ARHU309: Writers' House Colloquium: Creative Writing in Community

Section 0201

Spring 2016        Wednesdays, 7-8:30 PM
Leigh McDonald (leighcmcdonald@gmail.com; 301-405-3716)        1132 Queen Anne’s Hall

Office Hours
Thursdays, 2-3 PM, or by appointment, in Queen Anne’s Hall 0108. My hope and expectation is that we will meet one on one in addition to the mandatory midterm conferences.

Students with Disabilities
Students with an impairment or disability should let me know at the start of the semester so that we can ensure that your needs are accommodated. If you have a disability but have not yet registered it with Disability Support Services, please contact the DSS main office in the Shoemaker Building (301-314-7682).

Course Description
Betterment of craft; growth as a writer and reader. We will strive toward this goal using workshop, writing exercises, and studying published work.

I believe that teaching methods must be fluid and responsive to student needs. If you feel your learning is not being accommodated, please see me so that we can revise our model.

Course Goals
Students’ creative writing will improve through the study and practice of:
1. Formal elements, i.e. mastery/control of the unit of the line.
2. Avoidance of cliche or overused language.
3. Authorial Sensibility: each student's work emanates from a specific, unique individual with an identifiable sensibility.

Expectations
As you signed up for a poetry course, I expect you have a strong interest in literature and the craft of creative writing. I also assume that you want to improve your writing. I expect you to take advantage of the resources that Writers’ House provides. If you are interested in creative writing, being an active member in the community is invaluable.

Access to Canvas
We will be using Canvas (www.elms.umd.edu) for this class. Please be sure that you have reliable access to this site. We will be using weekly modules for this class--relevant readings and discussions will be posted there. Please post your poems to the discussion area at midnight the Friday before they are to be workshopped.

Inclement Weather
We'll follow university closings. I've found President Loh’s Twitter to be the most immediate way to access university delay/closing information (https://twitter.com/presidentloh; @presidentloh). If we miss class and I don't tell you otherwise, we'll just push our schedule back a week.

**Materials**
You'll probably want some kind of notebook or folder. Remember to hold on to your drafts and feedback from other students. I may want to see your copies in the final portfolio. Find a system that works best for you and remember to stay organized.

**Recommended Reading**
*Elegy for a Broken Machine* by Patrick Phillips  
*Night Sky With Exit Wounds* by Ocean Vuong

**Required Reading**
I will be providing excerpts (~10-15 pages) from each of these works at least a week before we’ll discuss them. These excerpts, among other essays and materials I distribute, will be your required reading. It is up to you if you’d like to purchase/borrow the books.

**Grading**
30% Participation:

20% In class participation: This class meets only once a week, so do not miss class unless necessary. Participation is key to workshop, discussion, and activities. If you are not in class, you cannot participate. If you are sick or have an outstanding circumstance, email me.

*No laptops or cellphones in class.* There are some exceptions to this, like if we need to research something. I expect you to use your best judgement.

Literature component/reading discussions: I will be regularly assigning material that we will talk about in class. Your participation in these discussions is vital. You are expected to read all material in the module unless I tell you otherwise. I expect you to read the distributed poems at least a couple times before discussion. In addition to the work of the visiting authors, I may distribute other material before or during class for discussion.

5% Conferences: This time is for you. You can bring in anything-- a poem we’ve just workshopped, a poem you’d like to workshop, something I’ve never seen before, etc. Feel free to email me the material in advance.

10% Writers Here & Now and Litfest: You are expected to attend these events. **I will be checking for your attendance on the reception sign-in sheets.** If you are unable to attend one of these events, please see me for an alternative. You will need to write up a one paragraph response to the outside event you attend. You may attend any literary event at the Folger Shakespeare Library or Library of Congress. If there is something else you’d like to propose, see me.
Writers Here & Now: https://www.english.umd.edu/academics/clcs/lectures/whn


40% Written work:

25% Submissions: You are expected to submit one poem per scheduled workshop date. Please submit Friday at midnight the week before you are to be workshopped.

15% Feedback: Please print and respond to student writing before class. Mark up your copy of the student work. You may also write comments on a separate page. I expect to see comments on the poem (see the AP Style editing marks PDF on ELMS under course files) and a paragraph or two below the poem to explain your comments further. These comments will be given to the poet up for workshop after their session. I may collect feedback and grade based on completion.

25% Final manuscript:
At least three poems that have been substantially revised.

The Workshop Model
The following model is a response to Rosalie Morales Kearns’ “Voice of Authority: Theorizing Creative Writing Pedagogy.” You can read this essay under “Course Files” on ELMS. We will view each draft up for workshop as a work-in-progress (Kearns 790).

Schedule: I will finalize the workshop schedule by or after our first meeting. Each student will be up for workshop 2-4 times. Everyone works at a different pace. That being said, it is important to push yourself. Workshop is meant to increase your production by way of deadlines.

Descriptive comments: We will begin a workshop session by describing what is happening in the piece. Even the most “basic” observations or questions can prove useful to the author. Pay careful attention to mechanics and technique. Be specific. Ex: Describe/identify the main event(s) of the poem, the speaker, the form, etc.

Some things to consider…
Form Stanza Syntax Diction Punctuation Rhyme
Enjambment Linebreaks Grammar Closure Surface/ Secret subject
Narrative Clarity Voice Length Specificity Concision

Unfamiliar with some or all of these terms? Ask or visit:
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/glossary-terms

Prescriptive comments: After descriptive comments, we will move to prescriptive comments. This is often a natural progression. What could work better in the poem? How? Be specific. Remember, we are looking to create a healthy, positive workshop atmosphere. Evaluative
criticism that relies on the words “good” or “bad” is not helpful. It’s okay to say you love something but try to express why. Remember that we are working on revision; we are making suggestions for the author’s next draft.

The Gag-Rule: Students will be given a chance to respond at the end of their workshop session, time permitted. I’ve found that this time is best used for the poet to ask for clarification or about something in their poem that was not addressed—not as a moment to defend. Ex: What did you think of my title? What did you mean when you said…?

Check in with yourself: Try to check in with yourself before you respond to work both at home and in class. Because of the workshop setting, the teacher and students may be in “fault-finding mode” when reading work (Kearns 795). The questions below will help you interrogate this reflex.

- Have you read the piece enough times? Sometimes issues of clarity are the fault of the reader (Kearns 798).
- Are you supporting a literary norm? Consider that the break might be intentional. If it’s not working, try to provide a successful example of that break in a published work (Kearns 793).
- Are you partial to your aesthetic preference? Yes! But, you can and will broaden your taste by reading against it. It also helps to just acknowledge what kind(s) of poetry you prefer and why. You do not have to love a poem to appreciate or admire it. (Kearns 798).