ENGL 201/01
Introduction to Fiction Writing
Fall 2009
MWF 10 - 10:50 p.m.
Clough 300

Texts

- The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction, edited by Lex Williford and Michael Martone, Touchstone, 2nd edition

Overview
In this class we will study narrative form and theory, leading to a workshop in which students present several samples of their own fiction for discussion. We will read a variety of contemporary short fiction to illustrate its breadth and to give the class concrete examples of different narrative techniques. We will also read a practical text to give us a common vocabulary with which to discuss both the samples and your own classmates’ work.

More broadly, 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.

Writing Load
Everyone will write and revise three (3) complete short stories over the course of this semester. 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 6 pages, double-spaced, in length at time of submission. You are free to write about whatever you wish, so long as you fulfill, at semester’s end, the following requirements:

- One story must be in the first person
- One story must be in the third person
- One story must be told from the point of view of someone not your (i.e., the author’s) gender

You will gather together the three original stories, my comments on these stories, and the revised versions of all three 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 four (4) 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 for each workshop day and email those 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, as a piece of narrative, and you should evaluate how well it works according to some simple conventions of narrative writing we will discuss.

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
4 exercises—25%
Final portfolio (all 3 original stories plus their revised versions)—60%
Participation (written comments, class discussion)—15%

Your individual story drafts 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 “complete story” is defined by: a) one that has a beginning, middle, and end (not necessarily in that order) and that contains some sort of climax/epiphany; b) a story where you maintain a consistent point of view; and c) a story that is grammatically and stylistically correct.

A note about “grammatically and stylistically correct”—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 three original stories and the three 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 7 days past 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

8/26     Introduction to class
8/28     Ch. 1 of Writing Fiction [WF]; “A Temporary Matter,” 321
         9/21     “Nilda,” 144; “Two Kinds,” 599
         9/4      Description exercise due; WF—Ch. 7 (form, plot, structure) & “Happy Endings”; “Everything that Rises Must Converge” 9/25     story #1 due
9/7      Labor Day: No class
9/9      “Car Crash While Hitchhiking,” 288; “Twilight of the Superheroes,” 190 10/2     workshop story #1
9/11     “Tiny, Smiling Daddy,” 228 10/3     workshop story #1
9/14     WF—Ch. 3 (character, dialogue) & “Gryphon” 10/5     workshop story #1;
         9/16     “Silver Water,” 72; “The Fireman’s Wife,” 33; Dialogue exercise due 10/7     WF—Ch 8 (point of view) & “Gusev”
         9/17     Alumnae Poetry Reading, 7:30 p.m., Blount Auditorium 10/9     “Communist,” 214; “Boys,” 413; Character sketch exercise due
9/18     WF—Ch. 4 (character, indirect presentation) & “A Visit of Charity” 10/12     “Xmas, Jamaica Plain,” 609; “Girl,” 319
         10/14     WF—Ch. 6 (time) & “The Swimmer”; “A Serious Talk”
         10/16     “The Cavemen in the Hedges,” 533
         10/19     Fall Break
         10/21     “Sea Oak,” 547; story #2 due
10/26 workshop story #2
10/28 workshop story #2
10/30 workshop story #2

11/2 workshop story #2; **point of view exercise due**

11/4 “Marie,” 293; “The Rest of Her Life,” 628
11/6 WF—Ch. 9 (signs and symbols) & “The First Day”

11/11 “Pilgrims,” 489; “The Shawl” (handout);
11/13 **Story #3 due**

11/16 workshop story #3
11/18 workshop story #3
11/20 workshop story #3

11/23 workshop story #3
11/25 Thanksgiving
11/27 Thanksgiving

11/30 WF—Ch. 10 (theme) & “A Man Told Me the Story of his Life”; “Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot,” 103
12/2 “The Ceiling,” 93
12/4 “Winky” (from ch. 10)

12/7 WF—Ch. 11 (revision) & “Keith”; “Notes on ‘Keith’”
12/9 Last day of class: TBA

12/14 **Portfolio due by noon**