Course Title: Electric Story and Novel Openings: Captivating Your Readers from the Start
Course Code: FICT 77
Instructor: Ron Nyren

When a reader first picks up a story, they are like a coma patient—fluttering open their eyes in an unfamiliar world, wondering, where am I, when am I, who am I? The writer has an obligation to quickly and effectively place the reader in the story.

—from Thrill Me by Benjamin Percy

Course Summary:

Whether you’re writing a novel or a short story, this course is designed to give you tools and inspiration for writing openings that invite, beguile, intrigue, or transport the reader while pointing toward the heart of the story. Developing the ability to craft strong beginnings helps us captivate the reader not just in the initial few paragraphs or pages, but also at the start of each new scene, section, or chapter—not to mention all the way through.

In this course, we will investigate how to create powerful openings that engage readers in the challenges the characters face and pose meaningful narrative questions that will be answered or complicated by the end. At each session, I’ll talk briefly about a particular element of craft as it relates to openings and to storytelling as a whole, then we’ll talk about how to apply these strategies in ways that are in harmony with your own individual aesthetics and subject matters. In-class writing exercises will help you explore creative approaches to writing, rewriting, and reimagining your openings and stories.

We’ll also read the beginnings of a few published novels and several full short stories and discuss how the authors draw the reader in while setting up the urgent and authentic concerns of the work. Everyone in the class will have the option to share with the class an opening to a published work they love, as well as to turn in up to 5,000 words of their own fiction (short story or novel excerpt) for workshopping. In workshop, we’ll provide honest, constructive feedback, focusing on what’s working well, how the opening seems to be setting up what’s coming next, and what untapped possibilities might lie within the piece.

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

Note About Live Attendance and Recording:

These class sessions will be recorded, but because this class will be highly interactive, and much of the learning will come from our discussions and the feedback we give on others’ stories, regular live attendance is required. The class depends on you and the particular

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experiences and knowledge and ideas you bring. If an emergency prevents you from coming to class, please email me as soon as you can, before class if possible. If you cannot make a session, please watch the recording before the next session.

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)
  - Attend and participate in at least 7 class sessions and write workshop critiques for all of your peers to receive credit.
- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)
  - Attend and participate in at least 7 class sessions, submit a story/novel excerpt for workshop, and write workshop critiques for all of your peers.
  - 25% of your grade will come from turning in your workshop piece.
  - 25% will come from attending and participating.
  - 50% will come from responding to the work of your peers.

*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.

Format for Turning in Work for Workshop:

When you upload your short story or novel opening (up to 5,000 words) to Canvas for workshop, make sure it is double-spaced, page-numbered, with margins of one inch, in a typeface that’s easy to read (like 12-point Times Roman). Indicate if it’s a short story or novel.

Readings:

We’ll be reading and discussing a number of stories from *Best American Short Stories 2019 (BASS19)* in their entirety to consider how the openings relate to the story as a whole. In addition, we’ll be looking at a couple of short essays on the craft of writing as well as the beginnings of a few novels. I’ve given you links to the openings of these novels below, but feel free to read a sample from your favorite online bookseller as an alternative. And everyone can have a turn sharing with the class the first page from a published novel or short story they love to talk briefly about why they love it.

Writing Exercises:

Each class meeting will include an in-class writing exercise designed to help you apply techniques we’ve discussed in an opening of your own (either the very beginning of your
story or novel, or the opening of a later scene or section). If you like, you can revise your in-class writing exercise and turn it in to me (up to 800 words each) each week for my feedback.

**Tentative Weekly Outline:**

**Week One: Bringing Characters to Life**
- Questions: How can the opening give readers a sense of who the characters are right away? How can the piece begin to suggest relationships and challenges/conflicts?
- For discussion: Kathleen Alcott, "Natural Light" (full story from BASS19)
- In-Class Writing Exercise: "Attitude in Action"
- Sign up for workshop and for sharing an opening you love

**Week Two: Raising Narrative Questions in the Reader's Mind**
- What keeps readers turning pages? How can the opening make an honest, engaging promise about the kind of experience readers are in for?
- For discussion: Manuel Muñoz, "Anyone Can Do It" (full story from BASS19); shared openings
- In-class writing exercise: “The Catalyst”

**Week Three: Balancing Mystery and Clarity**
- Questions: How can an opening balance mystery and clarity, intriguing readers to want to know more without confusing them?
- For discussion: Sarah Stone, “Mystery Vs. Confusion” (essay); Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, "The Era" (full story from BASS19); shared openings
- Workshop
- In-class writing exercise: “Encounters with the Unknown”

**Week Four: Unlocking the Dramatic Possibilities of Point of View**
- Questions: How do writers choose which point of view to use for a particular work? How does the choice of the point-of-view character(s) alter the very nature of the story being told?
- In-Class Writing Exercise: “The Switch”
- Workshop

**Week Five: “In the Previous Episode Of…”: Conveying What Happened Before the Story Starts**
- Questions: How can we begin a story in medias res while giving readers what they need to catch on? How much or how little backstory or set-up is the right amount to give readers for a particular story’s needs?
• For discussion: Ursula K. Le Guin, “Pity and Shame” (full story from BASS19); shared openings
• In-class writing exercise: “In the Midst”
• Workshop

**Week Six: Inviting in the Reader: Setting and Sensory Details**
• Questions: How can images embody emotions, themes, or memories while transporting the reader to the novel’s setting? How do writers use sensory details and figurative language not only for their vividness but also for their thematic and symbolic weight?
• In-Class Writing Exercise: “Synesthesia”
• Workshop

**Week Seven: Shaping the Scenes**
• Questions: What makes an opening scene gripping? What makes a scene feel significant and complete while inviting the reader to read on?
• In-Class Writing Exercise: “Fuse on Fire”
• Workshop

**Week Eight: Honing the Language: Making Voice and Tone Compelling**
• Questions: What is the relationship between the style of a story and its content? How do writers choose the right tone or attitude for narrating the lives of a particular story’s characters?
• For discussion: Marisa Silver on Leonard Michaels’s “Murderers” (essay); Karen Russell, “Black Corfu” (full story from BASS19); shared openings
• In-class writing exercise: “Possession”
• Workshop

**Week Nine: Linking Beginnings with Endings**
• Questions: How can the ending answer or address questions raised in the beginning in a way that feels resonant? How can the ending show a significant change or new perspective on the characters’ lives?
• For discussion: Saïd Sayrafiezadeh, “Audition” (full story from BASS19); shared openings
• In-class writing exercise: “Alternate Reality Endings”
• Workshop

**Week Ten: Revising Your Opening/Developing the Story**
• Questions: How can writers draw on their opening to give them clues for going forward? When should revision come into the process, and how can revision uncover the novel’s most urgent subject matters and possibilities?
• For discussion: Weike Wang, “Omakase” (full story from BASS19); shared openings
• In-class writing exercise: “Rehearsal”
• Workshop