

## **WVWC MFA CORE & GUEST FACULTY TEACHING STATEMENTS**

### **MARK DEFOE**

When I look at poem as a teacher I seek to bring forward the best the poem offers us. I point out what I think could be better and I will praise what I think is strong. I do not wish to dictate, but to guide and suggest. I believe in poetry writing a knowledge of the basics, intelligence, hard-work, experimentation, compassion, creativity, humor and empathy are essential.

Over the years I have developed some beliefs about and observations on the nature of this mysterious and sometimes life-changing art called poetry. Here are a few I try to apply in the classroom:

1. Poetry is “good talk,” but it is more than rambling prose with a straight left margin and a ragged right margin. 2. Most good poets develop a concept of the line. 3. Poetry is the creative use of language—metaphor and image are its special essence. 4. The music of poetry—rhythm, meter and sonic effects—is essential in poetic expression. 5. While focus on the personal feelings is important, poems can confront history, politics, science, domestic life, even philosophy. 6. Poems can be written without the “I” pronoun. 7. Serious poets revise—and revise and revise. 8. Poems can be narrative; they can tell a story. 9. Obscure, erudite, esoteric, literary or pop culture references or allusions do not make a poem profound. 10. Often successful poems establish a “ground situation.” 11. The workshop is not the world. 12. Good poetry is memorable in the now; great poetry is forever unforgettable.

### **KATIE FALLON**

I write literary nonfiction to change the future. This genre allows me to use all the tools available to a literary artist while also affording me the opportunity to convince, argue, inform, and entertain. Most of my work explores the relationships among humans, animals, and the ecosystems we share. I strive to tackle important environmental and cultural issues while staying true to my art. My nonfiction draws on traditional research methods as well as memory, reflection, and experience (and I also try to make readers laugh). I interview. I read scientific papers. I travel and observe. For me, the process is rewarding. I am a committed reviser.

Teaching is one of my passions; both of my parents are educators, and they instilled in me the importance of education at all levels—through childhood, college, and beyond. I believe my duty as a teacher is not only to provide students with the tools they need to succeed in class, but also to inspire them to become active members of their professions and communities.

### **DIANE GILLIAM**

I am interested both in work that is like mine, and not like mine. I’d describe my own work thus far as very accessible, often depending on narrative, whether at the level of the poem or the level of the book. At the moment, I’m wanting to write poems about the feminine aspect of the divine. I don’t expect to leave story behind—I am a believer in the great transpersonal stories—but I want to get better at more ways to make my way down the page. I understand teaching to be a matter of entering into each poem as the best reader I can be, to arrive at an understanding of what it is and what I believe it wants to do and be, and then to ask the best questions of it that I know to ask. I am very ambitious for my own poems, and I feel the same for work that I companion in this way.

### **JEREMY JONES**

As both a writer and teacher of literary nonfiction, I believe in making a mess to find the heart of a one’s work, in following Montaigne’s lead and snatching any subject in sight, no matter how daunting or trivial, and trying to pin (pen?) it to the page. Naturally, I am drawn to freewheeling, ambitious early drafts. This means, of course, that the real work happens in the debriefing and note-taking and rewriting

after the first draft—in cleaning up the mess. My own writing tends to explore unexpected connections (connections I discover in those messy early drafts), but I am interested in a wide range of nonfiction. More than anything, I read for language. And as a teacher, I try to help other writers craft sharp, evocative, layered language that wraps up the reader and fashions an experience more than a singular message. I trust Richard Hugo’s claim that the music will lead to the truth, so I seek to empower writers to follow their language to the heart of the matter.

### **KAREN SALYER MCELMURRAY**

Let me offer the same introduction to how I read that I always offer in workshop itself. When I read a story or an essay or any prose work I look for what the writer Charles Baxter calls “the intentions” of the piece: ...to locate those passages/devices/choices that seem most effective in pursuit of the work's intent, or core. Often, Baxter says, the most useful response a writer can receive is an indication of what is successful, but only after a discussion of the work’s content and related form. I will be handing out the whole description of how it is that Baxter workshops stories, but for my purposes, that means trying to figure out what the HEARTWOOD of a piece is. By “heartwood” I mean not the emotional heart necessarily, but the deepest “core” of a piece, the hardest part of the wood, the story’s central intent, its purpose. Some of the questions that heartwood might ask: What are the layers of this story, that essay, this poem? How do we peel them back, like an onion-skin, like the petals of a flower, to find the bulb, the bud, the core? Does that core hurt? Does it sing? What is the caliber of that song? What words will be remembered most after we close our eyes and no longer see the lines the words make if we break them apart? Does the piece echo inside us, and how? Does it create a vacuum, or an absence? Does it taste sweet or bitter, salty or sour? Does it leave us thirsty or does it satisfy? Why? What does it tell, long after the pages are turned over, folded, left behind? Or, best question of all, as one student said to me, “Isn’t heartwood really the dead part of the wood?” I looked it up, she said. Okay. The dead part. As Adrienne Rich said, “how do we dead, awaken?” Psychologist James Hillman says, “we must leave the ego-centered daylight world of consciousness and enter the realms of imagination and soul, the underworld of the dream.” Heartwood.

### **RICHARD SCHMITT**

For a long time my Advanced Fiction syllabus has contained some of the following, which as well as anything else might hint at something called a teaching philosophy.

“Writing, like carpentry, mathematics, basket weaving, or any other skill, can be taught, learned, even mastered, by practicing a number of skills pertaining to the subject. My primary task is to expose you to those skills and offer a critical and helpful audience to evaluate your work.”

“I cannot grade talent or natural ability since these things are subjective and possibly nonexistent. I reward hard work, diligence, timeliness, perseverance, and honesty in the pursuit of truth.”

“You cannot be too humble. The art of fiction is trying to express basic human emotion as fundamental truth. A daunting task. If we approach it on our knees we increase the chance of being blessed.”

Writing for me is mining. I’m underground in the dark with a pickax, I mean a toothpick, and I believe there’s a vein of gold here somewhere, but it’s hidden in tons of useless uninspiring rock, and I have limited time before the air runs out to pick away, hoping to hit something useful. This is where the, (see above), perseverance comes in. The director says I’m a realist, but everything here seems to indicate I live in fantasyland.

## **JACINDA TOWNSEND**

My teaching philosophy is simple: I am less interested in teaching someone to write the way I write than I am in helping them write the way they will. I enjoy helping students hammer the dross into something shimmery, and in ushering inventive writing out of the powder room and into the great ballroom of literature. I believe that writers need to develop habits that will keep them writing after they've departed the security of workshop and the nurturing presence of a built-in writing community; to that end, I encourage my students to learn how to read as writers and to realize how absolutely critical is the skill of effective self-editing.

## **JESSIE VAN EERDEN**

In my writing and my teaching, I am interested in all prose forms that lie on the spectrum between fiction and nonfiction; I'm interested in braided elements, in seeking out the unlikely strand, and in personal prose that serves as a portal to the universal, beyond the self. I'm interested in spirituality, writing "that deals with the bedrock of human existence—why we are here, where we are going, and how we can comport ourselves with dignity along the way" (Philip Zaleski, editor of *Best American Spiritual Writing Series*). I believe that literary spiritual writing must be grounded and embodied, not homiletic, not dogmatic or agenda-driven; it must complicate surface understandings (I approach writing about Appalachia and rural communities similarly). All that said, I'm also drawn to the irreverent and profane and to work that is wildly different from my own. In the words of poet and teacher Jack Ridl, I aim "to support the authenticity of the vision." If there is a trend in my mentoring, it's that I urge students—no matter their style or subject matter—toward eschewing neatness in favor of risk and surprise, toward musicality in prose, and toward layered, textured imagery.

## **DOUG VAN GUNDY**

I believe that the best way to learn is to teach, so in my teaching I am always chasing after the thing that I don't already know, the idea that I find electrifying, the poems that makes me want to try new things in my own poems. This allows me to approach MFA teaching in a collaborative way, striving to be open to the student's interests and obsessions as well as my own. In doing so, I try to help students find an organic way of working that best serves their poetry, a poetry that may in no way resemble my own. I like to be challenged and to challenge my students.

In my own writing, I am most interested in where authenticity meets musicality. Sound is very important to me – rhythm, assonance, sibilance, consonance, alliteration – but so is sense. Poetry is communication, and while it can and should be challenging, is ultimately intended to be understood. I believe my work is both approachable and surprising.

## **ERIC WAGGONER**

In 1904, in a letter to a friend, Franz Kafka wrote, "I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound us. If a book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading it for?" That's where it's at for me. The "blow to the head" Kafka describes here can take many forms. It can be the shock of the familiar, an expression of some experience or reality we share with the writer, who's been able somehow to articulate a truth we've always known intimately, but have never seen phrased that accurately, that precisely. It can be the shock of the strange, the *unfamiliar*—the creation or articulation of an experience so foreign to us that we enter a world we never knew existed, and leave changed in some small but irreversible way. But the shock, the blow, is what we owe the reader.

I've been writing and teaching professionally for more than two decades. It's not a skill you ever master. We're back at square one every time we start a new project. But paying close critical attention to how language can be used to make the ordinary strange, and vice versa, allows our use of it to become increasingly deliberate, more risky, and more meaningful. Bad writing, dull writing, tepid writing,

surrounds us. So does overwrought, sentimental, and pointlessly ornate writing. Both are needless, and leave us unchanged. When I read, I want to know that the writer has put on a flame-retardant suit, walked into the fire and come out again, to tell me what it was like to move in all that heat and light. I want to know what that fire looked like to you—what colors were inside it, the sound of it when it flared up by your ear. I want to know why you chose to go into that fire—what the risks were for you, why you went in despite the fear you felt, what you learned from passing through it.

There are some crucial fundamentals that cross all genres: clarity of expression, a functional bullshit detector you can aim at your own writing, the absolute necessity of good grammar. Beyond these, the rest is yours to discover and develop. My job is to listen to your words—to hear them in their own register and idiom, and to tell you what I think is coming through clearly, and what's still muffled, distorted, buried somewhere in the mix. I'll listen for the blow.

Lean into the dark, into what you don't know, into the thoughts that scare and confuse you. That's where the good stuff is. You must never be afraid to go there.