

WV Wesleyan Low-Residency MFA Program

Summer 2017 Residency Seminars

All students, regardless of genre track, are required to complete the assigned reading, viewing, and writing before the residency. Purchase (or check out of the library long-term) all assigned books (there are a total of two assigned books—a poetry collection and a play—and four additional books that are recommended but optional); watch the assigned YouTube clip and film of Twelfth Night; download and print all attached documents (there are a total of eight PDF attachments), or store the PDFs in an organized fashion electronically, for easy access. At the residency, you are required to have at the ready all materials relevant to the day's seminars.

BOY BREAKING GLASS: POLITICAL AND PROTEST POETRY, Mary Carroll-Hackett.

Boy breaking glass/Whose broken window is a cry of art —Gwendolyn Brooks

Ideological, protest, or political poetry in its broad context includes a large range of thematic concerns and approaches, from straightforward political subjects to poems wherein the “I” itself is a political statement. This seminar will examine several approaches to protest and political poetry, including the civil, the prophetic, the skeptical, and the poetics of empathy. Work to be discussed will include Walt Whitman, W.B. Yeats, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Lorna Dee Cervantes, June Jordan, Sam Hamill's anthology *Poets Against the War*, contemporary Hebrew and Palestinian poets, Yusef Komunyakaa, Brian Turner, and selected poems from two very recent protest anthologies: *Poetry & Resistance: Voices for Social Justice* and *Resist Much Obey Little: Inaugural Poems to the Resistance*. We'll also examine competing stances on the efficacy of political poetry, from Auden's "Poetry makes nothing happen," to contemporary arguments from Kwame Dawes on what political poetry is (or should be).

ASSIGNED READING:

- *Poetry of Resistance: Voices for Social Justice*, Francisco X. Alarcón, Odilia Galván Rodríguez. University of Arizona Press, 2016. (ISBN-13: 978-0816502790)
- Download I Carroll-Hackett PDF which includes:
 - Poems:** Ten Poems
 - Articles:** Adrienne Rich “Notes Toward a Politics of Location”
Adrienne Rich “Someone Is Writing a Poem”
Alice Walker Excerpt from *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*
Dissent Magazine: The Protest Poets
PBS Newshour: Allison Hedge Coke: America, I Sing You Back
PBS Newshour: Layli Long Soldier: Native Poet Speaks the Language of Standing Rock
Don Share: Harriet: Poetry Makes Nothing Happen...Or Does It?
Kwame Dawes: Harriet: Political Poetry

WHAT YOU CAN'T KNOW: THE NECESSITY OF SPECULATION IN CREATIVE NONFICTION, Jason Howard. It's inevitable. Creative nonfiction writers—and especially memoirists—will encounter a roadblock of limited knowledge at some point in their writing process. *I don't know why my grandmother did that*, the memoirist will worry. *How can I know with certainty how Susan B. Anthony felt?* the personal essayist may ask in frustration. Both might even tell themselves they can't move forward. They would be wrong. In this seminar, we will discuss the value of embracing what can't be known when writing creative nonfiction. Using examples from the work of Jo Ann Beard and Hilton Als, and the assigned essay by Sonja Livingston, as well as exercises, we will examine how the use of speculation and imagination can add deeper layers of meaning and complexity on the page.

ASSIGNED READING: Download I Howard PDF: “The Lady with the Alligator Purse” Livingston

IN PRAISE OF INEFFICIENCY: EMBRACING LIMINALITY IN THE WRITING PROCESS, Jessie van Eerden.

Back to the rough ground! Look and see! —Wittgenstein

Most of us know what it feels like to have a story, essay, or poem that is serviceable, high-functioning even, possibly publishable—it doesn't elicit many edits from a peer or mentor—but something is missing. Too often we stop our writing process once our work is competent and our plans are executed, and we fail to brave the opportunities for new

discovery. Susan Sontag writes: “The function of writing is to explode one’s subject—transform it into something else. (Writing is a series of transformations.)” But how does one explode her subject? The first step may be to find value in liminality: a place of waiting, not knowing, transitioning. In anthropology, liminality (from the Latin word *limen*, meaning “a threshold”) is the in-between stage of ritual, when a person has let go of the old status and norm but has not yet entered the new. Taking our writing into the liminal space, the space of threshold, can help us let go of the competently executed work to allow it to become something more vital. In this seminar, we’ll study craft essays that discuss modes of eschewing neatness in favor of exploding a work, modes such as inefficient unraveling, defamiliarizing, embracing inconsistency, going subterranean into strangeness and surprise. We’ll also study creative models that enact these movements and offer us practical strategies and prompts for taking our work to the next level.

ASSIGNED READING: Download I van Eerden PDF which includes:

Craft Essays: Kevin McIlvoy “The Overplus”; Carl Dennis “Midcourse Corrections”; Richard Hugo “Writing off the Subject”; Charles Baxter “On Defamiliarization”

Creative Models: Claudia Emerson (poetry) “Photograph: Farm Auction”; Alistair MacLeod (fiction) “In the Fall”; Tobias Wolff (fiction) “Bullet in the Brain”; Touré (nonfiction) “What’s Inside You, Brother?”

WRITING THE BODY, Jonathan Corcoran. Behind every moment of joy, sorrow, or ecstasy is a physical body in excitement, in pain, or in rapture. In this seminar, we will discuss how to write the body with maximal effect. We will discuss how to write original descriptions for the parts of ourselves that we think we know so well and how an increased awareness of and focus on the physical body in our writing can bolster scene, theme, and character development. The corporeal body houses all of our senses, and there is a practical logic to what happens to us when we see the world, feel sensation, taste, hear, and smell. By carefully conveying this logic through our writing, we can allow readers to experience our texts in new ways, to move beyond a purely intellectual engagement with our stories and in fact *feel* the words themselves. **No assigned reading.**

DEVELOPING A STORY DRAFT, Yuri Herrera. In this workshop we will reflect and do exercises that point towards developing a personal way of speaking about our experiences, the ones we already have had and the ones we deem possible. Because that is one of the main virtues of literature: its non-conformism, its attempt to speak in new ways about what we see, as well as about how we conceive the world can be, or should be. **Participants of this workshop should come to the session with a summary of a story they are writing or they are planning to write.** Different exercises will help the participants to examine the nuances of their story and find new perspectives on how to develop it.

The exercises will focus on three topics:

- Techniques to come up with a plot or original idea for a story.
 - Finding out the different possibilities of the topic that the story is already putting forward.
 - Developing new ways of exploring settings or anecdotes apparently “not interesting.”
- How to adapt personal anecdotes to a literary form.
 - Taking a step back from a personal anecdote in order to make its emotional core communicable to readers.
 - Finding ways to develop a different approach to a story from that in which it was originally conceived.
- How to improve a first draft of a fiction text.
 - How to identify what is indispensable in your story.
 - Exercises to trim non-useful information from a draft. **No assigned reading.**

THE APPALACHIAN POETRY OF JAMES WRIGHT, Doug Van Gundy. That James Wright is one of the great American poets of the 20th century is undisputed. And while his unblinking critique of (and love for) America allow him to belong to the entire nation and the world, he is often geographically pigeonholed as a “Midwestern” poet. In this seminar, we will explore Wright’s childhood in Martin’s Ferry, Ohio (across the river from Wheeling, WV), his deep family ties to the Appalachian region, and his almost painful empathy for the impoverished and working-class people Eastern Ohio and West Virginia, and how these elements influenced his poetry over the course of his writing life. **No assigned reading.**

BLASTING THROUGH WRITER’S BLOCK, Rahul Mehta. For a long time I didn’t believe in writer’s block. I thought writers who complained about it were making excuses for their own laziness or lack of discipline. And then, in the middle of working on my second book, it hit me. Hard. Getting through it was a struggle. What I eventually came to

understand is that I wasn't lacking inspiration; I was lacking faith: in my words, and in myself. In this seminar, we'll examine writer's block and its sources, and we'll discuss practical strategies for blasting through it. I'll be drawing from ideas culled from creativity gurus Julia Cameron, Anne Lamott, Natalie Goldberg, and Lynda Barry as well as some of my own time-tested techniques. **No assigned reading.**

RAISING VOICE: FROM WHISPER TO HOWL, Kim Dana Kupperman. This seminar will explore that nebulous aspect of prose and verse called "voice." We'll look at various modes and descriptions of voice and examine voice in the context of persona and sensibility. We will also look at some practical ways of developing voice—and modulating it—in writing. **No assigned reading.**

WHAT'S SHAKESPEARE GOT TO DO WITH IT? Devon McNamara. Explore what the early modern English of Shakespeare's turn of the century* romance, *Twelfth Night*, or *What You Will*, tells writers about contemporary prosody, rendering atmospheres, turning jolly/not so jolly madness into loving good sense, boys into girls, girls into boys, loss into revelation, illusions into realities. *16th into 17th

ASSIGNED READING: The play: *Twelfth Night*, or *What You Will*, by William Shakespeare – any edition in Shakespeare's early modern (sometimes known as Elizabethan or Jacobean) language.

ASSIGNED VIEWING (via Netflix or YouTube): The film, *Twelfth Night*, or *What You Will*, by William Shakespeare, directed by Trevor Nunn, with Ben Kingsley, Helena Bonham-Carter, Nigel Hawthorne, Imelda Staunton, Imogen Stubbs, and other stars, adapted and cut for the big screen and filmed in Cornwall, period style mid-19th century, music by Irishman Shaun Davey, original lyrics by William Shakespeare. **GOOGLE:** Alicia Kaiser's "The Influence of Stage Directions: Feste, the Omniscient Fool in Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night*" for a helpful overall description of Nunn's slight but significant changes re: point of view for contemporary audiences.

NUNS FRET NOT: CONSIDERING THE SONNET, Mark DeFoe. With perhaps the exception of the limerick and the haiku, no poetic form is more widely known than the sonnet. It has far outgrown its Italian origins. Everybody wrote them—many still do. In light of its rich history, we will look at contemporary takes on this classic form.

ASSIGNED READING: Download I DeFoe PDF

SCENE BASICS FOR FICTION AND NONFICTION, Richard Schmitt. What is a scene? Why do we need scenes? How do we make them? These questions are the fundamental focus of the class. We will apply some traditional terms and definitions to the assigned reading and to a few excerpts I'll bring to class. Please review the basic terms on the first page of the download, and bring a copy to class.

ASSIGNED READING: Download I Schmitt PDF which includes: Basic scene terms; "Everything Falls," Jill Ketterer; "Sunday in the Park," Bel Kaufman; "Nobody Listens When I Talk," Annette Sanford; "We're at a Party," Alexis Apfelbaum; opening scene of *The Godfather* screenplay.

ASSIGNED VIEWING: Kindly spend seven minutes watching the opening scene of *The Godfather* on YouTube. There are a number of links. Here is one: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B34sntlgl4g>

RECOMMENDED READING: (Recommended reading is for those seeking a more in-depth study of dramatic structure and will not be used extensively in class.)

- *The Scene Book: A Primer for the Fiction Writer*, Sandra Scofield, Penguin Books, 2007 (ISBN-13: 978-0143038269).
- *Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays*, David Ball, SIU Press, 1983 (ISBN-13: 978-0809311101).

TIME AND CONSCIOUSNESS, Eric Waggoner. As a representative aesthetic medium, language has a capacity to manipulate time and "replicate" perception and consciousness in ways far more malleable and plastic than most other art forms. This seminar examines the expressive and syntactical processes by which language can stretch/compress/freeze/skip time, and convincingly replicate an ordering perceptive consciousness, in the service of creating a believable experience for a reader. Focused examples from fiction, poetry, and nonfiction will be considered. **No assigned reading.**

WHAT IS LIGHT WITHOUT DARK?: USING THEMATIC CONTRAST TO BUILD NARRATIVE TENSION AND CHARACTER, Mesha Maren.

Light versus dark and good versus evil are themes that have been around for as long as humans have been telling stories and they are integral to many different types of narratives from myths to lullabies to modern literature. In this seminar we will explore how we as writers can deepen and strengthen our own work by leaning into the darkness and using the light/dark/good/evil dichotomy to build tension and develop characters. We will examine the use of archetypes, methods for developing tension through “dark” and “light” landscapes, the idea of character as witness, and ways to constructively delve into characters’ (and our own) inner darkness.

The readings for this seminar are, necessarily, heavy and often violent in nature. Please be gentle with yourself while preparing for this seminar. It may be best not to read the selected pieces back to back as they can be quite overwhelming. As you read take note of your emotions and thoughts, the places where you are tempted to look away and the places where you feel the emotion physically. I will not require that anyone share the ways in which these readings have affected them but I will leave time during the seminar for folks who wish to discuss this.

ASSIGNED READING: Download I Maren PDF which includes:

Blood Meridian pages 241-250

Luis Alberto Urrea *The Devil’s Highway* pages 3-6

Breece Pancake “First Day of Winter”

Bonnie Jo Campbell “The Trespasser”

Phil Klay “Bodies” pages 53-71

Eudora Welty “Where Is the Voice Coming From?”

Toni Morrison *Beloved* pages 148-153 and 159-165

Amy Hempel “In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried”

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING:

1. In *Blood Meridian* the judge has a theory about the order of the universe. What according to him is the unifying element above all else? In what ways does McCarthy use this mythic theme to reflect on the more specific theme of American expansion into Mexico?
2. Landscape is such an important element in Urrea’s *The Devil’s Highway* that one might argue that the landscape itself becomes a character. What specific adjectives are used to describe the land and how is this contrasted with the landscape of the characters’ past?
3. Similarly, in Pancake’s “First Day of Winter” the landscape plays an important role. What are the adjectives used to describe the land in this story? What colors are present in the story? If you were to illustrate this story with paintings what would your palette look like? How does this affect the tension of the piece?
4. In Bonnie Jo Campbell’s “The Trespasser” the lives of two very different girls are compared and contrasted through their relationships to one space. In what ways do each of these girls manage to witness each other’s lives through this space and the objects in it?
5. In Phil Klay’s “Bodies” the narrator begins by explaining that when people ask him about Iraq he tells a false story about something that he never really witnessed. Later, at the end of “Bodies,” the narrator reveals a real moment that he actually truly witnessed. In what ways do these two events differ from one another? In what ways are they similar? What type of structure is built in this trajectory from the first false event to the final real event? What do these two events tell us about the narrator?
6. Eudora Welty is quoted as saying “I don’t write out of anger [but] there was one story that anger certainly lit the fuse of.” She wrote “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” in June, 1963, the very night after she heard about the murder of civil-rights activist Medgar Evers. She later said “What I was writing about really was that world of hate I felt I had grown up with and I felt I could speak as someone who knew it.” Welty wrote her story from the perspective of a man who is uncannily similar to the real-life murderer of Medgar Evers. She tells the story through this murder’s voice and she does not explicitly condemn the action, she simply lets it play out. What do you think about Welty’s choice to write from this point of view? What responsibilities does a fiction writer have when taking on a perspective such as this? Is it possible to write about a “world of hate” without furthering this hate?
7. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is a story with a shocking and horrific scene at its center, the scene that is for played out in the two chapters selected here. This moment literally haunts the characters in this book and the novel returns to it over and over again through different perspectives. This moment is both a secret, something intensely personal and hidden in Sethe’s past, and public knowledge. What are the differences and similarities between the ways that this moment is portrayed in the first chapter and in the second? How much is too much when asking your readers to look at a painful scene such as this? Is there a line that should not be crossed?

8. Amy Hempel uses humor and repetition throughout her story “In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried.” What are the effects of this humor and the repeated stories? What does this tell us about the narrator? In what ways does this repeated humor serve as a structure for the story itself?

THE GOOD STRANGENESS OF LYRIC ESSAY, Rachael Peckham. This seminar will examine the special “moves” of select lyric essays that grapple with highly fraught content, often involving some form of traumatic experience and/or personal observation. What is it about such *strange* (as in unknowable/unfamiliar) content that calls for equally *strange* (as in foreign/unconventional) approaches in the essay? Specifically, what is it about the lyrical devices of metaphor, fragmentation, indeterminacy, and pattern, to name a few, that allow these writers to essay their subjects in a way they couldn’t with narrative and/or reflection alone? What makes this combination “good”? We’ll test our answers against the works in question (by Steven Church, Ander Monson, Lia Purpura, and Lidia Yuknavitch), before trying out some of their approaches, ourselves, in a guided writing prompt.

ASSIGNED READING: Download I Peckham PDF which includes: “Thirty Minutes to the End,” Steven Church; “Index for X and the Origin of Fires,” Ander Monson; “Autopsy Report,” Lia Purpura; “Explicit Violence,” Lidia Yuknavitch. *Additional readings/examples will be provided at the session.*

AGENT ACQUISITION AND BOOK PROPOSALS (AND OTHER MYSTERIES: REVEALED!), Katie Fallon. *Soon enough, your MFA thesis will be finished, accepted, and in hand—you’ll be so proud! You’ll have written so many words! Then what?* This seminar will discuss several aspects of the business side of writing and publishing, and we will attempt to answer questions about the process. How do you begin—and how do you go from thesis to book? How long does a book need to be? Do you need an agent—why or why not? What does an agent do, and how do you find one? What can you expect from an agent? How does an agent get paid? What is a book proposal, and when do you need to write it? We will discuss strategies for making this process as painless as possible, and we will examine at least one nonfiction book proposal (and perhaps more) that succeeded in selling the book to a publisher. **No assigned reading.**

WRITING POETRY IN ALTERNATIVE POINTS-OF-VIEW, Rodney Jones. This seminar will discuss the predominant use of the autobiographical “I” by contemporary poets, investigate the difficulties of overriding first-person, and argue for the advantages of using other points of view, including those usually associated with fiction. It will feature a close focus on pronouns in several pertinent texts, including selections from Anne Carson’s *The Beauty of the Husband* and Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Gwendolyn Brooks’s “the mother,” Karen Solie’s “Tractor,” and John Berryman’s “Dream Song #14.”

ASSIGNED READING: Download I Jones PDF

RECOMMENDED READING:

Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and Anne Carson’s *The Beauty of the Husband*