

Intro to Creative Writing

David Gewanter

Office: 309 New North 7-7582 gewanted@georgetown.edu
Office Hours: TBA.

Required Texts:

Sarajevo Blues, Semezdin Mehmedinovic (online version will be supplied)

Twilight Los Angeles, 1992, Anna Deavere Smith

Running in the Family, Michael Ondaatje

The Cinnamon Peeler's Wife, Michael Ondaatje

The English Patient, Michael Ondaatje

The English Patient, a Screenplay, Anthony Minghella

and photocopied poems, stories, essays, scripts, which I will supply.

Many xeroxes. Many drafts. You will need a sturdy folder for these pages.

Books are available from:

Bridge Street Books, 2814 Pennsylvania Ave. NW (off M St next to Four Seasons Hotel)

Film Screenings in our room:

Twilight Los Angeles, 1992. TBA

The English Patient. TBA

You may also be asked to attend a literary event at GU or in DC.

Officialistic Intro:

If you've always wanted to write a memoir or a story, if you've wanted to find out what you can do in poetry or theatre, then this course is for you. We'll learn about and produce four modes of creative writing: poems, stories, personal prose, and dialogue. We'll discuss and analyze great texts, then try our hand at composing two lyric poems, a short story, a personal essay, a brief radio-play, and more. And we may hear craft lectures from the great writers in our Department and in DC who produce them. The authors under study include Stephen Crane, D.H. Lawrence, Michael Ondaatje, Anna Deavere Smith, Semezdin Mehmedinovic, and a number of poets. We'll follow Ondaatje through the four genres. This course works best for people with some experience in studying and writing in one (or more) of these genres, and who feel comfortable sharing their drafts in a group setting.

More directly on the course:

The world may have been created from nothing, but we must manage by making new things out of old and pre-existent materials. Coleridge used a long name for this: the *esemplastic imagination*. By this view, we don't draw pictures on a fully blank page, or invent music from silence; rather, we draw images after looking at things, and we play tunes and lyrics based on remembered music and speech. (Paul McCartney first thought that the tune of "Yesterday" was some dance-hall song his dad played.) We may not be Beatle-like, or God-like, but we can learn, copy, imitate, remember, shift, combine, invent...the imaginative actions such as Jasper Johns recommends: take an object; do something to it; then do something else to it.

So my longwinded perspective, and what drives much of this course, is as follows: study models; steal from them; steal from your fellow student-writers; alter the form of the model (text, received language, memory, 'vision') into something new.

Written work due for the course:

Creative Work:

You'll be given short critical or creative assignments, and some "starter material" for your creative compositions; you'll then compose and revise your drafts with advice from your writing group (3-4 fellow students); I'll offer you comments as well; then you'll revise the draft. At the end of the semester you'll assemble a portfolio of all your creative work, and revise them further at that time. Overall:

2-3 new poems

1-2 new short fiction pieces

1-2 new creative non-fiction pieces

1 new ten-minute radio play (written with your group).

"New" indicates that this course is to prompt new work, not to offer a forum for writing that you've already done, and now want to submit for critical response.

As we will work on drafts in small writing pods, I will ask you to write helpfully on each other's drafts, and for you to seek out honest helpful responses from your podmates. It is crucial that you read and comment on each other's work—you can make little progress on your own if you don't. However, several problems bedevil such a pedagogical-editorial enterprise: the commenter may be too nice (substituting skimpy praise for help), too nasty (defeating the text and its writer), or hesitant-circumspect-"lazy" (won't comment much on drafts). Please work hard as an editor—it's a fast cheap way to learn your craft.

Critical Work:

Beside the short analytic assignments, you'll have one critical essay due (approx. 6-7 pp), and possibly 1-2 short "performance reviews" of a poetry or fiction reading, or a stage performance.

Overall, it's a goodly amount of writing and revising.

I won't be deciding the final grade by a formula, but will try to weigh your best work more heavily, and construct the best profile for your efforts during the term.

Intro to Creative Writing: Tentative Schedule

David Gewanter

WEEK ONE: Intro, hellos, poems.

The forms of Crane: “The Open Boat” story v. newspaper article.

WEEK TWO: Ondaatje’s *Cinnamon Peeler*, poems; reading poems

Short analytic assignments #1 (on Montale & Crane) due.

Short analytic assignment #2 (on 9/11 poems) due.

[For assignments & creative writing tasks, see next section.]

WEEK THREE: Ondaatje poems. Conversation poems.

Assignment #3: “Remember” poem due.

Short analytic assignment #4 (on *CP*) due.

WEEK FOUR: Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*: creative non-fiction (cnf)

Assignment #5: “Conversation” poem due.

Short analytic assignment #6 due. Revised “Remember” poem due.

Bring in photo for your group. See Assignment #7 (cnf) for details.

WEEK FIVE: War witness, *Sarajevo Blues*

Assignment #7: First creative non-fiction draft due.

WEEK SIX: *English Patient*, novel

Assignment #8: First creative non-fiction final draft due.

Short fictionistic assignment #9 due.

WEEK SEVEN: *English Patient*, novel

Assignment #10: First fiction draft due.

WEEK EIGHT: Catchup week—rethinking our readings.

Assignment #11: First fiction final draft due.

Short fun dialogue assignment #12 due.

WEEK NINE: *English Patient*, screenplay & film

Assignment #13: Second cnf or fiction draft due.

Intro to Creative Writing: Tentative Schedule

David Gewanter

WEEK TEN: *English Patient* & catchup.

Assignment #14: Second cnf or fiction final draft due.

WEEK ELEVEN: *Twilight LA*, the text

Analytic assignment #15 (leading to essay #1) due.

Quick assignment #16 due.

WEEK TWELVE: *Twilight LA*, the film

Assignment #17: First essay due.

Assignment #18: Lampoon poem due.

WEEK THIRTEEN:

Assignment #19: your revised poem, and either your revised story or cnf is due.

WEEK FOURTEEN: *your* Radio Play

Assignment #20: Radio Play drafts due.

WEEK FIFTEEN: Radio Play presentations.

Assignment #21: Final portfolios due.

Q und A:

“I have written a little in genre X, not much in Y, and never in Z.”

Ok, we work from what you can do, and then experiment in these other forms.

2. “I have never written a creative piece.” or , “I don’t show anyone my work.”

Well, this course assumes some experience in writing, discussing, editing, your own creative works. Or willingness to try.

3. “I’ll be traveling. I’ll miss _____ classes.”

This course can help you discover new forms, test yourself, get working on loose, half-forgotten, sidelong ideas and tales you’ve harbored, and vaguely tried to work on. But you need to attend class. The course will work a bit like a language course: lotsa little things due each class. (As for your teacher, “Don’t trust his jokes; don’t assume a liberal attitude on this.”)

Further on your teacher: BA, Intellectual History, U. Michigan; MA, English (emphasis in creative writing), U.C. Berkeley; Ph.D., English, U.C. Berkeley. Taught composition, ran writing and creative writing programs at Harvard; now teaching at Georgetown. Three books of poems, *In the Belly* (1997), *The Sleep of Reason* (2003), and *War Bird* (forthcoming, Fall 2009), all from U. Chicago Press; co-editor, *Robert Lowell: Collected Poems* (FSG & Faber, 2003).