Stanford | Continuing Studies

Course Title: Publishing Fiction: A Playful, Community-Based Approach (online)
Course Code: EGL 59 W
Instructor: Sarah Stone

A Note from the Instructor

> "A win-win or positive-sum outcome means everyone wins, usually through cooperation and joint problem solving." (from the U.S. Institute of Peace)

Writers often alternate between sending out their work to every agent or press in the database and collapsing in front of the TV with a very large bowl of pasta, telling ourselves we don't care about publication. Maybe we keep sending work out and getting it back, and we don't know if it's because it's not quite finished, we're sending it to the wrong places, or we need a better query letter. Maybe we never send out work because it doesn't seem perfect enough, or because there are too many options, or because we're afraid that more rejection will feed the internal self-doubt beasts, and they're already healthy enough.

What if it doesn't have to be like this? The process of finding a publisher, publishing our own books, or becoming a hybrid author can teach writers more about the world, our own work, and what we want and can achieve. It can actually, at least some of the time, be an intriguing learning experience and a way to make new writer friends and to strengthen our own fiction.

This course will help you find your place (or places) in the great ecosystem of journal and book publishing. We will transform your search for publishing partners into a cooperative game with custom-designed strategies to find the best matches between your work and the available venues. We will sort through the dizzying array of traditional and indie publishing options and challenge the false narrative of other writers as competitors. The web is full of publishing misinformation, so we will turn to reliable sources to learn about the current publishing landscape.

Our writing exercises will help you to identify potential publishing partners, manage the ups and downs of the submission process, create query letters and synopses that do not sound as if they were written by a robot, find ways to reach readers, investigate social media strategies for both introvert and extrovert writers, and revise the first five pages of a work for submission. As a community, we will provide supportive, specific feedback on your exercises and the crucial first pages. You will finish the course with a detailed action plan for playing the publishing game with more curiosity and equanimity.

Note: This course is for writers who have taken previous writing courses and have a novel or group of stories well underway. You don't need to be absolutely ready to publish a book, but you'll get the most out of the course if you have been working long enough to have some training in the art and craft of writing, as well as a sense of what you're writing and why it matters to you.

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Course Readings

Each week we'll have readings related to the week's topic, along with suggestions for further reading. Since the contemporary publishing scene changes so quickly, and everyone has different goals and interests, these suggestions will form the basis for individual reading lists of recommended websites, articles, and books about publishing.

Writing Exercises

We will have weekly exercises, five required and five optional, as we create the foundations of each writer's publishing approach. Some of these exercises will help you discover more about your own writing and the best available venues for your work. Others will raise your awareness of what you need to do to actually send out your work. We'll set up the practices and systems that help you with both the time-management and accountability that help turn good intentions into actual submissions. Should you be looking for publishers or publishing your own work? Is there some alternative to "marketing" for getting your work into the world and finding readers? (You may have guessed that I firmly believe there is.)

You'll find details on our topics and the work we'll be doing in the schedule at the end of this syllabus.

Discussions

Every week, we'll discuss ideas and examples related to our week's topic. These discussions are optional but will make a big difference to your learning in the course. The maximum limit for initial discussion responses is 250 words: this helps to protect your writing time, acknowledges that workshop and exercise responses are a higher priority in terms of class work, and also, very importantly, allows the discussion to be a discussion. When you keep your response thoughtful but brief, it creates room for other people to join the conversation. Your response doesn't have to be a full 250 words -- a substantive paragraph is enough when you're pressed for time. The ideal way to respond to a question is to enter into conversation with your colleagues. For this reason, I suggest replying to each other's posts, only starting your own thread if you want to address a really different topic. And I invite you to add additional thoughts and responses as the conversation unfolds.

Beginnings Workshop

Once we've had a chance to get to know everyone's work and aims for their books, we'll workshop the crucial first pages, up to 1700 words, of a novel or the initial story in a collection. You'll work in small groups, and everyone will also receive my feedback. We're looking for considered, generous, honest, and useful responses.

This workshop is designed to get the crucial first few pages in shape, as a way of inviting in your readers and clearly setting out the promises and expectations of the book. We're looking at a very short selection in order to allow us to give a close reading of these first pages. (Many agents and editors will read only the first page for most submissions, so we'll give special attention to that opening.) The opening of a book is essential for establishing our relationship with a reader. Sometimes we're so hyper-aware of this that it can actually get in our way, so we'll read each participant's opening pages with attention to artistic integrity and craft as well as to potential readers' experiences.

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Weekly Routine

Each week, you'll log onto Canvas and work through the week's module, which will include my lecture, writing and reading assignments, any optional materials or links, and other announcements. Writing exercises, workshop pieces, and discussion responses can be posted in the appropriate threads, which you can find by clicking either the "Home" or "Discussion" view. The lecture and assignments for the coming week will be available on the Friday before the week begins. This way, if you know you're going into a busy period, you can get ahead on your work.

MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY: During the week, you'll post your responses to the readings and discussion questions, respond to the work of your peers, and ask any questions you have. I'll come into the online classroom at least three times during the week – generally on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursday afternoons (though I'll almost always drop by the classroom around midday Friday to check on pressing questions). During my classroom sessions, I will respond to work as much as possible in the order in which it was posted, responding to required work before additional discussions, in order to make sure everyone is getting their responses. I read all of your responses to each other as well and chime in when I have something to add. If there are more posts than I can do justice to at one time, I'll get to the rest when I return to the classroom. I also check email at least once each weekday in case of questions and will email you with class announcements and further thoughts about our discussions.

WEEKENDS: Here is a chance for you to get ahead on the week's work if you wish to post exercises or responses to discussion questions for the following week. I'm off Canvas and email on the weekends and am a believer in the benefits of taking an Internet break and restoring our single-tasking brains and our ability to concentrate. If it works for you to post on the weekends, though, please do. Come by the classroom whenever it works for you. The beauty of an online class is that we can all do our work when our schedules permit; we don't have to be working simultaneously. So log on when it's convenient for you, morning or night, weekday or weekend. On Mondays, the previous week will become closed for posting, though it will remain available for reading throughout the course.

Chat/ZOOM Schedule

We'll have a mixture of group live group video chat/ZOOM sessions and individual office hours to discuss your own writing and publishing plans. The group chats for our term will combine informal conversation and specific themes and processes. Zoom also records and uploads audio and video versions of the chats, with embedded transcripts, into our Warpwire page so you can watch or listen to them even if you can't attend (keep in mind that, like everything in the course, they're confidential and not to be shared).

The chats will take place on Thursday, April 2 from 1:30 to 2:30 p.m. PT; Thursday, April 9 from 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. PT; Tuesday, April 28 at 5 p.m. PT; and Thursday, June 4 from 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. PT. These dates will be on our course calendar, and I will also post reminders and connection information in Announcements.

Since everyone has different work hours and is likely to be in multiple time zones, I've set these up at a variety of times, and attendance is also optional. In the weeks in between, I'll be available by appointment for anyone who wants a one-to-one chat about their writing. All of this is completely optional. Our primary place for conversations and classwork will always be in our online discussions.

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Grade Options and Requirements

- *No Grade Requested (NGR)*
  This is the default administrative option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.
- *Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)*
  This is the option I recommend: it will give you some sense of accountability but with fewer requirements than a letter grade. To receive credit, you need to submit at least five exercises, including your beginning, and comment generously on your classmates' exercises and workshop pieces. Please note that workshop responses are mandatory for those who want credit for the class.
- *Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)*
  Grades are based on your doing the work and being fully present and part of our processes rather than on the "quality" of your fiction or publishing materials, so that you can feel free to take risks and experiment with your work. For this option, you will also need to at least submit five exercises, including your beginning, comment generously on your classmates' exercises and workshop pieces, and actively participate in most discussions. Please note that workshop responses are mandatory for those who want credit or a grade for the class.

*Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.

Your peer responses should be thoughtful and helpful and should demonstrate evidence that you are absorbing the lessons. Keep in mind that computers break down, people get sick, bosses suddenly come up with large last-minute projects…you may want to post your assignments and workshop responses on the earlier side. You'll get the most out of the class if you stay regularly active in the forums and put attention into the reading and your responses to your classmates as well as your own work. Email me if you run into trouble so we can figure out a solution.

Since breakthroughs happen at different speeds and different times – troughs that appear endless to us may be followed by huge leaps, but sometimes not for a while – your grade will be based on turning in your work and writing helpful commentaries for your fellow writers. It doesn't work to grade exercises or fiction based on "quality," because a) this kind of grading is highly subjective, and b) writing for a grade gets in the way of your sense of passion and inner purpose (this is just as true when you're writing query letters or synopses). Still, to get the most helpful reading from the rest of us, please make sure your writing is fairly well copy-edited for obvious spelling and grammar errors and is on time.

Keep in mind that some people are in a moment of their life where the course can be central, others have multiple outside obligations. If all you can do is the minimum requirements, it's still enough to be a full member of our classroom community. Some people will have the time and energy to engage very regularly in ongoing discussions, and others will dip in and out as their schedules allow. The priorities, though, are to do your own writing, to do the processes to discover publishing and career-building strategies that feel authentic and possible for you, and to respond to your colleagues' exercises and beginning.

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Confidentiality & Ownership

Writing workshops are built on trust. This may be even truer in an online course where we're not all sitting together in the same room. To this end, it's important that we all agree that the work we present here and the personal information we share stays within this group. Everything we post in here, or say in Zoom chats, is confidential: sharing writing or personal information by group participants is not permitted without express permission from the writer. Stanford has more information about this as the course begins. The writers in Continuing Studies are a great group, so in my experience, as we approach our responses and those of others in good faith, it all works wonderfully well, and our online communications have a high degree of trust and community support.

Schedule

Here is a preliminary schedule for our topics and activities this term (there may be small changes, but in general, this is how we'll be proceeding). In each week we'll have a mixture of lectures, exercises, and readings to demystify publishing, including magazine, traditional large- and small-scale book publishing, and a variety of self-publishing options. You'll have exercises, with feedback from both instructor and class members, to discover your strongest ideas and material and to figure out how your work intersects with publishing options. We'll also address blocks and common writers' questions.

Since publishing is such a huge, complex, and fluid industry, we'll be looking at overviews of each topic: there's always much more to know. Still, by the time we finish a week, you should have the tools and information to know what you still need to learn and what resources will help you out, including where and how to acquire additional knowledge.

Week One: The Publishing Landscape and the Individual Writer
We'll begin the course with a bird's-eye look at the publishing landscape, covering both traditional and innovative forms of book publishing, along with an exploration of your own ideas, projects, and backgrounds as readers and writers.

Week Two: Treasure Hunt
How do writers get published? And what practices should they avoid? We'll explore the connections between our reading and our writing and discover your literary kin and the relationships between your individual style, subject matters, personality, and potential publishing avenues. This week, you'll begin working actively to unearth your own likely places in the publishing world.

Week Three: Platform for Fiction Writers
We'll consider ways to create or augment your online and offline presence as a writer even before publication, as you strengthen your relationship to your writing community and reach out to potential readers in a way that plays to your strengths. We'll also take a look at thriving despite the ebbs and flows of the writer's life: surviving success and failure, droughts and floods. This week includes resources for flourishing in the long run, as well as a deeper dive into the nature and purposes of your own fiction.

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Week Four: Playing Pieces
As we begin to consider how to find and work with traditional publishing partners, including agents and editors of small and large presses, you'll learn about, and have the option of practicing, book descriptions/synopses, a crucial skill for both traditionally published and indie authors.

Week Five: Invitations
Not all writers want, or need, agents or traditional publishers, but it helps to have possible strategies for getting their attention and interacting with them. You'll have the option of practicing those non-robotic query letters to an agent or editor for a book-length work of fiction, whether mainstream, literary, or genre. These letters will include bios and one-sentence book descriptions, useful for all authors, including indie authors preparing public presentations of their work.

Week Six: Wordplay
Workshop Week! Working in small groups, we're going to focus on establishing just how much a book can accomplish in the first five pages and how your opening pages work with your synopsis and overall intentions for the book. You'll strengthen your writer's voice and the book's invitation to its readers in ways that are true to your purposes and aesthetic and also likely to capture and hold your particular readers' attention.

Week Seven: Your Own Rules
The writer as entrepreneur, Part I. Because self-publishing is such an important part of the new literary landscape, we're going to take a close look at how it works, including evaluating whether self-publishing is a reasonable option for your work and learning useful sources and methods for finding reliable partners and information about the process.

Week Eight: Art Show
The writer as entrepreneur, Part II. Both traditionally published and indie writers need to understand decisions about covers, book design, and so on as they relate to both sales and reaching your particular readers. This week is about the book as object: online and offline.

Week Nine: Social
In the run-up to book publication, and once the book is out, you'll have a variety of online and IRL ways of building your community and reaching readers. You'll want to plan for some of these well in advance. We'll explore Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media sites, with strategies for both introvert and extrovert writers.

Week Ten: The Party
This week, you'll bring together your discoveries from the course and set up your action plan, including taking your first step on this plan, as well as creating accountability systems to move forward after the course ends.

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