

ENGL 291 Honors: The Reading and Writing of Fiction and Poetry

course information:

Section 703
MWF 10-10:50
Hibbs 262

instructor:

Jennifer Merrifield
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office hours:

T 4-6pm & by appt.
Harrison St. Coffee Shop
402 N. Harrison St.

Required Texts

- *The Story and Its Writer*, Compact 7th Edition, Ann Charters, Ed. (S&W is at the VCU Bookstore)
- *Contemporary American Poetry*, 8th Edition, A. Poulin Jr. and Michael Waters, Eds. (CAP is at the VCU Bookstore)
- Course pack (the CP is at Uptown Copy, 1205 W Main St., across from Papa John Pizza)

Required Resources

- A writer's journal to keep any ideas, jottings, quotes, exercises, craft ideas/techniques gleaned from readings, hand-written drafts, etc. in one place. If you carry a laptop everywhere, that'd be fine too. Ditto index cards.
- A two-pocket folder for submission of your portfolios.
- A good dictionary and a better thesaurus. (If you're buying, consider American Heritage and Roget's.) It's a reader's responsibility to look up new and unfamiliar words.
- Funds budgeted to distribute your poems and stories to everyone in the workshop.

Primary Goals

- To improve our reading and writing skills—especially in regards to literary fiction and poetry—through reading, creative and critical writing, peer editing, and time with visiting writers.
- To further develop an enjoyment of literature as readers and writers, and to understand the close connection of the two—reading as writers—through experience.
- To understand the creative process through direct experience of it as writers.
- To write, critique, and improve our own stories and poems.
- To create a writing community that reads, critiques, evaluates, and analyzes each other's work both in and out of class.
- To understand with greater clarity the distinctions between “literary” fiction and “genre” fiction by having greater access to contemporary literature and its writers as well as through the experience of writing.
- To understand what a poem is and isn't through experience.

Purpose

In the last twenty years, the number of creative writing classes and programs in this country has blossomed; more people are writing, more books of poetry and short fiction are being published, and more readings are happening in communities all over America. Despite this growth in popularity, many people still puzzle over what a poet writes or how a short story gets written.

I'm a firm believer that writing and reading go hand in hand, and that makes me unexceptional, so this course will be both a class in writing and reading. In Latin, "student" is a sentence that translates to "They are eager," and the texts will provide a number of stories and poems that many of you will relate to. About half the class time will be spent discussing this work and learning the language for talking about writing, and the other half will be spent actually talking about each other's work in a workshop setting. Your job is to be first a feeling person, then a calculating editor who can discuss literature in a meaningful way, allowing you to apprentice yourselves to these writers with the goal of shaping your own writing to evoke feeling and emotion in your audience.

It is through literature that we've always re-experienced the world and are given abilities to look beyond what we normally believe to be true. The art of the writer is to recreate the world and present it to the reader.

Policies and Expectations

Attendance: Regular and prompt attendance is essential for establishing a community of readers and writers; it shows respect and commitment to your own and others' work. Thus attendance is mandatory, and there are no excused absences. You are allowed up to three absences this semester for any reason; if you miss four or more classes, you fail. If you come more than ten minutes late (thereby interrupting the discussion or workshop), I will mark you absent. If you are five minutes late three times, you have another absence on your record. As a continued display of respect for each other and the work: Please don't leave the room during class unless it's an emergency, turn off cell phones and keep them off your desk, and refrain from eating unless you bring enough for the entire group.

Participation: It's important to realize that for this class to work, participation is crucial and expected. You will need to complete all readings and assignments before classtime to demonstrate your synthesis of the material in an intelligent seminar-style discussion. The reading and writing load for this class will be heavy—it won't be an easy A—but if you are serious about reading and writing, this course offers a way to develop your crucial writerly awareness of the world and sensitivity to your own and others' work.

Outside Participation: You will also be expected to go to any live readings that may be held at VCU or, if possible, in Richmond, this semester. I understand there will be conflicts of scheduling and life that may prevent you from attending all of them. However, you must attend at least two readings (one fiction, one poetry) to complete the "Escaping the Page" assignments (your investigative response papers). Since the assignments ask you to investigate a transcendental moment you've experienced at a reading, attending more readings will allow you to be more open to such an experience and better prepared to analyze it in your responses. I will keep an updated list of such opportunities on Blackboard—or you may bring an interesting event to my attention. I recommend taking care of this requirement as early as possible.

Reading: We are here to learn a new way of reading that is thoughtful and critical, that involves attention to content, technical form, style, context and subtext; a reading that is active rather than passive. By examining these elements in published and well-studied creative writing we will learn the language through which meaningful discussion of literature and writing is possible. To that end, the class will be responsible for deciding which stories and poems we'll study and apprentice ourselves to so the syllabus readings reflect the best of our creative interests and obsessions.

Writing: Fostered by our reading, we'll learn how to write creatively by imitating and experimenting with various authors, techniques and styles. Writerly investigations of published work will help us explore and harness various elements of craft in our own writing (with a focus on things like characterization, sensory description, plot, etc.) and help develop suggestions for our peers' writing as it moves through the process of creation and revision.

This should be a fun class, a class in which you explore your creativity and your surroundings through language. Celebrate, bitch about, love, hate, relate, remember, and examine the world around you—a world full of concrete things like birch trees and lovers and abstractions like love or religion.

Workshopping: We will all read and discuss every piece submitted for the workshops. To help focus our thoughts for discussion, each of you will also write approximately a half page (typed, single-spaced) about each workshop piece. I will use your comments as a way of taking attendance. (See guidelines in the "Workshop Guide to Creating Writing" for ways to focus your comments. You are also encouraged to comment in the margins of each story and poem.)

Late Assignments: This class has a tight schedule. If you are not going to have a piece ready to distribute before your workshop date, you must trade dates with someone BEFORE the distribution date. I can't accept stories or poems by email or fax. Failure to turn a piece in for workshop can cause a letter grade deduction on your final grade. If you miss class, the appropriate way to turn your work in is to take it to the department office and give it to one of the secretaries. Do not slide it under my office door or slip it in my mailbox.

Conferences: I expect to meet with each of you at least once over the course of the semester for a scheduled conference about your work. Please bring any drafts and revisions you'd like to discuss, and provide me with a copy (in person or by email) at least 48 hours in advance. My email address is jmerrifield@aol.com.

Presentation and Mechanics: Please no assignments handed-in with anything but Times New Roman, Arial, or Garamond. If a poem needs a special font to make it "better" then the poem isn't doing its job. Fiction should be double-spaced; poetry should be single-spaced, as double-spacing creates a new stanza. You may copy your work back-to-back in order to save paper. Grammar and usage count when determining your grade.

Plagiarism: Creative work often incorporates, responds to, translates or references others' work in a number of ways, but presenting others' work in a way that infers that it's your own is unethical and academically dishonest. If you have questions about using others' work in your own writing, please discuss it with me in advance. Plagiarism will be treated to the harshest extent possible, including failure of the class and possible expulsion.

Student Conduct in the Classroom: According to the VCU Resource Guide, "The instructional program at VCU is based upon the premise that students enrolled in a class are entitled to receive instruction free from interference by other students. Accordingly, in classrooms, laboratories, studies, and other learning areas, students are expected to conduct themselves in an orderly and cooperative manner so that the faculty member can proceed with their [sic] customary instruction. Faculty members (including graduate teaching assistants) may set reasonable standards for classroom behavior in order to serve these objectives. If a student believes that the behavior of another student is disruptive, the instructor should be informed." Among other things, the University Rules and Procedures prohibit anyone from having "...in his possession any firearm, other weapon, or explosive, regardless of whether a license to possess the same has been issued, without the written authorization of the President of the university..."

See the VCU Resource Guide for more information. Certainly the expectation in this course is that students will attend class with punctuality, proper decorum, required course material, and studious involvement. The VCU Resource Guide contains additional important information about a number of other policies with which students should be familiar, including Guidelines on Prohibition of Sexual Harassment, Grade Review Procedure, and Ethics Policy on Computing. It also contains maps, phone numbers, and information about resources available to VCU students. The VCU Resource Guide is available online or through the Division of Student Affairs.

Email Policy: Electronic mail or "email" is considered an official method for communication at VCU because it delivers information in a convenient, timely, cost effective, and environmentally aware manner. This policy ensures that all students have access to this important form of communication. It ensures students can be reached through a standardized channel by faculty and other staff of the University as needed. Mail sent to the VCU email address may include notification of University-related actions, including disciplinary action. Please read the policy in its entirety: www.students.vcu.edu/rg/policies/rg7email.html.

You are expected to check your official VCU Email on a daily basis. Students are responsible for the consequences of not reading, in a timely fashion, University-related communications sent to their official VCU student Email account.

Americans with Disabilities Act: SECTION 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 require that VCU provide an "academic adjustment" and/or a "reasonable accommodation" to any individual who advises us of a physical and/or mental disability. If you have a physical or mental limitation that requires an academic adjustment or accommodation, arrange a meeting with me as soon as possible. Adjustments and accommodations cannot be retroactively applied to coursework that has been previously completed or due.

Grading Scale:

The course will consist of 1,000 possible points.

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|-----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Portfolio: 200 pts. | 900-1000 = A |
| Midterm and Final Exams: 200 pts. | 800-899= B |
| Quizzes & Participation: 120 pts. | 700-799= C |
| Writing Assignments: 240 pts. | 600-699= D |
| Investigative Papers: 240 pts. | 599 & below = F |

Requirements for Class

Regarding Grades: 80% of work completed is not an 80%. *If you fail to complete any of the formal assignments for this course, you fail the course.*

Fiction:

- One short story (about 5 pgs) that will be workshopped
- One-half page of written comments (typed, single-spaced) on all worksheet stories
- Five writing exercises
- Three one-page craft investigations on elements of fiction
- A one-page investigative response to a fiction reading (*Due at your leisure, but before final's week*)
- Two or more quizzes on the elements of fiction
- Portfolio: One short story (5-7 pgs)

Poetry:

- Three original poems, two of which will be workshopped
- One-half page of written comments (typed, single-spaced) on all worksheet poems
- Four writing exercises (imitation poems)
- Three one-page craft investigations on elements of poetry
- A one-page investigative response to a poetry reading (*Due at your leisure, but before final's week*)
- Two or more quizzes on the elements of poetry
- Memorize one poem from CAP (over 12 lines)
- Portfolio: Revisions of at least five poems

On Quizzes: The scheduled quizzes will help you to learn the basic terminology for discussing poetry and fiction. From time to time, we will also have unscheduled quizzes on the readings (both the model texts and the workshop pieces). You will have opportunities to generate questions for some of the quizzes.

On Participation: Because participation is so crucial to the overall success of this course, you will receive a participation grade. This grade will be determined by your intelligent, considered contributions to in-class discussions on the readings and your verbal contributions to workshops, and is part of your overall quiz grade.

Takehome Midterm: On the readings and elements of fiction. You'll find a story from the anthology that we did not discuss in class, one that makes you see a piece of your world in a new light. Once it's picked you, you'll read it as a writer, choosing four elements from our fiction toolkit to focus on in a discussion of that story's craft.

In-class Final Exam: On the readings and elements of poetry. You'll be asked to memorize, in advance, one poem from CAP that we didn't cover in class—over 12 lines, under 50—and discuss its craft in a short essay.

Portfolio: The portfolio is two-thirds of your final exam, and will be due on the date that exam is administered. It will include a cover letter (2-3 pgs), a revised full-length story (5-7 pages), and revisions of five poems. You will need to submit all previous drafts, including workshop drafts with my comments, along with the final version of the poems and story.

On Portfolio Grading: The hardest thing to learn as a writer is how to separate yourself from the work. The second hardest thing to learn is that the work is not the process of sitting down and writing, but the process of sitting down with a story or poem you like and seeing it objectively enough to make it a better story or poem. This is not a class in which you continue writing the way you have been. This is an academic discipline and you are expected to regard the class accordingly. So while I have no specific requirements concerning style, subject matter, or form, I do have standards of quality and craft by which I evaluate your work. These standards will become evident as we read and critique work throughout the semester, but here are the general guidelines I use to grade your portfolios:

A range: Original. Emotionally, aurally, intellectually potent. Well developed. Polished. Demonstrates effective use of techniques discussed in class. Demonstrates evidence of the writer's sustained care and attention. Impressive initial effort, significant revision, serious consideration of workshop critiques and suggestions for improvement. Free of typos, spelling and grammatical errors, or other such distractions to the reader.

B range: Original. Demonstrates serious attempts to employ techniques discussed in class, but could benefit from further revision—for development, potency, structure, and/or polish. Shows evidence of some rigorous revision and serious consideration of workshop critiques. Very few typos, spelling and grammatical errors, or other such distractions to the reader.

C range: Somewhat lacking in originality or vitality. Demonstrates some attempt to employ techniques discussed in class, but is left underdeveloped, unpolished or unclear. Demonstrates minimal evidence of the writer's effort in revision and/or reveals disregard for workshop critiques. Alternately, or additionally: contains typographical, spelling, and grammatical errors that hinder an easy read through the work.

D range: Lacks originality. Demonstrates minimal attempt to reach and affect an audience. Demonstrates no (or almost no) evidence of revision. Alternately, or additionally: contains typographical, spelling, and grammatical errors that impede clarity.

F: Demonstrates neither initial effort nor any attempt at revision.

NOTE: While I grade portfolios holistically (points only), I'm happy to provide written feedback—and/or conference with you again—on your revised poems and stories. Just let me know in advance that you want this.

THE SYLLABUS: a living, breathing organism, thus subject to change

First Day

F 8/25 **Freak things. Obsessions. An assignment.**

Exercise: "An Exercise in Scandalous and Dishonest Behavior."

Assignment 1: If you haven't already, buy the Course Pack, textbooks, and required resources.

Get comfortable with the structure and content of our Blackboard site. Read the syllabus!

Assignment 2: Read around in S&W, identifying stories that engage or mystify you that you'd like to study.

Week One

M 8/28 **Students as teachers. Intros. Writers & readers. You are what you eat.**

Due: The list of stories you'd like to study. Bring S&W, and be prepared to talk about your choices.

W 8/30 **From the Ground Up.**

Readings: Reading Short Stories (S&W 1039-43) | The Elements of Fiction (S&W 1044-59) | Lorrie Moore, "How to Become a Writer" (CP 93, 2-4)

F 9/1 **Leaving the Familiar Shore.**
Readings: Dorothea Brande, "Learning to See Again" (CP 18-23) | Ann Lamott, "Getting Started," "Small Assignments," "Shitty First Drafts" (CP 6-17)
Quiz: Vocabulary for discussing fiction

Week Two

M 9/4 **Happy Labor Day!**

W 9/6 **Learning to See Again: Mirrors, Microscopes, 3D Glasses. Part 1: Viewings.**
Readings: Janet Burroway, "Showing and Telling" (CP 24-40) | Linda Seger, "Defining the Character" (CP 41-54)
Due: Exercise #1 (Observation/Character)

F 9/8 **Learning to See Again: Mirrors, Microscopes, 3D Glasses. Part 2: The Moody House.**
Readings: Sherwood Anderson, "Hands" (S&W 28-31) | Sherwood Anderson, "Form, Not Plot, in the Short Story" (S&W 835-37)

Friday September 8: Deadline for students to provide advance written notification to instructors of intent to observe religious holidays. Reasonable accommodations for completion of work missed should be made for students observing holidays.

Week Three

M 9/11 **Learning to See Again: Mirrors, Microscopes, 3D Glasses. Part 3: Moving In.**
Reading: Sandra Cisneros, "The House on Mango Street" (S&W 162-3)
Due: Exercise #2 (Description/Character)

W 9/13 **Learning to Talk Again. Bohemian Secrets.**
Readings: Guy de Maupassant, "The Necklace" (S&W 522-29) | Raymond Carver, "Cathedral" (S&W 88-98)
Due: First Craft Investigation (a hard copy to me and an electronic copy on Blackboard)

F 9/15 **First Words.**
Readings: First Craft Investigations (Blackboard)
Due: Exercise #3 (Dialogue)

Week Four

M 9/18 **Learning to Walk Again. Stirred Not Shaken.**
Readings: Margaret Atwood, "Reading Blind" (S&W 837-40) | Bobbie Ann Mason, "Shiloh" (S&W 510-21) | Junot Diaz, "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie" (S&W 246-49)

W 9/20 **An Ear to the Ground.**
Readings: Josip Novakovich, "Point of View" (CP 55-62) | George Garrett (Blackboard)

F 9/22 **When Barefoot's Better.**
Readings: Ben Nyberg, "Why Stories Fail" (CP 63-68) | Rust Hills, "Slick Fiction and Quality Fiction" (CP 69-72)
Due: Exercise #4 (POV)

Conference Reminder: let me know when you want to discuss your fiction.

Week Five

M 9/25 Shifting Perspective.

Readings: Margaret Atwood, "Happy Endings" (S&W 32-35) | Ambrose Bierce, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek" (S&W 74-81)

Due: Creative Quiz Questions (on the readings and/or the elements of fiction)
Scenes (Exposition, Rising Action, Climax)

W 9/27 Reentering the Funhouse.

Due: A minimum of three character-driven, character-focused scenes from your short story

F 9/29 Algebra for Magicians.

Quiz: Readings, Elements of Fiction

Readings: Kit Reed, "What to Leave Out and What to Put In" (handout) | A Workshop Guide for Creating Writing (handout)

Due: Exercise #5 (Organic Plot)
Second Craft Investigation (a hard copy to me and an electronic copy on Blackboard)

Week Six

M 10/2 Writer, Reviser

Readings: Second Craft Investigations (Blackboard) | ZZ Packer, "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere" (S&W 677-92)

Due: Group One's Stories

W 10/4 Group One Workshop.

Due: Workshop comments
Group Two's Stories
Third Craft Investigations (a hard copy to me and an electronic copy on Blackboard)

F 10/6 Group Two Workshop.

Due: Workshop comments
Group Three's Stories

Week Seven

M 10/9 Group Three Workshop.

Readings: Amy Tan, "Two Kinds" (S&W 730-39)

Due: Workshop comments
Group Four's Stories

W 10/11 Group Four Workshop.

Due: Workshop comments
Group Five's Stories

F 10/13 Group Five Workshop.

Due: Workshop comments

Week Eight

M 10/16 Spillover Workshop. More from the Funhouse.

W 10/18 **Spillover Workshop.**
**Due: Takehome Midterms.

F 10/20 **Happy Reading Days!**

Week Nine

M 10/23 **Little Franksteins. The Body Electric. Text in Motion.**
Readings: Debra Marquart, "This New Quiet" (CP 74) | Clint McCown, "Fingerlings" (CP 73) | Michael Waters, "The Wax Apple" (CP 75) | Molly Giles, "Protest" (CP 76) | Kenneth Koch, "Introduction" (CP 78-88)

W 10/25 **Ecstatic Forms, Expedient Occasions.**
Readings: Robert Hass, "The Image," "Meditation at Lagunitas," "A Story About the Body," "Privilege of Being" (CAP 199-201) | Michael Palmer, "I Do Not" (CAP 389-91) | Philip Levine, "They Feed They Lion" (CAP 313-14) | Ai, "The Mother's Tale," "Finished" (CAP 3, 6-8)
Due: First Craft Investigation (on the 10/25 readings)

F 10/27 **The Songs We Sing.**
Readings: First Craft Investigations (Blackboard) | Find and bring your favorite CAP poem to class.
Quiz: Vocabulary for discussing poetry
Due: Imitation Poems #1: Association

Week Ten

M 10/30 **Association Workshop.**
Due: Workshop comments

W 11/1 **Painting with Words. Kinetic Still Lives.**
Readings: Stephen Dobyns, "Tomatoes" (CAP 110) | WS Merwin, "Fog-horn" (CAP 344) | CK Williams, "Blades" (CAP 561) | Yusef Komunyakaa, "Ode to the Maggot" (CAP 271)

F 11/3 **The Artist's Brush**
Due: Imitation Poems #2: Objects

Friday November 3rd: Last day to withdraw from a course with the mark of "W."

Week Eleven

M 11/6 **Object Workshop**
Due: Workshop comments

W 11/8 **Being an I: Beginnings**
Readings: Adrienne Rich, "Diving Into the Wreck" (CAP 415-17) | Sylvia Plath, "Daddy" (CAP 406-08) | Charles Simic, "Charles Simic" (CAP 439) | Crystal Williams, "In Search of Aunt Jemima" (CP 89-91)

F 11/10 **Being an I: Multiply Forked Paths**
Readings: David Jauss, "Lever of Transcendence: Contradiction and the Physics of Creativity" (handout)

Conference Reminder: let me know when you want to discuss your poetry.

Week Twelve

- M 11/13** **Being an Other: Negative Capability.**
Readings: Anne Sexton, "Her Kind" (CAP 431) | Mark Strand, "My Life By Somebody Else" (CAP 530) | Naomi Shihab Nye, "Arabic" (CAP 358-59) | Tomaz Saluman, "Young Cops" (CP 92)
Due: Second Craft Investigation
- W 11/15** **Limbic Brains & Backyard Benches.**
Readings: Second Craft Investigations (Blackboard) | Kimiko Hahn, "The Shower" (CAP 179) | Anne Sexton, "The Room of My Life" (CAP 437) | Charles Simic, "Used Bookstore" (CAP 444) | Theodore Roethke, "Root Cellar" (CAP 423)
- F 11/17** **More from the Rooms of Our Lives**
Due: Creative Quiz Questions (on the readings and/or the elements of poetry)
Imitation Poems #3: Being an I
Imitation Poems #4: Being an Other

Week Thirteen

- M 11/20** **I am Here and You are Here: Workshop.**
Quiz: Readings, Elements of Poetry
Due: Workshop comments for Imitation Poems #3 and #4
- W 11/22** **Keys Strings & Lightning (1).**
Readings: Discover a poem from CAP not on the syllabus.
Due: A one-page justification of why it's a must-read, what we can learn to help craft our poems.
- F 11/24** **Happy Thanksgiving!**

Week Fourteen

- M 11/27** **Keys Strings & Lightning (2).**
Readings: Your Keys Strings & Lightnings: Blackboard posts and (TBA) selected source poems.
- W 11/29** **Keys Strings & Lightning (3).**
Readings: Your poem picks, TBA.
Due: Minimum THREE new poems, TWO of which will be distributed for full-class workshop.
- F 12/1** **New Poem Workshop.**
Due: Workshop comments, Group A

Week Fifteen

- M 12/4** **New Poem Workshop.**
Due: Workshop comments, Group B
- W 12/6** **New Poem Workshop.**
Due: Workshop comments, Group C
- F 12/8** **Poet, Performer. Spillover Workshop and Class Reading.**
**Due: Outstanding "Escaping the Page" Investigative Responses, Poetry and Fiction

Exam Week

F 12/15

Final Exam: 8-10:50 am.

Portfolio: Due at 8 am, if you haven't put it in my mailbox beforehand.