

WVWC MFA CORE & GUEST FACULTY TEACHING STATEMENTS

REMICA BINGHAM-RISHER

I want to create an environment that allows my students to think critically about literature and the place they'd like to begin carving in the literary landscape. This, of course, includes allowing them to ask open-ended questions and not citing myself as the foremost authority on any piece, even in my fields of expertise. I do believe firmly in the old adage that everyone would rather 'see a sermon than hear one,' so I employ modelling and use my own process, experiences, drafts and professional documents as exemplars and share them freely with my students, as seeing examples was what helped (and still helps!) me most as a student. I want my students to understand that literature is as vast and varied as music, so I might not have the answer, idea or viewpoint that most appeals to them, but I know how to look outside myself and help lead them to a better source. I am a line editor when I need to be, but mostly I want to push students to think critically about sustaining tension for the reader and entering subjects from various and varied angles. It has been said that poets only have a few subjects, among them: love, death, childhood, politics and dreams. If we are all beholden to only them, I am deeply invested in finding as many ways as is humanly possible to help explore them.

JONATHAN CORCORAN

I come to the classroom with the assumption that each student has a unique point of view and therefore a unique gift: the ability to tell a story like no other. I view my role as a teacher as that of a bridger of sorts—as someone who can help you, the student, identify the strengths of your voice and utilize these strengths to shape an impactful narrative. I think of the word impact as encompassing a wide range of possibilities. There's emotional impact, there's intellectual impact, there's aesthetic impact, and yes, there's a form of impact that involves shock factor. At the end of the day, I want to help students craft works that do something to the reader, that move the reader. How a work does this and for what purpose is up to the writer—I like quiet and loud stories equally.

I write stories and essays that are often heavy with a sense of place. One of my goals with writing is to illuminate the lives of individuals on the so-called fringes of society. I am drawn to lyricism and rhythmic writing and love to help students draw out the quirks of their own speech and writing patterns. I am interested in issues of social, economic, environmental, and racial justice, and like to help students learn how to translate these issues into effective and memorable narratives. You can count on me to pay equal attention to both the micro—the line and word—and the macro—the structure and thematic content. I also like to have “tough” conversations with students about their writing and goals and am not afraid to suggest “radical” revision; at the end of the day, I try to help students never stop grappling with that terrible and joyous question, “Why do you write?”

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.

MATTHEW FERRENCE

I.

I consider the classroom a site of what composition theorist Donna Qualley calls the “essayistic stance,” a place that recognizes “the importance of the provisional, the tentative.” My chief aims as a teacher are to cultivate critical awareness and the ability to make sense of an increasingly complex existence, to face the world always from a place where the acquisition of knowledge serves to prevent the acceptance of unconsidered or culturally pre-formed ideas. My teaching seeks to allow students to approach all knowledge as if it is at least partly conditional, open to constant revision and reconsideration. We seek new knowledge to deepen and refine the conclusions we draw.

II.

In my creative writing workshops, the essayistic stance demands the careful study of writers who shape the genre at hand, with a particular emphasis on contemporary artists. Our job is to develop good “ears,” to enter into a lifelong engagement with the tones, syntax, styles, and choices of other writers. In turn, the practice of workshop is the practice of close reading: we attend to peer writing both to help the authors improve draftwork and, more importantly, as exercise in our own reading. Within this double-focus we deepen our sense of participation a field of study and community of writers committed always to process, and we recognize that good writing comes about always through reflection, new perspective, and fresh thinking.

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.

MESHA MAREN

As an instructor and workshop facilitator my goal is to foster excellence by encouraging in my students a keen eye for close reading and a healthy dose of fearlessness. I base my teaching methods on three foundational principles: the necessity of a strong understanding of one's literary predecessors, a willingness to take risks, and an ability to empathize. I believe strongly that as writers we must first and foremost be focused, inquisitive readers. I stress to students the importance of examining not only the texts that they "love" but also, sometimes more significantly, those that they resist or dislike. I have found that the basic building blocks of creative writing can be best acquired through observation and imitation. While each student has their own utterly unique creative vision, all students can benefit from carefully observing and emulating the ways in which such foundational material as sentence structures and transitions are achieved. That said, as a teacher and mentor, I also consider it my job to draw students out of their comfort zone and inspire them to write more wildly and deeply in pursuit of the white-hot flame of personal truth that is at the center of all great writing. As a novelist, I am abidingly interested in exploring the intersections of identity and landscape and this passion shines through in my work with students.

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.

DEVON MCNAMARA

Love of listening is the true incentive in both teaching and writing. Love of listening for the truth of each individual's discovery of the language of life. Love of learning, over and over, through the down to earth dailiness of working closely with other writers as their work unfolds, grows strong, takes flight, how to wrestle with the joy and discipline of the craft, sound out the music of our contemporaries and the brilliances of those who came before us, yes, but also to hear the unique beauty and power of each voice as it finds its own shape, on the page and in the resonant space of the spirit.

I love poems that leap off the print into performance, thrill the bejeebers out of readers and audiences into a whole new state of being, or quietly, irrevocably shift, through a hitherto undiscovered dance of sound and sense, the entire universe of our perceptions, with dignity, pathos, respect for meanings, their histories and associations, quirks and geographies, so that we can't forget them, not never, not nohow. I love any poems that fall between, between outrageous hijinks and a rich and magisterial evocation of civilization.

My own work is to be read on the page but can be appreciated aloud, and, up to the present, seems concerned with the music of our speech, the way it unearths memory, the intensities of the land-and-seascapes where this music arises, the stories of our own and other times it tells and retells. Most of the work is poetry – my collection is called *Driving* – but I have long been at work on two projects, one a family memoir blended with an evocation of a lyrical autobiographical novel by Rebecca West, *The Fountain Overflows*, and the other a poetic portrait of Edith Swanneck, wife of Harold Godwinson (who lost the fight in 1066) whose life is known only in a few references from the brief chronicles of the time, though it must have been beyond extraordinary. Its unrecorded language seems to call to me across the centuries.

CATHERINE MOORE

Hello! I'm a nonfiction writer who got her MFA in poetry, so I'm blissfully mixed up in both genres. Here are some things that inspire me: In nonfiction, voices like Leslie Jamison, Isabel Wilkerson, Eula Biss, Jon Ronson, Ta Nehisi Coates; a few of my favorite poets are Charles Wright and James Wright and CD Wright. For fiction, I gobble up contemporary novels (Rachel Kushner, Haruki Murakami, Marilynne Robinson, Robert Gipe, etc etc). Work that warps the boundaries of journalism, lyric, memoir, history, criticism, and comedy. And it's got to sound good. Long, epic poems. Longform nonfiction. Long things interest me! History that changes my perspective on the present, especially hyper-local hidden histories. Works that seek to capture a heightened pitch of experience, while recuperating the historical record as (partial, imperfect) reparation. Work animated by a keen attention to a specific place, with deep context.

Right now I'm working on a book of narrative nonfiction concerning the West Virginia Mine Wars, which looks at that conflict through the eyes of present-day West Virginians.

I also am a public radio producer and would be happy to bring my recording kit and talk a bit about audio nonfiction storytelling. We can also discuss next steps toward pitching your ideas to publications, so you can learn to live in this crazy biz. And finally, the software Scrivener has changed my life. If there's interest, maybe some of us could have a Scrivener skillshare meet up.

I'm an acute but extremely friendly introvert, and a pretty informal person. :)

M. RANDAL O'WAIN

I believe that, as people, we are complicated and messy and set adrift with little to no true understanding of the complexities within our fellow humans. And it's for this reason I think humanity is

beautiful, even when we hate or squirm with envy or judge or slander: we always are fallible and vulnerable and I like knowing this about others and myself. I strive to simulate this sense of vulnerability in my fiction and I rarely shy from exposing this vulnerability in my essays. My favorite nonfiction and fiction does not claim to have answers, does not pretty up the ugly things so that they are more digestible, my favorite writing is hard-edged yet careful, is funny without cynicism, is kind and loving to even the most undeserved. My favorite writing is honest, even when the truth is not popular or is difficult to stomach, even when the truth is embarrassing. Our truths and lies are all so different. And this knowledge is where the magic happens: your unique voice once set free is what makes time-tested stories of, say, love and death new and real for the reader; your unique voice once set free is what makes you believable and inviting. I want us all to hop on one long party-bus where the movement, the process of discovery, is always more important than the destination.

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.

KAYLA RAE WHITAKER

As writers, we process with two distinct minds: the analytical mind that parses information and posits questions and theories, and the creative mind, which operates on instinct, impulse, and sensory attraction. The two are by no means mutually exclusive; both are necessary to developing a body of work. The need to grasp the spirit of a piece – its burdens, its wildness – is every bit as crucial as the need to understand that piece’s technical components. The creative mind, however, rules the direction and urgency of our fiction. Most of us began writing compelled by an internal drive, a compulsion we could not quite explain, even to ourselves. We learn and grow as professional writers compelled by that same, central force.

As an instructor, my objective is to inform the creative mind that, ultimately, holds sway over our work. My classroom is a collaborative space: we are here to help one another hone our instinctual arsenals. Students can expect an intentional combination of discussion, reading, and exercises, as we process most thoroughly through active trials. I aim to present material and discussion that will enable thoughtful, generative action. The classroom’s opportunity to trade notes and commiserate is particularly important for those engaging with the creative process, often a baffling and frustrating experience because it is precisely that – a process, rife with mistakes, foiled attempts, and glorious instances of discovery. Process demands patience, and dedication, and a good deal of self-forgiveness. I push this point when I teach, encouraging all to develop and engage in their own “long game.”