



CLASSROOM OBSERVATION

Instructor: Susan B.A. Somers-Willett
“ENWR 212: Introduction to Poetry Writing”

December 1, 2010

Report by: Jessica Restaino

Summary

Professor Somers-Willett began class promptly by asking students if they had any questions about the final project assignment for the course. She then asked students to take out the course syllabus to quickly review midterm exam concepts. The atmosphere in the classroom was immediately warm and focused; Professor Somers-Willett was at once the authoritative presence in the room, opening the session with necessary class business, and also the clear catalyst for the welcoming “feel” to the environment. At 11:40 am, Prof. Somers-Willett announced that the last workshop of the semester was about to start, and asked for a volunteer to go first. There was a clear organizational structure to the workshop, which all students very obviously understood and in which they all participated. First, a student—not the poet—would read the poem aloud; next, the poet would read her own poem aloud; and then Professor Somers-Willett would facilitate a discussion through a series of thought-provoking questions and observations, while the poet took notes and listened. When the discussion reached an ending point, Prof. Somers-Willett invited the poet to ask her own questions of the group. Three students went through this process over the course of the class session. The discussion incorporated a range of relevant terminology, substantive discussion of each poem’s content and structure, and—at all times—encouragement mixed with thoughtful critique.

Critique and Suggestions

This was an exciting and rich class to observe. Perhaps most notable about Prof. Somers-Willett’s pedagogical approach was the very insightful and engaging line of questioning she employed to elevate the level of discussion and analysis in the class. For example, she asked questions such as, “What do you think about that last stanza, as to how it might inform the poem?” and “What do you think is successful about the poem that you’d like to see stay?” Students consistently responded with informed, thoughtful feedback. One of the reasons Prof. Somers-Willett’s questions elicited such substantive input from students is that she had obviously established a shared language among the class for talking about poetry and poems. This language was clearly embedded in her discussion of form and aesthetics, and served to only further heighten the sense of required content knowledge and conceptual understanding for the class. For example, Prof. Somers-Willett clearly expected students to know and recognize formal properties—for example, what makes a poem an “ode”—and used terms such as “speaker,” “narrative,” “concrete images,” and “audience.” By students’ responses, it was clear that they

had—across the board—a working, shared understanding of the language necessary to the work of the class.

Ultimately, all elements of Prof. Somers-Willett’s approach to the class were positive and fruitful during this observation. Students were engaged and thoughtful, and the level of discussion and student work seemed meaningful and appropriate. Prof. Somers-Willett clearly works to create an inviting and also serious intellectual community. She provides both constructive criticism and positive encouragement for her students. At one point, she commended a student for sharing a work in progress, “I appreciate that you brought something that you’re not sure about, that’s in process, because that’s what workshop is about.” Students seemed to trust the class—and Prof. Somers-Willett—with their ideas and their writing. Overall, I commend Prof. Somers-Willett’s approach here and found this class both enjoyable and interesting to observe.

Conclusion

Professor Susan B.A. Somers-Willett is an effective and encouraging teacher for our students. This observation indicated only positive interactions between all involved in the class, as well as an informed, substantive, and appropriately rigorous classroom discourse.

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Observer

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