

## English 215: Introduction to Creative Writing

Block 6: February 13–March 8, 2017, in the Van Etten-Lacey House  
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Office hours: Mondays 3-4pm in Van Etten-Lacey, & by appointment

### WELCOME

We all tell stories about our lives, whether at the dinner table or the bus stop, at job interviews or in bed, on Facebook or over the phone. But how do those stories become literature, engaging and satisfying to an audience of strangers? How do our lives inspire stories purely invented—and how do invented stories interact with and affect the stories we live day to day? How does the language of the page affect and reflect the language of our lives?

This class will set out to answer these questions, first by examining the work of published authors, and then by examining our own. We'll pay careful attention to the stylistic choices that do (and don't) compel us as readers—considering voice, character, setting, form, and point of view—with the goal of writing what we'd like to read, however different each of our ideal visions may be.

### MATERIALS

- All required readings are available on Moodle, in packets organized by week. Please print, and don't squeeze multiple pages on one sheet. Humans read best when they read off paper, in a comfortable type size. If printing will be a problem for you, let me know. You're expected to bring every day's readings to class.
- 100-sheet composition notebook—the non-spiral, 9.5x7.5 inch kind.
- *draft: the journal of process*, Issue 3 (available at the bookstore)

### course policies & philosophies

#### THIS IS YOUR CLASS.

Your experience in this course is your own responsibility. If there's something you'd like to change about the class or your performance; if you have questions about a discussion, an assignment, feedback you've received, or anything else; or if there's something you simply want me to know, please speak up (or send an email). This syllabus is meant to sketch the outlines of a learning experience that you modify and actualize yourself.

#### ON READING

We'll read deeply, widely, and hungrily, as every serious writer must. You are expected not only to have opinions about each reading, but also to be able to articulate why you feel the way you do. Read actively, writing notes and responses in the margins, underlining lines that strike you, and looking up unknown words.

#### LITERATURE AS DOING

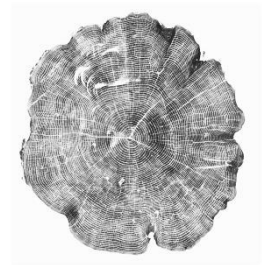
In this class, you'll be encouraged to consider what literature *does* more often than what it means, noting that every word, every punctuation mark, every conscious and unconscious choice the writer makes, exerts a little (or big) effect on the reader. You might practice “not getting it.”\* Bring action and reaction questions to class—for

“When you have only two pennies left in the world, buy a loaf of bread with one, and a lily with the other.”

“If you have two pennies, spend one on bread to give you life, and one on a flower to give meaning to your life.”

“The bread will sustain life. The flower will give you a reason to live.”

**This class is a class on the second penny:** on creating the meaning and the beauty that brings life to life.



\* “Not getting it might be described ... as a determined, tenacious ignorance that is in the

example, *What does the long, unpunctuated sentence do for readers?* (action), or *How did the author make me care about a person I don't know?* (reaction). You'll be required to share your questions at least once during the block, and you'll be invited to share them every day.

## R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Many of the works we'll discuss will be published, and some will be works-in-progress by your peers. You are expected to treat all writing, no matter whose, with the utmost respect, attention, and care. Because potentially sensitive information may come to light, I ask that each of you pledge not to discuss each other's work outside of our class.

## ON THE CANON: A SIDELONG SWIPE

(A syllabus is a kind of canon.) (A community is a canon. A canon is a community.) (You might think "creative writing" is anti-canonical, but it maintains its own changing canon.) (The spine of this class is a canon I've selected.) (A canon is at once arbitrary and overdetermined.) (Be skeptical!) (Your canon's as good as mine.)

## ON WRITING

Above all, write honestly. Don't pretend to believe things you don't believe. Don't shy away from complexity or contradiction. Dig deeper, go further, look more closely, and try again. Please, don't ever write anything that bores you—if you need help finding a point of interest, talk to me, a classmate, or a friend.

## YOUR NOTEBOOK

Taking inspiration from Lynda Barry's book *Syllabus*, your experience in this class will have its heart in a 100-sheet composition notebook. The notebook is for you—neither I nor any classmate will ever read it, though I'll flip through it to confirm your progress. It must be brand-new and empty on February 13 and completely full, including the front and backs of pages, on Tuesday of week 4 (March 7). This means 200 pages to fill over the course of only about 20 days—so you should aim to use 10 pages per day (!!). They don't have to be filled line-by-line with text. You can include scraps from the world around you, and drawings, or numbers, or lists, or anything else you see fit, as long as your notebook is mostly text, and as long as it serves its purpose as a place to facilitate and record your seeing, hearing, thinking, and imagining over the course of our class.

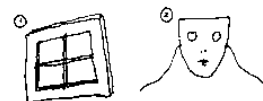
In addition to the required diary and seedling entries, your notebook is a place to try things out—think of it as a sketchbook for ideas that may or may not see canvas. You might try writing in panels (like a comic strip), or "writing" without writing—having "silent pages" where you do the work of writing without using actual words. You can copy out passages from (assigned or unassigned) readings you love. You can make collages that will inspire stories, essays, poems, or plays. You can eavesdrop and record everything you hear. You can interview friends and family and strangers. You can write down your dreams. You can use the notebook as your private analog Instagram. You can turn the notebook into your analog iPhone and look up all of your questions in its imaginary internet, using its free unlimited data plan. What will analog Siri say?

service of something better... a belief, for example, that in some situations **not getting it is more revealing** and **getting it is more obscuring**; that we can be fobbed off by satisfactions of getting it and oddly **enlivened** by the perplexity of not getting it." —Adam Phillips, *On Missing Out*

"Only in words is anyone ever omniscient." —Adam Phillips, *On Missing Out*

Barry calls her notebook "**both a navigation and expedition device**," and she reminds us that **our hands are "the original digital device."**

TWO KINDS OF ART



We undertake this experiment with the faith that, as Barry writes, "**the PHYSICAL ACT of writing or drawing is what brings INSPIRATION about.**"

## SEEDLINGS

are creative seeds/beginnings/experiments inspired by readings for this class. Prompts will be posted to Moodle daily. Do try to follow these prompts (for the sake of pushing yourself to try new things), but please also depart from them (for the sake of following your gut). You should spend 30 min-1 hour on each seedling. We will usually turn to them in the next day's class, and two or more of your seedlings will be revised and collected. I won't require you to turn in the others, but you'll share them with your classmates, and I am happy to talk with you about them any time.

## A READING JOURNAL

is a highly recommended additional use of your notebook. Practice asking how the text's actions (word choice, structure, imagery, subject, style, etc.) affect your reactions. The more detailed and specific your answer, the more adept you'll become at reading from a writer's perspective.

## IN-CLASS EXERCISES & FREEWRITES

can go in your notebook, too! These are a chance to stretch your creative muscles and take risks. Don't think too hard; don't worry about punctuation or spelling or the end result; try not to stop writing; see what comes out.

## YOUR WORKSHOP PIECE

is a more substantial, fully developed story, essay, poem, or poem series, on any subject, in a mode of your choice. This could be the outgrowth of one of your seedlings, a freewrite, or anything else you began work on this block. Bring in something you care about, something you're excited about, and something that you don't feel is totally finished—something for which you will genuinely welcome our feedback. This will be read by the entire class, and should be 4-10pp long.

## REFLECTIVE LETTERS & PROCESS NOTES

Once a week, you'll turn in a letter reflecting on your progress in the course so far. (I'll provide weekly prompts on Moodle.) With your workshop submission, you'll also turn in a process note reflecting on the project's past, present, and future—your goals, your questions and concerns, and the satisfactions and frustrations of your process (as opposed to product). With the revised draft, you'll turn in a reflective letter that comments on your revision's relationship to the work we read as a class.

## RESPONSES TO PEER WORK

You'll write a letter of about 500 words for each of your peers' workshop submissions. The purpose of this letter—and please do write it as a letter, beginning “Dear Darling Classmate” or *somesuch*—is to help you organize your thoughts and ideas for the project's revision, and to record your private reading experience for the writer's benefit before the group conversation begins. As in the workshop conversation itself, strive for generosity: be thorough and empathetic in your exploration of what the piece is attempting, and where its sparks of fire lie.

## REVISIONS

You'll revise at least two of your seedlings, and substantially revise your workshop submission. “Substantially” means doing much more than changing some punctuation marks or words here and there. You won't be expected to take into account all of the



**“There is a reason to  
move your ~~brush~~ [pen]  
for no reason.”**

—Lynda Barry, *What It Is*

“Strong reading doesn't ever ask: Am I getting this right? Strong reading *knows* that what it does to the poem is right.” —Harold Bloom, *Agon*

“The strong reader's belief in his reading is such that he does not need to persuade or convert anyone else. But by negating the contributions of others, the strong reader misses out on being told what his strong reading might be, in the best and the worst sense, an attempt to get out of.” —Adam Phillips, *On Missing Out*

Much of the writing you'll do in this course will be for your eyes only—private writing, along the lines of Stephen King's dicta (as related in his book *On Writing*, via his mentor John Gould) to **“Write with the door closed; revise with the door open.”** You are your first and foremost reader; you must learn to fully and honestly please yourself.

feedback you receive—that’s impossible—but you should select the feedback that resonates with you, and revise accordingly, reconsidering structure, meaning, voice, scene, and so on. You might think of this revision (re-“vision”: seeing it all over again!) as an entirely new project on the same subject or theme.

## ON WORKSHOP

The purpose of workshop is not to say, “I know what works and doesn’t work in your project,” or even “I know how to fix it”—it’s impossible for anyone to make those statements in good faith. The purpose of workshop is simply to be a reader to someone else’s work, and to say, “This is what the experience of reading your work was like, for me.” As we’ll see throughout the block, our responses to work both published and unpublished will be as varied as our life experiences, which is as it should be. Workshop (and any reading discussion) is an attempt to understand other perspectives, at the same time that it’s an opportunity to become a better, closer, sharper reader—and to gain a deeper understanding of your own reading tastes and vicissitudes.

## TASTE

is a messy result of life experience, including your reading experience, watching and listening experience, family, friends, enemies, community, and social class. We can learn to recognize our own taste—and we *should* learn to recognize it, so that we might try and see beyond it—but, no matter what, we can’t entirely leave it behind. As a result, it’s worth paying careful and concerned attention to taste in any workshop-like setting. Because I’m your teacher, my readings will sometimes sound like they have more weight than others in the room, and because I have more workshop experience than most of you, and I’m the one leaving crass marks on your transcripts [see below], they sort of do. But I’ve seen far too many workshops become an indoctrination into an instructor’s taste—a course-long exhortation to love what the instructor loves and to hate what he does, too—and I am going to do my best to avoid that. Please help by questioning my and each other’s responses, and by generously and authoritatively sharing your own tastes and responses with the class.

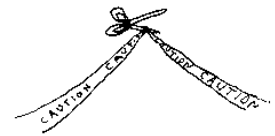
## ON GRADING

If I didn’t have to grade you, I wouldn’t. I want students to work hard because they care about the work, not because they crave the praise of an A or fear the disapproval of a D. I want above all to help you get satisfaction from your work on your own terms. But the college deems grades necessary, at this stage in your lives, because they are shorthand—crass, ugly shorthand—for me to communicate to the future my completely subjective evaluation of your performance at this tiny moment in the present. Unfortunate as it is, I take that responsibility seriously, and have high expectations. I am always, always happy to give you a verbal or written evaluation that is more nuanced than an A or a D, but here’s how that most primitive evaluation will break down:

- Participation (includes in-class exercises and seedling workshops): 25%
- Reflection on out-of-class event, reading questions, group *draft* presentation: 9%
- Notebooks (did you fill yours up? did you speak and write articulately about your progress throughout the block?): 15%
- Reflective letters and seedling revisions: 13%

But, King continues, “Once you know what the story is and get it right—as right as you can, anyway—**it belongs to anyone who wants to read it.**”

Our role as a class community will be to help each other achieve our separate goals, with the understanding that the process of reading-and-response is also a means of helping ourselves.



## PUT SIMPLY:

There aren’t rules.

You can do anything.

(I realize this over and over.)

You can be the Jackson Pollock of words on the page.

The only thing that matters is what happens when someone encounters those words—which we can never exactly predict. But...we’ll try.

This class will make you a better future-predictor.

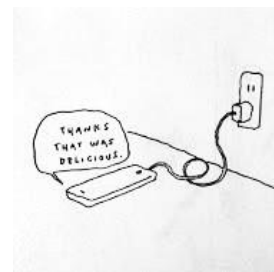


- Response letters to peer work (*March 1-3*): 15%
- Workshop submission with process note: 10%
- Final revisions, including process materials and process and context reflections: 13%

*Satisfactory work (C)* engages with the creative process, is completed on time, gives basic attention to revision, shows improvement, and/or contributes positively to the classroom environment. *Good work (B)* exceeds requirements by demonstrating evidence of effective revision; showing preparation, organization, and improvement; and/or contributing actively and constructively in the classroom. *Excellent work (A)* shows initiative and sophistication that consistently exceeds expectations, reflecting a deep commitment to the creative process; a capacity for analysis, reflection, and bold revision; and/or an active, thoughtful leadership role in the class. Earning a grade of *Unsatisfactory (D)* or lower means that you have not met minimum class standards in some way.

## ON PRESENCE

You are expected to attend every class meeting. More than merely attending, though, you are expected to be *present* in every sense of the word—mentally and physically—no matter who is speaking or what the class activity is. You should arrive focused, prepared, and on time. Cell phones, laptops, and all other electronic devices must be turned off and stowed away during class, old-school airplane-style (with exceptions for emergencies, to accommodate learning styles, etc.). This will facilitate the hush we need to read and write and observe and listen and think well.



## ON PARTICIPATION

I keep a daily record of participation and will share this feedback with you at midterm and on request. Effective participation is *not* simply about having a lot to say; it's about maintaining a strong level of engagement with your fellow classmates and the subject at hand, thinking consciously about when to share the floor, how to listen dynamically, and when to speak up in a way that will take the conversation further and create openings for others to join in. Participate generously, keeping in mind that your thoughtful contributions, and your facilitation of others' contributions, constitute a crucial part of everyone's learning experience. YOU are an essential element of the course; your ideas are our required reading.

## ON ABSENCE

Any unexcused absence will cause your participation grade to drop; falling asleep or otherwise being "absent" during class—even if you are physically present—will also be recorded as absence. EXCUSED ABSENCES (for illness, emergency, religious obligation, etc.) will not affect your grade, but—because so much of your learning in this course happens during irreproducible in-class conversation—more than three excused absences will occasion a conversation about withdrawal. Please be in touch about excused absences before they occur. You are responsible for finding out about work missed during absences of any kind.

LATE WORK is acceptable only by arrangement at least 24 hours in advance, and it may not always be logistically possible to make up a workshop, even if an absence is excused. I'll try to accommodate you—it helps if you're in touch as soon as possible.



## LEARNING ACCOMMODATIONS

Cornell College is committed to providing equal educational opportunities to all students. If you have a documented learning disability and will need accommodation in this course, you must request the accommodation(s) from me as early as possible and no later than the end of day four. Additional information about the policies and procedures for accommodation of learning disabilities is available at <http://www.cornellcollege.edu/academic-support-and-advising/disabilities/index.shtml>. Whether or not you have a documented disability, you are encouraged to be in touch as soon as possible about your particular learning needs.

## ACADEMIC HONESTY

You're expected to take inspiration from published work and from your classmates, but any borrowing (of language, concept, or form) must be clearly and explicitly acknowledged. If you're unsure whether or how to acknowledge source material, always *ask*. Failure to appropriately acknowledge sources—i.e., plagiarism—will be reported to the College.

*This course supports the Educational Outcomes of Cornell College with particular emphases on inquiry, communication, intercultural literacy, and citizenship.*

## CONSCIENTIOUS REFUSALS

The readings assigned in this course cover a wide range of genres, topics, and themes. Some are R-rated. Some may contain triggers for survivors of trauma. Because reading involves a process of discovery, I won't provide warnings. However, if you have concerns about a particular topic or trigger, I welcome your getting in touch.

Seedling: M. Sullivan  
All other drawings: Liana Finck  
Tree prints: Bryan Nash Gill

## SCHEDULE OF READINGS & ASSIGNMENTS

See Moodle for daily "seedling" prompts. All readings due on listed dates. Schedule is approximate; changes announced in class.

You'll also find a number of out-of-class events listed here. Plan to attend at least one, and write a one-paragraph reflection that considers the experience through the lens of our class conversations.

### week 1: a STORY is a story

M Feb 13—Literature as Action & Reaction

**9a.m.** Introductions. Cisneros, "My Name"; Khalawayh, "Names of the Lion"; Kincaid, "Girl"; Williams, "Why I Write"; six-word memoirs

*Over lunch:* Carefully read this syllabus and bring questions to class. Also read Barry, "from *Syllabus*."

**1p.m.** Introductions, continued. Generative writing. Mystery tastes.

T Feb 14—Character

**9:30a.m.** ♥♥ *Declare Your Love!* ♥♥

*Due:* An example of writing that you love. One page max. 19 copies, labeled with your name.

*Due on Moodle:* Who says love is impossible to explain? Tell us precisely why you love the example of writing that you love. Point to at least three specific details or elements of the text ("actions"), and explain their effect on you ("reactions"). Invent vocabulary if you need. 400-600 words.

**1p.m.** Chekhov, "Kashtanka"; Cunningham, "White Angel"; O'Connor, "Good Country People"

*recommended (for fun & discussion):* Lyster, "Are You a Round or a Pointy?"

*in class:* Elements of fiction.

**7p.m.** *in Iowa City:* Junot Diaz reading, 100 Phillips Hall (University of Iowa).

W Feb 15—Voice & Dialogue

*10:30a.m. in Iowa City: Q&A with Junot Diaz at Dey House*

*11a.m. on the O.C.: reading of poetry by Black American poets*

**12:30p.m.** Bambara, “Gorilla, My Love”; Diaz, “Nilda”; Plett, “Other Women”

*recommended: Bezmozgis, “Natasha”; O’Brien, “The Things They Carried.”*

*Due in your notebooks, today & every day from now on: Seedling. See Moodle for prompts.*

*7:30p.m. in Cedar Rapids, at Parlor City Five Seasons Room: Drop the Mic! (doors at 7p.m.)*

*7:30p.m. at Palisades Café (Mount Vernon): Writer’s Night (Go to listen, or email Joe Jennison if you’d like to read!)*

Th Feb 16—Setting & the Invented World

**12:30p.m.** Bloom, “Love Is Not a Pie”; Machado, “The Husband Stitch” & “Help Me Follow My Sister into the Land of the Dead”

*\*\* draft presentation: fiction group*

*7:30p.m. in Black Box Theater, Armstrong Hall: “They Call Me Q” (performance by Qurrat Ann Kadwani)*

F Feb 17—Structure

**12p.m.** Barthelme, “The School”; Olen Butler, “Six Pieces of Severance”; Phillips, selections from *And Yet They Were Happy*; Saunders, “The Perfect Gerbil”; Soffer, “Beginning, End”

*recommended: Glaser, “Pee On Water”; Baker, “from The Mezzanine”*

*in class: Skype Q&A with Carmen Machado. Coste Lewis, “Catalog I,” from Voyage of the Sable Venus.*

*Due in print by 5p.m. at the VEL: first reflection + at least one revised seedling / exercise with photocopy of original*

**week 2: a TRUE STORY is also a story**

M Feb 20—Found text, found story

**10a.m.** Kloc, “Weekly Review”; Ruefle, “Melody” (*online*); Shields, “Life Story”; Weinberger, “The Dream of India”

*recommended: Kloc, “Tower of Babble”; Shields, “Reality Hunger”*

**1:00p.m.** *Due in print, in lieu of today’s seedling (5 copies): Found text assignment*

*4:30p.m. at the VEL House: Poetry for the Presidency release party! Join us for readings and refreshments.*

T Feb 21—Perspective

**12:30p.m.** Moore, “People Like That Are the Only People Here”; Van Meter, “If You Knew Then What I Know Now”; Mailer, “Dear Myself Circa 1998”

*Due by 4p.m.: midterm self-evaluation (Moodle)*

W Feb 22—Retrospect

**12:30p.m.** Als, “Buddy Ebsen”; Didion, “Goodbye to All That”; Laymon, “How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America”

*in class: Brainard, “I Remember”*

Th Feb 23—Research & Experiment: the Loose Sally

**12:30p.m.** Biss, “The Pain Scale” & “Time and Distance Overcome”; Sahagún, “Definitions of Earthly Things”

*recommended: Jamison, “The Empathy Exams”; Monson, “Outline Toward a Theory of the Mine Versus the Mind”; Biss, “The Pain Scale” (Seneca Review version)*

*\*\* draft presentation: nonfiction group*

*\*\* one-on-one meetings with Helen by end of today. Bring questions about the course, the readings, or your own work.*

F Feb 24—Provocation & the Open Letter

**10a.m.** Dunham, from *Not That Kind of Girl*; Davis, “Letter to a Funeral Parlor”; Brucker, “Untitled Letters”; selections from *McSweeney’s* “Open Letters to People and Entities Unlikely to Respond”  
*Due: second reflection + at least one revised seedling with photocopy of original + 5 copies of (revised) seedling.*

### **week 3: i don’t know if a POEM is a story**

M Feb 27—Form

**12:30p.m.** “Traditional Forms & Other Forms” packet (Bishop, Ashbery, Plath, Auden, Smart, Keats, Dickinson, Moore, Stevens, Ashbery, Notley, Christensen, Hong, Rankine)

**4:30p.m.** in *Hall-Perrine: Distinguished Visiting Writer Kate Harding presents work from NASTY WOMEN (an anthology of essays forthcoming later this year). Followed by reception.*

T Feb 28—Play

**9a.m.** *Workshop submissions due from 8 prose people—19 copies.*

“Some [More] Contemporary Poems” packet (Diaz, Fitzpatrick, Hejinian, Hughes, Ives, Ruefle, Parker, Sharif, Smith, Tahajian, Vuong)

**\*\* draft presentation: poetry group**

*No afternoon class: read peer work & write response letters!*

W Mar 1—Workshop

**9:30a.m.** *Workshop submissions due from everyone else—19 copies.*

Bring two copies of each of your response letters for first workshops.

**1p.m.** Bring two copies of each of your response letters.

**7:30p.m.** at *Palisades Café (Mount Vernon): Writer’s Night (Go to listen, or email Joe Jennison if you’d like to read!)*

Th Mar 2—Workshop

**12:30p.m.** Bring two copies of each of your response letters.

F Mar 3—Workshop

**12p.m.** Bring two copies of each of your response letters.

**3:30p.m.** at the *VEL House: Coffeehouse reading for creative writers: Bring friends & your work-in-progress!*

### **week 4: the WRITER’S STORY**

M March 6—Revision, re-vision, radical revision!

**10a.m.** *Due: third reflection / vision document. Bring: work-in-progress.*

Cunningham, “Found in Translation”; Elbow, from “The Process of Writing—Growing”; TBA.

*Afternoon: conferences & independent re-visioning work*

T March 7—Reflection, readings, celebration

**12:30p.m.** *Due: at least 350 completely new words of your work-in-progress.*

*Also due: your completely filled-up notebook! (I won’t be reading these, just turning pages.)*

*in class: More revision and reflection; readings and celebration.*

W March 8—Finishing work

**by 12p.m. (noon)** *Due in print at the VEL House: Final revisions, including process & context reflections.*