

Rutgers University
MFA Program in Creative Writing
Non-Fiction Workshop 26:200:559
(Cross-listed in History as 26:510:504)
Spring 2021

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Pandemic Office Hours: **I am tied up every Wednesday from 9-2, but besides those hours I am available to meet, most any day, most any daytime, by phone, FaceTime, Zoom, whichever form you prefer. With class on Zoom, it is more important than ever that we keep the lines of communication wide open, raise questions when we have them, address problems, every kind of problem, when they arise.**

We shall have two kinds of meetings. Roughly three-quarters of them shall be devoted 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 remainder will be devoted to outside reading. I realize that this is a more time than is usually devoted to outside reading in a writing workshop. But I find that our discussions of outside reading, even just a few outside readings, however eclectically chosen, adds valuable points of reference, perspectives, and vocabulary to our discussion of your work, repaying the time it takes away from workshop, even in a large one. Here's what I will expect of you:

I 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 expect each of you to present your own work at least twice and I hope 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 volunteering for our first workshop, I will expect you to distribute your work in hard copy a week ahead of your presentation. If for some reason a writer is unable to distribute hard copy, I expect each of you to print up the piece yourselves and scribble on the pages yourselves. With the exception of students with special needs, I want computers on the seminar table to be the rare exception not the rule.

I will expect that (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 (**imagine a letter to the author, with a copy to me**) 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 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.

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: [HYPERLINK "http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/office-dean-student-affairs/academic-integrity-policy"](http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/office-dean-student-affairs/academic-integrity-policy)
<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.

Books to Buy (available in many different formats, from extremely inexpensive used editions to new paperbacks with eBooks somewhere in between. Ordinarily I would encourage you to find hard copy versions of the books. I have chosen them with that preference in mind. But for the duration of the pandemic, I

Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

Tobias Wolfe, *This Boy's Life*

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*

Ayad Akhtar, *Homeland Elegies*

OUR CRITICAL METHOD

This page may be the most important page of the syllabus. 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, let us

- 1) Try NOT to bring our own agendas to the pages we are reading.
- 2) Try to help the writer do her best work. We are attempting to help her create the best version of her piece, not to create our own. It is important for us, as hard as this may be, not bring our own expectations and approaches and style to our critiques. We are here to help each writer find his or her voice and realize his or her vision, not to impose our own.

As writers, let us

- 1) Try to be open and honest. I think of Baldwin: I want to be an honest man and a good writer.
- 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 us seeing or hearing or feeling or thinking? People want to hear that what they have shared with us has meaning to us. We need to try to make the palette of responses as wide as possible. Let's be specific and expansive in our use of vocabulary about the work. If none of this makes sense to you, simply (and this is not always so simple) describe the work to the workshop and back to the writer, as if you were telling someone about a story or essay or article he or she had not read.

2. Questions from the Writer

We shall give the writer a chance to ask us 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 (Subject to change, with plenty of notice)

- January 20: Introduction: The What and Why of Non-Fiction
Reading: John Edgar Wideman, "Arizona" and start reading Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*
- January 27: **Workshop:** _____, _____, and _____
Reading: Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*
- February 3: **Workshop:** _____, _____, and _____
Reading: Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*
- February 10: **Workshop:** _____, _____, and _____
Reading: Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*
- February 17: **Discussion of Hartman, *Lose Your Mother***
- February 24 **Workshop:** _____, _____, and _____
Start Reading Wolfe, *This Boy's Life*
- March 3: **Workshop:** _____, _____, and _____
Reading Wolfe, *This Boy's Life*
- March 10: **Workshop:** _____, _____, and _____
Reading Wolfe, *This Boy's Life*
- March 17: Spring Break
- March 24 **Discussion of Wolfe, *This Boy's Life***
- March 31 **Workshop:** _____, _____, and _____
- April 7 **Workshop:** _____, _____, and _____
- April 14 **Discussion of Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home***
- April 21 **Workshop:** _____, _____, and _____
- April 28 **Discussion of Ayad Akhtar, *Homeland Elegies***