Course Title: How Character Creates Plot: A Novel-Writing Workshop (flex online)
Course Code: NVL 26 W – Fall 2021
Instructor: Sarah Stone

A Note from the Instructor
“Connecting with readers on an emotional level is one of the greatest things a writer can hope for.”
—Celeste Ng

When we write a novel, we’re embarking on serious play, discovering how compelling and memorable characters come from a mixture of art, craft, and the ability to convincingly transform reality (or invent a new reality). Whether we’re writing a gripping page-turner, a deep character study, or a one-of-a-kind multigenre work, the relationship between the people and their actions and experiences can drive the story arc.

In this course for writers at any level, you will use craft exercises to help bring your characters into full life and relationship with each other, activate the plot, develop your voice, build effective scenes and dialogue, and find your novel’s shape and themes. You will learn to interweave place, time, and perspective in ways that reveal the deeper nature of the characters and help the plot (or alternative structure) unfold in ways that feel surprising but inevitable. And together we will read novels by Celeste Ng and Penelope Fitzgerald, learning how their characters and plots unite suspense and meaning. Along the way, we’ll consider the places people come from and where they go, and how this affects their stories, as well as questions of subplot, major and minor characters, and your characters’ secrets, quirks, lies, ideals, catastrophes, and visions.

We will have two workshop groups (you’ll self-select into these groups after our initial two weeks), and each of you will turn in a selection of your book, up to 5000 words, for comments from your group and me. Our comments will be designed to help spark your imagination and expand your sense of the possibilities of your novel. Whether you are just starting out or have been working on your novel for some time, you will finish the course with new craft tools, a stronger sense of your novel’s nature, and a plan for your next steps.

Writing Exercises
In the first two weeks of the course, we’ll have short writing exercises designed to help you write or revise your own novel, learning surprising ways to create tension and develop your characters. We’ll learn about each writer’s intentions, so that when we begin workshop we’ll be addressing each novel on its own terms, in relation to the writer’s project and aesthetics. The writing exercises continue all the way through the course, but both writing and responding to them become optional once workshop begins.

Workshop
The workshops are the heart of the class: we all learn at least as much from the process of thinking through comments for others, and reading other workshop responses, as from the feedback we
receive on our own work. Our responses will include identifying the aims and accomplishments of each selection, offering specific praise, asking questions, and suggesting areas for further development. I’ll give guidance on all of this too, since there’s an art to usefully reading each other’s work in ways that make workshop fun and leave the writer eager to get back to work. In this class, the writer is welcome to participate in the workshop threads as we go along. I strongly recommend not explaining or defending your work (we learn more when we let the conversation unfold). If you wish to redirect a discussion, though (i.e., if we’re getting the same thing wrong and you’d like to clarify it so we can move on – yes, the mother left 10 years ago, or no, the narrator is not the dog, etc.), or if you have questions for the group, feel free to add to the conversation in your workshop thread at any point during the week.

Beginning at the end of week two, one or two people in each group will submit a selection of a novel-in-progress (up to 5000 words) for their group to workshop via a concise, specific, honest, and supportive response (600-700 words). The only required feedback is for the piece(s) in your group, though you can choose to also respond to ones in the other group if you have extra time. You’ll post your workshop piece by Thursday 2 p.m. Pacific Time (all times in this course are listed in Pacific Time) before your workshop week. Note: for the sake of the class community, responses to a workshop piece become optional if the writer is missing any workshop responses. Your responses will be due by the following Wednesday at 2 p.m. but can be posted earlier. I post my own responses Wednesday afternoon, so as to let the conversation unfold before I weigh in substantially.

**Reading**

We’ll read and discuss two novels. You are welcome to read these books in any edition or format you like – we’ll find ways of referencing lines and chapters in our discussions that don’t rely on page numbers or e-reader locations. We’ll consider these books in craft terms, but also as human beings, as writers and as readers. What makes us believe in the characters and story (to the extent that we do), and what makes these books matter to us (if they do matter to us)? We’re going to explore our own preferences as readers as well as ways of opening up to a wider range of work. I will occasionally post additional optional links and readings as well. You can purchase the course texts via Bookshop.org by clicking on the link to access them directly, or you can buy them through your favorite local or online bookseller.

(Required) Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You: A Novel*
(Required) Penelope Fitzgerald, *At Freddie’s*

**Chat/ZOOM Schedule (our chats are optional but strongly recommended)**

We’ll have an informal and optional weekly live group video chat/ZOOM session each week. These chats will have a mix of close reading and craft discussion, writing exercises, open Q&A, and post-workshop author questions and ideas. Our primary time for ZOOM sessions will be Thursdays from 12-1 Pacific Time (all course times are in Stanford’s time zone). If this time proves difficult for some class members, we will schedule an alternate time for a couple of our sessions. If you can’t make a given chat time, you can watch or listen to the audio or video versions, which will show up automatically in Warpwire. Keep in mind that, like everything in the course, they’re confidential and not to be shared. I’m also available by appointment for an individual 20 or so minute chat in the couple of weeks after your workshop if you want more follow-up or to discuss any questions you have.
have about your work. The Zoom sessions are optional, but I urge you to come if you can. Our primary place for conversations and classwork will always be in our online discussions. You can find details and links on the course Zoom page.

**Discussions**

Every week, we’ll discuss ideas and examples related to our week’s topic, considering both our readings and your own writing as we look at the craft and process of writing. Participating in the reading/writing discussions is required for the first two weeks, then optional as workshops begin and our primary focus changes to workshop responses. A thoughtful paragraph is enough (in fact, I’m suggesting a limit of 250 words to initial posts, to help you stay focused on your writing) and the whole process works best if people are responding to each other’s ideas and posts.

**Due Dates (quick overview)**

The due dates are the same every week:

**Wednesdays by 2 p.m. (soft deadline):**

Writing exercises and – once we begin workshop – workshop responses. For writing exercises, this is a gentle deadline, and there are no grading consequences for missing it: we all need something to aim for, and the earlier you post, the more likely you are to get responses from your colleagues. There are no specific deadlines for responses to each other’s exercises, though the earlier you respond, the more the conversation can unfold. And I may not have a chance to respond to work in the current week if it comes in after Wednesday, though I will get to it in the following week. And as for workshop responses – it takes bravery to share our work, so posting thoughtful responses by the deadline, or even before, is both useful and compassionate.

**Thursdays by 2 p.m.: (definite deadline)**

Post your workshop piece the Thursday before your workshop week (in week two, we’ll have a workshop sign-up). This is the most important deadline in the course, because others may have planned their schedules around receiving the workshop pieces on time. Many people post the day before to avoid running into tech or life difficulties.

I’ll come into the online classroom at least three times during the week, generally on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday afternoons (with a brief midday visit on Friday for urgent questions). I will respond to work in the order in which it was posted, getting to required work before optional posts. I read all of your responses to each other as well and chime in when I have something to add. I post my workshop responses on Wednesday each week. I also check email at least once each weekday in case of questions and will email you with class announcements and further thoughts about our discussions. Each Monday, the previous week’s threads will be closed for posting, though still open for reading. If you have missing required exercises or still owe an author a workshop response, you can post it in a thread for work from previous weeks. Since workshop pieces come in on Thursdays, you always have a full weekend ahead of workshop to do your workshop responses then, if necessary.
The lecture and assignments for the coming week will be available on the Friday before the week begins. This way, if you know you're going into a busy period, you can get ahead on your work. Please post technical questions by opening a help ticket – click on the question mark in the vertical red bar at the left of your screen. Please post questions about assignments, readings, or course content in the Questions about Course Content thread for everyone to see. If you have a question about course material, someone else does too, and that person might be too shy to ask. You can use the course email system (in the red bar at the left of your screen) to contact me if you have an urgent, private question or concern. I’m offline on the weekends and am a believer in the benefits of taking an Internet break and restoring our ability to concentrate. Although I only respond to posts and email on weekday afternoons, please post on the boards at any time that works for you. The beauty of an online class is that we can all do our work when our schedules permit; we don't have to be working simultaneously.

**Grade Options and Requirements**

- **No Grade Requested (NGR)**
  This is the default administrative option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.

- **Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)**
  This is the option I recommend: though not actually a letter grade, it still gives you a sense of accountability. To get credit, you’ll need to submit at least two of the writing exercises during the course of the quarter, turn in your workshop piece, give thoughtful comments on your classmates’ exercises and on all of the workshop pieces, and actively participate in most discussions.

- **Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)**
  Grades are based on your doing the work and being fully present and part of our processes rather than on the “quality” of your fiction so that you can feel free to take risks and experiment with your work. For this option, you will also need to post at least two of the exercises during the course of the quarter, turn in your workshop piece, give thoughtful comments on your classmates’ exercises and on all of the workshop pieces, and actively participate in most discussions.

*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.*

Your peer responses should be thoughtful and detailed enough to be useful to the writer and should demonstrate evidence that you are absorbing the craft lessons. Note the importance of turning in your work (including critiques) on time, and keep in mind that computers break down, people get sick, bosses suddenly come up with large last-minute projects…you may want to post your assignments and workshop responses before the deadlines, especially if you know you find deadlines challenging.

Since writing breakthroughs happen at different speeds and different times – troughs that appear endless to us may be followed by huge leaps, but sometimes not for a while – your grade will be based on turning in your work and writing helpful commentaries on your fellow writers’ pieces. It

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doesn’t work to grade writing based on its “quality,” because a) this kind of grading is highly subjective, and b) writing for a grade gets in the way of your sense of passion and inner purpose. Still, to get the most helpful reading from the rest of us, please make sure your writing is fairly well copy-edited for obvious spelling and grammar errors and is on time.

You’ll get the most out of the class if you stay regularly active in the forums and put attention into the reading and your responses to your classmates as well as your own work. Of course, life comes along, and there may be moments when you have to miss an exercise or can’t comment as fully as usual on others’ writing exercises. Email me if you run into trouble.

Don’t lose heart! We are often most frustrated just before we make a big breakthrough. William Stafford famously wrote a poem a day and is often quoted (or misquoted in various versions – but he may have talked about this subject several times) as saying that he never had writer’s block. “When all else fails, I lower my standards and keep going.” Paradoxically, it’s when we’ve lowered our standards that we take the biggest risks and often do our most exciting work.

**Etiquette and Acceptable Online Behavior**

It can be hard to understand tone sometimes online. As much as possible, let’s give each other the benefit of the doubt. If someone has said something that feels problematic, you can email them to work it out privately via the course inbox. And please let me know as well if you would like me to step in and assist you. Occasionally something does need to be worked out. So let’s do it with as much affection and compassion as possible. Keep in mind that some people are in a moment of their life where the course can be central, others have multiple outside obligations. If you can only do the requirements, then that’s enough to be a full member of our classroom community.

You will find Stanford’s information on Etiquette and Acceptable Online Behavior in the Introduction module (keep in mind that everything in the course is confidential and not to be shared outside the classroom). The writers in the Stanford Continuing Studies community are among the most insightful and generous people I’ve ever worked with, so while it’s important to be familiar with Stanford’s standards and regulations, it's very rare to have difficulties. In my experience, as we approach our responses and those of others in good faith, it all works wonderfully well, and our online communications have a high degree of trust and community support.

**Preliminary Weekly Outline (put in names of exercises, writing retreat times)**

Here is a preliminary schedule for topics, exercises, and readings. Writing exercises are optional once workshop begins. Note: you don’t need to know what these terms mean in order to function happily in the class – we’ll look at these concepts in the lectures and in the process of our investigations.

**Week One: Entrances, Expectations, and Opening Narrative Maneuvers**

Fitzgerald, *At Freddie’s*, Chapter 1

**Week Two: Voice and Viewpoint**

Writing Exercise: Tell Me A Secret

Penelope Fitzgerald, *At Freddie’s*, Chapters 2-3

Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You: A Novel*, Chapters 2-3

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Week Three: Time Signatures: Scene, Dialogue, Exposition, Backstory
Writing Exercise: Outrunning the Critic
Workshop groups
Penelope Fitzgerald, At Freddie’s, Chapters 4-9
Celeste Ng, Everything I Never Told You: A Novel, Chapters 4-8

Week Four: Narrative Arcs and Alternate Structures: Varieties of Suspense
Writing Exercise: Plots and Subplots
Workshop groups
Penelope Fitzgerald, At Freddie’s, Chapters 10-14
Celeste Ng, Everything I Never Told You: A Novel, Chapters 9-12

Week Five: Character Complications
Writing Exercise: Character Constellations
Workshop groups
Penelope Fitzgerald, At Freddie’s, Chapters 15-17

Week Six: Thematic Urgency
Writing Exercise: Conflict Scenes
Workshop groups

Week Seven: The Pressure of Place
Writing Exercise: The Other Place
Workshop groups

Week Eight: Raising the Stakes, Upending Expectations
Writing Exercise: Raising the Stakes
Workshop groups

Week Nine: The Ending and the Beginning
Writing Exercise: Choice Points
Workshop groups

Week Ten: Revision Strategies and Moving Forward Plans
Writing Exercise: Moving Forward Plans