

Online Multigenre Workshop  
Spring 2008

Instructor: Brian Clements

Contact: For matters pertaining to this course, please contact me via the course email.

This section of the Online Multigenre Workshop comprises all of this semester's thesis students (6) and a group of third-semester students (9). Goals for the semester will be:

- To provide thesis students with peer feedback on their thesis proposals
- To provide third-semester students with some insight into the thesis production process
- To provide all students with peer feedback on portions of their thesis projects
- To use two major discussion threads to gain insight into editing processes and the demands of genre
- To share information and resources that might be useful for all students in the production, completion, and future publication of their thesis projects

Toward those ends, we will engage in three projects over the semester:

- Peer Review: Thesis Proposals and Thesis Projects
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- The Author/Editor Dynamic: Raymond Carver and Gordon Lish
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- Literary Adaptation
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GOALS

ASSIGNMENTS

Syllabus for  
MFA Online Multi-genre Workshop III  
Fall 2006  
Instructor: J. Briggs

Instructor Contact Information

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The multigenre workshop this semester contains four threads of discussion and activity. They are described below in a narrative form which tries to convey my thinking about why we should follow these threads.

Some of the elements of the course will be familiar to you, some approaches will be new. I look forward to lively discussions within the bounds of civility and friendliness that have been established by you as our inspiring first cohort of MFA students.

***Philosophy and General Comments***

Thread one: Discussion of texts about the writing as a response to “culture” vs. writing about “the existential condition.”

In this thread we’ll discuss and consider two very different approaches to writing in contemporary culture. Wallace is a postmodernist (or a post-postmodernist) and even though this piece was written in the 1990s, you can see that he is hip to the kinds of issues behind the Associated Writing Program meetings, that he’s really into American culture. His essay brings up all kinds of vital issues for us as writers in our time and place to think about. The fact that the book is a bit old (in this fast moving world, ancient) should provide some interesting perspective on all the commercial, sit com, pop star allusions Wallace uses. In contrast, Mary Oliver, arguably one of the finest American poets working today, is a traditionalist in the sense that her interest is in age old themes and the universal human condition. Though she writes in free verse and contemporary forms, she is clearly rooted in the long tradition of poetry and sees herself as inseparable from that tradition. Her handbook is a brilliant, easily readable introduction to poetry, language, and poetic sensibility and will serve as a contrast with Wallace. It will be useful in its own right as a reflection on process and language. as a hinge to the process/craft thread of our discussions. In this thread I will also ask you to read and reflect on Tim O’Brien’s “How to Tell a True War Story,” from his book *The Things They Carried*, in order to discuss Wallace’s concept of irony. As we go along I’ll introduce other short pieces into this thread via pdf.

### Thread two: Analysis of the drafting process.

Here I'm going to provide 1-5 page pdf's of typescripts or holographs from well-known writers (including some of our own MFA professors) and ask you to engage in a discussion of the changes you see being made in these pieces and what you think the process is and the thinking, or intuiting, behind these changes. While it's certainly not necessary for a writer to be aware of why she makes changes, and while I will am the last person to think that very many, if any, changes are made for *analytical* reasons, I do believe that discussing how the intuitive and analytical work makes for a more thoughtful writer and more sensitive teacher of writing. I expect that we'll get into all sorts of interesting byplays here. We'll be inquiring into rhythm, sensation, the nature of images, all kinds of cool ideas (cool to an old sixties guy like me, anyway). Later on in the semester I'll ask you to present some of your own drafts for our discussion. *So you'll need to keep electronic copies of drafts of something you're working on and to use the tracking changes function on your word processor so that you can show us what changed.*

### Thread three: Web tips for writers.

This little task interconnects with the first two threads. Here I will ask you to spend a little time each week searching the net for opportunities that exist for writers in cyberspace, opportunities that are of real interest and relevance to you (not just anything). This can be publishing opportunities, book promotion possibilities, peer groups of writers, research sites or approaches. I'd like you to come back to us with a little discussion of the resource, some information about the world of electronic publishing, and using the web to promote books, publishing opportunities, ideas for how to connect with an audience, or some excitement about how you might experiment with the form and delivery of your work. I've probably left a dozen things out. For instance, many writers are running blogs in order to bring readers to the authors' sites where they can also introduce them to fiction, poetry or other writing. Below is one URL you could look at to get started thinking about the web as a writing resource with many, many facets. As you do this, you will also want to think about what Wallace and Oliver are saying and see what affect the web has on your understanding of what they're saying. Perhaps you've done some of this in your aesthetics course. I guarantee, you've only scratched the surface. Let's see how this discussion develops. We may want to create a kind of distillation of the discussion: Web tips for writers. Who knows what we'll discover. Here's just one item I found I thought could be useful, as an example.

<http://www.people.carleton.edu/~tonksn/csproject/page6.html>

### Thread four: The semester workshop

As before, you'll post three pieces at three times during the semester for workshopping. The guidelines for the discussion and the deadlines are below. They are similar to previous semesters. This thread gets the shortest explanation but it hardly needs much. It's perhaps the most important part of the semester's work and requires careful attention by everyone.

### Private Feedback

I welcome the opportunity to look at your work one-to-one on line, I would just ask that you not overwhelm me with pieces. We can carry on a conversation using the mail function of Vista with attached files.

## *The Mechanics*

### *General*

I'll expect you to dial into the Vista site for the class at least twice a week. At this point I hope it's not shocking to hear that a four-credit class officially entails about 16 hours a week during a 15 week semester (four "contact" hours plus three hours for every contact hour). In this course, that would include the time spent online plus the time reading material and writing material for presentation in the workshop. My strong suggestion is to get into a routine that allows you to visit the four threads of the discussion twice a week, read through the postings and the assignments (if any), do whatever you need to do (reading, writing, thinking-through, analysis) then make a considered posting yourself. I've tried to organize the material so that as you click through each thread, you'll know what you need to do. Finish that thread and then go back to the home page and start the next thread. Put this syllabus somewhere nearby to provide an overview map for the threads.

### *Texts for the course*

Wallace, David Foster. A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again. Boston: Little Brown, 1997.

Oliver, Mary. A Poetry Handbook. San Diego: Harvest, 1994.

### *The Four (4) Threads*

**Thread one:** text discussion: Cultural vs. Existential

1. Order the two texts listed above so that you have them the first week in September.
2. Read the David Foster Wallace chapter entitled "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" by Sept. 15 and post your first comments about the chapter by that date.
3. I'm going to let this discussion unfold, so I'll post further assignments, including letting you know when to read the Mary Oliver book.

**Thread two:** Analysis of the drafting process

Note: *This semester the focus will be on creative writing drafts. Next semester on "practical writing drafts and process."*

1. Whenever you click into this thread, check first to see if there are any new drafts to look at.
2. Under this thread, you'll find the first pdf file of a writing draft in a folder marked "Drafts to Examine." Each draft will have a sequential number and an assignment date. **Print the file** of the most recent draft so you can study it closely. The file will contain directions or suggestions. Read these. There will be a discussion pin associated with that

particular draft (It'll have the same identifying number, date and name). Click into the discussion and join it.

3. Important suggestion: As you discuss specific changes that an author made (as reflected in the draft), work to make your comments as easy as possible for all of us to follow. Don't make us have to work hard to figure out what lines and changes you're referring to.

4. Sometime in late October we're going to switch from looking at the drafts of other authors (who will include some of WestConn's own visiting writers and writing mentors) to looking at drafts by you, members of the online workshop. **This semester focuses on creative writing drafts such as fiction or poetry. Most if not all of you are working on creative material. You will need to begin now to keep track of the changes you make in a piece you're working on**, so that you can submit those drafts to us later. If possible I'd suggest you pick a piece you're working on and start using the "track changes" function in your word processing program. You can then make a pdf or html of the document to show us the changes. There are also other ways to keep track of drafts and I can work that out with you individually, if need be.

### **Thread three:** Web tips for writers

1. Cruise the web a bit each week seeking out inspiration and insights about how the web can be of use to you as a writer. You may want to follow a theme. For example, you might want to track listserves or websites that focus on the subject matter you are writing about in your fiction, poetry or nonfiction. Would there be some way to use these sites to bring attention to your work? Many possibilities here. When you find something of interest, present it to us on the discussion board. Then we can ask questions about it. Post any URL right into your part of the discussion.

2. Begin posting to this thread Sept. 15.

3. Read through others' posts and respond to them.

4. Try to post something new of your own every week.

### **Thread four:** The semester workshop

1. Each of you will present three works or pieces for the workshop, creative or "practical."

2. By September 7 send me via Vista internal email a **one short paragraph description of each of the three pieces you intend to submit for the workshop this semester** (it will be possible to change these later if you need to). I especially need to know which genre the pieces will be in.

3. There will be three deadlines for submission of pieces for the workshop:

September 15—Whole Class Discussion

October 15—Small Group Discussions

November 15—Small Group Discussions

4. The work posted should be 5-10 pages.

5. At the end of each work list at least three items you want discussed about your piece (or three questions).

6. Send the work **to me through the Vista mail program via attached file** by the deadline in either MSWord or pdf format.

7. Two days after the deadline click into this thread by opening the file marked “Thread 4: The Semester Workshop” on the course Homepage. There each of the three deadline dates will be listed.
8. Click on the relevant deadline date. Inside this folder will be a folder containing all of the work submitted for that deadline. There will also be a folder containing a discussion for each member of the class.
9. Print out or open a file of one of your fellows’ works, read it, and enter the discussion connected with that file.
10. For the Oct. 15 and Nov. 15 deadlines, the class will be divided up into groups for peer discussions. I’ll let you know what the groups are once I have your one paragraph descriptions of the pieces you intend to submit for the semester workshop.
11. The **responses** to the works posted for the class should be extensive, thoughtful, and as detailed as you can make them. Start with the questions each author has put with the piece. These are the questions in the author’s mind. Then go from there. You’re all pretty familiar with and good at this now, and you all have experience with how to talk with others about their works and how to receive others’ observations. We’re trying to offer observations of our own reactions and thoughts about the piece, and these may or may not be relevant to the author. Figuring out what one’s readers mean by their comments is part of the creative process, a particularly difficult part. I’ll have more to say about that as the discussions unfold. Just remember, that encouragement and support are nice but perhaps not very fruitful; savage criticism is usually not very useful either. As an author yourself, you have the best possibility of saying something that the writer of a piece may find useful in making the piece better.

### **September 15 Deadline**

- The pieces for this first deadline will be discussed by all of us.
- Open the file marked “September 15” and you will find each of your names listed as well as a file marked “Works to Discuss.”
- We’ll discuss four works per week, taking them in the order in which the names are listed.
- You can open the discussion window and place it side by side on your screen with a window of the work for that discussion, or you can print out the work for each of the four people up for that week.

### **October 15 Deadline**

- The pieces for this deadline will be discussed in small groups.
- Open up the file marked “October 15” and you will find three files: 1) all of the works submitted for this deadline, 2) a file containing a list of the groups and membership in each group and 3) a file containing each of the four groups.
- Markup the works of the other members of your assigned group either electronically or in hard copy. Use the tracking changes method or any other that is serviceable and clear.
- Open up the discussion corresponding to the group you were assigned to and begin discussing the works of the members in your group.
- The order for the discussions in each group will be the order in which the names are listed.
- Send your markup copies to the authors in your group either by email, snailmail or as attached files. *Send an electronic or hard copy of this to me as well.*

### **November 15 Deadline**

--We'll do the same basic procedure here as for October, except that the membership of the groups will be different.

--In this case, begin each discussion with a 500 to 1,000 word response to the author's work.

--Send the authors the markups and an electronic or hard copy of them to me.

### ***Evaluation***

Timeliness of all posts and submissions--40 percent

Depth and thoroughness of peer critique and group work—30 percent

Depth and thoroughness of participation in discussions and activities—30 percent

### ***Plagiarism***

Plagiarism is presenting the work of others as your own, from whatever source, whether student or published work. Be sure that if you are using someone else's words or ideas that you indicate such by either a formal or informal citation. Complicity in another's act of plagiarism is itself an act of plagiarism.

From the *WCSU Student Handbook*:

A) Any person who is found guilty of any of the following acts committed while a student on a University campus or on property controlled by a University or University affiliates or in connection with off-campus University activities shall be subjected to the maximum penalty of expulsion or any other penalty authorized herein.

1. Academic misconduct including all forms of cheating and plagiarism.

Violations are subject to disciplinary proceedings, as explained in the section on "Student/University Relations" in the *WCSU Student Handbook*.