Course Title: Writing Mysteries and Thrillers: How to Craft Successful Intrigue and Suspense
Course Code: EGL 16W
Instructor: Seth Harwood

Course Summary:

This course focuses on writing Mysteries and Thrillers, aka Crime Fiction, which I define as broadly as fits your needs. Whatever you choose to write, if it feels like it fits this genre to you, it is open territory.

As stated in the course description, this is not a traditional workshop. Instead, students will work incrementally on building the opening chapter of a novel or a short story, submitting roughly 500-800 words per week in small groups, where peers will give paragraph-length responses. By course’s end, students will have a finished draft of a chapter or a story.

My own comments will come directly to each writer every week. I will focus on craft and how the words and sentences create scenes on the page to draw readers in and connect with them.

Our focus will be on how each student’s work functions, making this a priority in comments over a story’s events and turns. Our goal is to differentiate effective writing from what still needs work. We will build objective criteria for peer- and self-evaluation.

This course is meant to be fun. We will create a supportive community of writers reading one another’s work. I look forward to getting started.

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

- *On Writing* – Stephen King  
  This will serve as our craft book. We’ll use it to cover issues relating to form, content, writing practice vocabulary and creation of stories (where they come from).

  This anthology will give us the chance to read classic stories in the genre to practice talking about creative work, developing the proper language to read as writers, analyzing craft, technique and effective narrative strategies.

Grade Options and Requirements:

- **Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)** – written work is required. Your grade is based on the following:
  1) weekly writing assignments
  2) responses to peers (on time, balanced and constructive)
  3) participation in class discussions

- **Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)** - Attendance and participation in 70% of assignments and discussions is required.

- **No Grade Requested (NGR)** - No work is required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided. (Not suitable for those requiring proof of attendance/completion.)

Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final class meeting, by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies department.

Your grade will be largely based on your level of participation in the class. Whether adding to the online forums, giving your peers feedback on their work, or completing class assignments to build your own writing, I’m looking for you to have fun and to stay engaged. I also know that life intervenes. If you’re worried about missing parts of the class, see below about my Open Door Policy.

*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*:

Weekly Video Chat for this course will be Wednesdays at 12:00PT/3:00ET.
Note: Attendance in chat is not mandatory, but if you are unable to make it, I ask that you watch or listen to the recording each week. We cover a lot of good ground in these discussions.

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

Assignment for First Class:

Thumb through *The Best American Mystery Stories of the Century* looking at the range of beginning strategies used by the authors. Choose one or two openings that especially grabbed you for sharing during our first week(s). We’ll be talking about openings and how/why certain ones work for us.

Tentative Weekly Outline:

Week 1
- Intros, Getting to know each other and our writing goals
- Orientation to Canvas
- Discussion: [Story development] Anatomy of an opening
- Writing Assignment: Openings: Start in the Middle
- Reading Assignment: Frank Conroy “The Writers’ Workshop”

Week 2
- Discussion: [Craft Week] Bring your reader in by getting him or her to visualize the story right away—Creating the movie in the reader’s mind
- Writing Assignment: Building Action using Scenes and Dialogue – Set the Stage
- Develop your opening using ideas from scene/dialogue discussion

Week 3
- Discussion: [Plot Week] Get the hook in: Balancing suspense, intrigue and “spilling the beans”
- Writing Assignment: Drafting a climactic scene.

Week 4
- Discussion: [Tension Week] Building Intrigue without Confusion
  Anticipating Reader Questions and Answers
- Who knows what? (Reader, Author, and/or Character)
• Writing Assignment: Tension at its highest. (The Beehive Theory)

Week 5
• Discussion: [Craft Week] Looking at narrative strategy: Have you got it right?
• Writing Assignment: Experimenting with narrative distance.
• Continue your draft while exploring narrative distance.
• Reading Assignment: Stephen King, Patricia Highsmith

Week 6
• Discussion: [Character Week] Protagonist and Antagonist. Desires—How want drives the what
• Writing assignment: Exercise on desire driving a scene
• Reading assignment: Lawrence Block

Week 7
• Discussion: [Action Week] Major Dramatic Moment: Real or imagined?
  Where is your story going? How does the outline process help this?
• Writing Assignment: Pushing the action: revising for strong verbs!
• Supplemental info: use of the verb “to be”
• Reading Assignment: Jim Thompson and Bill Holinger handout

Week 8
• Discussion: [Process Week] How to shape plot: Outlines – Now or Later? Can we trust them? How can they help/hurt us?
• Writing assignment: Experimenting with outline for work in progress. Metacog on how this helps your current story.
• Reading assignment: Dennis Lehane

Week 9
• Discussion: [Craft Week] Revision – a learnable tool.
• Crafting scenarios, outlines, uncovering the fossils.
• Writing Assignment: Revision Exercise
• Reading assignment: James Crumley and Stephen Koch handout

Week 10
• Discussion: Wrapping up our class – What have we learned?
• Your Author Career: Where to go from here.
• Story submission, markets, online avenues to fan-building, author platform.
OPEN DOOR POLICY

IMPORTANT! Although many students take online courses with the absolute best intentions of doing every last little assignment, “real life”—in the form of business and family obligations or who-knows-what—can get in the way. Sometimes, the resulting frustration or anxiety causes students to drop completely out of the class. **Rather than adopting an “all-or-nothing” approach to your participation in the course, I recommend simply doing what you can, when you can.** If there are a couple of weeks in which you don’t get to the reading, or if there are times when you can’t complete a writing exercise, don’t worry. In terms of priorities within class work, please do your best to comment on your classmates’ submissions and work on your own piece for workshop. If you have to step away from the class for a bit, that’s fine. **You can always come back when things become more manageable.**

Chat/ZOOM

During each week of the class, I'll hold a 60 min live chat session. This will be an audio/video discussion of art, craft, process, and our weekly topic. Because everyone has different work hours (and time zones), attendance is optional, though highly encouraged. I will do my best to find a time that works for as many people in class as possible. The first slot I propose is on Wednesday at 12 noon (Pacific).

Our primary place for conversations about the reading and writing will be in our text-based discussion boards, but the Zoom Chats are often a fun, lively way to cover a lot of ground in a more personal, face-to-face manner. **A lot of the class bonding and community happens here.** I will also provide recordings of these that you can watch at a later time.

COURSE STRUCTURE (how the online classroom works)

WEEKLY ROUTINE:

All the materials for the coming week will be up by Friday afternoon. This way you can start your work for the following week over the weekend if you choose.

Each week, you’ll log onto Canvas and read the “Start Here” page. This will include my art/craft/process thoughts to start the week (the “lecture”), as well as both writing and reading assignments, any optional materials or links. From there, you can post and exchange thoughts with your peers at any time you choose, based on your schedule. One of the big benefits of an online class such as this is the asynchronous schedule, allowing everyone to choose when and where they participate. Onward!

**Mon-Weds:** Participate in the discussion boards, weigh in on craft topics, readings, student work.

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Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
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continuingstudies@stanford.edu
650-725-2650
**Wednesday:** Zoom Chat online from **12 noon to 1PM Pacific time.**

**Thursday:** Writing exercises **due by Thursday at Midnight Pacific Time.** For your writing exercises, I’ll have you post your work in small group sections and give one another feedback. You’ll have my response by the following Thursday to any work posted before the deadline.

**MY ROLE ONLINE:** In addition to posting each week’s craft lecture and running our Zoom Chats, I’ll moderate and participate in the discussions. I will come into the online classroom at least four days a week – generally Mon - Thurs – and will respond to work in the order in which it was posted. I may not respond to every post in each discussion, but I’ll stay very much involved. I ask you to stay engaged as well.