Course Description:

I feel that one of the best ways to make us better readers of poetry is to try to write it. This holds true for most skills. If we try to make furniture, we have a better eye for quality when we buy it. If we learn to cook well, we appreciate good cooks. If we work at painting houses, we appreciate a well-painted house. This course will help make you more comfortable in talking about poems, less fearful of poems as mysterious aesthetic objects; more able to recognize what is difficult to do in a poem, less willing to applaud the easy; more confident in your own judgment about lines and poems, less dependent on anthologies.

In this class we will read about different ways of viewing the construction of poems, the elements that help us put poems together. We will consider strategies for improving or revising poems that you have written; study poems in Ordinary Genius as well as in Mary Karr’s collection of poems to see how they have done it—we will look at them from a writer’s point of view rather than the content orientation of most literature classes. We will try to arrive at some definition of what makes a good poem.

Course Requirements:

You should be writing at least two poems per week, though only nine are required for your final portfolio; however, you only have to send 6 through the workshop. I have assigned 6 poems, so that leaves 3 free ones. You will find the assigned ones on the syllabus. It is important to draft a lot of poems even though many of them are dead on arrival. I would like 9 “finished” poems in a portfolio at the end of the quarter. Ted Hughes, a famous British poet and the poet-laureate of England for a number of years, said in the introduction of Sylvia Plath’s Collected Poems that some poems may not have been finished, but they had “temporarily exhausted her ingenuity.” I like that phrase, and I would like those 9 to have exhausted yours: you work them so hard that you don’t know what else to do with them, so you turn them in. Only 2 of the 9 can be short poems (14 lines or less).

At the end of the quarter, you will submit a portfolio that includes the finished poems, the poems that you submitted to the workshop, and assigned exercises and other poems you’ve tried. Perhaps the assigned poems didn’t make it to the “finished” category—that’s fine—but you will need to include them in the portfolio as well. For the final portfolio you will need to include the marked up versions of the poems (by me, preferably) and the final versions that indicate which assignment you were doing.

There will also be weekly quizzes over the reading. (If you audit the class, you aren’t obliged to do any of the work: you can listen, respond, submit things when you want to; you’re paying to absorb things, not earn credit. You can turn in the midterm portfolio, but I’d rather not see a final portfolio from auditors—there’s too much reading at the end of the quarter and I
usually don’t provide much feedback on this portfolio because I’ve already responded to
everything at least once, generally twice.)

**Course Objectives:**

By the end of the quarter you should be able to read any poem and either applaud and
e numerate its virtues or explain why and how it could be improved. So you should be able to
confidently read poems and make suggestions for improvement. You should be able to
appreciate the distinction between what is easy and what is difficult in a poem. You should be
more understanding of those who write and their creative efforts. You will be able to use poetic
forms with some facility and dexterity. You should be able to recognize public poetry from
private, what is sentimental and what isn’t. You should know some strategies for creating and
revising poems; you should understand the basic principles of metrical verse.

**Procedures for Submitting poems:** You will have to photocopy the poems for the class. At
each class meeting you will turn in poems that will be discussed in the next class meeting. We
want the poems to be read closely and thoughtfully. Single space your poems and do not put
your names on them. To conserve paper and photocopying expenses, you can turn in two poems
on the same sheet or do it jointly with another member of the class; you can reduce the size and
single-space (but they should be clearly readable for the old guy with glasses). You must send 6
poems through the workshop; this is a minimum—you can send all 9 if you want to. You should
always keep an extra copy for yourself--never turn in an only copy (I don’t want to be
responsible for losing the best poem of the century).

**Attendance** is absolutely required. One class equals four regular classes. Most of what happens
and is learned in this course happens in class--as you hear how other people have read your
poems, how we talk about poems and revisions, how meter works, etc. If you miss two class
meetings, you should drop the class. Three absences is an automatic “F” for the course.

**Grades:** I do not assign grades to individual poems. I will grade the portfolio at about midterm
break, and then at the end of the quarter. My grades are determined by the way you have revised
according to the suggestions given in class, the ambitiousness of the poems themselves, the
quality of the writing, and the facility with which you’ve handled some of the forms. Poems,
like prose, need to be written clearly and grammatically. Some people have the notion that
poems are some kind of cranial effusion that flows out in whatever “form” it wants to; however,
poems are shaped very deliberately, are revised again and again for clarity and economy, and are
scrupulously grammatical. Ten percent of the grade is dependent on participation and handing
things in on time. Trying hard is good, but difficult to grade. We will work on the criteria by
which we judge poems and apply those criteria all quarter long. You should be able to apply
these criteria to your own work and to pay attention to how others apply them to your work. The
grading roughly breaks down as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Portfolios</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quizzes</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation &amp; attendance</td>
<td>10 (assuming that there is one or fewer absences)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Eng. 365 Syllabus  
Tuesdays: 2-5:00  

*Ordinary Genius*, (OG), Kim Addonizio  
*Sinners Welcome*, Mary Karr  

Oct. 1: General Intro. & writing assignment;  

8: OG: 19-46; Workshop; narrative poem; the first Lion Rock reading is Tuesday Oct 8 at 7:30pm in The SURC Theatre. Alice Derry is the poet and will attend this class for an hour so plan to go to the reading.  

15: OG: 47-76; Workshop; memory poem; SW 1-13  

22: OG: 77-95; Workshop; persona poem; SW 14-26  

29: OG: 99-126; Workshop; imitation poem; SW 27-40  

Nov. 5: OG: 127-155; Workshop; formal poem; SW: 41-55  

12: OG: 156-186; Workshop; **Portfolios due**  

19: OG: 187-213; Workshop; SW: 56-67  

23: OG: 217-248; Workshop  

26: OG: 256-284; workshop  

Dec. 3: OG: 287-296; workshop  

Final:  
**Portfolio due:** 9 poems and marked versions; Reading
POEM ASSIGNMENTS. When you submit them to the workshop, tell us which poem you are trying to write (narrative, memory, form, persona, imitation, or exercise number and page).

1. Write a narrative poem, one that tells the story of an incident. Let it be about anyone. Don’t use a lot of abstract talk. Try to suggest things through details. Incident poems you can use as models are Karr’s “Metaphysique du mal” (8) or look online for Kumanyakka’s “Facing It” about his visit to the Vietnam Memorial.

2. Memory poem: choose some memory or sequence of related memories to write a poem that examines a person, incident, idea. You can use Karr’s “Delinquent Missive” (11) as a model; she combines this strategy with the letter idea—writing a letter to someone from your past, also a good starting point.

3. Write a formal poem (sonnet, villanelle, or sestina). If you choose a sonnet, use iambic pentameter. It must have a narrative context; otherwise, you are prone to emotional talk that is difficult to sustain. I want you to use rhymes (slant rhyme is good, too) but to disguise them by using enjambment and caesuras. You can devise your own rhyme scheme or use Shakespeare’s, Petrarch’s, or Spenser’s. Hand in two versions: one with the scansion marks and one without. If you need help finding models of villanelles and sestinas, let me know, but you can probably find plenty online. A. E. Stallings’s villanelle called “Burned” from Olives is a good model (I can provide that poem; Dylan Thomas’s “Do Not Go Gentle”; Wendy Cope’s “Lonely Hearts”). Good sestinas include “Sestina” by Elizabeth Bishop, Mark Halperin’s “Mists and Imagined Fields”)

4. Write a persona poem (write from the point of view of someone whose gender is opposite of yours); try to make it go on for at least a page. If you choose the point of view of a child, don’t make it overly simplistic—children have complex emotional lives too. Children also have sophisticated thoughts and perceptions, even if their language isn’t equal to yours.

5. Do an imitation of one of the poems you admired either in Ordinary Genius or Sinners Welcome. Include a photocopy of the poem you are imitating when you turn it into the portfolio. By “imitation” I mean that you should try to imitate the writer’s strategies for executing a poem: the type of image-making, the interplay of statement and description, the place he/she tends to go to find the poem in the first place, his/her syntax. You can’t use any of their language, just their strategies. Try to imitate their way of constructing a poem.

6. Try one of the suggestions in Ordinary Genius; I will be making suggestions as we go through each of the chapters. Here are some possibilities: #2, 3, 5 on page 40-41; 7, 8 on pages 72-3; 1,2, 3, 5, 9 on pages 168-169; 1,2,3 page 196.