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

Course Summary:

“Form and theory” means how we discuss what holds a novel together, the things that make a work of sequential prose feel like a three dimensional whole in both time and space. “The writing life” means the habits by which the novelist gets there, from the initial inspiration through the long haul of drafting, organizing and revising the material.

In this course, students will build skills and concepts for understanding not only how successful novels are constructed but also for working with their individual creative processes so that their own novels become realized. To this end, each week will ask key questions about form and process, and will offer writing exercises to enlarge each student’s toolbox of techniques, explore the work’s possibilities, and create productive habits of mind.

This course is also designed to allow students who have not fully settled on a novel idea to try out more than one novel premise so that they are ready to commit before starting Novel I. In that course and beyond, you will begin to receive extensive workshop critique, beginning with your novel’s opening. But the emphasis in our class is on establishing a foundation of craft concepts and process models, practicing good writing habits, generating new pages, and exploring your novel ideas. In place of a traditional workshop, in the final weeks of our course each student will meet with me for a 45-minute one-to-one conference in which we’ll identify your work’s strengths and pinpoint skills and creative practices to strengthen so that you are fully prepared for Novel I.

This course is largely about learning to read as writers, so that you can garner technique for your own book and be a good reader for your peers. Students will read a book on story structure alongside two novels, and will analyze the choices these authors made with an eye to what is transferable to their own projects. Students will be continually encouraged to self-evaluate, to decide what kind of writer they are in regards to process and intent. During the last week of the course, students will look both backwards and forwards in order to create a working plan for the adventure of writing their novel.

*Please see course page for full description and additional details.*
REQUIRED TEXTS:
* Elements of Fiction: Beginnings, Middles and Ends* by Nancy Kress

* My Name Is Lucy Barton* by Elizabeth Strout
  [https://bookshop.org/books/my-name-is-lucy-barton/9780812979527](https://bookshop.org/books/my-name-is-lucy-barton/9780812979527)

* Everything I Never Told You* by Celeste Ng
  [https://bookshop.org/books/everything-i-never-told-you-9781483013145/9780143127550](https://bookshop.org/books/everything-i-never-told-you-9781483013145/9780143127550)

* Olympus, Texas* by Stacey Swann
  [https://bookshop.org/books/olympus-texas-9780593414095/9780385545211](https://bookshop.org/books/olympus-texas-9780593414095/9780385545211)

* The Modern Library Writer’s Workshop* by Stephen Koch

Grade Options and Requirements:
- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)

65%: completing your required creative and critical work in a timely fashion. This includes weekly writing assignments and discussion questions. Discussion questions that are optional will be clearly marked. Because our course must move on from week to week, work posted after the week has expired will be given credit only in cases of medical or family emergency.

35%: creating a welcoming and productive atmosphere while responding to other writers. This includes writing feedback to group-mates’ short writing assignments and responding to other students’ discussion points answers.

Zoom meetings are highly recommended but, due to time zones and scheduling challenges, not required. All Zoom meetings will be recorded so that you can watch at a time that suits you.

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
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Tentative Weekly Outline:

**Week One: Making Our Writing Space (Mentally and Physically)**
Who are we as readers? Who are we as writers? 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?
Reading: Camille Dungy, “Say Yes to Yourself: A Poet’s Guide to Living and Writing” (PDF)

**Week Two: The Implicit Promise**
What do you see and hear when you first walk inside a compelling novel? How do you sense the novel’s implicit promise? How can you make the implicit promise of your own novel strongly felt by the reader? We’ll focus especially on point of view, tone, and voice and how they set the terms for how the reader will engage with your novel.
Reading: *Beginnings, Middles and Ends*, Chapters 1-3. *My Name Is Lucy Barton*, beginning to page 77. “Gesture Writing” (online link), by yours truly.

**Week Three: Lines of Tension, or What Keeps a Novel Humming?**
How do novels sustain momentum and tension (of both immediate and long-lasting varieties) after their openings?

**Week Four: What Is This Really About? How Theme Connects to Internal and External Stakes**
How do novels gain in tension and complexity as they move through their middles?
Reading: *Beginnings, Middles and Ends*, Chapter 6, 7, and 8. *My Name Is Lucy Barton*, to end, Eileen Pollack, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Theme” (PDF).

**Week Five: Writing Residency Week**
A week with no assigned readings and no discussion question assignments so that you can dedicate yourself to drafting new pages with class support. I will be available for 30 minute one-on-one meetings, by appointment.

**Week Six: Frontstory, Backstory, and Making Scenes Do More**
How can you avoid endless digression into backstory? How do summary and scene interact and how can you make scene do more work? How can you do better work by letting yourself work less?
Reading: *Everything I Never Told You*, pages 100-101; Robert Boswell recorded lecture on scene.

**Week Seven: POV Primer, and Trouble-Shooting POV Tips**
Some basics on psychic distance, some play, and some pov practice.
Reading: *Everything I Never Told You*, pages 102-216; Frederick Reiken, “The Author-Narrator-Character Merge: Why Many First-Time Novelists End Up with Flat, Uninteresting Protagonists” (PDF)

**Week Eight: Setting Yourself up for “The Turn”**
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? Also: Can combining scenes help you keep your narrative arc strong?
Reading: *Everything I Never Told You*, pages 217-292; *Beginnings, Middles, and Ends* Chapter 9.

**Week Nine: Novelists’ Book Club**
A week to read and discuss Stacey Swann’s *Olympus, Texas* in advance of her live visit.
Reading: As much as you can read of *Olympus, Texas*.

**Week Ten: The Writing Journey**
How can you sustain your energy for the work to come? Some wilderness tips for the path ahead.
Reading: No new assigned reading. You will be working extensively on your self-evaluation during this week.

**Weekly Schedule:**

**Friday before the week ahead:** The coming week’s module opens.

**Monday:** each new week officially starts. I will send a kick-off email on Sundays.

**Tuesday:** I will hold a live Zoom hour every Tuesday, time of day to be determined by a Doodle poll we’ll take in the first few days of class. In this hour, I will lead conversations about craft questions that have arisen on the discussion threads. In the latter part of these live Zoom hours, we will get a jump on the coming week’s writing assignment. These live sessions are not absolutely required, but they are highly recommended, a great way to get to know and support each other. It’s absolutely OK if you need to drop into the live group session late, or leave early. And every group chat will be recorded, so students unable to attend can view them later.

**Wednesday:** 5 pm (PST), Writing Assignment due.

**Thursday:** 5 pm (PST), responses to the Discussion Points questions due, though it’s ideal to get these up early in the week, to allow for more conversation.

**Throughout the Week:** Discussion Points conversations continue, and you respond to two or three of your peer’s writing assignments.
**Weekend:** Get a jumpstart on doing the reading, answering the discussion points for the next week, experimenting with the coming week’s writing prompts/working on your novel.

**Late work:** I will read and respond to any writing assignments that are posted by midnight Saturday. After that, unfortunately, I have to move on to the next week. This is often quite excruciating, as I very much want to read your work. But, the train must keep moving.

This framework may sound complex but tends to work quite naturally in practice.

**Weekly Writing Assignments**

Writing a novel requires, for many writers, extensive experimentation. To this end, you will be asked to create new freewrites from prompts, posting 400-800 words each week during weeks two through four. Some of these prompts are meant to keep us loose and playful. Others let you think about your novel on a different scale, including an outlining assignment. I recommend setting aside 90 minutes for each (a timer can be a blessing) and approaching them with curiosity and detachment. Who knows what will come from them?

**Important:** If the prompt doesn’t speak to you, or if you’re just raring to write a passage you have in mind for your novel, you can opt to post any new pages you’ve written in the last week, up to 800 words. However, this does not apply to the Week One assignment, or to the outlining assignment, which I’d like everyone to try.

Although it’s understandable to want to post previously written passages from your novel in progress, it’s better for both the individual and the class when everyone drafts something new. Again, it’s about having an area of your writing life where you can proceed with curiosity and detachment. If you already have many pages of your novel written, rest assured the workshops in Novel I and beyond will delve into those soon.

**Small Group Writing/Practice Workshop Assignment Feedback:**

You will be posting your weekly writing assignment in groups of three or four. The groups will shift from week to week, so that you will read a variety of your peers’ work. I will provide clear prompts for providing feedback to your group members.

Later writing assignment groups will also function as practice workshop sessions to prepare you for future courses, with feedback prompts requiring longer responses.

**Word Limits:**

I ask that you keep your weekly writing exercises to 400-800 words, and your initial discussion questions responses to 200-500 words. If the class shows an interest, I will create a special forum for students who want to share more newly generated pages than this. In order to keep pace and provide quality attention to everyone’s writing assignments, I must personally refrain from giving feedback on this “over and above” sharing, but I am glad to
give you a forum for it.

**My Commentary:**

You will receive comments from me on your writing assignment every week. I will also review every one of your writing assignments before we meet for your 45-minute one-to-one conference in our final weeks.

**Discussion Question Reflections:**

Each week you will be asked to dig deep into the published novels, and to use your own ideas, the course lectures, and the craft book and essays to analyze how each novel is working. The discussion questions are designed to make you flip back, reread and cite specific scenes, details, and language to make your arguments about why you feel as you do—or why you know what you know—about the characters and story. You’re welcome to be candid about your reactions to the published readings, but our focus will be on commenting less as book club members, more as writers reading writers. Don’t worry, there are truly no “right” answers, and no one right way to talk about how novels work! You need not aim to impress me or the class; bring up things that honestly intrigue or befuddle you about the effects the published novels create and how, using mere language, they do that.

**One Final Important Note:**

Students who come to the OWC program are highly motivated and have every intention of doing every assignment, but sometimes changing professional deadlines, family needs, illness, and other unexpected occurrences make keeping up impossible. Please check in with me if you are having personal difficulties that make it hard to keep up. If the situation is not confidential, post to the Comments and Questions board if you will be traveling or otherwise offline for a period of time so that other students know when to expect you back.

For the next 10 weeks, we are a community of writers seeking to push the boundaries of the work we write, and aiming to support one another in that exploration. This course is a place where we can read and discuss published authors and each other’s work with equal parts curiosity, passion, and practicality. I am your leader and facilitator, but we are all members of this community, and your greatest learning may come from your talented peers. I love to teach because I know that I will be learning new things from your insights, too. I am eager to be part of the community with you, and I feel fortunate that Stanford Continuing Studies has assembled us to pursue the writing life together. Let’s begin!