Course Title: Short Story Workshop: Write a Riveting, Stylish, Singular Story
Course Code: FICT 68 W
Instructor: Matt Sumell

Course Summary:

This course will essentially be a class in narrative, that is, how to tell a story in a riveting, stylish, superdoop, never-to-be-seen-again manner. It is rarely easy and usually mysterious, So, it might be safe to say there will be no other class that rewards you as much for making mistakes. There are a lot of unknowns. Here are some knowns: Writing involves a steady hand at suspense, a close attention to language, a near-obsessive grasp of detail, and an underlying yet palpable sense of direction. All characters want things—love, sex, money, Cheezits—and a particular character’s search for that thing, those things, forms the basis of plot.

Or maybe not. There are exceptions.

This is a fairly traditional formulation, and we’ll spend the quarter discussing how it is that particular stories, both our own and published works, either fulfill or evade this construction. More specifically, over the course of ten weeks, we will model and practice a process useful to fiction composition: reading, analyzing, and mining books, and then accreting some of our own ideas that can be applied to our work. Think of the class as a laboratory designed to encourage your own creative production.

Each student will submit one story of approximately five pages to me and then another of a “fuller” length that we will workshop as a class. Your story will be critiqued the following class period.

**A note on critiques and workshop comments:** My philosophy regarding workshops is that the most helpful criticism of a story is an honest description of what it was like for you to read another writer’s story—where it was that you were most engaged, most intensely stimulated, and where your interest flagged. Critiques allow a writer to see his or her readers, to realize what an abundance of interpretation and personality the reader brings to the work, and to listen to the way in which their work has crossed the divide, made the connection. In my experience workshops can be very complicated emotionally and so we must keep in mind that this is a first draft, and your goal is to help the author in his or her revision toward a final draft. It is essential that your comments, both written and spoken, be careful, considered, honest, specific and at all times respectful. I can't stress that enough, so I’ll make it bigger. YOU MUST BE RESPECTFUL. Begin by finding at least one particular thing that you appreciate in the story but do not limit your comments to empty praise. Each critique that you write should contain both applause and constructive criticism.

I want to impress upon you how valuable writers can be to each other, provided they take seriously each other’s work!
GRADING:
Breakdown is as follows:
- 25% story short
- 25% workshop story
- 50% weekly responses to published and peer work

Course Materials:
*The Ecco Anthology of Contemporary American Short Fiction*

Zoom Video Office Hour
Each week I’ll be available for an online office hour that I will usually hold at 12:30 PM on Fridays, PT, although this could be subject to change with advance notice on workshop weeks. This weekly session is not a course requirement, but rather an opportunity for us to talk “face-to-face” over very simple Zoom conferencing technology. It’s your chance to ask questions, talk about relevant topics that come up in class, get to know your classmates, and for the writers being workshopped to ask direct questions.

Grade Options and Requirements:
- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)
  - *All assignments will be graded on a completed / not completed basis*
    - 1/3 completion of the weekly writing assignments and opening section of your novel
    - 1/3 feedback to peers
    - 1/3 participation in discussions of published work and craft resources.

  To receive an A, you must submit your writing each week and on time, submit a paragraph of feedback to the other 3 members of your small group, and answer at least 1 discussion question on the published work each week. If you do 80% of this, you’ll get a B. If you do 70% of this, you’ll get a C. Less than 70% will earn you a D or NP. However, if you have an illness or need an extension, don’t hesitate to let me know.

- Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)
  - A passing grade (for "Credit") = at least 70% of expectations accomplished

- 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.

*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.*
Weekly Routine
Every week of our ten-week course will focus on different aspects of the art and craft of writing, with the assigned readings for example and inspiration. At the start of each week, you’ll log onto Canvas and work through the week’s module, which will include my lecture, writing and reading assignments, any optional materials or links, and other announcements. In the first three weeks, you will do short writing exercises designed to help you generate or revise material, at the end of which you’ll submit to me a “story-short” of up to 1500 words (5 pages, double-spaced). We’ll start workshopping our peers’ work in week 4. These stories can be of a fuller length, up to 5000 words (20 pages, double-spaced). Throughout the course, we’ll have ongoing discussions of readings, craft ideas, and any other questions and thoughts that feel helpful to you in in getting your work done.

Here’s a tentative schedule:

**Week One**
Introductions, expectations, workshop signup / *OK, BUT WHY?* / “Off” by Aimee Bender

**Week Two**
*OK, BUT WHAT?* / Love List Exercise / Pickney Benedict’s “Mercy”

**Week Three**
*Location, Location, Location* / Mapmaking exercise / Story-short due / Junot Diaz’ “Aurora”

**Week Four**
*Conflict, conflict, conflict* / George Saunders’ “The Red Bow” & “Adams” Audio / 1st WORKSHOP!

**Week Five**
*Fun. Times.* / “Emergency” by Denis Johnson & “Bullet in the Brain” by Tobias Wolff

**Week Six**
*Getting Vulnerable* / Edwidge Danticat’s “Night Women” & “Chuck Palanuk’s “Escort” / 3rd WORKSHOP!

**Week Seven**
*Likeability* / Mary Gaitskill’s “Girl on a Plane” / 4th WORKSHOP!

**Week Eight**
*Fear, Horror, Dread, Pacing* / William Gay’s “The Paperhanger” / 5th WORKSHOP!

**Week Nine**
*Editing* / Thom Jones “Pugilist At Rest” / 6th WORKSHOP!

**Week Ten**
*Publishing & Takeaways / Submitting work* / FINAL WORKSHOP!

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
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