Course Title: Making a Scene: Dynamic Short Fiction  
Course Code: FICT 36 W  
Instructor: Lewis Robinson

Course Summary:

Scene is the fundamental unit of story, and great scenes are the key to great stories. But what makes a scene gripping? How can we keep our readers on the edge of their seats? What are the pitfalls of quiet scenes in which the protagonist takes a bath? Or highly-torqued scenes in which the same protagonist is struck by lightning? This course will focus on the craft of writing scenes that compel, whether obviously dramatic or not. We will begin with writing exercises to develop a sense of action, concrete details, and psychological underpinnings. After writing, sharing, and discussing a series of exercises, we will work to see how our scenes can best be woven into a storyline. This transition will open a whole new craft conversation. When is dialogue necessary? How should we balance sensory details and explanation? We will study the work of Jhumpa Lahiri, Mary Gaitskill, Richard Ford, Z.Z. Packer, Flannery O’Connor, and others.

*Please see course page for full description and additional details.

Required Texts:

Fiction Writer’s Workshop by Josip Novakovich  
https://www.amazon.com/dp/1582975361/ref=rdr_ext_tmb

100 Years of the Best American Short Stories edited by Lorrie Moore and Heidi Pitlor  
https://www.amazon.com/dp/B00QPI449E/ref=rdr_kindle_ext_tmb

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions.  
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Grade Options and Requirements:

- **No Grade Requested (NGR)**
  - This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.

- **Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)**
  - Students must participate in at least 70% of weekly discussions and/or Zoom sessions.

- **Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)**
  - Students must participate in at least 70% of weekly discussions and/or Zoom sessions, and complete a piece of written work (to be discussed further in 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.*

**Tentative Zoom Schedule**: Friday 12pm-1pm PST

*Please note that the Zoom schedule is subject to change.*

**Tentative Weekly Outline:**

**Week 1: Source Materials**

Haruki Murakami compares the process of writing to digging a hole in the sand. The writer sweats, cursing the shovel. The writer persists until finally she runs across something unexpected: a deep, secret water vein. The only way such good fortune is possible is from gaining the strength to dig continuously.

When a writer starts a story, there are no time-saving prescriptions, and there isn’t a correct path. The overall objective of this class will be to write a complete short story, around 10-20 pages, as well as to focus on the vividness of our dramatic moments, our scenes. To get there, we’ll stick our shovels in the sand. We’ll experiment and explore. We’ll use the first three weeks to write and discuss a series of “story starts,” writing exercises that will get us to dig unselfconsciously. We’ll discuss what we uncover.

Try as best you can to think and live as writers during the course of these 10 weeks. Jot down ideas as they come to you. As the writer Joseph Heller once said...
of his work habits: “I have to be alone. A bus is good. Or walking the dog. Brushing my teeth is marvelous—it was especially so for Catch-22. Often when I am very tired, just before going to bed, while washing my face and brushing my teeth, my mind gets very clear … and produces a line for the next day’s work, or some idea way ahead.”

The key to this class: the more you push yourself to write, even when you don’t feel at the top of your game, the better fiction writer you’ll become. To make progress as writers we must expect that first-draft work might not be dazzling. Your ability to hand in assignments on time will be essential to the workings of the class.

Although our responses to exercises (beginning in week 1) may not be as comprehensive as our comments in our story draft workshops (beginning in week 5), we’ll each write a thoughtful paragraph of feedback. I’ll offer suggestions and guidance for these comments.

Reading assignments: Fiction Writer’s Workshop chapter 1, “Sources of Fiction.” “The Third and Final Continent” by Jhumpa Lahiri (100 Years anthology).

**Week 2: Character**

What is the difference between words and the world? How do characters, when described with specific language, come alive to a reader? We will take a close look at the folks populating our early writing exercises. Why do some characters seem static, while others really jump off the page? Asking questions about our characters (What do they want and need? What are their dreams? What are their secrets?) can lead us toward a discussion about plot.

Reading assignments:
*Fiction Writer’s Workshop* chapter 3, “Character.” “The Girl on the Plane” by Mary Gaitskill (100 Years anthology).
**Week 3: Plot**

No car chase or shark attack can substitute for forthright, consistent characterization. The plot of a short story should spring from its characters, so the more able we are to plumb their depths, the more engaging our plot will be. How might the action of our stories best reveal the true hearts of our characters?

It will be helpful at this point to consider sources of tension in the stories we're reading and the stories we're beginning to write. What internal pressure, and external pressure, does each protagonist face? How might these two sources of tension be related?

Reading assignments:
*Fiction Writer’s Workshop* chapter 4, “Plot,” pp. 64-86.
“Everything That Rises Must Converge” by Flannery O’Connor (100 Years anthology).
“Communist” by Richard Ford (100 Years anthology).

**Week 4: Point of view**

Understanding how the point of view is functioning in a given story is critical. The p.o.v. should be the engine of the narrative. What is being highlighted and what is being withheld, and why? What are the advantages and disadvantages of telling a story in first-person or third-person? What bearing does the emotional and psychological state of the narrator have on the telling of a story?

The first draft of your short story will be due on Friday, April 25th. These story drafts should be roughly 10-20 pages. We will begin workshopping stories in week 5, roughly 3-5 stories per week.

A thoughtful and honest workshop atmosphere is worth striving for. Our goals for workshop will be: 1) to be compassionate in our attempt to understand a piece of writing from the inside, and 2) to separate the text from its author so that we can provide honest and constructive feedback. For example, each time we workshop we should be asking the following questions: what is the genius of the current
draft? How might that genius be further capitalized upon and developed? It is important to remember that the more thoughtful and specific your written critiques are, the more you will hone the skills you need to revise your own stories. (Each posted critique should be a page or so in length.) The best workshops are compassionate, candid, and have a “quid pro quo” feeling.

Reading assignments: Fiction Writer’s Workshop chapter 5, “Point of View.” “Brownies” by Z.Z. Packer (100 Years anthology)

**Week 5: Setting**

Are characters born of their settings, or the other way around? (Had *Wuthering Heights* been set in a sunny beachside resort would the romance have ended happily?) As fiction writers, we’re often paying such close attention to the interiors of our characters that we lose sight of the surroundings. Setting should be more than just a backdrop; we’ll compare and contrast various strategies for evoking “atmosphere” and we’ll consider ways to integrate setting and characterization.

Well-rendered sensory details will engage your readers, but even more important is the story that these details are telling.

Reading assignments:
*Fiction Writer’s Workshop* chapter 2, “Setting.”
“Fiesta, 1980” by Junot Diaz (100 Years anthology).

**Week 6: Dialogue**

Story dialogue provides us with vivid occasions to bear witness. Of course, a narrative can suffer from inauthentic or extraneous dialogue; every story must earn its opportunities to showcase conversation. When is dialogue necessary, and what exactly creates a charged, energetic scene?

Dialogue in fiction is made to seem like real speech, but it’s not *exactly* like real speech. If one were to transcribe a conversation between two people on the street,
the dialogue would probably seem boring and extraneous. As we practice writing
dialogue, we’ll look for ways to capitalize upon subtext. After all, dialogue in fiction
is more often a way to express miscommunication than it is to impart information.
Story dialogue should always feel essential, and it should contain some form of
tension. When we discuss an exchange of dialogue in a scene—while we workshop
student stories, and when we’re studying published stories—we will ask ourselves
what exactly is being expressed about the dynamic between the characters.

Reading assignments: *Fiction Writer’s Workshop* chapter 6, “Dialogue and Scene.”
“Awaiting Orders” by Tobias Wolff (100 Years anthology).

**Week 7: Beginnings and Endings**

How can you hook a reader in the first sentence, or the first paragraph? How much
resolution is needed by the end of the story? What kinds of endings feel false to
us? What kinds of endings are too abrupt? In answering these questions, we’ll also
adress pacing, and the balance of summary and scene.

Reading assignments: *Fiction Writer’s Workshop* chapter 7, “Beginnings and
Endings.”
“Lawns” by Mona Simpson (100 Years anthology)

**Week 8: Description and Word Choice**

This will be our opportunity to talk—and to nitpick—about the difference between
what the writer wants to convey and what is actually being conveyed. What is the
purpose of sensory detail? When is description extraneous? When and how might
description draw too much attention to itself?

Reading assignments:
*Fiction Writer’s Workshop* chapter 8, “Description and Word Choice.”
“Refresh, Refresh” by Benjamin Percy (100 Years anthology)
Week 9: Voice

“Voice” is much talked by literary critics, but what does this term actually mean? If we can agree that that voice of Jhumpa Lahiri’s work is different from Mary Gaitskill’s, what is the evidence? Let’s break it down.

How might a writer new to the short-story form establish a distinctive voice?

Reading assignments:
*Fiction Writer’s Workshop* chapter 9, “Voice.”
“If You Sing Like That For Me” by Ahkil Sharma (100 Years anthology)

Week 10: Revision

If our workshops are worth their salt, each writer will feel energized to get back to work on their stories, to sharpen the details, to bolster characterization, to reconsider the balance of summary and scene. What are the best strategies? What if the critiques you receive contradict each other? We will discuss how to embark upon the most important task you face as a writer: re-writing.

Reading assignments: *Fiction Writer’s Workshop* chapter 10, “Revision.”
“At the Round Earth’s Imagined Corners” by Lauren Groff (100 Years anthology)