Course Description

I was tempted to call this class, “Firming up a Sagging Middle” because that is exactly what we will be doing as we take our novels through the treacherous Middle Passage that will eventually bring them to a satisfying climax and conclusion. This can be a challenging exercise. That’s because the middle portion of a book is, generally, its most hazardous. It is the place where many writers (even the most experienced) may find themselves bogging down. It is the place where we have already established character and place and theme and where story takes over.

In this course we will study the primary points of successful novel writing—the above mentioned character, place, dialogue, substance, etc.—but our main emphasis will be on plotting, on telling the story. We will work on ensuring that our novels are actually saying on paper what, in our minds, we envision them as saying. We will do this by taking a close look at our central plot to make sure it carries through the novel without faltering and that it is supported and enhanced by strong subplots. Everything we write should “push” directly toward that “aha” moment which will be our novel’s climax.

This is a very practical course. It will begin with two weeks in which, we most importantly, we will begin with a review of our primary characters and how they are reacting within our stories, what motivates them and how they are growing and changing—or not growing and changing—as our book progresses. As the course progresses we will also discuss place, dialogue, incidents, structure, style, etc. but these will all be studied in their relationship to the enhancement of the story we are telling.

Although there is no craft text as such we will be reading excerpts from three selected novels in order to see how each author develops the story of his or her book. During the first week of class, students will be asked to post a very short synopsis of their own novel. We will learn about story from the novels we are reading, and we will learn about story from each other.
Tentative Zoom Time:

Thursdays, 12:00 PM (PT)

The Work You Will Do Here:

The course will be divided into two sections:

- **Writing Exercises**
  A preliminary two weeks of shorter assignments, usually 500-750 words. These lead to the writing workshops.

- **Writing Workshops**
  - Weeks 3-10 will be devoted to our Writing Workshops. These Workshops will differ from the earlier Writing Exercises in that each participant will submit one longer piece (typically about 10,000 words) along with the brief (1,000 words of less) synopsis. These will all need to be submitted at the beginning of the second week. The course will then break into two groups. This is so an intensive and encouraging critique can be given to each participant’s work. In addition to critiquing our Workshop pieces, each student will continue to learn new craft points and expand upon ones already studied. It is important that participants not be shy about showing their early work. Drafts are just that—drafts. They are not expected to be perfect. Indeed, early constructive criticism can be extremely useful in helping to focus a story and give the writer the confidence and enthusiasm to keep going forward.

Our Weekly Routine:

In the interest of establishing a writing routing, most of our weeks will involve these tasks:

1. Comments for Writing Exercises and Writing Workshop Groups.
2. Discussion Forums for our readings from required books.
3. Discussion Forums for our own work: recap of the previous week (challenges and successes), problem solving, goals for next week.
4. Discussion Forums for craft issues that may arrive.
5. Wring Exercises or Writing Workshop submission for the following week. Every week throughout this course you will have a writing assignment that is due by Thursday at 10 AM (PT). You may submit earlier if you like. You will have through Monday of the following week to respond to the other members of your group. It is my belief that by learning how to read as a writer and to edit others you will also learn how to self-edit. It is important that you give the kind of thoughtful and constructive feedback that you would want to receive from others. The Class in general, and Workshop specifically, combine in a system of reciprocity so it is important that everyone participate fully.
Grades:
Grades will be based on involvement in class discussions, short writing assignments given during the first week two weeks of the quarter, a longer writing piece of approximately 10,000 words that is due at the beginning of the 3rd week, and participation in exercise and Workshop critiques.

Required Materials:

Beautiful Ruins
Jess Walters
ISBN-10: 0061928178

Station Eleven
Emily St. John Mandel
ISBN-10: 0804172447

You Should Have Left
Daniel Kehlmann
ISBN-10: 110187192X