

ENGL 4714 (CRN 12836) - ADVANCED POETRY (Spring 2009)
Monday/Wednesday 4:00-5:15pm, MCB 201

Welcome to Advanced Poetry Writing. All of you have already taken ENGL 3714, which makes this a class for serious students of poetry. The core of this class is the craft of poetry. Your active attendance and participation are crucial to the dynamic, community-building process of the writing workshop. (Translation: attendance is mandatory. Perpetual latecomers and no-shows will not be looked upon kindly. Participation is also mandatory. You will be expected to share your erudite thoughts and opinions in each and every class.) You will also be expected to write and read a great deal. We will plumb the heights and depths of contemporary American poetry in a variety of fun-filled ways. I have selected seven books of poetry that we will read as a class, so that you can start to get a sense of how an entire collection of poems is structured, as many of you are working on longer writing projects or senior capstone projects. Many of the poets we will read this semester will be visiting VT for readings, or come specifically to visit our class and discuss their work with you. Students will be required to write and revise **at least** nine poems over the course of the semester; the ultimate goal is to help you produce a chapbook of poetry containing *at least* nine strong poems that you are wildly proud of. (Please note: revision is absolutely critical to the writing process—if you believe your work is perfect as-is, and refuse to change it, this is not the class for you.) All of this reaches towards our primary goal: to develop your individual poetic voice and style. This class is a journey—be prepared to forge ahead into the inner regions of yourself, and the outer regions of poetic vastness.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Professor: Erika Meitner
Email: meitner@vt.edu
Office: 410 Shanks Hall
Office Hours: Mon 11-1, Wed 11-12 & by appointment
Office Phone: 540.231.7728

COURSE WEB PRESENCE - <http://scholar.vt.edu>

REQUIRED TEXTS (available at the Virginia Tech Bookstore)

“Good poems are the best teachers.”
-Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*

- *Modern Life*, by Matthea Harvey
- *Muscular Music*, Terrance Hayes
- *Wind in a Box*, by Terrance Hayes
- *Yellowrocket*, by Todd Boss
- *Hardscrabble*, Kevin McFadden
- *Becoming the Villainess* by Jeannine Hall Gailey
- *This Clumsy Living*, by Bob Hicok
- One contemporary American poetry book of your choice (this can be bought used, new, or checked out from the library)

RECOMMENDED TEXT (also available at the Virginia Tech Bookstore)

- *In The Palm of Your Hand*, by Steve Kowitz - This is a fabulous book of writing exercises that conquers all aspects of poetic issues and forms, and will be very helpful in unsticking you if you get stuck. I may be assigning exercises from this book on an as-needed basis to individuals, or to the entire class.

ASSIGNMENTS

WEEKLY WORK:

- 1 new poem due each week on the days specified on the calendar—usually on Mondays (Note: I will not accept any work via email.)
- Written comments on each poem being considered by workshop
- Assigned reading (usually the book of the week) – see “Calendar” for details.

ADDITIONAL ASSIGNMENTS:

- 1) **Book Review:** every week you will be reading one book of poetry. For ONE of these books, you will write a 2-3 page review, to be handed in the day we go over that particular book in class.
- 2) **Leading Discussion:** students will be asked to sign up (in groups of 2-3) to lead discussion at least once over the course of the semester for one of the books we are reading as a class. You will be expected to talk with your partner(s), and come up with a brief synopsis of the style of the work, the trajectory of the book, and a short biography of the poet. You might also take advantage of podcasts, audio, or video of your poet reading their work (and play it for the class). You will be asked to have at least four discussion questions prepared for the class, and select 2-3 poems that the class can use to do a close reading of a particular poet’s work. You will also provide the class with a writing exercise based on one of the poems in the book. Your presentations will be graded by me, and by the class.
- 3) **Book-of-Your-Choice Presentation:** you will be reading a book of contemporary American poetry of your choice. You will bring 15 copies of your favorite poem(s) from the book you read, with the book’s bibliographic information (title, author, publisher, year) written on the xeroxed poem(s). Each student will be asked to present for 10-15 minutes on the book they read (what they thought of the book as a whole, poetic style or influences of the author, etc.). You will receive more details about this assignment during the semester.
- 4) **Readings & Reading Responses:** You must attend ONE poetry reading, and write a 2-page response, due the next class after the reading. Reading Responses should include the poet’s full name; the date, time, and location of the reading; and a list of the poems read, as well as an analysis of the reading. Please see handout on “Poetry Reading Responses” for more detailed guidelines. If you can’t attend any of the evening readings due to schedule conflicts, *please see me during office hours in the first two weeks of the semester* so that we can make alternate arrangements.
- 5) **Conferences:** At some point during the semester, I will be scheduling a mandatory individual conference with you to talk about how your work and the class are going. I would, of course, like to see you more often than this one conference, so please see my ‘office hours’ information at the top of the syllabus, and feel free to stop by with your work, with questions, with concerns, or just to chat.
- 6) **Final Portfolio:** a final portfolio is due the last day of class that must consist of:
 - Your chapbook, which will consist of 9-12 revised poems, a short (1-page) introductory note to the reader that is a statement of your intent for the book/your own poetics, and 2-3 blurbs of your work from your classmates that will appear on the back cover
 - Your original drafts with my comments on them (*so please keep all your drafts!*)
 - Your book review (1) and your reading response (1), as well as the written assessments of your presentations (2); all of these will have already been graded.

WORKSHOP

Over the course of the semester, each student will have approximately 5 poems workshopped by the entire class. We will be setting up some sort of rotating order regarding who will be workshopped each week once class begins that we will use for the duration of the semester. When it's your turn to be workshopped, you may select any poem you've been working on to submit to the class. *Bring enough copies of the poem for the class to class the week before the week you are scheduled so that we have time to read it and comment on it. Copies must be typed, error-free, and have your name on them. When you receive copies of other students' poems, you are expected to take time to read them and comment on them carefully* (for more information on this, see the "Workshop Guidelines" handout). If I get a sense that people are slacking on their workshop duties, I will start collecting typed copies of your comments on each poem. I reserve the right to check the comments you make on your classmates' poems at random. Please Note: if you are absent on a day where you are due to be workshopped, we will skip you and move on to the next student. There will be no make-up workshop.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

You will be allowed one absence during the semester before your grade begins to drop. Beyond that, each absence will drop your grade by a half-letter (e.g. an A will drop to an A-, an A- to a B+, etc.). If you miss a class for any reason, you still must:

- a) do the readings and assignments for the missed day
- b) deliver your comments on workshopped poems to the author at the next class meeting
- c) deliver any written work due to me at the next class meeting

More than any other kind of class, a workshop demands attendance. Your voice adds immeasurably to the group, while your absence is a loss. If you have any sort of emergency (medical, family), or religious observance, that forces you to miss a class, PLEASE absolutely come see me, call me, or email me about it—I'm tough, but not inflexible. Keep in mind that while I appreciate knowing in advance if you will miss a class, informing me of it does not necessarily mean that you will be excused for that class.

Regarding lateness: two latenesses count as one absence.

Regarding excessive absences: FIVE absences lead to automatic failure of the class.

GRADES

- 30% class participation (response to workshop poems, discussion and analysis of assigned texts, attendance in class). In a workshop it is vital that everyone involved participate and contribute their efforts, so please don't hide in the corner! If your insights are grounded in the text and thoughtfully presented, you can't go wrong. Everyone is entitled to their own opinions, so please share yours!
- 20% written/presented assignments (one book review, one book-of-your-choice presentation, one group presentation, and one reading response – each worth 5%)
- 50% final portfolio (poems and revisions contained in your chapbook). This grade will not be drawn from the "greatness" of your poetry, but from the amount of work you've put into your poems over the course of the semester. I will be looking for the willingness to experiment with new forms, subjects, and voices, your quality of revision, and your overall investment in your poems. Has your work improved and changed over the course of the semester? Were you open to suggestions about your work from both me and the class? Did your poems change considerably from the first draft form? The point of this class is to make everyone a better poet. On that end, grades become an annoying marker. Sweat counts. Love counts. If you care about your writing, and dedicate time to it, it will show.

- *Please note*—any of the following will get you a failing grade: more than five unexcused absences, failure to hand in two or more critical writing assignments (or do two or more presentations), failure to hand in four or more creative assignments.

SOME LAST NOTES

- **Grammar**: Grammar and Mechanics should be correct in imaginative writing as they are in formal reports and essays. If you know you have trouble, see me, or get help at the Writing Center on the third floor of Shanks (http://www.composition.english.vt.edu/wc/WC_Home.html).
- **Plagiarism**: The Virginia Tech Honor System Constitution sets forth the vital principle that “Every student has the right to live in an academic environment that is free from the injustices caused by any form of intellectual dishonesty.” Therefore, the Virginia Tech Honor Code will be upheld in this course for all work submitted. See the Honor System website at www.honorsystem.vt.edu.
- **Disability Statement**: Reasonable accommodations are available for students who have a disability. Students should contact the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD), 150 Henderson Hall, 231-3788 (V), 231-1740 (TTY); Susan P. Angle, spangle@vt.edu, www.ssd.vt.edu. “Students with disabilities are responsible for self-identification....To be eligible for services, documentation of the disability from a qualified professional must be presented to SSD upon request.” If you are a student with special needs or circumstances, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or feel that you may need an accommodation because of a disability (learning disability, attention deficit disorder, psychological, physical, etc.) please make an appointment with me as soon as possible during my office hours.
- **Illness**: to excuse an absence due to illness, I will need a note from Schiffert Health Center or a doctor.