

## Syllabus

*"we asked to be obsessed with writing, and we were"* Lowell

This is an introductory class in the writing and appreciation of poetry. Our set texts are three establishing works of the past half century in America, modern classics all : Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, John Berryman's *77 Dream Songs*, and Elizabeth Bishop's *Geography III*. A poetry respectively of detail, of strangeness, and of description. We will take our bearings from them.

I will want you during the term to get as close as possible to those books. Reading something once through does not mean that you have read it, poetry (which "almost successfully resists the intelligence" – Wallace Stevens) even less than prose. As our culture, such as it is, becomes less literate and less verbal, the poem more than ever is a sort of archaism, a robber bandit in the hills. We will talk at what will seem to you like stupefying length and level of detail about our books. I want you to ponder poems: why the length (or brevity), why the form, why a word, why a detail, what does factor  $n$  or  $x$  or  $y$  bring to the party? What makes it a poem? How is the tone? Whose is the voice? What brings you back to it, or keeps you from ever leaving it?

For the class to succeed, you will have to show unusual, quite exceptional, commitment to it. You will have to work outside the three hours of our time together. Look up words, read biographies, read other poems and poets, attend events (the graduate reading series, the Writers' Festival). You will offer (written) presentations of individual poems, and keep a 'reading journal' for the semester. You will commit at least one poem to memory (and recite it to the class). If you don't like to read, and to re-read, this is not a class for you. It should (in the end) be fun, but if you don't put an awful lot of work into it, it won't be.

The other part of the class will be your own writing of original poems. Some of this will be free, some of it to terms and parameters I will set. Try to use all your intelligence, imagination, ambition, and experience when you write. (If a poem is not worth talking about, don't expect us to talk about it.) The qualities of our set books – detail, strangeness, and description – offer a goodish guide as to how you should proceed. With the numbers of the class as they are, students should expect to be workshopped perhaps every two or three weeks. A workshop is not a trial; and you shouldn't think in terms of defending yourself; rather, listen to what people say, and try to take that part of it that is useful to your poem, and apply it as well as you can. The tone of remarks should be friendly and constructive and precise.

By the semester's end, you should have a good sense of what poetry is currently about. We should have read and talked about in some detail fifty or hundred contemporary poems, and you should have written a handful yourself that you are more or less proud of.

I don't like to talk about grades, and don't feel I should have to. As college students, you should be beyond that. Remember, much is expected of those, like yourselves, to whom much has been given. If you happen to get an A in the class, you will have earned it. Grading is based on attendance, participation, writing, and progress.

Michael Hofmann

[mhofmann@ufl.edu](mailto:mhofmann@ufl.edu)

Turlington 4211 (office hours, Monday, 2-4 pm, and after class, Wednesday, 4-5)

Further details, a little lifting of the veil:

1. I would like you to memorize a poem, and recite it in class (I will as well!).
2. You should write a prose autobiography/ memoir (a la "91 Revere Street") of 6-10 pages (this is a 'Gordon Rule' course, after all, and you need to be writing)
3. I would like to see an informal reading journal, with notes/ thoughts/ reactions to individual poems
4. I will ask you to write maybe 3 short (2-page) papers, again on individual poems – perhaps one per poet.
5. Please make time to see me individually some time at the middle of the semester, for talk on progress, perspectives, etc.
6. When we get on to the 'writing poems' part of the class, next month, please bring copies of your poems (+2 for me), and come prepared to talk about each other's work.
7. Each book will average out at 4-5 classes. Be sure always to have the right one with you! I'll give you enough notice.

M.H.