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ENGL 201-02, Introduction to Fiction Writing, Fall 2009

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ENGL 201/02
Introduction to Fiction Writing
Fall 2009
MWF 1 - 1:50 p.m.
Palmer 203

Texts

- *The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction*, edited by Lex Williford and Michael Martone, Touchstone, 2nd edition
- *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, by Janet Burroway, Longman, 7th 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 of 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	9/21	"Nilda," 144, "Two Kinds," 599
8/28	Ch. 1 of <i>Writing Fiction</i> [WF]; "A Temporary Matter," 321	9/23	"Sarah Cole: A Type of Love Story," 1; "The Pugilist at Rest," 304;
8/31	WF—Ch. 2 (detail) & "The Things They Carried"	9/25	story #1 due
9/2	"After Rosa Parks," 129; "Management of Grief," 417	9/28	workshop story #1
9/4	Description exercise due ; WF—Ch. 7 (form, plot, structure) & "Happy Endings"; "Everything that Rises Must Converge"	9/30	workshop story #1
9/7	Labor Day: No class	10/2	workshop story #1
9/9	"Car Crash While Hitchhiking," 288; "Twilight of the Superheroes," 190	10/5	workshop story #1;
9/11	"Tiny, Smiling Daddy," 228	10/7	WF—Ch 8 (point of view) & "Gusev"
9/14	WF—Ch. 3 (character, dialogue) & "Gryphon"	10/9	"Communist," 214; "Boys," 413; Character sketch exercise due
9/16	"Silver Water," 72; "The Fireman's Wife," 33; Dialogue exercise due	10/12	"Xmas, Jamaica Plain," 609; "Girl," 319
9/17	Alumnae Poetry Reading, 7:30 p.m., Blount Auditorium	10/14	WF—Ch. 6 (time) & "The Swimmer"; "A Serious Talk"
9/18	WF—Ch. 4 (character, indirect presentation) & "A Visit of Charity"	10/16	"The Cavemen in the Hedges," 533
		10/19	Fall Break
			WF—Ch. 5 (place) & "Love and Hydrogen"
		10/21	"The Half-Skinned Steer," 520; "The Hermit's Story," 22
		10/23	"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”
- 11/9 “Brownies,” 503; “The Secret Goldfish,” 397
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**