Course Title: Novel II: Plot and Structure  
Course Code: OWC 304C  
Instructor: Stephanie Reents

Course Summary: Novel II is designed to allow you to build on your hard work in Novel I. You’re at an exciting point in the process of writing, a place where you may begin to feel the book take its shape. We’ll talk about issues that many writers encounter mid-draft and we’ll discuss techniques for how best to work with the information you have about where you’re headed. We’ll also work hard to keep the sense of discovery alive. Surprising yourself, and letting what you’ve done so far speak to you in unexpected ways, is key to dynamic work.

Like Novel I, this class will focus on workshop. Everyone will draft the next 5,000 words of their novel for their peers and instructor to critique and discuss. We will also read and discuss two novels in order to explore different ways of structuring your material as well as maintaining your momentum (or keeping your plot in motion) as you move into the middle section of your novel. Weekly “lectures” (the introductions in our schedule), readings, and writing assignments (required for the first three weeks, but optional after that) will center around issues such as raising the stakes of your novel, finding the right fictional form, managing scenes and sections, handling subplots and minor characters, thinking forward to the end, and much more.

Writing Exercises

In the first three weeks of the course, you will do short (up to 750 words) writing exercises designed to help you write or revise your own novel, working with your own materials and characters. You’ll respond to at least three of your classmates’ exercises a week and receive responses from them. We’ll have exercises all the way through the course, but they become optional once workshop begins. Our exercises will be a chance to put into practice the concepts from the week’s lectures (topics listed at the end of the syllabus, in the “Schedule” section).

After workshops begin, we’ll be focusing on the workshop pieces. I will still respond to optional exercises, once you’ve posted your workshop responses, though more briefly than in the initial weeks, and I encourage you to respond to
each other if you have time and especially if you’re trying out the exercises yourself.

Workshop

In this course, everyone’s primary responsibility will be writing 5,000 new words of their novel and commenting on the writing of other students. Beginning at the end of week three, two or three writers at a time will submit a section of their novels for everyone in class to workshop via a supportive and detailed letter of feedback. You’ll post your workshop pieces by the end of the day Friday before your workshop week. (You will sign up for your workshop slot at the beginning of the term.) Other students’ mandatory letters of response (roughly 500-700 words) are due by the Wednesday of the workshop week. At the end of the day on Wednesday, the writer may post responses: asking questions, seeking clarification, testing out a new idea. I hope that we can continue “talking” about the workshop pieces through the end of the week.

I’ll give you more advice about how to shape these letters so that they’re both supportive and constructive, but for now I’ll say that becoming a good reader is an important step in your development as a writer. Learning how to identify the strengths and weaknesses in others’ fiction will help you recognize the strengths and weaknesses in your own. Besides commenting on specific craft issues (which I’ll describe later), you’ll talk about what makes the pages memorable; articulate their underlying ideas; and finally make specific suggestions for revision.

Remember: your job isn’t to tell the writer to write a different novel or chapter; rather, by using the power of your imagination, you should attempt to describe what the novel could be in its best incarnation and then provide detailed suggestions for how the writer could realize the best incarnation of his or her project.

Be kind. Be generous. Read another’s work as you would like your own work to be read. Don’t shy away from making suggestions. (Being too nice is its own kind of irresponsible workshop behavior) Comment with an eye towards helping another writer write the best novel possible. One of my teachers, Barbara Kingsolver, once said that the lucky thing about being a writer is that everyone can win! It’s not like running a marathon where only one person breaks the tape at the finish line.

One final note: workshops are built on reciprocity. If you have missed writing critiques of your classmates’ work, then they are not required to comment on yours.
Discussions

Each week, I’ll post a couple of questions for you to reflect on, related to the novels we’re reading and the craft issues we’re discussing. I highly encourage you to jump in to these discussions. As you know, discussions are always more interesting when more people participate and there’s a wide range of opinions. At the same time, please don’t feel like you need to write a novel in response to my questions (especially you’re actually focused on writing your own novels). Instead, aim to keep your posts fairly short (a sentence, a paragraph, 250 words) and try engage with one another – just as you would in a live classroom.

Reading is a fundamental part of a writer’s training. Writers love to read, and they engage in the act of reading just as anyone with an appreciation for the written word does. They read to find out what happens next and why. They read to lose themselves in imaginary worlds. They read to understand characters they’d never encounter in their real lives or to become more intimate with those who seem as familiar as family and friends. They read to make discoveries about themselves and new situations. They read to feel. At the same time, writers read as writers, paying close attention to the architecture of the text. We, writers, read to understand the choices that another writer has made to produce certain effects. We might ask: Why does the opening of this work make me feel so sad? What makes this unsympathetic character likeable? How is time handled in this novel? How does this writer keep complicating the plot?

This course asks you to practice reading as a writer, since this will ultimately strengthen your own writing. You will be encouraged to bring together your emotional side (How does this make me feel?) with your analytical side (What formal choices has the writer made that could explain the way I’m feeling?).

Required Readings

Since this is a workshop, you should prioritize reading your classmates’ submissions. Before we begin workshopping (and perhaps before the term begins), I hope you will also read the books listed below since we will be discussing them.

Title: Disgrace
Author: J.M. Coetzee

Title: Asymmetry
Author: Lisa Halliday

Chat/ZOOM Schedule

We’ll have informal and optional weekly live group video chat/Zoom sessions on Sundays for the first three weeks of the term, at different times, to accommodate different time zones. These chats will be a mix of close readings and craft discussions, writing exercises, and open Q&A.

Sunday, April 5, from 5:00 – 6:00 p.m. PT  
Sunday, April 12 from 1:30 – 2:30 p.m. PT  
Sunday, April 19 from 5:00 – 6:00 p.m. PT

We’ll also have two final meetings in the last two weeks of class. These meetings will serve as a workshop follow-up, where you can ask your classmates and me any questions about your piece, the topics we’ve covered, writing in general, or your next steps.

Sunday, May 31, from 5:00 – 6:00 p.m. PT  
Sunday, June 7 from 1:30 – 2:30 p.m. PT

In the weeks when we don’t have group chats, I’ll have more traditional office hours and will be available by appointment for anyone who wants a 20- to 25-minute one-on-one chat about their workshop piece or process questions. If you’d like a chat, email me through the course Inbox, and we’ll find a time. The best time to schedule these chats is usually a week or so after your workshop, to think about any lingering questions you might have. If you can’t make the group chats, you can watch or listen to the audio and video versions. We record these and post them on the same day as the chat. Keep in mind that, like everything in the course, they're confidential and not to be shared. I will post reminders and connection information in Announcements. These will also be posted in the online course calendar so you can always find them. All of this is optional! Our primary place for conversations and classwork will always be in our online discussions.

Due Dates (quick overview)

These due dates are the same every week. I expect your posts to go up on the day that is listed below, but I don’t care what time that day you post by, as long as it’s before you go to bed and the work is up by the time we get up and enter Canvas the next day.
**Wednesday by end of day:**
Post your writing exercises (weeks 1-3), initial discussion point responses on the published reading, and – once we begin workshop – workshop critiques.

**Friday by the end of the day:**
Post responses to the exercises (weeks 1-3).

Post your piece that is up for workshop ahead of the week that you chose to be workshopped.

I will respond to work in the order in which it was posted. I read all of your responses to each other as well and chime in when I have something to add. I post my workshop responses on Wednesday each week. I post somewhat late in the chain, so that my response won’t influence the group. 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.

Barring medical/family emergency, you will lose points for turning in work after the week on which it was due. It’s important for us to keep moving forward. If you owe an author a letter of critique, it will be your responsibility to get it to that person (and copy me so that I know you did it). I know that some of you use the weekends to do work, and that’s great. Since workshop pieces come in on Fridays, you always have a full weekend ahead of workshop to do your letters of critique then, if necessary.

**Grading**

**1/3: Workshop submission.** Up to 5000 words, submitted on the date that you sign up for and formatted for reading: submitted in Word (not as a PDF, Pages, or Google Doc), spell-checked and proofread, double-spaced, in a 12 point font with page numbers. You’ll also want to paste a version into your workshop thread, to make sure everyone gets to read it. Important note: if you’re missing critiques, then responses from anyone to whom you have not written a letter become optional.

**1/3: Letters of critique.** These letters should be respectful, honest, and specific, approximately 500-700 words long. Strike a balance between providing supportive feedback and constructive questions or suggestions for revision. These should also be posted on time (by end of Wednesday), so that we have a full discussion. If a real emergency comes along and you must be late, please let me know and then post them as soon as you can.
1/3: Overall participation. Includes three mandatory writing exercises in the first weeks of class and posting one response, up to 250 words, on any of the discussion questions. (More than one is fine, but one is required).

I do not grade your writing based on its "quality," because a) this is subjective, and b) writing is hard enough without worrying about a grade. Try to write out of a sense of passion and purpose, not to please me. Please be a good community member in all the ways spelled out here, plus those others you know all about, and make sure your writing is copy-edited and that it shows substantial engagement. Your peer responses should be thoughtful and detailed enough to be useful to the writer and should demonstrate evidence that you are absorbing the craft lessons and putting real thought into their work.

Etiquette and Acceptable Online Behavior

Please strive to follow “the golden rule” in online exchanges. Be as courteous and respectful as you want others to be with you. We are all here (I hope) from a shared love of novels and writing, a desire to grow and produce the best books we can, and an interest in receiving some help along the way as well as offering it in return. We are a community. We want to support one another creatively. Don’t post anything that isn’t in keeping with that intention. If someone writes something that feels problematic, you can email them to work it out privately (via the course inbox, which you can find in the vertical red strip at the left of the screen). And please let me know as well if you would like me to step in and assist you. When we do need to work through a conflict, let’s do it with as much affection and compassion as possible. Please also read Stanford’s information on Etiquette and Acceptable Online Behavior in the Introduction module and remember that everything in the course is confidential and not to be shared outside the classroom.

Tentative Weekly Outline:

Week One: Getting to Know Your Novel-In-Progress
Week Two: Intensity and Stakes
Week Three: Narrative Structure
Week Four: Interiority / Exteriority
Week Five: Scenes and Sections
Week Six: Writing Discomfort

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
365 Lasuen St., Stanford, CA 94305
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Week Seven: Subplots and Minor Characters
Week Eight: Discovering Meaning
Week Nine: Outlining and Other Graphic Approaches
Week Ten: Casting Forward