

English 215
Introduction to Creative Writing
Block 2: Sept. 28 – Oct. 21, 2015
South Hall 302

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A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them –

William Stafford

Overview:

We will be taking William Stafford's words as a foundation for this class, that writing is as much about exploration and discovery as it is self-expression. How is it that we come to discover what it is that we have to say? As Robert Frost said, "No surprise for the writer; no surprise for the reader." How do we surprise ourselves?

Our goal will be to explore process, to experiment, to see language in ways that will surprise us and challenge us. We will focus on experimenting and opening up possibilities more than "finishing" pieces; exploration rather than expression; process rather than product. You will end up with a range of types of writing: character sketches, bits of dialogue, poem fragments, descriptions, etc. I would like you to develop as much "stuff" as possible rather than focusing on individual pieces—*write without expectation!* Our goal then will be to generate material that may take you months or years to even see where it came from or where it's going. *Writing takes times!* Certainly finished work may come out of this class, but you should not necessarily expect it. Some of you may well have work that you're already engaged in; this is fine, but for the purposes of this course I will ask you to be a blank slate, to start from scratch and see what emerges.

You will find that the experimentation we do in this class will only benefit any work you may be doing outside of this class. We will explore ways to foster creativity which is always of value. I will give you many exercises, and we will read about exercises that other people suggest—try any that sound interesting, whether or not I specifically assign it. The most important thing you can do this block is to *write a lot!* You should be willing to try a variety of approaches to your writing. We will do a great deal of in-class writing; I would like you to keep these exercises together as a way of generating material and cross-fertilizing ideas. Please bring your notebook to every session.

Good writing also inherently involves active reading. We will read a wide range of writers, and our conversations will focus on "craft" issues rather than interpretive issues (although the two can not be so easily separated). In other words, we will try to discover how writing achieves certain effects. I would like you to keep responses to the reading in the same book as another way of cross-fertilizing ideas. As you read, consider how a writer may have developed the work at hand—what seems most unique (as well as what seems less

effective—sometimes we can learn as much from writers we don't like as those we admire). If you take nothing else from this course, I hope that you will see the way that reading impacts your own writing and pushes you in new, exciting directions.

Objectives:

This course supports the Educational Priorities and Outcomes of Cornell College with emphases on knowledge, inquiry, communication, and intercultural literacy

My hope is that students will

- better understand different approaches and methods to cultivate creativity in their lives (knowledge).
- explore various forms of written, creative expression and develop methods for communicating various experiences (inquiry and communication).
- develop skills to critically read the creative work of other authors (inquiry and intercultural literacy).
- be able to critically read their peers' work and orally communicate their aesthetic responses (communication and intercultural literacy).
- understand different cultural aesthetics and values and incorporate their own aesthetic beliefs into their own written work (intercultural literacy).

Required Books:

The Making of a Story, Alice LaPlante. WW Norton.

From the Fishhouse: An Anthology of Poems that Sing, Rhyme, Resound, Syncopate, Alliterate, and Just Sound Great, Camille T. Dungy, Matt O'Donnell, Jeffery Thomson, eds. Persea Books.

You should also have a journal that you bring to class every day for in-class writing and discussion. I will not collect these journals, so it need not be the only use for this journal, but please make sure it has enough room to do a great deal of in-class writing. Please bring to every class!

Grading:

Students often suggest that creative writing is too subjective to be graded. While I don't completely agree with this notion, there is certainly some validity to the observation. More importantly, if our goal is to break through to fresh, unexpected material, worrying about a grade can prove counterproductive. Grading, then, will primarily focus on other classroom issues besides the quality of your creative work. You should feel free to experiment and push yourself in new directions in your writing without worrying too much about the graded aspect of your work. That said, I expect you to write a lot and I expect you to try many

different approaches in your work. You should write more than what I specifically assign—the assignments and readings are starting points, but it's up to you to use these as a springboard and keep going. Your willingness to try new work and to willingly revise is more important than how I evaluate the individual pieces. You will turn in a final portfolio that should show me the range of what you've been attempting over the course of the block.

I will grade this class holistically. In other words, I will give you a final grade based on the block's work as a whole rather than individual grades.

I will give you feedback on assignments over the block, and I will give periodic feedback to work in general. At any point, though, that you would like to talk about your grade or any other issues of concern, please come see me; I am happy to talk through any aspect of the course with you at any time.

Assignments:

- **Participation:** You are expected to come prepared to make comments, contribute writing exercises, discuss the reading etc. You should have at least one observation or question in your notebook about the daily reading, ready for each class. This is a large class, however; you are not necessarily expected to contribute every session but to make a substantive contribution over the course of the block. Please remember that a thoughtful question is often just as important as a comment—contribute to the conversation in whatever way feels appropriate to you. I will give feedback on participation mid-way through the block so you know where you stand and what you might work on.
- **Daily Writing:** Every weekday you will be turning in 1-2 pages of work electronically (not as hard copy). I will evaluate these on the way the work engages with a particular exercise and/or the stylistic issues we are discussing and your willingness to push yourself and experiment. More than anything, I will be looking to see variety and range in your writing over the course of the block. I will not comment specifically on every piece; instead, at the end of each week you will submit 1-2 pages of work done that week on which you would like feedback. Since my goal is to get you experimenting widely, *do not* necessarily wait for a specific exercise; try any exercises in the reading that seem interesting; pose exercises to your peers; imitate anyone's work you enjoy. If I do not specify a specific exercise for a given day, you may submit whatever you would like (as long as it is from this block) *Write often* and in many different ways.
- **Craft Paper:** Each of you will choose a poem from a selected list of poems in *From the Fishhouse* and will analyze the work from a technical perspective (as opposed to a literary-critical perspective). In other words, I will want you to read as writers: how does a writer do what he or she does? The paper should discuss what particular stylistic elements you see as unique to a given writer. This paper will discuss many of the issues that we discuss throughout the block: tone, diction, imagery, rhythm, character, plot, pacing etc. A useful way to think about this assignment is to ask what you would imitate if you were going to imitate the

poem you are discussing. These papers will be roughly 4 pages. You will also share this material with your peers in short presentations.

- **Workshop Discussion:** During the second and third weeks, we will be workshopping peers' writing. You will each be responsible for beginning the conversations about peers' work. You will open up with a few comments about what you think is most important about the work and you will then pose two or three questions that you think are important to think about for that person's writing. I will lead the discussion at that point, so you will not be responsible for directing traffic of the ensuing discussion; your goal is to get us going.
- **BreakBeat Poets:** On Oct. 16, three poets from the anthology *BreakBeat Poets* will be performing on campus. I expect you to attend this event unless you tell me ahead of time that you will not be able to attend (in which case, I will give you a different assignment). You will write a review of this performance, thinking specifically about what you learn as a writer: how did these writers/performers achieve the affects they do? What can you learn from them as writers?
- **Final Portfolio:** On the last Tuesday of class, you will turn in a portfolio of 7-8 pages that represent the range of work you've done over the block. It is true that this is not necessarily a large sampling; I want you to fully evaluate the work you've done to choose what seems most interesting and representative. I will be expecting you to challenge your work and experiment over the block; beyond the 7-8 pages, I would like to see at least 3 versions of 1 piece with a brief commentary explaining what you think works or not in different versions. You will also write a brief commentary of what you see as your strengths and weaknesses that will be included in the portfolio. I will grade this commentary as heavily as the work itself—rather than me judging the quality of the work alone, I will look at how you are thinking about your own work.
- **Process Paper:** Over the course of this block, you will be primarily exposed to my process as a writer. Much of this will not be inherently useful to you as a writer (we all need to find our own process). But the effort of trying on a particular process is useful in terms of finding our own way. At the same time, I want you to be exposed to what other writers have to say about their process. Over the course of the block, then, you will be engaged in some research to find out what other writers say about how they write. The goal will be for you to have a broader sense of the different ways that writers work, and for you to consider what might be most productive for you. This paper will ask you to reflect on your own experiences as a writer this block, using the ideas of at least four other writers. You will try to synthesize their ideas and mine and your own experiences into some statement about how you think about the process of writing.

Accommodations:

Cornell College is committed to providing equal educational opportunities to all students. If you have a documented learning disability and will need any accommodation in this course, you **must** request the accommodation(s) from [the instructor of the course] as early as

possible and no later than the third day of the term. Additional information about the policies and procedures for accommodation of learning disabilities is available on the Cornell web site at http://www.cornellcollege.edu/academic_affairs/disabilities/.

Academic Honesty:

Cornell College expects all members of the Cornell community to act with academic integrity. An important aspect of academic integrity is respecting the work of others. A student is expected to explicitly acknowledge ideas, claims, observations, or data of others, unless generally known. When a piece of work is submitted for credit, a student is asserting that the submission is her or his work unless there is a citation of a specific source. If there is no appropriate acknowledgement of sources, whether intended or not, this may constitute a violation of the College's requirement for honesty in academic work and may be treated as a case of academic dishonesty. The procedures regarding how the College deals with cases of academic dishonesty appear in The Catalogue, under the heading "Academic Honesty."

General:

I am happy to speak with you about any academic challenges you may have. Please feel free to stop in during my office hours or make an appointment. Please don't wait for any problem to become insurmountable; the earlier we can talk about any challenges you have the better I will be able to help you. If in doubt about anything, come talk with me.

Schedule:

We will meet daily from 12:30 – 3:00, and on Tue. Wed. and Thur. from 9:00 – 11:00. A blank class period does not mean we will not have class; many class sessions are open or do not have specific readings. There will also be daily readings from *From the Fishhouse*, but these will be determined based on our discussions, so I will determine these weekly. Each week I will post a more detailed/updated schedule of meetings, readings, and assignments on moodle, but here is a general schedule:

Week 1:

Mon. Sept. 28:

AM: Introductions and course overview

PM:

Tue. Sept. 29:

AM:

PM: LaPlante, Ch. 1

Wed. Sept. 30:

AM:

PM: LaPlante, Ch. 2 through p. 72

Thur. Oct. 1:

AM:

PM: LaPlante, Ch. 3

Fri. Oct 2:

PM:

Week 2:

Mon. Oct. 5

PM: LaPlante Chap. 12 through p. 533

Tue. Oct. 6

AM:

PM: LaPlante Chap. 10

Wed. Oct 7

AM:

PM: LaPlante, Chap. 6

Thur. Oct 8

AM:

PM: LaPlante, Chap. 7

Fri. Oct. 9

PM:

Week 3:

Mon. Oct. 12

PM:

DUE: Craft Papers by 5 PM

Tue. Oct. 13

AM: Small Group Workshops

PM: LaPlante, Chap. 8

Wed. Oct. 14

AM: Small Group Workshops

PM: LaPlante, Chap. 12

Thur. Oct. 15

AM: Small Group Workshops

PM:

Fri. Oct. 16

PM:

Due: Process Papers by 5 PM

WEEK 4

Mon. Oct 19

PM:

Tue. Oct 20

AM: Workshop

PM: Workshop

Wed Oct 21

Due: Portfolio by 12 PM, NO LATE WORK ACCEPTED