACED, with page numbers.**

The week before you are workshopped, you are expected to bring in enough copies of your stories every student in class. The first page of your submission should include your name, email address, the title of the story and what form it is: whether it is a short story or excerpt of something longer.

**WHEN YOU ARE WRITING A CRITIQUE:**

Please format your work in double-spaced, 11 or 12 point font, Times New Roman or another standard font that is easy to read. Please don’t forget page numbers. Heading should be your name, the name of the work, name of the class, and the date.
Please think of your critique as an informal letter addressed to the writer. Usually it hovers around one or more pages of typed comments. Please bear the following in mind:

We are helping the writer get the story to where the story is going/ seems to want to go, NOT where we think the story should go. We are not trying to encourage the writer to write like anyone other than themselves. Ask yourself: what do I think this writer is trying to do with this piece? Then, guide your comments toward trying to help them get them there.

Your comments should begin with what is working well, perhaps mentioning with page numbers phrases or sentences you found especially arresting, elements you think are functioning well, characters or descriptions that leap from the page, etc…

After two or so paragraphs of what is working well, you can transition into elements that are not working as well. There is no such thing as a problem with a story, only a challenge. Be nice. You are holding this person’s efforts/heart in your hands. This does not mean you should ignore faulty elements in plot, character, or the like. It just means you should always phrase your suggestions in a way that helps, not hinders, the writer’s creativity. If our goal is to help the writer, we must take care to speak helpfully.

The comments “I like this,” or ‘I don’t like this” are not as helpful as, for example, pinpointing a detail about a character that allowed you to see them clearly in your mind, or a line of dialogue you felt was out of character, etc… In other words, strive for specificity in your comments.

I advise against being too “English teacher-y” with grammar and punctuation line edits. We are not computers. The point of a workshop is not to act as a Microsoft Word spell check, but to address the more subjective and ambiguous elements to crafting a story. Rule of thumb: if it can be fixed with a grammar or spell check, don’t spend too much time notating on it.