STANFORD CONTINUING STUDIES
Novel Writing – NVL 134, Fall 2021
Wednesdays 6:30 – 9:20 pm
September 22 – December 1

INSTRUCTOR: Lynn Stegner

OFFICE HOURS: While I do not hold regular office hours for this course, I am happy to schedule a video or phone appointment.

TEXTBOOK: The Paris Review Interviews, Vol. I, Vol. II, & Vol. IV. These collections derive from the original Paris Review interviews called “Writers at Work,” and are intended to provide students with a sense of the various narrative matters facing all writers, ranging from personal habits of composition to the overarching themes of a culture.

I will also distribute via attachment several stand-alone interviews, as well as a suggested reading list, and students are encouraged to deepen their practical understanding of the novel as both a traditional and evolving narrative form.

MATERIALS AND/OR EXPENSES: None beyond the three volumes of the Paris Review Interviews.

REQUIREMENTS FOR CREDIT: Several grading options are available to students registered in the workshop. If students wish to receive transcript credit for the course, and/or a letter grade, then they must attend most of the class meetings; produce one to two chapters of a novel (length dependent), or one chapter and one revision; and participate regularly and respectfully in workshop discussions. Those choosing the NGR option are not subject to attendance constraints; that being said, the workshop dynamic relies upon a consortium of voices working together toward a single goal—making our novels the best that they can be. So, though not required of everyone, attendance with active participation is desired as part and parcel of being a solid citizen of the workshop community.

Before our first meeting—

* FIRST ASSIGNMENT: Read the interview with Louise Erdrich. This will be available to those enrolled in the course one week before we begin.

* Students should also contact the instructor, Lynn Stegner, via email no later than one week before the first class meeting to indicate whether or not they have work in progress that will be ready for discussion on September 22nd. Those students who do have work ready will then send those narratives to me in time for workshop participants to read them before the 22nd.
WEEKLY SCHEDULE AND OUTLINE:

*NOTE:* Neither the subject of novel writing nor the dynamic of a writing workshop lends itself to a rigid schedule of topical presentations, since issues arise organically from the material under discussion week by week. Nevertheless, we will follow roughly the natural sequence involved in developing, composing, and revising a novel, something along the following lines:

WEEK 1 – September 22
- *Housekeeping*
  - Student sign-up: manuscript presentation calendar *via* Google Doc
  - Handouts & explanations
  - Discussion of workshop protocol and dynamic
  - Guidelines for thinking and talking about works in progress
- *Student manuscript presentations & discussions*
- *For next week:* Selected reading from *The Paris Review* or elsewhere.

WEEK 2 – September 29
- *Short lecture: Before you begin*
  - Raw Materials: fomenting ideas with imagination; the art of weaving autobiographical material into the fabric of fiction; truth vs. fact
  - Research, homework, and respectful preparedness – fictional credibility
  - Organizing your material & notes
  - Good habits, good writing
- *Student manuscripts*
- *For next week:* Selected reading from *The Paris Review* or elsewhere.

WEEK 3 – October 6
- *Short lecture: Point of View*
  - The most important decision you will make – who tells the story, and why
- *Student manuscripts*
- *For next week:* Selected reading from *The Paris Review* or elsewhere.

WEEK 4 – October 13
- *Short lecture: Chapter One, Paragraph One*
  - Brushing in a background – time, place, atmosphere
  - Introducing characters
  - Seeding conflict & tension
  - The fictional situation & early stages of plotting
- *Student manuscripts*
- *For next week:* Selected reading from *The Paris Review* or elsewhere.

WEEK 5 – October 20
- *Short lecture: Composing the material*
  - Experiential language & details vs. *telling* through summary & abstractions
  - Narratively relevant details and description – specificity
PRELIMINARY COURSE SYLLABUS

- Word choice – verbs especially
- Resonating words & tone with content; prose style with context & culture
- Dramatic scenes
- Causative plot elements and loading the spring; the narrative EKG

- **Student manuscripts**
- **For next week:** Selected reading from *The Paris Review* or elsewhere.

WEEK 6 – October 27
- **Short lecture: Characterization & development**
  - Breathing life into your players
  - Plot-driven vs. character-driven narratives: “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?” -- *Henry James* – Symbiosis of character and event
  - Names & Appearance
  - Interiority
  - The informing past: backstory, flashbacks, & summaries
  - Tells & stage action: language, habits, ticks, gestures, vernacularism, dialogue & etc.
  - Other people, other eyes
  - Development & change: growing your characters

- **Student manuscripts**
- **For next week:** Selected reading from *The Paris Review* or elsewhere.

WEEK 7 – November 3
- **Short lecture: Furnishing the House – the narrative toolbox**
  - More on dialogue
  - Metaphor, simile, & symbolism – forms of analogy or comparison
  - Narrative voice & atmosphere
  - Necessary exposition & summary; interpretation of events
  - Flashbacks and the informing past; backstories
  - The language of the senses

- **Student manuscripts**
- **For next week:** Selected reading from *The Paris Review* or elsewhere.

WEEK 8 – November 10
- **Short lecture: Narrative Architecture – Plot & Structure**
  - Story & Plot
  - Conflict, Complications, Climax
  - Resolution
  - Orchestrating content, scenes, backstories and anything else meant to enrich, expand, or explain the central narrative line
  - Time schemes & markers; time passing on the page; time jumps & transitions
  - Pacing & prose rhythm

- **Student manuscripts**
- **For next week:** Selected reading from *The Paris Review* or elsewhere.

WEEK 9 – November 17
• **Short lecture: Thematic considerations**
  o Point, import, and organizing conceits
  o How a novel *means* and why it must – Dramatized Belief

• **Student manuscripts**

• **For next class:** Selected reading from *The Paris Review* or elsewhere.

* * *   No Class Wednesday November 24<sup>th</sup>   * * *

**WEEK 10 – December 1**

• **Q & A – The road to publication**
  o Revision, revision, revision
  o Final line-editing
  o Submissions, contests & awards
  o Agents & query letters; presses & publishers

• **Student manuscripts**

Class sessions will not be recorded.