

Stanford | Continuing Studies

Course Title: Writing Your Poetry Chapbook

Course Code: POET 17 W

Instructor: Greg Wrenn, MFA

And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

—Wallace Stevens, “Sunday Morning”

Course Summary:

This course is for those of you who have written poems before and are now wondering how to shape the beginnings of a book—the desire to assemble a collection is natural as you continue to develop craft and find your voice. Perhaps you have a particular theme—the death of a loved one, the ups and downs of the spiritual life—that you want to explore in greater depth than a single poem can. Accordingly, our course is divided into five 2-week units that each correspond to a key poetic theme: Love; Politics and History; Family; Spirituality; and Death. Each week, along with a reading assignment, you’ll have a writing assignment meant to get you thinking about writing a sequence of related poems.

For this course, writing a chapbook is your way to deepen your engagement with your key themes. In a chapbook, which is usually 10-40 pages long, each poem is in conversation with the others. One poem may reflect another, or a poetic series might tell a story or consider a subject from many different angles. More than just an unrelated group of poems, the chapbook seeks the poetry among the poems.

Classic as well as contemporary poems will inspire our chapbooks. What might we learn from beloved sonnets, odes, cycles, and free verse poems to create coherent poetic sequences of our own? In our weekly writing assignments, we will experiment with a variety of poetic forms, craft elements, and themes. Essential craft tools—rhythm, rhyme, syntax, imagery, and metaphor—will be emphasized in a nurturing and rigorous class environment. We will aspire to boldness and an openness to the mystery of language and life. Students will finish the course with a 10-page draft of their own chapbook.

Grade Options and Requirements:

- No Grade Requested (NGR)
 - This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.
- Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)

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- Students must participate in at least 70% of weekly discussions and/or Zoom sessions.
- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)
 - Students must participate in at least 70% of weekly discussions and/or Zoom sessions, and submit a 10-page draft of their chapbook.

**Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.*

Grade Breakdown

Submission of 10-page Chapbook Draft: 35%

Posting of Poems: 25%

Posting of Feedback: 25%

Timely Discussion Participation: 15%

Writing Assignments and Workshop

There will be ten distinct poem assignments during the quarter. To earn full credit, you must submit to seven (7) of the workshops; in other words, you can opt out of submitting your work three (3) times. I will offer you extended feedback consisting of approximately three paragraphs on four (4) of your poems; for the others I'll offer you brief, targeted advice for improving your work.

By Wednesday at 12:00 PM EST of each week, each student will upload a poem to the forum, though you are encouraged to do this sooner—I do not comment on late work, so please be certain to submit something if you want feedback, even if your poem is very rough. In addition, I'll be moderating our discussion, posting comments on poems as they appear. A paragraph of specific feedback from you should suffice for each poem.

A 10-page draft of your chapbook as a single PDF is due at the end of the quarter.

Weekly Reading Assignments and Discussion Questions

Every week, in addition to the poetry writing assignment, there are discussion questions and a reading assignment.

Required Texts

[*Poems, Poets, Poetry*](#) (Compact Third Edition)

Helen Vendler

ISBN-10: 1457652196

Ariel: The Restored Edition

Sylvia Plath
ISBN-10: 0060732601

So, How Was the War? [Kindle Edition]

Hugh Martin
ASIN: B00ICLG3IC

Catherine's Laughter

C.K. Williams
ISBN-10: 1936747685

Wild Iris

Louise Glück
ISBN-10: 0880013346

Native Guard

Natasha Trethewey
ISBN-10: 0618872655

Tentative Zoom Schedule*:

On Thursdays at 5:00 PM EST I will hold a live chat discussion session, via Zoom (a video conferencing platform), which is optional and recorded in case you cannot attend. It's an opportunity for me to answer any of your questions and to broaden our forum discussion for the week. It is our live virtual writing community, so your engaged, constructive, spirited presence is most welcome. If you can't come, you may also email me questions beforehand that I can address during the Zoom session, so that you can see me answer them on the video.

I will be offering optional one-on-one conferences in the last month of the course.

**Please note that the Zoom schedule is subject to change. The live video sessions are recorded; student attendance is optional*

Tentative Weekly Outline:

Unit I: Love

Week 1: Eros

Week 2: Betrayal

Reading Selections: C. K. Williams, *Catherine's Laugh* [chapbook]; Chapter 3 of Vendler's *Poems, Poets, Poetry*; T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"; Tracy K. Smith, "Credulity"

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Writing Assignments: A love sonnet; a poem that includes an extended image that expresses—that *enacts*—betrayal or heartbreak.

Unit 2: Politics & History

Week 3: Revolution

Week 4: Revision

Reading Selections: Hugh Martin, *So How Was the War?* [chapbook]; Rita Dove, “Parsley”; William Butler Yeats, “Easter 1916”; Robert Lowell, “For the Union Dead”

Writing Assignments: A poem that *shows* rather than *tells* a core political belief of the lyric speaker; a dramatic monologue in the voice of a marginalized person with an interpretation of our national history that differs from yours.

Unit 3: Family

Week 5: Genealogies

Week 6: Scrapbooking

Reading Selections: Sylvia Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition* [book]; Richard Blanco, “Letters for Mamá”; Frank Bidart, “To My Father”; Elizabeth Bishop, “Poem”

Writing Assignments: A poem about a moment in a relative’s life that you weren’t around to witness; a letter to your child (born, unborn, or deceased) that you wouldn’t necessary share with them.

Unit 4: Spirituality

Week 7: Surrender

Week 8: Devotion

Reading Selections: Louise Glück, *Wild Iris* [book]; Walt Whitman, Selections from *Song of Myself*; Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Pied Beauty” and “Spring and Fall”; George Herbert, “Easter Wings”

Writing Assignments: A poem that in some way tracks a spiritual struggle; a “spiritual” poem that has the same lineation as one of the assigned poems this week.

Unit 5: Death

Week 9: Deathbed

Week 10: Afterlife

PRELIMINARY ONLINE COURSE SYLLABUS

Reading Selections: Natasha Trethewey, *Native Guard* [book]; Emily Dickinson, “The Heart asks Pleasure – First”; John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn”; Walt Whitman, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”

Writing Assignments: A deathbed poem; a poem whose speaker is already dead, speaking from the afterlife.

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