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English 313

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James Harms, ENGL 313, Spring 2003, Creative

Writing: Poetry

ENG 313 Spring 2003

Creative Writing Workshop: Poetry

Syllabus (subject to revision)

TTh: 10:00-11:15

Jim Harms

Office: 461 Stansbury, 293-3107 x451; <jharms@wvu.edu>

Hours: Hours: tba (or by appointment)

It is difficult

to get the news from poems

yet men die miserably every day

for lack

of what is found there.

--William Carlos Williams

Course Description

This course is a workshop in poetry writing. Our primary mission is to use class time to critique your poems. We will, however, read a great deal, and do in- and out-of-class exercises to help facilitate your writing process. Still, most of our hours will be spent discussing your work. The assumption, of course, is that your interest and experience in creative writing (you should have taken a 200-level creative writing class prior to enrolling in this workshop) have prepared you to make the most of this kind of concentrated attention. Though I will be giving you specific assignments at the beginning of the semester, I will also be asking you to write several poems that reflect your own concerns as a poet, poems that result from your ongoing engagement with the writing process.

We will be reading four or five books of poetry this semester, all of which were published within the last couple of years. Because this is a craft class, I will be asking you to write short response papers about the poems you're reading, papers that will address issues of composition, technique, aesthetics and style. I want you to struggle and strain to figure out what makes these poets tick. At some point I will ask you to write at least one (perhaps more) imitation of a poet we've read and discussed. We will also spend significant class time discussing these texts. Each workshop session will begin with a discussion of a reading assignment. Your involvement in these discussions

is mandatory and vital to the success of the class. Be prepared.

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As for the workshop: be mindful that your classmates will be relying on you, as you will be on them. Read carefully all poems that are to be workshopped, and make specific comments directly on your copy of each. This copy is to be returned to the author at the end of the discussion. It's my belief that we learn as much from trying to see and articulate the strengths and difficulties in another person's work as we do from listening to what others have to say about our own.

We will begin workshopping the third or fourth week of class. My goal is for each of you to have five of the eight poems required for this class workshopped this semester. For that to happen you need to turn them in consistently and regularly (try not to submit several poems at once). Occasionally I'll have specific due dates for poems, but for the most part the worksheets will reflect the flow of poems that are trickling in as you finish them. That should make for a consistent number each week. Still, you'll need to plan on turning in a poem nearly every week once we move into the workshop phase of the semester.

I should say that not all poems you turn in will be workshopped. For a variety of reasons I may choose to make comments and return a poem to you directly. Don't let this alarm you, but **make sure you're in line to have four poems workshopped over the course of the semester.**

I take this process very seriously; there are few places on a college campus more vital and human than the creative writing workshop. We have to take care of each other's poems and

treat each other with respect and generosity. Most importantly, we owe each other our attention. To do well in this class you need to be all of these: careful, respectful, generous and attentive. You also need to write poems, read the books, and attend actively and regularly. That's it.

Books (tentative) and Supplies

Lives of Water . John
Hoppenthaler

Dance and Disappear. Laura Kasischke

Skid . Dean Young

At least one other collection to be announced

A journal for this class only (bring to each meeting)

Numerous handouts of poems essays, to be collected and saved.

Course Design/Requirements

Poetry . You are required to write and revise eight poems this semester, at least five of which should be workshopped. Of these, at least one will be an imitation, one will be a formal poem, and the rest can be, but need not be, based on exercises or optional assignments that I'll make from time to time.

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Responses/

Explications . You will be required on several occasions to write (and type up) a two to

three page response in which you characterize a particular poet's writing style, address his/her subject matter and explicate one poem from the selection under discussion (one we haven't discussed in class). An explication is a line by line (or passage by passage) analysis of the technical decisions made in a poem and their resulting effects (on meaning, tone, etc.). These explications will take many forms depending on what we're looking for in particular poets.

Final Portfolio . A final portfolio of revised poems will be due the last day of class (prior to finals week). This portfolio should be introduced with an essay that discusses your evolving aesthetic and how you see your poems as part of a tradition. The portfolio will also include all the responses you've turned in (and which I've graded and handed back), a selected sample from your journal (just a few xeroxed pages to let me know what you've been up to), original drafts of all your poems (preferably those with my comments on them) and any notes or commentary that you think would be helpful.

Attendance/ Participation . A workshop doesn't work without consistent attendance and enthusiastic participation. These are requirements. More than two absences will result in the dropping of your grade.

Readings . There will be several readings this semester, and attendance at these is mandatory (a schedule will be distributed). Naturally there will be reasons why you might not be able to attend an evening reading (work, a conflicting class); please let me know if this is the case. Since

we'll be reading John Hoppenthaler's book, make sure you attend his reading.

Course Schedule

You will know at all times what is expected of you; however, it is impossible to set up a week-by-week schedule, simply because it is impossible to know what the pace of the workshop will be.

I *can* tell you that we will begin the semester with two weeks of reading and discussion: you will have a reading assignment from *Dance & Disappear* to prepare for our second meeting (Thursday of the first week). You will also be quizzed on selected terms from the glossary of poetic terms at that second meeting. Generally, each class will begin with a writing exercise (please bring your journals).

We will begin workshopping the third or fourth week of class (depending on how our discussions are going), which means that a poem will be due the second or third week. In other words, you should be writing at all times, from the first day of the semester to the last, whether or not I've actually given a specific assignment. I expect poems to grow out of our weekly writing exercises, and from the readings; try to give yourself the freedom to start many more poems than you actually finish, to finish many more than you actually turn in, to fail as much as you succeed (or more!). Once we begin workshopping we will continue to do so for most of the semester. Please let me know at any time if you're unsure of what is expected of you. I would suggest that you try to write every day in your journal, so that you have a poem or two in process at all times

throughout the semester. Feel free to read ahead in the books
and by all means come by and see me in my office.

Please note: this class isn't about the workshopping of finished poems; you should expect to turn in work that is "in process," which means that some of your poems will be a bit rough.

That's fine. Get comfortable with taking chances. Finally: **KEEP THIS SYLLABUS**, and refer to it regularly.

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