

MFA Seminars – Summer Residency
July 2 – 11, 2021

Living Tensions: The City and Urban Environments — Richard Boada

In this workshop, we'll read, write, talk, and think about a diverse cross-section of 20th and 21st century poetic texts to focus on the topic of The City and Urban Environments. In our course, we will read and write poems about cities where we have lived, places where we could never be from, cityscapes, landscapes, the movement of traffic or city rivers, or the crumbling foundations and infrastructure in order to understand who we are as poets and citizens. We will consider ways contemporary poetry takes place in what Jennifer De Vere Brody calls "an expanded field of writing" where language is embodied material that takes shape both on- and off- of the physical page. Throughout the course, we will continually attempt to re-define (or de-refine) what it means to read and to write within the context of how we understand our cities and urban spaces.

The Vast In-Between: On Writing the Middle of a Novel — Rajia Hassib (Guest Writer)

The middle of a novel often seems like a dark abyss, but it's an abyss that can be bridged. This seminar will offer tips and exercise focusing on using a novel's beginning as well as its potential ending to generate its middle. Through looking at published examples as well as participating in multiple writing exercises, writers will explore several elements to include in the first few pages and how each of these elements can help create a compelling middle that maintains a steady pace as well as a seamless flow. Note: If you are working on a novel, please have a copy of the first few pages with you to use in the exercises.

On Flow — Jeremy Jones

You've probably received this well-intentioned but mostly unhelpful feedback at some point in your writing life: "This just doesn't flow." But what does this really mean? It's not much to work with in revision and, by the way, what even is *flow*? Is it some mystical quality we can only know in our bones? Something that occurs once you've fiddled long enough with the words to make them sing? A gift given to the honey-tongued writers only?

In this seminar, we'll pick apart and examine what constitutes flow. We'll get geeky, and a little grammatical, to explore what's happening on the sentence-level of smooth-moving prose: Lexical cohesion! Rhythm patterns! Metadiscourse! We'll examine published essays and excerpts, and then, you'll put the ideas to work in various writing exercises. **Bring one of your prose drafts with you!**

Required Advance Reading

- "The Short Sentence as Gospel Truth," Roy Peter Clark
- "Living Like Weasels," Annie Dillard
- "Near a Church," James Agee
- "Moving Water, Tucson," Peggy Shumaker
- "The Smooth Skull of Winter," Gretel Ehrlich

Eavan Boland: *Great Dublin Poet & Powerful Feminist Voice* — Devon McNamara (Poetry)

This description of Eavan Boland is the title of Adam Piette’s brief, brilliant account of Eavan Boland’s life and work in the journal *The Conversation* -- link below. “Eavan Boland is the real thing,” wrote James Merrill, who called her work “ravishing” and marveled at her “skill and imagination.” Exploring her poems in *The Lost Land*, listed below, the title poem of *The Journey*, and “Anna Liffey” from *New Collected Poems*, 2008, we will marvel and learn from ways this beloved poet, whose mark on the world is now indelible, summons the power of the invisible to make her vital sense of place and history, and even the voice itself, visible.

McNamara PDF “Unheroic,” “A Habitable Grief,”
“The Mother Tongue,” “Mother Ireland,” “Heroic”

<https://theconversation.com/eavan-boland-the-great-dublin-poet-and-powerful-feminist-voice>
<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/on-eavan-boland-s-first-anniversary>

The Thinking-Work in Essays — Randon Billings Noble

Writing a creative or literary essay (terms I use to differentiate this kind of essay from an academic one) requires both thought and craft. Many of the craft elements are similar to those found in fiction and poetry (rich imagery, sensory details, startling metaphors) – but what about the thinking part? In this seminar we’ll look at some examples of thinking-work in essays and do a series of generative exercises to provoke the same kind of thought in a nascent essay of your own.

Required Advanced Readings:

“An Abundance of Public Toilets” by Ross Gay
“Rivering” by Dinty Moore
“Hateful Things and other Things” by Sei Shonagon

Making a Scene — Richard Schmitt

You’re five-years old in a crowded cereal aisle, you’ve just thrown down a box of tutti-frutti-loops and stomped on them, howling loud enough to be heard out in the parking lot. All heads turn. Your mother, mortified, growls: “You’re making a scene!” And that’s the point isn’t it? You want attention, all the attention, from everyone, so much attention that no one can look away. Mom is forced to bend to your will. When, in a piece of writing, we want all the reader’s attention, rigidly focused, we make a scene. In this class we will develop skills for making scenes more effectively. We will explore when to use a scene as opposed to exposition, paying specific attention to the balance between the two, and how they work together to form a strong narrative the reader cannot look away from. Please spend three minutes watching the opening credits of *North by Northwest*: written by Ernest Lehman, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1959). In class we will examine the opening scene of that film. There is no need to watch the entire film although it is a classic.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBxjwurp_04&list=PLxzE4_wATIG6b013rxOqdZKFo78-NQo0W&index=10

Required Advance Reading:
“Sunday in the Park” by Bel Kaufman
“Everything Falls” by Jill Ketterer
Opening Scene of North by Northwest
A Scene from “Daughter of the Moon”, by Janet Peery
Scene Terms Sheet

Recommended Reading:

The Scene Book: A Primer for the Fiction Writer, Sandra Scofield, Penguin Books, 2007
Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays, David Ball, SIU Press, 1983.

Cross Training — Robert Stevens

This Low-Residency program emphasizes multi-genre work because fiction writers, for example, can improve their own prose by examining, for example, a poet’s sense of economy or verb choices. In this craft seminar, we’ll consider additional genres (such as film and music) for tips, tricks, and approaches that will benefit both prose writers and poets. Expect a dazzling multimedia extravaganza tailor-made for the residency’s online format.

Required Advanced Readings:

- a) My seminar contains plot spoilers for 1917 (2019) and Fences (2016), although there's no need to watch the movies before the seminar.
- b) Please watch the first 9 minutes of 1917, which you can find free on YouTube and here: <https://www.facebook.com/UniversalPicturesAllAccess/videos/561161808078882/>
- c) One of the techniques we'll be discussing is the tracking shot. We won't go into a lot of technical details, but feel free to do some light googling if you're unfamiliar with the term.
- d) Please read this brief description of a poetic form: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/pantoum>
- e) Please read the pantoums and prose excerpts on Google Drive. It's 5 pages in total.

Writing in the Gaps — Jessie van Eerden (Guest Writer)

Gaps are generative; they invite invention. Often, what interests us about a parable or myth, a news story or a painting, is what goes unsaid or what remains mere suggestion. This seminar will explore possibilities for engaging biblical and other mythic narratives, as well as iconic historical and artistic events, as fresh material. We will explore the idea of *midrash*, a term in rabbinic literature for the interpretive study of the Bible; with the root meaning “to seek out” or “to inquire,” *midrash* is what Rabbi Lawrence Kushner calls the “fiction concealed beneath the apparent text of the biblical narrative: what might have happened before and after, above and below the biblical story.” Instead of domesticating the sacred text, or packaging it for moralizing message, *midrash* makes the text strange in order to access its truths on another level. Combining principles of *midrash* with insights from a craft essay on “darashing” by Marjorie Sandor, we will examine fiction, poetry, and nonfiction that enters mythic, historic, and artistic moments at the fissure of the what-if, of the maybe-it-was-like-this, of the unheard voice, of the hinted-at life. Ultimately, in the process of writing in the gap that exists between the familiar narrative and

the unspoken one, we discover that the gap we're really exploring is the one between our familiar selves and our selves estranged and understood anew.

Required Advanced Reading:

“The Ram in the Thicket: Midrash and the Contemporary Creative Writer,”
craft essay by Marjorie Sandor

“Sarah’s Choice,” poem by Eleanor Wilner

Excerpts from Michael Ondaatje’s novel *Coming Through Slaughter*

Poems from Patricia Smith’s collection *Incendiary Art*

“Fuller,” personal essay by Albert Goldbarth

***Punching Above Your Weight: The Fight for the Title* — Doug Van Gundy**

The title is the first thing a reader encounters when reading our work, yet many of us approach the writing of titles as an afterthought or obligation to be fulfilled. This seminar will explore the different functions a title can serve in shaping, illuminating or even creatively obfuscating the work that follows it, examine what makes a good title “good”, and look at several strategies for discovering successful titles.

*No advance reading, but bring a favorite anthology
or collection of stories, essays or poems with you.*

Graduate Seminars:

Imaginings — Linda Ankras-Dove (poetry)

Authors in all literary genres offer their works in order to open doorways. If the writing is effective, going through these doorways stimulates and expands readers’ imagination. Imagery is a central craft device for poetry but also useful with other genres. The seminar’s overall purpose is to enrich participants’ understanding of various aspects of imagery that they can apply in their own work. After a brief overview of various categories of imagery, the main focus will be on the use of imagery by poets such as Eleanor Wilner and Eavan Boland, with participants invited to contribute to the discussion. If time allows, the focus will turn to work like some of Gary Snyder’s that is largely without imagery but still effective. **No advanced reading.**

What Is She Seeing? Fiction Meets Ekphrasis — Abigail Benjamin (fiction)

Ekphrasis is an ancient form of poetry based on a work of art. We will gain a common vocabulary of Ekphrasis theory by studying the classic examples of John Keats’ Ode on a Grecian Urn and William Carlos Williams Landscape with the Fall of Icarus. What happens when fiction embraces this poetry form? How can visual art objects help us communicate the deep, interior feelings of a character to a reader? In a generative workshop we will study examples from multiple genres. We’ll explore how a character’s response to high and low art, objects in nature, and ordinary household objects can spark a “whirling vortex of meaning”

writers can use as a craft element in poetry, creative nonfiction and fiction. **No advanced reading, handouts will be provided.**

Including the Voice of Others Through Quotes, Digressions, Collaborations, and Artistic Forms — Trish Hatfield

What makes including the voice of others, aside from acute relevance of content, is when they provide structural integrity to your narrative either in the line or in the overall placement on the page. We'll look at four forms: direct quotes, exact words vs paraphrasing; digressions, deviating from main subject; collaboration, working and writing with others on the same manuscript; and artistic forms (lyrics, photo images—marble models, people, landscape, etchings, drawings). All four can fortify your voice by going beyond what was expected, adding gravitas and/or felicity—if done with what author Jonathan Corcoran describes as a “willingness to engage with cool, steady analysis of self, situation, and context.” My purpose is to show how each form works to elevate creative nonfiction to new levels of revelation and comprehension in the work of Patrick Madden, Maggie Nelson, David Shields, Patti Smith, and Kate Zambreno, plus examples from my essays and thesis created in this MFA program. I will share the complications and rewards resulting from “the analysis of self, situation, and context.” There will be a blend of lecture / PowerPoints, handouts, small group work/reporting out, and question and answer.

For Writing Activity: Please bring a photo or strong memory of a photo you could include in an essay you've written or would like to write. **Required advanced reading: Hatfield PDF**

Exploration of the Self: Dysphoria and the Body — Taylor Risinger (poetry)

Each individual experiences the world around them through their body. The way we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell are unique experiences of our own. What provides a common ground is that we all use our bodies as the tool to do so. When we think about poetry and the body, we consider it to be a personal relationship. The poet often uses senses and body language to ground the reader in the poem and to provide a way to bring the reader in on a personal level. The body is the common element. During this seminar we will explore how to utilize the body as a tool to engage your readers while focusing on the lenses of sexuality, gender, and feminism. **No advanced reading.**

Write What You Don't Know: Altering Narrative Voice to Enhance Story — Kellie Tatem (fiction)

Voice in writing is an infinite and nebulous topic and arguably the most important element of the craft. A well-crafted narrative voice can keep the reader turning the page of a mediocre story and a mediocre narrative voice can cause the reader to lose interest in an otherwise good story. In this seminar students will learn to identify five elements of voice that can be isolated and changed to enhance their own voices and in doing so will learn how to write in narrative voices they may be unfamiliar with.

Students will need to bring three to four unrelated paragraphs (or poems – narrative prose if possible) of their own writing. Before the seminar students should study these paragraphs/poems

and note sentence/line length, word choice, and syntactical similarities along with any other repetitive elements they notice. **There is no advanced reading for this seminar.**