Course Title: The Writing Life: Form and Theory of the Novel  
Course Code: OWC 101 B  
Instructor: Rachel Smith

Course Summary:

“The writing life” is the way we create the time, space, and motivation to sit down and write day-by-day, and how we regain momentum if life takes us away from our routine. It’s the collection of habits that allow us to harness an initial spark of a story into an intelligent and meaningful draft, and to take that draft through rounds of revision. “Form and theory” are how we discuss the elements and techniques that give a novel its sense of completeness, coherence, and meaning.

We’ll read a craft book on story structure alongside two novels, and we’ll analyze the choices these authors have made with an eye to what is transferable to your own projects. In our discussions we’ll consider what it means to read like a writer, explore ways of cultivating our individual creativity, and deepen our own understanding of the connections between the individual writing process and the forms we create in our own work as well as those we see on the published page.

Above all, this course is meant to offer you an open and spacious period in which experiment around what you want your novel to be. This is your dedicated time to explore structures and approaches, to play with outlining, to generate piles of material, to explore alternative ideas that interest you, to practice giving and receiving peer feedback, and to build skills for the process of writing your novel overall.

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

Grade Requirements:

- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)  
  - 65%: completing your required creative and critical work by due dates. This includes: weekly short writing assignments and responses to at least one discussion question a week.  
  - 35%: creating a welcoming and productive atmosphere while responding to other writers. This includes peer feedback to group-mates’ short writing assignments, and replying to other students’ discussion responses.  
  - Though other activities and readings are offered, completing them or skipping them will not impact a student’s grade.
**Tentative Zoom Schedule:**

Thursdays 12 PM (PT)
*Please note that the Zoom schedule is subject to change.

**Required Books:**

*My Name Is Lucy Barton* by Elizabeth Strout  
https://www.amazon.com/My-Name-Lucy-Barton-Novel/dp/0812979524

*The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennet  

*Beginnings, Middles, and Ends* by Nancy Kress  

**Recommended Book:**

*Olympus, Texas* by Stacey Swann  
ISBN: 978-0385545211  

  - Author Stacey Swann (who is a former instructor of this course) will attend a Zoom session Week 9 to answer questions about the process of writing her novel. Attendance is optional and the session will be recorded.

**Weekly Writing Assignments and Workshop:**

Students enter the novel program at a variety of stages in relation to their individual projects. You may be in the early stages of writing or idea-generating. On the other hand, some of you may be revising a completed draft. Since you'll have the opportunity to workshop the beginning of your novel in Novel I in the winter, the purpose of this class is not to polish and submit your beginning. Rather, I ask that you use your time here to generate ideas (for the novel or its revisions) and especially to generate *material*. Scenes, bits of narration, character sketches, and so on. Having a body of material to draw from will be a tremendous asset in writing your book. This is also a great time to practice techniques that you can apply as you move through the writing process.

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Rather than running a formal workshop where the class reviews a large chunk of pages from each student, you’ll have your weekly writing exercises (450-750 words) workshopped in rotation in small groups throughout the quarter. These workshops will offer you a chance to practice giving feedback to one another and prepare you for more formal workshops later on in the program. I’ll give notes on your exercises every other week, and I’ll hold individual conferences with each student toward the end of the quarter.

**Tentative Weekly Outline:**

**Week One: Know Thyself: Ritual, Motivation, and Your Writing**
What are our reasons for writing our books? What rituals and habits will best support us in accomplishing our goals? Who are our models and inspirations, and how are we like those writers and irreducibly different? How do we stay fluid and stay in touch with the initial flash of a novel’s inspiration over the long haul?

**Week Two: Finding a Way In**
What is the novel as a form and what marks a strong beginning? We’ll consider questions such as: How does a novel establish its implicit promise and how does that matter? How is conflict created and what kinds of conflict matter to the reader? What is the importance of voice, language, and point-of-view?
Readings: *Beginnings, Middles and Ends*, First quarter of *My Name is Lucy Barton*.

**Week Three: Story & the Difference Between Story and Plot**
How do you know if what you are writing qualifies as story? Do we need to stick to the conflict-crisis-resolution model? To what obligations do we need to hold our novels? What is a throughline? What’s the difference between story and plot?
Readings: *Beginnings, Middles and Ends*, Chapter 4. Second quarter of *My Name is Lucy Barton*.

**Week Four: The Meaning of (and in) Plot**
What is the role of plot in any work of fiction and how is plot different in commercial and literary novels? What role might suspense play in your book? What is a “clock” in a novel and might you make use of one?
Readings: "Episode, Scene, Speech, and Word: The Madness of Lear,” Norman Maclean. Third quarter of *My Name is Lucy Barton*.

**Week Five: The Week-Long Writing Residency**
This week you’ll focus on finishing your novel excerpt for workshop.
Reading: “How I wrote The Remains of the Day in four weeks” by Kazuo Ishiguro

**Week Six: Whose story is this, anyway?**

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How contemplative are your characters? How much do they think about and interpret the things that are happening to them? Or do they just move through the world and act? What’s the relationship between the inner lives of your novel’s character(s) and the actions they take on the page? What makes a character vivid and real?
Readings: *Beginnings, Middles and Ends*, Chapters 5 and 6. Fourth quarter of *My Name is Lucy Barton*.

**Week Seven: Surprising, Yet Inevitable?**
How do you stay on track to a powerful climax—even if you don’t know which way the story’s final turn will go? What do you need to know about your ending before you get there? What is the relationship between a novel’s beginning and its end?
Readings: *Beginnings, Middles and Ends*. First quarter of *The Vanishing Half*.

**Week Eight: Writing the Most Important Things You Know**
How do you select what to keep writing about through the long haul of the novel and keep making it matter? How does theme connect to plot, character, and story? How do you keep your sense of curiosity as a writer and create depth, importance, and authenticity (both literal and emotional) for your reader?
Readings: "Making Things Carry More Emotional Weight than They Logically Should," from Alice LaPlante’s *The Making of a Story*, Interview with George Saunders from the *Writer’s Digest*. Second quarter of *The Vanishing Half*.

**Week Nine: Point of View, Recognition, Reversal, and More (Your Technical Toolbox)**
What technical tools can be engaged to fine-tune and help sculpt the shape your novel?
Readings: Excerpt from *How Fiction Works* by James Wood. Third quarter of *The Vanishing Half*.

**Week Ten: But what if I fail?**
What if, indeed? What is failure? How do we negotiate the doubting voice? How to get back to the desk after a lapse? How do we use those inevitable (small and large) setbacks, frustrations, and challenges in life to fuel our writing rather than take us away from it?