

**DRAFT**

Rutgers University

MFA Program in Creative Writing  
Non-Fiction Workshop 26:200:559  
(Cross-listed in History as 26:510:504)  
Spring 2015

James Goodman  
goodmanj@rutgers.edu  
973-353-5410 Ext. 3886  
Offices Hours: Wednesday, 2:00-500 and Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday by  
appointment

Welcome. We have the almost unimaginable luxury, especially in the wake of a great recession (more of a depression, which hasn't really ended for a whole lot of people and realms, including the arts and humanities) of a creative writing workshop. Let's make the most of it.

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. (My guess is that with the number of students I am anticipating this term you will each present twice)

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 a

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 five to seven days 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. (The same goes for our outside reading

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 recommend that you to try write every day of the week, and to keep a log of each day's reading and writing. Record, in any way you would like, what you read, what you wrote, what you had hoped to accomplished, what you actually accomplished, and anything else you think might be helpful to you as you go about trying to make writing a habit, an addiction, something you simply can't live without.

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 (non-fiction, in any of its many many different varieties) writing 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.

Now a word from our the bureaucracy, with the learning goals for this writing workshop;

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.

#### Readings, Non-Fiction Workshop, Spring 2015

Here are some of the books that we will likely be reading together. PLEASE DO NOT BUY THEM BEFORE THE FIRST CLASS. The list is likely to change and I will have suggestions about where you can get them for the best price.

DuBois, "Souls of Black Folks," Appiah, The Ethics of Identity, Als, White Girls, Rankine, Citizen, Woodson, Brown Girl Dreaming, McBride, Color of Water, Jamison, The Empathy Exams, Oz, Jews and Words, Lerner, Leaving the Atocha Station or 10:04.