FIVE X FIVE: MASTERS OF SHORT FICTION
Spring 2016, WRTNG-UG.1524-001
Wednesdays, 3:30-6:10pm
1 Washington Place, Room 432

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Students in this reading and writing-intensive class will engage in a close study of short fiction by five masters of the form: James Baldwin, Grace Paley, Junot Diaz, Leonard Michaels, and Joy Williams. Students will be exposed to a shifting kaleidoscope of approaches to language, form, and representations of the personal and socio-political self. In examining the range of voices, techniques, and formal strategies these authors employ, and by experimenting with some of these same approaches in their own fiction, students will expand their understanding of the diversity, vitality, and possibility available to today’s short story writer. The class will feature close readings, discussion, group work, in-class exercises, formal assignments, and workshop. In every aspect of the class, students will be expected to engage actively, think critically and precisely, and to experiment, push, and transform their own writing in imaginative ways.

Course Objectives:

In this course, students will learn to:
1. Invigorate their imaginative potential while actively pursuing their own fiction in a supportive, intellectually stimulating environment.
2. Critically engage with and analyze the works of several contemporary writers, while examining literary fiction from the writer’s point of view.
3. Develop a greater understanding of and engagement with the thinking, process, and practice of working writers.
4. Respond to the central role of language in the creation of meaning and develop a greater sensitivity to the affective power of words.
5. Work with and in relation to others, through the in-class workshop model.
6. Utilize their capacity to analyze their own writing in a self-reflective manner while learning the critical importance of redrafting and revision.
7. Recognize that becoming a writer is a life-long process.

Required texts (available at the NYU Bookstore):
- James Baldwin—Going to Meet the Man
- Grace Paley—The Collected Stories
- Junot Diaz—This is How You Lose Her
- Leonard Michaels—The Collected Stories
- Joy Williams—The Visiting Privilege: New and Collected Stories
****Notebook: You’ll also need a notebook or folder for this class, preferably one with a 3-ring binding so you can take pages in and out. This will be the repository for exercises, assignments, and your notes on class discussion and workshops.

Class Structure: The course will consist of readings in contemporary short fiction, discussion, in-class writing, student presentations, take-home assignments, and workshop. Keep in mind too that, as part of our training as writers, much of the work for this class will consist of developing a regular, disciplined writing practice at home. Outside of class time and the time you’ll spend on readings, exercises, and critiques, you should plan to devote a minimum of five to six hours a week to working on your fiction.

Attendance: Since this is an interactive class that runs largely on student participation, regular attendance and engagement is absolutely mandatory. If you miss a class, you remain responsible for all reading and writing assignments, and you’re required to send me a short reading response to the readings for that class. If you have work scheduled for submission, it’s still your duty to get it to me and your colleagues. If you miss more than two classes, your course grade will be affected. If you are unable to fulfill your responsibilities due to a personal or family emergency, please contact me at your earliest convenience so we can accommodate everyone’s needs. Ditto religious observances.

Lateness is strongly discouraged. It’s disruptive to the class, and not beneficial to the student. Three late marks will count as an absence. Naturally, students must be present mentally as well as physically. If you zone out completely during class I’ll start marking you as absent.

Readings: Students must complete all assigned reading. Learn the language inside the language, engage the material, and formulate opinions. Bring the assigned texts and your notes on them to the class for which that assignment is due. You should come to class with something to say about every reading assignment. Failure to do so will affect your grade.

Student Presentations: Students will regularly be asked to give presentations about the reading assignments, either individually or in groups. In these presentations students will have the opportunity to bring the conceptual frameworks of our discussions to bear on the texts under examination, identify the narrative strategies in these works, and present these findings to the class with the aim of generating further discussion and analysis. While these presentations need not be practiced and polished, they should represent a fair amount of preparation, organization, and critical intelligence.

A few things to think about for your presentations: Students should identify what the intention of the work seems to be (defining the “terms” of the work), what tradition it seems to spring from or respond to, how well its aims are achieved, and what techniques it employs. Obviously, whether you “liked” a story or not is less relevant than trying to describe what the author is doing. What narrative strategies does the author employ? How does he or she use craft elements? As our conceptual vocabulary increases, you’ll learn to speak more precisely about such elements as structure, theme, character, point of view, and setting, and how these create and amplify meaning in the text.

Shorter Writing Exercises: Every class will include writing exercises, sometimes in-class and sometimes take-home. You should take these exercises seriously, but also use them as an
opportunity to stretch out and be inventive. Some of your craziest or most imaginative exercises may someday morph into your most profound finished story. You will be called on regularly to share your work with the class, and you’ll be expected to listen and respond to the work of your fellow writers in the spirit of generosity, enjoyment, and constructive critique.

Stories and Revisions for Workshop: The class centers around three workshops. For two of them you’ll submit new, rough drafts of original stories, and for final workshop you’ll submit a substantially revised version of one of those rough drafts. These longer stories should be more ambitious and more seriously considered than your in-class exercises.

Your workshop stories must be—to the best of your abilities—complete, which means you should attempt a beginning, a middle, and an end. I advise you to begin work on these drafts well before the due date. Cobbling together a story the night before it’s due is a recipe for disaster. Both rough and revised drafts will be due in your portfolio at the end of the semester. You’ll receive more specific requirements and guidelines, both for the stories and for workshop protocol, later in the semester.

All submissions to workshop should be word-processed, paginated, and double-spaced in twelve-point font with student name, the name of the course, and the date in the upper left-hand corner. Materials for workshop may not be distributed by email. All students are expected to hand out paper copies of their pieces to the class when they are due. Any violation of this provision will result in the final grade being lowered as well as the potential loss of workshop time.

Final Portfolio: At the end of the semester you’ll be required to turn in your notebook, which should contain all of the creative writing assignments from the course, discussion and workshop notes, any and all drafts of the two longer stories, and the revised, final drafts of those stories, accompanied by a revision letter that details the revision process and the changes you made.

Grades: Grades will be based on the following: attendance, participation, the level of intelligence and sophistication in responses to the required reading, quality of writing and effort to incorporate course concepts, and effort and success in revision. Regular participation and a completed portfolio are required to receive even a passing grade in the course. An A represents truly excellent work, a B commendably good work; a C adequate work; and a D poor work. Approximately 50% of your grade will be based on your engagement and participation in the classroom and with the readings (assigned readings and the work of your peers), and 50% will be based on your written work.

Some of your take-home exercises will be turned in to me. These will be graded √ +, √ or √ -. These marks are a general estimation of how the piece stacked up within the class and not a reflection of your overall worth. Unsatisfactory exercises may be rewritten if you choose, but if you do, please include both the original and the rewrite when turning a second version in. These exercises will likely receive some brief commentary from me. Your longer stories and revisions will receive extensive narrative feedback.

If at any point in the semester you are unclear about the course requirements, or have a question about your grade or your standing in the class, please don’t hesitate to ask. I’m happy to talk to you about your standing, and how to improve your work.
Classroom Decorum: I expect you to be on time to class and to pay attention during our sessions. During class discussions, please give your peers the courtesy of your attention, and the respect they deserve when you respond to their work. It is possible to be constructive and kind simultaneously. If we’re writing in-class, please grant your colleagues the courtesy of a quiet room. If you need to leave the classroom for personal reasons, you may, but please keep these interruptions minimal.

I realize we’re living in the digital age, but laptops, iPads, Smartphones, and other digital devices are not allowed during class sessions. They can be a great boon to study and to creative activity, but they can also prove distracting in the classroom. (Besides, studies have shown that more of the brain is activated when writers write by hand.) Cell phones should be shut off and put away. Each class session will include a short break midway through, during which you can check messages and make calls.

Office Hours
My office hour are Wednesday 1:00-3:00 pm in room 407, 1 Wash Place. If these times are impossible for you, let me know, and we’ll work something out. I do my best to be available to students, and I encourage you to schedule private conferences as needed. I’m happy to discuss your work, the mystery of writing in general, the realm of literature, and other related matters. If you have questions about the progress of your writing, your grade, or your status in the class, you may speak with me at any time.

Academic Integrity
As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website (www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html)
Schedule


3/16: Spring break. No class session.


5/11: Final portfolios due (We may or may not hold a formal class session on this day--depending on whether or not we complete our revision workshop on 5/4--but your portfolios will be due during our regular class meeting time regardless).