

Fall 2015

ENGL 6191

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Remote Graduate Fiction Workshop

ENGL 6191

Katy Simpson Smith

Student Learning Objectives

By the end of the semester, students will be able to:

- produce creative work at a more advanced and self-aware level than when they began the course
- analyze a variety of published work, including short stories, essays, and poems, in order to better interpret and assess a wide range of craft and style choices
- critique their fellow students' work using a combination of constructive suggestions and insightful encouragement

Main Components of the Class

Writing Stories

Over the course of the semester you will write three brand-new, original short stories that will be workshopped by your peers. These stories should generally be between 10 and 30 pages; if you're working on something a bit different (a novel, flash fiction, etc.), let me know in advance and we can work something out. You'll send me your story as an email attachment by 10:00 am CST on the day you've been assigned, so that I can post it for the group by noon. (And please use standard formatting: double-spaced, 12-point, Times New Roman, in a Word document.)

Critiquing Stories

Equally important, you will offer constructive feedback on the stories of your peers, at the rate of two per week. Critiques are not criticisms; the best kind of critique uses specific language to illuminate not only how the story could improve, but also what the story is already doing particularly well. As writers, we can be as blind to our strengths as our weaknesses, and it is the talent of the group to lay it all bare before us. And always remember that we're discussing the story, not the author. You will:

- write a formal critique of each story (about one page, single-spaced) to post on the discussion forum
- attach a copy of the story with your line edits (this should be done as "track changes" in the original Word document; these needn't be extensive—some readers are more sentence-oriented than others)
- actively participate in an informal discussion of the story that will spin out of our critiques. How active is "actively"? If you post three times thoughtfully, you're doing well.

*For those of you new to workshopping, I'll post Barb Johnson's handy critique rubric on the website—she lays out a detailed approach to addressing strengths, weaknesses, and specific elements, and while you don't need to follow this precise structure, it can be a helpful guideline.

Reading Published Work

You can't really be a writer without being a reader, and I've found that the wider the net, the better. You'll be reading a couple of pieces each week (alternating among short stories, essays, and poems) and will respond to them in a readings forum. These responses do not need to be either lengthy or formalized. My goal is merely to get your impressions, and to make you think about why you respond the way you do. How do the pieces make you feel? Is there something you can point to—structure, word choice, imagery—that affected your reaction? Do they make you think differently about your own work? About life in general? You can respond to all of the pieces or just one of them, in a paragraph or a page, and as always, I encourage you to engage with each other.

Attending a Real Live Reading

Do you live in a town with an independent bookstore? Do you go to readings? You should! At least once this semester, you will attend a literary reading and write a one-page report about the experience. What did the author do well? How would you have improved it? How does hearing work read aloud affect your enjoyment of it? Did you ask a question during the Q&A? (Yes!) Did you introduce yourself to the author afterward? (Yes! Networking!) You can submit this report on the Book Club forum at any point during the semester until the last day of classes. I also encourage you to post on this forum about any great books you've read recently, since we're all eager for recommendations.

* If you live in rural Minnesota and there are no readings, let me know and we'll come up with an alternative.

** If you live in the Southeast or the Pacific Northwest, you might be able to catch your teacher reading in August! Bonus points: www.katysimpsonsmith.com/events

Finally, Revision

For some of us, this is the most pleasurable part of the writing process; for others, it's a total nightmare. Regardless, it's necessary. For your final project, you will revise one of the three stories from the semester and write a 1- to 2-page summary of how you chose to revise it and why. This revision will be due by noon on the last day of the exam period, December 11.

My Role

Along with you, I'll be posting formal critiques of the stories and checking in periodically on the discussions. (I'll send my line edits separately to the author.) I see myself as a facilitator and a part-time participant rather than an instructor or overlord. But I am always available if you have questions about your work; just give me a couple of days to respond, as I'll be traveling a fair amount this fall.

Timeline

Because the timeline for our workshops stretches past a week, our units will overlap; so as not to cause too much confusion, I'm including the basic deadlines below. (Note that all times are in Central Standard Time! Don't forget to adjust as necessary.)

- *Wednesday by 10:00 am*, the student being workshopped will email her or his story to me
- *Wednesday by noon*, I will post these stories on the online forum
- the following *Tuesday by noon*, all students will have posted their formal critiques and line edits of the stories (for the students being workshopped, don't forget that you have to critique your workshop partner!); you will not be able to see anyone else's critique until you have posted yours
- from *Tuesday at noon* until *Friday at noon*, all students **except the author** will engage in a free-wheeling discussion of the material at hand, piggybacking on each other's advice, brainstorming new ideas, etc.; this will take place in the same forum in which the critiques are posted
- after *Friday at noon*, the author will enter the discussion with a final comment (this can be appreciation, clarification, or further questioning, but cannot be defensiveness)
- responses to the published work we're reading that week can be posted on the Readings forum at any point in the ten days between *Wednesday* and the following *Friday*
- *Things get funky the week of Thanksgiving, when we'll move the schedule up two days; students getting workshopped that week will turn in their pieces *by 10:00 am Monday, Nov. 23*, critiques will be due *by noon on Sunday*, and the author can chime in *at noon on Wednesday*, the last day of class.

Evaluation, Penalties, and Other Jargon

Because the purpose of this class is to improve as writers and readers, you will be evaluated on your timeliness, thoroughness, and thoughtfulness as you engage both with the written word and with each other.

A story turned in late sets us all back; more than one late assignment will automatically drop your grade from an A to a B. If you find yourself getting behind or feeling overwhelmed, let me know so that we can work something out. If your forum etiquette is less than desirable, I'll send you an email; if it continues, this will also result in a drop in letter grade. In general, failure to complete any components of the class will adversely affect your grade. If you fail to submit a story or critique for the week, that will count as an absence, which must be made up. With more than two absences, you will not be able to pass the class.

And from the UNO team, who is just trying to keep us all safe:

Academic integrity is fundamental to the process of learning and evaluating academic performance. Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, the following: cheating, plagiarism, tampering with academic records and examinations, falsifying identity, and being an accessory to acts of academic dishonesty. Refer to

the Student Code of Conduct for further information. The Code is available online at <http://www.studentaffairs.uno.edu>.

It is University policy to provide, on a flexible and individualized basis, reasonable accommodations to students who have disabilities that may affect their ability to participate in course activities or to meet course requirements. Students with disabilities should contact the Office of Disability Services as well as their instructors to discuss their individual needs for accommodations. For more information, please go to <http://www.ods.uno.edu>.

To ensure academic integrity, all students enrolled in distance learning courses at the University of New Orleans may be required to participate in additional student identification procedures. At the discretion of the faculty member teaching the course, these measures may include on-campus proctored examinations, off-site or online proctored examinations, or other reasonable measures to ensure student identity. Authentication measures for this course are simply the student's unique Moodle username and password.

Schedule

- August 19:** Cole and Alyssa
Story: Edward P. Jones, "The Girl Who Raised Pigeons"
- August 26:** Tess and Farai
Essay: Charles D'Ambrosio, "Loitering"
- September 2:** Michael and Christian
Poems: Sharon Olds, "Outside the Operating Room of the Sex-Change Doctor"
 Mary Szybist, "Entrances and Exits"
 Natasha Trethewey, "Native Guard"
- September 9:** Victoria and Brandon
Stories: Mark Richard, "This Is Us, Excellent"
 Amy Hempel, "The Harvest"
- September 16:** Greg and Thelma
Essay: John Jeremiah Sullivan, "Getting Down to What Is Really Real"
- September 23:** Cole and Alyssa
Poems: Shayla Lawson, "Reasons Why She Is Working So Hard"
 Nikky Finney, "The Afterbirth, 1931"
 Terrance Hayes, "Woofers (When I Consider the African-American)"
- September 30:** Tess and Farai
Stories: Daniyal Mueenuddin, "Nawabdin Electrician"
 Tiphonie Yanique, "The Bridge Stories"
- October 7:** Michael and Christian
Essays: Roxane Gay, "The Solace of Preparing Fried Foods and Other Quaint Remembrances from 1960s Mississippi: Thoughts on *The Help*"
- Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda, "On Whiteness and the Racial Imaginary"
- October 14:** Victoria and Brandon
Poems: Jorie Graham, "Untitled"
 Mark Doty, "Description"
 Mark Wunderlich, "Coyote with Mange"
- October 21:** Greg and Thelma
Stories: Sherman Alexie, "Jesus Christ's Half-Brother Is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation"
 Jaquira Díaz, "Section 8"
- October 28:** Cole and Alyssa
Essays: Eula Biss, "Time and Distance Overcome"
 Kiese Laymon, "Hey Mama"
- November 4:** Tess and Farai
Poems: Carol Ann Duffy, "Epiphany"
 Jane Hirshfield, "This Was Once a Love Poem"
 Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon, "RR Lyrae: Matter"
- November 11:** Michael and Christian
Stories: Paul Yoon, "Among the Wreckage"
 Wells Tower, "Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned"
- November 18:** Victoria and Brandon
Essay: Leslie Jamison, "The Empathy Exams"
- November 23:** Greg and Thelma
Poems: Beth Ann Fennelly, "From L'Hotel Terminus Notebooks"
 Saeed Jones, "Prelude to Bruise"