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**ENGL 311/01**  
**Advanced Fiction Writing**  
**Spring 2009**  
**MWF 1 - 1:50 p.m.**  
**Palmer 211**

**Texts**

- *The Stories of John Cheever*, Vintage
- *The Wonders of the Invisible World* by David Gates, Vintage
- *The Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri, Mariner Books
- *You Must Be This Happy to Enter* by Elizabeth Crane, Punk Planet
- *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* by George Saunders, Riverhead

**Overview**

We might subtitle this class Varieties of Realism, or John Cheever and his Children. In short, it's the class in which you will continue to work on your own fiction while becoming more self-conscious of literary history and context and where that history might leave you as a beginning writer here in 2009. That means that we will continue to read the stories before us with an eye to how they work as stories—what devices and narrative techniques they employ to generate meaning—but we will also at the same time read them with an eye toward literary history and how each of these authors responds to that history (or doesn't). The point is not only for you to work on your individual stories but to begin to think of your individual stories as existing within that continuum.

A premise: the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the short story go from the medium with which authors earned their living and created the financial space in which to write their novels (Faulkner, Fitzgerald) to the medium from which practically no one makes their living. In strict economic terms, the short story no longer has a reason to exist. And yet stories still continue to be written, and freed from paying an author's rent, tied to no commercial purpose, they are free now to wholly be art, and perhaps to respond in some way to the medium which usurped short fiction's position in the culture: television.

And so we will look at how these various authors have handled this change in literary history. Our big canonical text is the mid-century master John Cheever, one of the last professional story writers and one of the geniuses of "realism." With his example of form, subject matter, and aesthetic vision before us, we will read four much more contemporary examples of short fiction to see how these writers have continued the traditions of Cheever or thrown them off entirely to pursue the fantastical, the unreal, the satirical, etc. And we will discuss how these different authors respond to the subsequent influx of mass culture and the schisms of post-modernism.

More broadly, just as in 201, in this workshop we will read, discuss, write, and revise **literary short fiction**. Literary fiction discloses truths about human experience in a moving and artful way. It strives for seamless mimesis while simultaneously making resourceful and aesthetically sound use of all the various aspects storytelling, including language, point of view, plot, character, setting, metaphor, symbolism and tone. In short, you will endeavor to write *literature*. For the purposes of the class, you cannot write genre fiction—that is, fantasy, science fiction, mystery, children's fiction, young adult fiction, and so on. However, hopefully our discussions will also reveal how this prescription gets a little complicated at this point in literary history.

### Writing Load

Everyone will write four (4) complete short stories over the course of this semester. At the end of the semester, you will hand revised versions of two (2) of these stories. Each story *submitted for discussion* should be “complete,” with a worked-out ending—even a bad one. (Fixing bad endings is one of the things workshop is for.) Each story submitted **must exceed 8 pages, double-spaced, in length at time of submission**. You are free to write about whatever you wish and employ whatever points of view or narrative techniques you wish, so long as a) each story is complete with a beginning, middle, and end (though not necessarily in that order) with some sort of epiphany/climax (or at least some aesthetically justifiable absence thereof); b) you maintain a consistent point of view within each story; and c) each story is grammatically and stylistically correct.

You will gather together the original stories, my comments on these stories, and the revised versions of the two stories into a final portfolio, which you will submit to me at the end of the semester for final evaluation. This portfolio should consist of polished, well-crafted fiction. In assessing the merit of the completed portfolio, I will pay special attention to the *revisions* you have made to stories that originally appeared in workshop. The portfolio should run anywhere from 5,000 to 7,500 words (between 16-22 pages), but can certainly be longer.

You will also write two (2) exercises, which I will grade. The average grade of these four exercises will constitute your “exercise average.”

### Story Submissions

During workshop weeks, we will workshop roughly four stories per class period. You will submit your stories to me via email attachment, and I will then compile all the stories into packets corresponding to the days when they will be workshopped and email them back to the class. Each of you is then responsible for printing out that day’s packet. Moreover, you will write *at least* a half-page of typed, single-spaced comments for each story up for discussion. Please bring two copies of these typed-out comments, one for me and one for the author up for workshop.

### Workshops

This class is not really a lecture. No doubt I will do a lot of talking and you will do a lot of listening but the primary goal is to force you to write and to force the rest of the class to discuss that writing in sympathetic and constructive ways. Your task as a student is split between writing short narratives (as well as the exercises) and discussing the work of your peers, which means your in-class discussion/comments and your written critiques are as important as your own writing. It will not only help your fellow students—giving them valuable feedback, giving them an actual audience, turning a private creation into a public act—it will sharpen your own critical skills. You will be able to view your own writing differently after critiquing your peers’ work.

What to say? You should look at your classmates’ writing with an eye toward *how* it works and how *well* it works, as a piece of narrative.

### Attendance

You are allowed to miss three classes for any reason. For every missed class after three, your final grade for the course will be reduced by one third. I make no distinction between “excused” and “unexcused” absences. **If you miss more than 6 classes total, you will fail the course.** In addition, consistent tardiness will be counted as an absence.

### Quizzes

We’ll only have quizzes if class discussion lags. If these occur, they’ll be folded in with your participation grade.

### **Grade Breakdown**

2 exercises—25%

Final portfolio (four original stories accompanied by two revised versions)—60%

Participation (written comments, class discussion)—15%

Your individual pieces of writing won't receive a letter grade but written and verbal feedback instead. How can you make a good grade? Hand in complete stories on time; contribute constructive, energetic feedback on your peers' stories throughout the entire semester; contribute something to class discussion at each class meeting; engage in a concentrated revision for every story in your portfolio, not simply fixing the spelling and changing a character's name; and meet the other particular requirements for the various exercises along the way.

A note about grammar/style: I'm all for aesthetically justifiable rule-bending of standard written English within your short stories. Such as the emphatic use of the incomplete sentence, for example. However, what I won't permit is the disregard of grammar/style conventions that's merely the consequence of a) laziness or b) ignorance of proper usage. For example, incorrect comma and semi-colon usage or failure to properly punctuate dialogue will severely affect your grade. So be deliberate and conscious and exceedingly precise in your writing.

*The four original stories and the two revisions constitute major assignments for this course; as such, if you do not hand in one of these major assignments, you will fail the entire class.*

### **Late Papers**

Each assignment is due on the day stipulated on the syllabus. Any late assignment will be reduced 1/3 of a letter grade for each day that it is delayed (A- to B+, etc.). Any assignment turned in 5 class sessions *after* the original due date will receive a grade of F and can result in failure of the course itself. Also, if you don't hand in a story in time for it to be properly workshopped, you will fail the class.

### **Plagiarism**

As per the Honor Code, all work you hand in during the semester must be entirely your own and produced exclusively for this class.

### **Disability Accommodation**

If you need any accommodations related to a disability, please schedule an appointment with Melissa Butler McCowen, Coordinator of Disability Services, 843-3994, mbutler@rhodes.edu.

*This syllabus and the following daily schedule are subject to change with adequate notice.*

## Tentative Daily Schedule

1/14	Introduction to class	3/2	Lahiri: "This Blessed House"; "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar"; "The Third and Final Continent"; <b>story #2 due</b>
1/16	Cheever: "Preface," vii; "Goodbye, My Brother," 3; "The Enormous Radio," 33	3/4	workshop story #2
1/19	MLK Day: no class	3/6	workshop story #2
1/21	Cheever: "The Season of Divorce," 137; "The Chaste Clarissa," 147; "O Youth and Beauty!" 210; "Reunion," 518	3/9	workshop story #2
1/23	Cheever: "The Five-Forty-Eight," 236; "Just One More Time," 248; "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill," 253	3/11	workshop story #2
		3/13	workshop story #2
		3/16	Spring Break
		3/18	Spring Break
1/26	Cheever: "The Worm in the Apple," 285; "The Country Husband," 325; "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow," 498	3/20	Spring Break
1/28	Cheever: "A Miscellany of Characters That Will Not Appear," 467; "An Educated American Woman," 521; "The Swimmer," 603	3/23	Gates: "The Bad Thing"; "Star Baby"; "The Wonders of the Invisible World"; "Vigil"
1/30	Cheever: "Metamorphoses," 536; "The Geometry of Love," 594; "Another Story," 624; "Three Stories," 672; <b>story #1 due</b>	3/25	Gates: "Beating"; "The Intruder"; "The Crazy Thought"
		3/27	Gates: "A Wronged Husband"; "Saturn; "The Mail Lady"; <b>story #3 due</b>
2/2	workshop story #1	3/30	workshop story #3
2/4	workshop story #1	4/1	workshop story #3
2/6	workshop story #1	4/3	workshop story #3
2/9	workshop story #1	4/6	workshop story #3
2/11	workshop story #1	4/8	workshop story #3; <b>form exercise due</b>
2/13	No class. Wallace: "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," on reserve in library	4/10	Good Friday: no class
2/16	Crane: "My Life is Awesome! And Great!"; "Betty the Zombie"; "Banana Love"; "Notes for a Story about . . ."	4/13	Saunders: "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline"; "Isabelle"
2/18	Crane: "Clearview"; "What Our Week Was Like"; "The Glistening Head of . . ."; "Donovan's Closet"	4/15	Saunders: "The Wavemaker Falters"; "The 400-Pound CEO"
2/20	Crane: "Sally . . ."; "What Happens When Mipods . . ."; Emmanuel"; "Varieties of Loudness in Chicago"; <b>parody exercise due</b>	4/17	Saunders: "Offloading Mrs. Schwartz"; "Downtrodden Mary's Failed . . ."
2/23	Crane: "Blue Girl"; "You Must Be This Happy to Enter"; "The Most Everything in the World"; "Promise"	4/20	Saunders: "Bounty"; <b>story #4 due</b>
2/25	Lahiri: "A Temporary Matter"; "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine"; "Interpreter of Maladies"	4/22	workshop story #4
2/27	Lahiri: "A Real Durwan"; "Sexy"; "Mrs. Sen's"	4/24	workshop story #4
		4/27	workshop story #4
		4/29	workshop story #4
		5/1	workshop story #4; last day wrap up
		5/4	<b>Portfolio due by noon</b>