

CRWR 212: Intro to Creative Writing

Professor: Chelsey Johnson

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Class Meets: TR 3:30-4:50 pm, Washington 312

Office: Tucker 032 (in the basement)

College of William & Mary, Spring 2017

Office hours: TR 2:00-3:00, or by appointment

Get it down. Take chances. It may be bad, but it is the only way you can do anything really good. You have to write badly in order to write well.

—William Faulkner

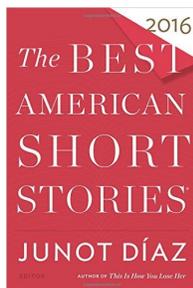
If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?

—Emily Dickinson

WE ARE MAKING BIRDS, NOT BIRDCAGES.

—Dean Young

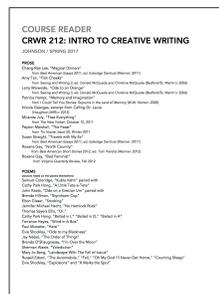
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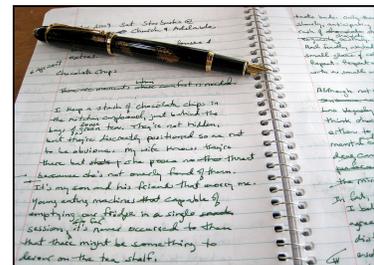
The Best American Short Stories 2016, ed. Junot Diaz



Citizen by Claudia Rankine



Course reader of essays & poems, available at Staples



Your own writing notebook

I. COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course provides an introduction to writing fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry. In 15 weeks of extensive, intensive reading and writing, we'll establish a solid grounding in the elements, and you'll write several poems, stories, and essays.

The structure of the course will consist primarily of three elements: **reading and discussing** stories and poems; **writing** assignments and experiments; and **workshops** where you'll read each other's work and give constructive feedback.

II. THE WORK

- **Reading:** Reading for pleasure is probably what made you want to write, and reading closely will teach you how to write better. We'll read and discuss several stories/essays/poems, as well as craft-oriented texts, every week. Read the work closely, but also for enjoyment, and take notes. Come prepared to talk about, probe, and question what makes these pieces work the way they do—and how you can steal their tricks and techniques for yourself.

- **Writing:** Through in-class writing, specific assignments, and writing on your own time, you'll generate abundant new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in this course. (Please don't haul in the pieces of a novel you've been working on or a poem you wrote in high school—your new, fresh work is what we want to see here.) At the end of the semester, you'll assemble a final portfolio that showcases your best writing from this course, in all three genres. The strongest portfolios show substantial revision from their initial drafts. The final portfolio is due by the end of our final exam time (in lieu of an exam).

- **Workshop:** Workshop helps you as a writer *and* as a reader. On workshop days, we'll usually discuss three stories or essays, or five poems. How it works: everyone will workshop one prose piece (story or essay) and one poem. You'll sign up for a couple of workshop dates, and on the class date *before* your workshop date, you'll bring me 15 anonymous copies of their story/ poem/ essay; I'll distribute these to the rest of the class. Everyone reads these and writes

notes in the margins, plus a letter to the author that describes the piece's content, strengths, and possibilities for growth. When we convene for the next class, we'll talk about each piece for 15-20 minutes, and the author will get a chance to ask questions of their own.

Important: What we read in workshop will be new and raw and in progress.

Accordingly, read with an eye toward possibilities, not just problems. Think constructive, not de(con)structive. Our aim is not to squash it for being imperfect, but to help the writer tap into the most exciting and promising complexities of the work.

- **Writing notebook:** Get in the habit of observing, daydreaming, and writing it down, if you aren't already. Waiting for inspiration at a computer desk doesn't always yield much—but if you start carrying around a notebook and writing down ideas, overheard conversation, random thoughts, images, sounds, remembered snippets, etc., you'll find those things are money in the writing bank. They'll serve you well. I won't read your notebook, but you'll show it to me once before spring break and once toward the end of the semester.

- **Readings and Talks:** Attend at least two of the Patrick Hayes Series readings this semester. All are at 5pm in Tucker Theater.

- Fiction writer Edwidge Danticat, Feb. 8
- Artist-in-Residence Eddy Harris, Feb. 28
- Poets (and WM alumni) Richard Lucyshyn and Jack Christian, March 30
- Poet Sharon Olds, April 6

III. GRADES

Your writing assignments will not be graded individually; instead you will receive detailed comments on each piece. The goal here isn't to be mysterious—it's to let you write and explore in relative freedom, and to write for the sake of writing, not reward. However, the College does expect a grade at the end of the semester. So here's the breakdown.

10 points	Filling a writing notebook
20 points (scalable*)	Engagement 1. Class participation: preparation + attendance (default: 10 points) 2. Workshop letters: thoroughness, timeliness (default: 10 points)
30 points (scalable*)	Writing assignments in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry: timeliness, completeness, quality (default: 10 points per genre)
40 points	Final portfolio: quality, evidence of significant revision
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100 points	

Because your writing will most likely improve (perhaps even dramatically) over the semester, for your final grade, I prefer to weigh your entire catalog of work with more emphasis on the revised final portfolio than the early stuff.

WHAT "QUALITY" MEANS HERE

1. IMAGINATION: I want you to be adventurous in your writing; write what you know, sure, but not the obvious. Be brave and strange. Be vulnerable and take risks. I also look for **depth** in your work—writing that goes beyond cliché, and strives to go below the surface.

2. CRAFT: Evidence that you're actively practicing the techniques we cover in class, and that you are pushing yourself beyond simplistic forms and habits. Your work comes in proofread and clean.

*"Scalable" means that you can opt to weight these elements depending on your learning and interaction strengths; the default for each element is 10, but you can choose to shift the weight from 5-15 points. For example, if you prefer listening to talking in class but you do want to demonstrate that you're fully present, you could weight your Engagement grade accordingly: instead of 10 points class participation and 10 points letters, you could choose 5 points participation and 15 points letters. Another example: Your poetry and nonfiction are strong but you've struggled with your fiction. You can distribute the 30 points of the writing assignments to be, for example, 5 points fiction, 15 points nonfiction, 10 points poetry—as long as they add up to 30. This isn't license to blow off a genre or a requirement, but to allow for flexibility in learning modes.

If at any point in the semester you are curious or anxious about what your grade is, just ask me. We'll sit down and talk about where you stand.

Note: If you have come to Intro to Creative Writing hoping to get an easy A, you may be in the wrong class. In this one, we will take writing seriously, including yours.

Also note: Your grade does not reflect on what I think of you as a person, and is not meant to predict your future as a writer. It just reflects this course, this semester.

IV. COURSE VALUES

Participation: BE RESPECTFUL.

Discussion is the heart of the class. The quality of it depends on the preparation and participation of each of us. Try to speak up at least twice every class period. Come prepared and well-read, and remember that **respect** is vital to creating an atmosphere conducive to artistic growth. We want everyone to feel invited to contribute their evaluations, ideas and questions—and, of course, share their writing. Differing viewpoints are welcome and encouraged; sarcasm and mockery are not, inside and outside the classroom, online and off. We live by the Vegas rule: What happens in this class stays in this class. Embrace difference, respect privacy, listen and read generously, and always assume the best about each other.

Attendance: BE HERE.

When everyone is present and on time, every time, the class is just better for all of us. Class starts at 3:30 sharp. I understand sickness and emergencies happen, so you

can miss twice for any reason. If absence becomes excessive, bring me university or medical documentation. Multiple absences and/or tardies affect the whole class, and thus may affect your final grade.

Timeliness: BE READY.

Printed assignments are due in class on their due date. You can have two extensions on assignments that are due solely to me, but please note that **late work cannot be accepted for workshop**—it's logistically complicated and puts too much time pressure on your classmates

Electronic Devices: BE PRESENT.

You can use laptops and tablets to access assigned readings. Otherwise, they're best closed. We need your full engagement here. Out of respect for your classmates and discussion, please keep phones turned off and tucked away. We only see each other a few hours a week—let's be fully present.

ACCESSIBILITY AND ACCOMMODATION

Your success in this class is important to me. If you have a documented disability for which you may require accommodations, please see the Office of Disability Services and/or let me know so we can make sure those needs are met. If there are other circumstances that may affect your performance in this class, please let me know as soon as possible so that we can work together

to develop strategies for adapting assignments to meet both your needs and the requirements of the course.

V. PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism comes from the Latin word for “kidnap.” It can range from lifting passages from a source without citing it to recycling an entire assignment written by another person. Plagiarism in the creative writing classroom is a CRIME AGAINST ART. (Yes, I just said that.) Because over the course of the semester I read a lot of your writing, it’s usually immediately obvious to me when someone has used words that are not their own. Nonetheless, we all expect you’ll demonstrate the utmost honesty and integrity in your work, and whenever you have borrowed from another writer or source for artistic purposes, give credit where it’s due.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND WORKSHOPS

As of January 18, 2017. Subject to change, with reasonable advance notice.

All fiction is in the Best American Short Stories. Essays and poems will be in the course reader.

DATE	TUESDAY	THURSDAY
<p>Week One January 19 Hello</p>	<p>(no class yet)</p>	<p>Introductions. Syllabus. Reading as a writer: Elizabeth Tallent, “No One’s a Mystery” (in class) In-class writing: Creating detail.</p>
<p>Week Two Jan. 24-26 Fiction</p>	<p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, “Apollo” • Louise Erdrich, “The Flower” • Michael Kardos, “The Extreme Importance of Relevant Detail” (PDF on BB) <p>Take note: of how characters are described, and what specific details make them come to life.</p>	<p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Karen Russell, “The Prospectors” • Smith Henderson, “Treasure State” <p>Take note: of how these pairs of characters interact with each other, and how both resistance and compliance move the story forward.</p> <p>In-class writing: A life story in a paragraph.</p>
<p>Week 3 Jan. 31- Feb. 2 Fiction</p>	<p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ben Marcus, “Cold Little Bird” <p>Take note: of how the dynamics of a family emerge in the story, especially through dialogue.</p> <p>Write: Assignment #1, Two Characters. Everyone brings three copies.</p> <p>Small Group Workshops: Five groups of three.</p>	<p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yuko Sakata, “On This Side” • Meron Hadero, “The Suitcase” <p>Take note: of the shape of <i>scenes</i> in each story (where they start, how they build, where they end.)</p>
<p>Week Four Feb. 7-9 Fiction</p>	<p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lauren Groff, “For the Love of God, For the God of Love” <p>Take note: of how the shifting point of view operates here.</p> <p>Write: Assignment #2, Scene.</p>	<p>NO CLASS. Professor at AWP Conference.</p> <p>EDWIDGE DANTICAT reads Wednesday, February 8, Tucker Theater, 5 pm.</p>

	Building on Assignment #1, plunge your two characters into a moment of trouble and develop it into a scene, paying close attention to motivation and drawing on little clues you've already built in.	
Week Five Feb. 14-16	Read: • Ted Chiang, "The Great Silence" Due: Three students will bring in 15 copies of their story for Wednesday's workshop.	Workshop: Short Story, Round One Due: Three more students will bring in 15 copies of their story for Monday's workshop.
Week Six Feb. 21-23	Workshop: Short Story, Round Two Due: Three more students will bring in 15 copies of their story for Wednesday's workshop.	Workshop: Short Story, Round Three Due: All remaining short stories are due to me.
Week Seven NONFICTION Feb. 28- March 2	NONFICTION BEGINS Read: • Vivian Gornick, excerpt from <i>The Situation and the Story</i> • Eddy Harris, "Vicksburg" • David Foster Wallace, "Consider the Lobster" In-class: <i>I Remember</i> . EDDY HARRIS reads February 28, Tucker Theater, 5 pm.	Read: • Alexander Chee, "Girl" • Peyton Marshall, "The Feast" and "From the Hills of Fauquier County" Take note: how to create a character out of oneself. Skype conversation with Peyton Marshall. Come with a question or two.
SPRING BREAK		
Week Eight March 14-16 Nonfiction	Read: <i>Citizen</i> , pages 1-66 In-class writing	Read: <i>Citizen</i> , pages 69-113 In-class writing
Week Nine March 21-23	Read: <i>Citizen</i> , pages 114-end Due: Three students will bring in creative nonfiction to workshop.	Workshop: Nonfiction, Round One Due: Three more students will bring in creative nonfiction to workshop.

<p>Week Ten March 28-30</p>	<p>Workshop: Nonfiction, Round Two</p> <p>Due: Remaining creative nonfiction pieces.</p>	<p>WELCOME TO POETRY Read: Poems by Lucille Clifton, Billy Collins, Layli Long Soldier, Solmaz Sharif In-class writing.</p>
<p>Week Eleven April 4-6</p>	<p>INTERIOR MUSIC Read: Handout about sound Poems by Elton Glaser, Jennifer Michael Hecht, Cathy Park Hong, Wallace Stevens, Terrance Hayes</p> <p>In class: "Rapping, Deconstructed," a short film about hip hop and prosody</p> <p>Write: Assignment #5, Twenty Little Poetry Projects. Five people will bring in 15 copies of their poems for workshop.</p>	<p>Workshop: Twenty Lines poems. (5 people)</p>
<p>Week Twelve April 11-13</p>	<p>THE LINE Poems by Frank O'Hara, Paul Monette, Eileen Myles, Ari Baniyas, Ocean Vuong, Max Ritvo</p> <p>Write: Assignment #6: Interior Music. Five people will bring in 15 copies of their poems for workshop.</p>	<p>Poetry Workshop: Interior Music poems. (5 people)</p>
<p>Week Thirteen April 18-20</p>	<p>ODES, TAKEDOWNS, ELEGIES Read: Poems by Evie Shockley, Jay Nebel, Brenda Shaughnessy, Danez Smith, Sherman Alexie</p> <p>In-class writing: Generating ode, elegy, and takedown material.</p>	<p>MORE FORMS Read: Poems by Evie Shockley, Douglas Kearney, Layli Long Soldier, Tyehimba Jess</p> <p>Write: Assignment #7, Odes, Takedowns, Elegies. Five people will bring in 15 copies of their poems for workshop.</p>
<p>Week Fourteen April 25-27</p>	<p>Poetry Workshop: Odes, Takedowns, Elegies. (5 people)</p>	<p>OTHER DIMENSIONS Write: Write a poem on anything except a piece of</p>

		<p>ordinary paper. Bring it to class to present, and we'll set up a pop-up exhibition to peruse them all.</p> <p>Course evaluations. Bring your laptop to class.</p>
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SUMMARY OF IMPORTANT DATES

January 31: Assignment #1 due (character)

February 7: Assignment #2 due (scene)

February 8: Edwidge Danticat reading

February 14/16/21/23: Assignment #3 due (short story)

February 28: Eddy Harris reading

March 21/23/28: Assignment #4 due (creative nonfiction)

March 30: Alumni poetry reading

April 4: Assignment #5 due (twenty-line poem)

April 11: Assignment #6 due (interior music poem)

April 6: Sharon Olds reading

April 20: Assignment #7 due (odes/takedowns/elegies)

April 27: Assignment #8 due (poem as object)

May 14: Final portfolio due

