

Poetry Workshop and Chapbook Project with Catherine Wagner
Master Class: Creative Writing

Catherine Wagner is an American poet and academic who will discuss the craft of writing poetry and her career and professional path as a poet, in addition to reading, discussing, and critiquing student work.

Summary of Catherine Wagner's master class, Poetry Workshop and Chapbook Project by Katherine Factor, coordinator:

I know Ms. Wagner from her work, as well as having heard her read and knowing her first-rate reputation as a poet and teacher. We prepared the creative writing students previous to her visit by studying her work and interviews, discussing influences, and sharing interpretation. Her visit was smashing – she was so smart and covered many areas of poetry – from the mundane to mothering to traditional meter. Her craft talk on poetry was attended by over 20 creative writers and interdisciplinary arts students.



At her reading at Parks Gallery, Cathy read and sang (!) to a full house of students and adults.

Two students were chosen by Cathy to continue on in mentorship, per the AEL grant Kim Henderson, chair of creative writing, devised. One student, Taylor, was a first year senior with straight A's, excellent attitude, and great work – a real sense of the romantic. We wanted to reward her potential and give her professional exposure in poetry, as she could easily pursue any subject well. As her main teacher in poetry, I have seen her grow a soulful part of her inner self. Our other student Whitney Low, is a third year junior who surpasses expectations and can work in a serial manner. Through this project, she was able to undertake tasks she was ready for, and see her poems share subject matter take an arc in a book.

For me as their teacher, it has been really wonderful to see them receive such attention and feedback, showing what sustaining an art practice – poetry- can result in a final artifact- the book. For our department, and for Idyllwild Arts in general, this has really opened doors to publishing more student work more often. This process has given us the idea to launch our own department press – which means we can produce more student work in a finalized form, increase visibility and public relations, focus student goals, and create an identity through the production of artifacts. These chapbooks will be posted/published online on our school website as pdf's on the AEL page.

Thank you AEL, Don Put, Kim Henderson, Cathy Wagner and our students for creating a project that has immediate and long-term benefits.

Katherine Factor
May 2011

Overall Feedback from Catherine Wagner:

I met Whitney and Taylor, the students who later worked with me on the chapbook project, last November at Idyllwild. They (along with the other students) had been reading my work and they had intelligent questions and comments on it that continued after my master class and after my reading. In the master class, I discussed methods for generating poems under various busy circumstances, about the illusion and truth of “inspiration,” and about specific technical issues, including sound play and line breaking. (I later discussed sound play and line breaking more specifically with Taylor and Whitney by phone, with regard to particular poems of theirs.)

The students and I did a number of writing exercises together during the master class, and I had a chance to discuss their poems (which I had been given ahead of time) with them during a poetry workshop the next day. I was amazed by the Idyllwild students' poems overall: I wish my college students were as astonishingly inventive. I enjoyed the work I saw by Taylor and Whitney and thought I could be of use to them as they revised, so with Katherine Factor I selected them to work on the chapbook project.

They each emailed me a stack of poems, and during long phone calls, we discussed revisions, cuts, and possibilities for ordering them into an effective sequence. I also gave them some initial advice about chapbook making and sent them some web sites to look at so that they could get ideas. Whitney and Taylor then sent me revised poems in a tentative order. Around the same time, I sent them instructions and specific advice about designing and putting together a chapbook. In another set of long phone calls, we discussed final ideas for the design, firmed up the order and discussed final revisions. I believe their chapbooks are at the printer now and I'm looking very much forward to seeing them. *I still hope to talk to Whitney and Taylor about potential avenues for publishing their poems in journals.* They are remarkable young women – ambitious, articulate about their work, and graceful at taking criticism. I feel privileged to have worked with them and to have had the chance to meet the students at Idyllwild.

C Wagner
May 2011

Sample Comments from Cathy to Whitney Low:

“Below I've pasted your poems – with the latest versions you sent me first, followed by the ones I'm commenting on for the first time. I've tracked changes, which means you'll probably want to work from your versions, not this document, as you revise; that's because it can be tricky to make Tracked Changes disappear from a document (even if you can't see them, sometimes when you email or print them, they reappear – this is why it's really important to use a PDF as your final version to print from).

“This is a really beautiful and moving and surprising set of poems, and as they share similar subject matter they should make a very coherent chapbook. Think about how you want to order them. You might start with The Rejection of Caius. Try putting them in different orders – shuffle them around and look at how the beginnings and endings change when put next to other poems (context is really important).

“These comments (and especially the cuts/changes I've made) are suggestions only. Do take them seriously, think about them, make a decision that's right for your instincts about your work. I'm looking forward to talking to you about them.” – Cathy W

Student Feedback

Taylor Johnson mid-term feedback: “Catherine Wagner has really given me a new way to look at revision. I've always avoided it like the plague, but Cathy gave me such useful tips for revising my poetry; cutting static words ending with -ing, nixing unnecessary words, and rewriting into prose to find the rhythm. Everything she's said has been really helpful.”

Taylor Johnson final feedback: “I have to say that I was at first very hesitant to agree to this project. As a first year senior, I was uncomfortable with the level I was at

regarding poetry, and my insecurity made the mentorship seem incredibly daunting. But now I'm very glad I did it. What could have been a complete disaster become a great opportunity to hone my poetry skills, work on revision, and learn about the process of actually putting a chapbook together. Cathy Wagner was an invaluable mentor: we kept in contact via email and phone as she guided me through the process of choosing the final selection of poems and revising (something I knew nothing about and had no idea where to start). Katherine, too, was great to have; fully involved with the chapbook process, she even took us off the hill in search for the perfect paper. I really feel like I gained a lot of valuable insight, not only on chapbooks and poetry, but also on how wonderful it is to have a network of other writers for support. I'm really glad I was chosen to do this project and that I got so much out of it; it isn't something I'll ever regret."

Whitney Aviles-Low final feedback: "Working with Catherine Wager has been an incredible experience. It was not altogether what I expected, and I was pleasantly surprised by how much I actually learned. When I started out, I was under the impression that the greatest focus of the project would be on the poetry itself; while my poems were reviewed by Cathy and edited several times, in the end I spent most of my time arranging the chapbook. From start to finish, everything was up to us – from the cover design to the poem order to the type of paper we wanted to use. We were in charge of basically every detail.

"With Catherine's help, I learned the thought process that goes into making chapbooks. Everything matters and lends to the meaning of the chapbook's content. By doing this project, I got a sense of how poem order not only affects the poems' meaning, but also sets up certain expectations for the readers.

"This project took quite a lot of work. Communicating with Cathy through e-mail was very effective, but making phone contact was a little more difficult considering our location. Despite the chapbook's being arranged and all set to print, I plan to continue editing some of the poems included in it; editing work is hardly ever completely done."