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ENG 2003-002

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English 2003-002
Fall, 2002
CH 3239

Bruce Guernsey
CH 3605 (581-6290)
Office Hours:
TTR: 3-4:30

Texts:

Stein and Murray, eds., Illinois Voices
Hall, To Read A Poem, 2nd. 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. Being a good reader of poetry, however, does not guarantee you will be an equally good poet. With practice through apprenticeship, that ability may come 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 textures--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 give you practice in various forms and techniques. From mid-October on, however, 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, especially, 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. You won't be examined on anything, and I resist giving grades to your poems because they are not finished. So, I ask you to try to live without quizzes and tests and to concentrate instead on the following:

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.
Although I will not grade your exercises or your poems individually, my comments on them or about them in class will give you a pretty good idea 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 above 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 tenacious 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: Illinois Voices, 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 stop or speed at the yellow light
Week 6: The Sounds of Speech--snarl, snide, snot, snow
Week 7: The Forms We Make--the distance from home to first

Week 8: Individual Conferences

Weeks 9-14: Workshop Sessions--revise, revise, revise

Final Comments:

A class like this is different than any other you'll take. There is no set body of material you are to master and there are no exams. You will learn, instead, as an explorer does, and the undiscovered country is yourself. A poet is the detective of "why?" and leaves no piece of evidence unturned in trying to answer it.