Intermediate Fiction Workshop
— Provisional Syllabus —
Sharon Mesmer, Instructor
Spring 2017
New York University, CRWRI-UA.816.006, Tuesdays, 3:30pm-6:15pm
Location TBD
Contact: shardav@verizon.net // sm4824@nyu.edu // 917-576-8606
Office hours: TBD

"... to write squalidly and structurally as though with the acute angles of a rigid, enigmatic triangle ..."
— Clarice Lispector, translation by Johnny Lorenz

Course Description

Is it possible to write, as Clarice Lispector suggests, both "squalidly and structurally"? I say yes. Both ends of the trajectory are possible ... and necessary, really, in order to produce surprisingly inventive writing. In this workshop, we will explore and exploit the fertile (oftentimes untouched) mud of our imaginations through a series of five writing exercises paired with model texts, each utilizing a different prose form into which even the muddiest, most inchoate and problematic ideas, images and language can be flowed. (Occasionally I will use my own work to show you how I approached these forms. ... I never give assignments that I myself haven't tried!) We will discuss the visible and invisible architectures of these model texts, and how you can deploy those architectures for your own purposes. Are you an absolute beginner? an uncertain experimenter? a bitter literary world veteran? Doesn't matter. The assignments + model texts can be used by anyone at any level of proficiency. Additionally, having a varied mix of voices is important, as Bitter Literary World Veteran can always learn something from Absolute Beginner about (as Jack Kerouac said) being "submissive to everything, open, listening." Together we'll read, write, discuss, dissect, experiment and create. Our objectives? 1.) To read, learn about, and be inspired by, the writings of others, including our fellow classmates; and 2.) to produce five fully alive pieces of prose that you would feel confident submitting to magazines (if that's your goal) or just proud to have written.

Assignments + Model Texts

1.) A story told in vignettes/ The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros
2.) A story told in second person/"Helio" by Lydia Tomkiw (handout)
3.) A "Fibonacci" story/"The Virgin Formica" by Sharon Mesmer from The Virgin Formica (handout)
4.) A dream story/"The Bucket Rider" and "The Bridge" by Franz Kafka (handout)
5.) A "cut-up" story/"Bon Ami" from The Empty Quarter by Sharon Mesmer (handout)

Required Book


Any edition will be fine. Please purchase your book from an independent bookstore.

Grading

Class participation (discussions of the model texts and your fellow writers' work, showing up for all sessions) is very important, and thus here it's 50% of the grade. (The other 50% is the quality of your final portfolio — basically the best versions of the assignments.) Nothing is
more stultifying for both students and teachers—especially teachers!—than a workshop situation where everyone is there simply to get comments on their own work. (Or just get through the whole thing and get the grade.) This is not a series of one-on-one tutorials; it can be an invigorating temporary autonomous zone of creative effort that yields spectacular results. You’re completely free, of course, to not like the work of a particular student, but I strenuously suggest that you be prepared to tell that particular student—in compassionate, constructive terms—what you honestly feel would ameliorate the issues you find in his or her work. If you’re new to the workshop situation, don’t worry: at the first session I will provide general discussion guidelines that we can use until we become comfortable talking to each other. Debate—even disagreement—is encouraged. Personal attacks are so not. Don’t. Our workshop will be a place where all feel comfortable exploring and exploiting the fertile, and oftentimes untouched, mud of our imaginations. About grading your writing: I know it’s difficult to “grade” quality. I promise that I will always consider it fairly and objectively. I hope that you will give it your best effort. Doing so will benefit you, your fellow writers, and me.

Attendance

At your third absence you will receive an F. Lateness after fifteen minutes past the start of class will be considered half an absence. Please schedule an appointment with me during my office hour if attendance becomes an issue. If you are scheduled to present work and find it necessary to stay home from class, please inform me by phone call.

Plagiarism

In this crazy modern society of ours writers often appropriate. However, they don’t appropriate entire stories. That kind of plagiarism will not be tolerated.

Course Overview

Reading and discussing your work: Because we won’t have time to read everyone’s work aloud in class every session, I’ll ask four people to volunteer during the previous week’s session to present their work the following week. By choosing four people to present each session (two before the break and two after) we should be able to get around to everyone three times in the course of the semester. Those presenting in class should be sure to email work to the class email list no later than noon on the Monday before class (you can, of course, send it as early as Saturday or Sunday) so that everyone has adequate time to read it (especially me!). I’ll create an email list for sending work around and I’ll also send weekly email reminders about what we’ll be doing the day of class. When you send your work, send it in two versions: as an attachment and also copied and pasted into the body of the email. Everyone should print out the emailed work, read it carefully on your own, make comments on it, and bring the pieces to class to discuss and hand back to the writers. By reading the work outside of class, class time can be utilized for discussions of student work and the model texts (and for other interesting stuff like where to send your work, which readings to go to, books and litmags/sites/blogs to check out, how rough writers’ lives are, etc.). I’d also like to include 15 minutes of in-class writing whenever possible, because the discussions will no doubt generate ideas that you’ll want to remember and explore when they’re still fresh. No texting in class!!!!! You will not be allowed to use mobile devices in class (except during the breaks) because the temptation to obsessively check email, Facebook, Twitter and whatever else seems to be too great. Journals: Every writer keeps a journal. (Or at least scribbles illegible yet brilliant notes and then loses them.) Every writer in this class should purchase a journal, use it, and bring it to class every session. A journal is a great place for your in-class writing, and for noting down things outside of class that strike you as interesting. (Kerouac again, in his "Rules for Spontaneous Prose": "Scribbled secret notebooks, and wild typewritten pages, for yr own joy.") Final grade: Your final “portfolio” (basically all the work you presented in class) should be copied and pasted into an email and as an attachment and sent no later than 5 pm (DATE

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TBD), to shardav@verizon.net. Your final grade will go down one full point for every day the portfolio is late.

### Schedule

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<th>Session 1/</th>
<th>Syllabus review, introductions, in-class writing, etc.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Session 2/</td>
<td>Discussion of first model text, in-class writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Session 3/</td>
<td>Presentations, in-class writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Session 4/</td>
<td>Discussion of second model text, presentations, writing</td>
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<td>Session 5/</td>
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<td>Session 6/</td>
<td>Discussion of third model text, presentations, writing</td>
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<td>Session 7/</td>
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<td>Session 8/</td>
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<td>Session 9/</td>
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<td>Session 10/</td>
<td>Discussion of fifth model text, presentations, writing</td>
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<td>Session 14/</td>
<td>Presentations, party!</td>
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A general guideline for discussing work at the outset could be:

1. What do you notice, overall, about the piece?
2. What do you want to know more about?
3. What do you want to know less about?

Once we're more comfortable around each other we can dispense with that rubric and just discuss stuff.

Rewriting is encouraged after you've received comments on your work. Feel free to present the rewritten work. For the final portfolio, send what you believe to be the best versions of your responses to the assignments.

Responses to assignments can be presented at any time during the semester (i.e., vignettes can still be presented when we've moved on to, say, the Fibonacci). Also, you can email work to me for comments if it's not your turn to present in class. Please be aware that you can do this! Don't wait until the final portfolio is due to show me work for comments because I will be reading the work of fourteen writers by that point!

During the course of the semester I will be suggesting additional books or articles/essays to read outside of class that relate to issues raised during our discussions. All of you will have
your own suggestions as well, and I'll keep a running list. At the end of the term I'll pass out an "ancillary reading" document containing all our suggestions.

I encourage you to schedule a conference with me during the semester. My office hour is (see the first page).

A final note: Writing need not be an onerous task. Quite the contrary, it can be challenging, entertaining, refreshing, redemptive, and even revelatory if you approach it with humor, curiosity, lack of shame and a sense of adventure. This is an opportunity to form a community of writers, learn about literature, and gain entree into the New York City writing scene — use this opportunity to its fullest advantage. And even though we’re not working on novels in this class, the novelist W. Somerset Maugham said something very important about writing:

"There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are."