**Introduction to Creative Writing**

**Spring 2007**

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**REQUIRED TEXTS:**


***Each of you is to have your own copy of both books. Bring both of them to class with you each day unless I tell you otherwise. I will make regular assignments out of them. Read these assignments prior to the class during which they are to be discussed.***

As one historian of creative writing has noted, the term “creative writing” implies something in progress, imperfect, not yet complete (D.J. Myers, *The Elephants Teach*). And to a certain extent, that is one of the assumptions behind the way I teach this class. At the same time, the history of creative writing reveals a constant tension between such a process emphasis and one that insists that the creative writing class must also lead toward the making of aesthetic products that reflect critical standards. In this class my purpose is to provide some kind of reasonable balance among these three crucial factors: process, product, and standards.

The history of creative writing classes is also rooted in the master/apprentice relationship. That is, students (apprentices) explore their talents under the supervision and assistance of an artist who, by his or her accomplishments and commitment to creative work, has earned the status of master. I don’t much like the connotations of that term and don’t see myself as a master, but the concept itself has persisted since at least Classical times (and probably has even more ancient origins) and has been responsible for a good deal of the very best art the world offers. So this is another assumption underlying the class. Most of my work has been in poetry, but I began as a writer of short fiction. I have been writing and publishing my work for the last five decades—a fact that makes me a bit nervous even as I type it—and I have had a fair amount of both acceptance and rejection, the latter, I assure you, up close and personal (rejection of almost any kind generally is). Almost all writers experience plenty of criticism and rejection, and perhaps the hardest part of serious writing is learning how to cope with and get beyond such “failure.” For any of you interested in the details of my creative history, you can check out my web page (http://www.hu.mtu.edu/~rfreisi). It’s a bit out of date, but it will give you a reasonable idea. You can also order at least two of my books from various online bookstores (Amazon, Borders, Barnes & Noble). I keep a few copies in my office for anyone interested in sampling my work. I guess I should also say that I have been teaching creative writing for over thirty years. It is the most challenging class I have ever taught, and, like the perfect curveball, I am still trying to get it right. I can always use your help.

**What Are The Goals For This Class?**

1. To give you the time, space, and encouragement to engage in and extend your own creative writing talents. I assume, by the way, that you all have such talents, possibly to varying degrees. But you all are creative, and you all have the potential to grow. I will ask you to extend yourself as far as you can and in the process to aspire to the condition of art. That is a tall order, to be sure, but that is my goal. I hope you will make it yours as well.

2. To help you see how good poems and stories are put together, how they are crafted.

3. To help you direct your work at a critical audience. To do that, I will ask you to assume your audience this semester to be readers and editors of the many mainline quality literary magazines being published in America today. Part of my job is to teach you what the values of such a readership would be. There are certainly other readerships out there, but I am asking you to focus on the one I have identified.

4. To assist you in acquiring a working vocabulary of techniques and craft issues accomplished writers possess.

5. To help you become discerning and lifelong readers of serious literature.
6. To help you understand the difference between a creative process and a final aesthetic product and, ideally, to give you the experience of both.

7. To assist you in learning more about yourself and your worldview as well as to encourage you to regard such self-exploration as the raw material for art as well as a necessary part of continuing personal growth. This last goal is by no means the least in importance. It may very well be the most valuable asset you gain from this class.

**What Traits & Attitudes Might Help You Succeed in This Class?**

Students who do well in this class typically possess all or most of the following:

1. An interest in expressing feelings and ideas through words and a willingness to share these with others, which may involve a fair amount of risk.

2. Actual interest in (or at least tolerance for) the details of American English—syllables, syntax, grammar, punctuation, spelling, rhythmic strategies, the effect of verbal sonic devices on the ear and their feel in the mouth ("mouthfeel").

3. Interest in the structure of lyric and narrative forms.

4. Genuine concern for what William Faulkner called "the old verities"—compassion, pity, truth, beauty, joy, despair, etc.

5. Some knowledge of and respect for the humanistic tradition (literature, history, philosophy, painting, music, dance, sculpture, theater). And although science may not be technically humanistic, it, too, has a great deal to offer any serious writer in the content, formal structure, and metaphoric dimensions of good prose and poetry.

6. Willingness to take yourself seriously as a creative writer for fourteen weeks, a willingness that frequently involves taking some personal risks.

7. Willingness to learn literary principles and to break them if necessary for intended artistic effects.

8. Openness to criticism and willingness to offer other writers suggestions for improving their writing. Both require that you take your work and that of your classmates with high seriousness.

9. Respect for and commitment to the importance of revision.

10. Deriving pleasure from both the play of imagination and serious play with words and sentences.

**What Will You Have to Produce in this Class?**

I will ask you to complete one short story (about 10-15 pages typed) and three poems (one of these in an assigned form). I will also regularly assign what I call "finger exercises," brief writing assignments intended to teach specific matters of craft important in the making of stories and poems that reflect the aforementioned critical taste.

Please Note: With respect to fiction—This is NOT a class in entertainment fiction, the kind you might read in popular magazines like Field and Stream or Reader's Digest or Seventeen (Playboy and Esquire are notable exceptions). Nor is this a class in the writing of science fiction (sorry) or fantasy literature (sorry again). And finally, this is not a class in writing stories according to the formulas, clichés, and tastes of commercial television or Hollywood films. With respect to poetry—This is not a class in writing what the popular press and greeting card companies typically offer to the public as poetry. In the case of both genres, our standard is literary fiction and poetry of high quality, the kind of stories and poems you would find in any major contemporary literary magazine. Broadly speaking, our subject matter this term is more or less the present condition of real human beings, and we want to treat this "condition" (as serious writers in one way or another always do) with intelligence and artistic discipline. Admittedly, there is considerable latitude for creative approaches within such subject matter.
How Will You Spend Your Time This Semester?

We will divide the class roughly into two halves, the first devoted to short fiction, the second to poetry.

Within each of these two basic halves of the course, we will work on our own writing and study the work of accomplished writers to learn as much as we can about the ingredients of artful stories and poems. During the first few weeks of each unit, we will discuss readings in our texts, complete finger exercises, and work with one another in small groups. The primary aim of these various activities is to give you both theory and practice in the composing of stories or poems. In the last week or so of each unit, we will workshop your manuscripts. This will require some extra photocopying costs for each of you. Whose work will be workshoped will be determined by me. By the time the class is over, most of you should have had a poem or a story discussed by the entire class. That's a goal, not a promise. But all of you will have your work reviewed by classmates critically in your small groups. I also will work in conferences with those of you who are interested.

What Deadlines Will You Have To Meet?

Here are the main deadlines, as I see them now at least (they are all subject to revision):

- Th of Week 2—One-paragraph description of your story idea (more on this soon)
- Th of Week 4—Good working draft of story due
- Th of Week 5—Final draft of story due
- Th of Week 8—Poem 1 due
- Th of Week 10—Poem 2 due
- Th of Week 12—Poem 3 due
- Th of Week 14—Final Portfolio due

In addition, as I noted earlier, you will have various finger exercises due, mostly at intervals during the early parts of each of the two units. I will also ask you regularly to read assignments from each of your two texts. These readings must be completed prior to the class for which they are due.

For each of the major deadlines above, you are to bring typed and carefully edited copies on good quality 8 1/2 by 11 paper. Sometimes I will ask you to bring copies for your group or for the entire class. Please have a class notebook for these manuscripts, for finger exercises, and for all handouts so that you do not lose any of this material.

***These are important deadlines, and you must meet them.

How Will You Be Graded?

I will not grade individual assignments, and most of my feedback will be oral rather than written. I would not grade you at all for the class if I didn't have to. But obviously I do, so here is how I will assess your work:

I will consider five broad categories; the % of the final grade for each is in parentheses:

- Participation (20 %)
- Finger Exercises (20 %)
- Products (30 %)
- *Process (30 %)
- Attendance (no % assigned because I expect nearly perfect attendance; see note below under Final Notes)

*The Process category refers explicitly to the amount of revision prior to and following discussion of your work. We will talk about this frequently in class, but you should know that almost all serious writers value the process of drafting and re-drafting. I have sometimes had as many as 40 or 50 drafts of a poem before I was satisfied. I know you are busy, and I don't expect to see that many drafts, but I DO expect to see ample evidence that you worked and re-worked your poems and story. NB: I will not accept the excuse that you did all of your revising on your computer and saved only the last draft or two. Make hard copy of all drafts and save them for your
portfolio. I pay attention to substantive differences among drafts, so don’t simply run off multiple copies of essentially the same draft in order to pad your Process section of the portfolio.

**You might note that in one way or another roughly 70% of the course final grade is based on process criteria. How you do with respect to those criteria is pretty much in your hands. It will be my job to judge the products—the final poems and story you submit. In making my judgment, I will assess the overall literary quality of your writing, but I will also look for evidence that you were trying to apply the knowledge of craft issues stressed in your texts and in our discussions.**

You must complete all assignments. Failure to do so will have a major impact on your final grade. I also expect you to turn all assignments in on time. Clearly, it’s better to turn an assignment in late rather than not at all, but a pattern of late submissions will also have a significant impact on your final grade.

**How Will You Submit Your Work For A Final Grade?**

You will put all of your written work—handouts, finger exercises, drafts/revisions, and final drafts—in a portfolio, one that has a binding mechanism. You should use dividers to mark off each section of the portfolio so I can make my way easily through your work. The first page of your portfolio must be a retrospective assessment of your work and your experience with the class. This retrospective should be typed, single-spaced, and at least one full page. We will talk more about this assignment toward the end of the term. This portfolio is due no later than the last day of class prior to exams.

**Some Final Notes**

*You are always welcome to stop by my office or to schedule a conference with me in order to talk about work in progress. Conferences can be valuable, and in my role as “master” I am a resource I hope you will be willing to take advantage of.

**A final word about attendance: I will give you two misses free, no penalty. You should be careful about when you take these cuts. For example, missing class on a day when an assignment is due is obviously not a good idea. Nor is missing class on a full workshop day. Each miss thereafter will cost you dearly; for example, if you had an A and three misses, it would become an AB; four misses lowers it to a B; five to a BC; six to a C; seven to a D. Anything beyond that would revert to an F. If you start with less than an A, you can see the problem. If you should miss a class, you are responsible for finding out what the assignment is for the next class and being prepared.

FINAL NOTE: MTU’s Affirmative Action Officer has asked that all faculty include the following statement on each course syllabus:

MTU complies with all federal and state laws and regulations regarding discrimination, including the Americans with Disability Act of 1990 (ADA). If you have a disability and need a reasonable accommodation for equal access to education or services at MTU, please call Dr. Gloria Melton, Associate Dean of Students, (2212). For other concerns about discrimination, you may contact your advisor, department head, or the Affirmative Action Office (3310).