Fall 8-15-1998

ENG 2003-001: Creative Writing: Poetry

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English 2003--001
Creative Writing: Poetry
Fall, 1998
CH 305

Bruce Guernsey
CH 312 (581-6290)
Office Hours:
Wed: 12:30-3:00
Thurs: 9:30-10:30

Texts:
Hall, To Read A Poem, 2nd. ed.
Janeczko, Pocket Poems
Wallace, Writing Poems, 3rd. ed.

Course Description:

This is a course in both the reading and the writing of poetry. It is based on the old-fashioned notion that reading and writing go together: a good writer knows how to read, accurately and critically. Because you are a good reader of poetry, however, does not guarantee you will be an equally good poet. That may come--again, no guarantees--with practice through apprenticeship, the way young Japanese potters learn from a mentor or beginning cooks from a head chef. One thing is certain, though: if you have no love of language, of its sounds and meanings, the good poems will not come at all.

The first half of the semester will be the reading part. You will also write, but not as much on your own as you will during the second half of the term. That is, your first writing assignments will be designed to get you to practice various forms and techniques; whereas, from mid-October on, you'll be expected to adopt what you've tried into original poems.

In both halves of the semester, I want you to be physical with language, to be concrete and specific and to avoid cliches at all cost. Use your hands when you write and your mouth when you read. For this class, toss the computer out the window and buy a bic, or a quill if you can find one. Poetry is slow work, both the reading and the writing.

Grades:

The most difficult task I have in this course is determining your grade. This is not a math class, nor are you and the work you've done a sum total divided by percentages. Here's what counts, the course requirements, if you will:

1. class participation--hard to do if you are not here;
2. exercise assignments completed and revised as needed;
3. 100 lines of original poetry;
   a. each poem comprising these lines to be revised;
4. a weekly reading log and/or personal journal;
5. 3-5 page critical evaluation of your writing;
6. a portfolio made up of 2-5, due the last class day.

I will not grade your exercises or your poems individually, but my comments on them or about them in class will give you sufficient indication of what I think. We will also meet in conferences during the term and you may ask me then how you are doing. Remember: a "C" means "satisfactory," not failure. If you do no more than satisfy the course requirements, you will get a "C." You will impress me most by your willingness to improve which means being honest about your work and being courageous enough to revise it.

Revision is not correction. It means "to see again." Always be willing to stare hard at what you've written and to try it again from a new perspective. Writing provides us what life and love usually do not: another chance.

Schedule:

Week 1: Pocket Poems, selected readings, general intro to class
Week 2: Frost parody, selected readings in Hall
Week 3: Imagery--making sense of the senses
Week 4: Figures of Speech--how to figure them
Week 5: Symbols and Signs--to slow or speed at the yellow light
Week 6: The Sounds of Speech--snarl, snot, and snow
Week 7: The Forms We Make--the distance from home to first

Week 8: Individual Conferences

Weeks 9-14: Workshop Sessions--when commas become like nails

Final Comments:

A class like this is different than any other you'll take. There is no set body of information you are to master and, tra la!, there are no exams. But this does not mean that you won't learn anything in here. Not at all. Instead of information, what you might learn is something about yourself and the curious species you belong to. Nothing in this class will go unasked or unquestioned. Poetry comes from one little word: "why?" Be sure to ask it, and get ready to have some laughs as well.