Course Title: The Writing Life: Form & Theory of the Novel
Course Code: OWC 101 D
Instructor: Angela Pneuman

Course Summary:

In this course we’ll discuss what holds a novel together—the elements that create the feeling of a three-dimensional experience for a reader out of “words on a page.” We’ll approach questions of technique through weekly lectures, assigned readings from our two required novels as well as the craft book and the book on creative practice, and writing assignments that ask you to experiment with some of the approaches you’re learning about. We’ll also talk a bit about the writing life—the habits, the processes, the tips that will help you over the long project of drafting your novel.

This course is also designed to allow students who have not settled on a novel idea to try out more than one, so that you are ready to commit to a journey before starting Novel I. We’ll workshop short portions in this course, but in Novel I, and after that in Novels II and III, you’ll begin to receive extensive workshop critique. For this class, we’ll work to establish a foundation of approaches, concepts, and habits. We’ll generate new pages and explore the ideas you have for your novel. During Week 5, you’ll be able to schedule a one-on-one meeting with me to discuss your thoughts, plans, and progress.

Much of this course is about learning to read as writers; this will help you as you work on your own novel and also as you respond to your fellow novelists. During our final week, we’ll look both backwards over what we’ve done and forwards towards a working plan for the long haul. We’ll also discuss next immediate steps.

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

Required Texts:

The Modern Library Writer’s Workshop by Stephen Koch

Syllabus by Lynda Barry
https://www.amazon.com/Syllabus-Accidental-Professor-Lynda-Barry/dp/1770461612/
The Vanishing Half, by Brit Bennett

Old School, by Tobias Wolff
https://www.amazon.com/Old-School-Tobias-Wolff/dp/0375701494/

Recommended Text:

Olympus, Texas by Stacey Swann
ISBN: 978-0385545211

- Author Stacey Swann (who is a former instructor of this course) will attend a Zoom session Week 9 to answer questions about the process of writing her novel. Attendance is optional and the session will be recorded.

Grade Options and Requirements:

- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass) OWC students must take classes for a grade.

60%: completion of required weekly writing assignments (Weeks 1 to 4); weekly discussion questions (1 per week, may include a response to someone else’s response); and your 3500-word workshop submission.
  
  Note: weekly writing assignments become optional in the second half of class to allow you to focus on workshop and your workshop responses

40%: responding with generosity to other writers; this includes feedback on weekly writing assignments in small groups (Weeks 1 to 4) and response letters in your assigned workshop groups (Week 6 to 10)

Tentative Weekly Outline:

Week 1: The Concept of Discovery & Some Beginning Questions
Week 2: Convincing Characters
Week 3: Point of View & Narrative Voice
Week 4: Tension, Conflict & Momentum, Forecasting
Week 5: Writing Residency Week*
Week 6: Setting & Discovery
Week 7: Scenes & Dialog

* Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
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650-725-2650
Week 8: Summary & Backstory (in a First Draft)
Week 9: Discovering the Threads of Theme
Week 10: The Writing Journey—Outlining and Energy for the Long Project

*No assigned readings, writings, or discussions this week; a chance for you to push ahead with new pages; this week you may make a 20 to 30-minute one-on-one zoom appointment with me—the one-on-one is recommended, but not mandatory.

**Weekly Schedule:**

**Sunday:** Expect an email from me Sunday nights, introducing the upcoming week

**Wednesday:** Weekly Writing Assignments due at midnight PT (Weeks 1-4)
Workshop responses due at midnight PT (Weeks 6-10)

**Thursday:** Responses to discussion questions due at midnight PT—though it’s better to get these up early in the week, if possible, for more conversation

**Friday:** The next week’s workshop submissions due midnight PT (Weeks 6-10)

**All Week:** Discussion question conversations continue (Weeks 1-4, 6-10)
Respond to your small group writing assignments (Weeks 1 to 4); please respond by the end of the week

**Weekend:** Read; answer discussion questions for the next week; get a jump start on the next writing prompts; work on your novel

**Late work:** Since much of the course depends on giving and receiving feedback in a timely manner, please adhere to the deadlines. After the week ends (Sat night, midnight), I will close the week’s threads to new posts.

Does this sound complicated? It’s much less so than it seems—you’ll see, and don’t hesitate to ask questions!

**ZOOM**

Each week, we’ll check in with a video “office hour” via ZOOM. This is a time for you to come ready with any questions or comments about the week’s topics, or writing fiction in general—your novel in particular. Because of our various time zones, ZOOM meetings are recommended but not required. If you can’t make one and would like to tune in, you will be able to find links to each recording in Warpwire. During workshop weeks we may or may not discuss individual pieces—as they come up. There will be no official “live workshop” over ZOOM.

**Here is the ZOOM schedule for the term:**

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Weekly Writing Assignments

Drafting a novel requires experimentation and the willingness to keep approaching your own material with an open mind. We’ll be spending a lot of time on prompts and freewriting—posting 500 to 800 words a week—to encourage you to keep discovering and engaging with your material in fresh ways, and to keep entering the world of your novel from new angles. I recommend spending about 90 minutes for each weekly writing assignment—writing quickly. You may come up with something that becomes part of the book, or the exercise may help in other less definable ways.

Unless otherwise noted* if the weekly prompts (often I’ll give you two options from which to choose) don’t inspire you, you can post instead 500 to 800 words of new novel pages. *Expect a couple exceptions to this.

For the weekly assignments it’s important to post new work rather than previously written pages from your novel. Try to push forward and experiment as much as possible.

Again, during Weeks 1-4 these weekly assignments will be mandatory, and you’ll be responding to each other in small feedback groups of three or four. During our Workshop Weeks 6-10, these weekly assignments become optional. You will receive my very brief comments on the weekly exercises every week; they are due Wednesday, but I will comment on late work (as noted above) provided it is posted by Saturday midnight of the week assigned.

Discussion Questions:

Each week we’ll be reading portions of two published novels with an eye to how they’re working; we’ll be developing a shared nomenclature and consciously “reading like writers.” The course lectures and craft books will help inform the weekly discussion questions as we analyze portions of each book—you’ll flip back into the material and refer to specific details, or language, or scenes to help you think about the question and support your thoughts. Please remember: just like in workshop it’s important not to become stuck responding with how much you like or dislike the assigned reading; we often can learn from

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the techniques of books we don’t love.

Please don’t worry—there are no “right” answers and no “correct” ways to discuss how a novel operates. The discussion questions are meant to enhance your understanding of how writing works and to encourage you to harvest techniques you admire.

Workshop

During Weeks 6-10, you’ll each submit up to 3500 words of your novel-in-progress for half-class workshops. We’ll talk more about the schedule and feedback guidelines when we get a little closer.

One Final Note:

Please let me know if something unexpected makes it difficult to keep up. If the situation is not confidential, post to the Thoughts 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 forming our own community of writers as we push forward on our individual projects; our goal is to be both supportive of each other and productive with our own work. I’m excited to lead and facilitate this community—every term I learn from the insights of the group, and I’m looking forward to getting to know you and your novels-in-progress.