

# PLEASE DO NOT BUY ANY BOOKS UNTIL AFTER OUR FIRST MEETING

Rutgers University  
MFA Program in Creative Writing  
Non-Fiction Workshop 26:200:559  
(Cross-listed in History as 26:510:504)  
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Offices Hours: Wednesday, 3:00-500 and Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday by appointment

Once we get up to speed, we shall do two things in each of our meetings: We shall devote the first 90-120 minutes to your writing, to workshop, i.e., the reading (ahead of time), scribbling and commenting upon (ahead of time), and in-class discussion of your work. The last 30-60 minutes we shall devote to outside reading, some that I assign and some that you assign. I realize that this is a more time than is usually devoted to outside reading in a workshop. But writers need to read as well as to write, and of late it is my sense (an admittedly cranky and perhaps completely mistaken sense) that we are not reading enough. Consider it a modest experiment, and we'll see how it goes. Here's what I will expect of you:

I will expect you to do all the reading and come to class prepared to contribute to a lively discussion of our common reading and one another's writing (prepared with thoughts and comments and questions and constructive criticism, all of which go beyond the easy, the predictable, the clichéd and especially the black and the white). To put it another way: Attendance and class participation are not optional. They are a fundamental part of your responsibility as a citizen of this workshop. What's more, the less you speak, the more I'll have to, and believe me when I say that you will tire of that very quickly.

I will expect each of you to present your own work at least twice and perhaps three times during the term. I would love it if everyone had the chance to submit new work twice and a substantial revision once.

I urge you--and this is purely for your own good--to struggle to take each of your pieces as far as you can take them before sharing them with us. The farther you take a piece, the more we can help you with it. If you are fully aware of half the things wrong with your piece when our discussion begins, chances are that half of our discussion of that piece will be a waste of your time. Under no circumstances should you submit a really early let alone a rough draft.

With the possible exception of those of you brave enough to present at our first workshop, I will expect you to distribute your work a week ahead of your presentation.

I will expect that (well ahead of class) each of you will read and if possible reread each of the pieces on the agenda for that week. Your marginalia and closing comments should be carefully considered, thoughtful, humane, penetrating, and honest most of all. Imagine a writer friend, a close writer friend, has asked you to read an essay she's working on in order to help her figure out how to do what is trying to do better (as opposed to what you would do if the piece were yours). There is nothing is to be gained, for your friend or for the art, by holding back.

That said: How you are honest will inevitably shape how helpful your comments will be. The more you are able to say about the experience of reading and the chemistry of the experience—the voice, the language, the structure--the piece the better. The less you say about what you liked and didn't like, what worked and didn't work, the better.

Same with our outside readings: Think of it this way: A discussion is like a paragraph. A good one very rarely starts with a bad first line. The last thing I want to know is whether you liked the book. Save it. Better to talk

about what they writer did, how she did it, what you learned from her about writing, what you might like to imitate, borrow, or steal. I will expect you, ahead of class, to mark up the hard copy of each other's work.

I would like each of you to schedule a conference with me during the week after you present a piece in class.

Finally, I would like each of you to select a short piece of someone else's writing (non-fiction, in any of its many different varieties, in the most expansive sense of the term) for discussion and appreciation one week of the term. I am not talking about any old piece of good writing, something you grab on your way out of the house, but something that has, at one time or another, been precious to you, simply knocked your off your feet, for what it says and how it says it. Something that taught you about the power of great prose and the magic of great prose, and perhaps even made you want to write it. As soon as you select something, we will plug it into our reading schedule. When it comes to length, be considerate of the demands on everyone's time.

### **Learning Goals:**

Goal 1: By the end of this semester, you will have gained intensive experience reading, writing, revising, and critiquing creative non-fiction.

Goal 2: That experience will supplement and complement the experience you gain in your poetry and fiction workshops and craft classes, increasing your range as a writer and improving your ability to write critically about structure, craft, and literary traditions of the work of a wide variety of writers.

Goal 3: All that should strengthen your preparation for entry into the public life of literature, which includes locating your own work in the context of contemporary literary practice, preparing that work according to professional standards, teaching creative writing, and participating in diverse literary communities.

### **Academic Integrity:**

We are ALL required to follow the University's Policy on Academic Integrity, which falls under the Code of Student Conduct. The policy and the consequences of violating it are outlined here:  
<http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/office-dean-student-affairs/academic-integrity-policy>.

*I strictly follow the University's rules regarding plagiarism and other academic irregularities.*

*Please consult me if you have any questions about what is and is not appropriate regarding the use of sources or citation.*

You must also include the honor pledge, "On my honor, I have neither received nor given any unauthorized assistance on this examination (assignment)." on both graduate and undergraduate syllabi.

## OUR CRITICAL METHOD

This page may be the most important of them all. Our method shall be different from the method in your other workshops, perhaps dramatically so. It may take some getting used to, but I think you may find the difference refreshing.

### **As responders, each of you is responsible to**

- 1) Try NOT to bring your own agenda to work you are reading.
- 2) Try to help the writer to do her best work. You are attempting to help the writer create the best version of her piece, not to create your own. It is important for you, as hard as this may be, not bring your own biases and expectations to your critique. You are here to help each writer find his or her voice and realize his or her vision, not to impose your own.

### **As writers, each of you is responsible to**

- 1) Try to be honest and open.
- 2) Try to get yourself to a place where you can question your own work in a somewhat public forum.
- 3) Try to be very clear about your intent. Why? Because we want our feedback to take off from and be grounded in your intent, what moves you to say something in a particular way, what you mean to say.

### **Here's how we will do it:**

#### 1. Statements of Meaning

We shall give the writer positive feedback about the work, especially specific aspects or moments that affected us. What worked? What got you seeing or hearing or feeling or thinking? People want to hear that what they have shared with you has meaning. Responders need to try to make the palette of responses as wide as possible. Be specific and expansive in your use of vocabulary about the work.

#### 2. Questions from the Writer

We shall give the writer a chance to ask readers questions about the work. Be specific; nothing is too insignificant. The more the writer helps us understand what she is trying to do and how she is trying to do it, the more meaningful the dialogue will be. We should be prepared to respond directly to the questions asked.

#### 3. Neutral Questions

We shall ask the writer neutral questions about the work. It is very important for us to try not to be judgmental in the phrasing of our questions. Rather than asking, "Why did you write it from X, Y, or Z's point of view?" or "Why is it so dark?" or "Why did it end so abruptly?" we might ask, "What ideas or motivations guided your choices about the point of view of the piece, or the mood of the piece? or about the ending?" Writers should only try to answer questions if they think trying to answer will be helpful to them. Often, the best neutral questions leave us without an immediate answer.

#### 4. Opinions

If you have an opinion that can't be stated in the form of a neutral question, you can express it in this, our final stage. Try asking, "I have an opinion about \_\_\_\_\_, would you like to hear it?" The writer can say no. Our

opinions should be positive criticism, with problem solving in mind. This way of expressing opinions and offering criticism gives writers control of this sensitive moment and allows for a productive dialogue.

### Schedule

January 18:	Introduction: The What and Why of Non-Fiction? Reading: I will distribute some short readings in class
January 25:	Workshop: Reading: Julian Barnes, <i>Levels of Life</i>
February 1:	Workshop: Reading: Jenny Offill, <i>Dept. of Speculation</i>
February 8:	Workshop: Reading: Claudia Rankine, <i>Don't Let Me Be Lonely</i>
February 15	Workshop: Reading: Kathryn Schulz and Ian Frazier, selected essays
February 22	Workshop: Reading: Carlo Rovelli, <i>Seven Brief Lessons on Physics</i>
March 1	Workshop: Reading: Alan Lightman, <i>Einstein's Dreams</i>
March 8:	Workshop: Reading: Rovelli and Lightman
March 15:	Spring Break
March 22	Workshop: Reading: Philip Roth, <i>Patrimony</i>
March 28	Workshop: Reading: Janet Malcolm, <i>The Silent Woman</i>
April 5	Workshop: Reading: Helen Garner, <i>The First Stone</i> (and its critics) or Garner, <i>This House of Grief</i> or or Garner, <i>Joe Cinque's Consolation</i>
April 12	Workshop: Reading: TBD by workshop
April 19	Workshop Reading: TBD by workshop
April 26	Workshop and Reading: What Remains Reading: TBD by workshop.