

Stanford | Continuing Studies

Course Title: NOVEL 1: The Powerful Beginning
OWC 303 B Winter Quarter 2022
Instructor: Sarah Stone

Course Summary

This term, we're going to use the idea of a powerful beginning to help you find your way more deeply into your novel and to develop a range of artistic and craft strategies. The collective goal from here to the end of the certificate program is for you to make substantial progress toward the completion of your novel.

Every novelist needs to invent their own approach to craft: we'll support each other in understanding more about the essence and nature of your novels and aesthetics. You can use the writing exercises, our readings, our weekly Zoom discussions, and the workshops to explore any part of your novel—you can choose to focus on your beginning or any part of your book. We'll consider the promises a beginning makes, inciting incidents and premises, characters and their relationships, points of view and voice, language and dialogue, building and sustaining tension, plots and alternative structures, and the narrative design that gives you a sense of your novel as a whole.

For the first two weeks of class, we'll do writing exercises, in class and on Zoom, to strengthen your scenes and discover more about your characters. We'll have writing exercises every week throughout the term, though they become optional once workshop begins. We'll have two workshop groups (you'll self-select into these groups in our initial two weeks), and each of you will turn in a 3500-4999 word selection of your book for comments from your group and me. Our comments will be designed to spark your imagination and expand your sense of the possibilities of your novel.

Together, we'll consider a diverse and wide-ranging set of published novel beginnings, along with some optional craft books. We'll use the novel beginnings to explore different aesthetics and traditions and discuss how you might apply what you learn to your own novels.

Writing Exercises

For the first two weeks of the course, we'll have writing exercises to create more dynamic character interactions, intensify narrative urgency, and discover more about the 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

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
 365 Lasuen St., Stanford, CA 94305
 continuingstudies@stanford.edu
 650-725-2650

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.

We will have two workshop groups (you'll self-select into these groups during our initial two weeks), and each of you will turn in a selection of your book, up to 4999 words, for comments from your group and me. You will only be required to write feedback on the piece(s) from your group, although you are also welcome to respond to the writers in the other group if you can. Beginning at the end of week two, one or two people in each group will submit a selection of a novel-in-progress (3500 to 4999 words) for their group to workshop via a concise, specific, honest, and supportive response (about 500 words). You'll post your workshop piece by Thursday 2 p.m. 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.

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.

Assigned Readings

This class is principally a workshop, so we are not assigning complete novels. Instead, you will be reading your workshop group's pieces and also samples of books each week, in keeping with the course theme of multiplicity. Even the first few pages of a book give a great deal of information about the book's situation and concerns. The most complete versions of opening chapters can often be found on a publisher's website (type the name of the book in quotes into Google, or your favorite search engine, and add "excerpt" to find these). If you'd rather, you can just go straight to an online bookseller, find the book, and download the sample. Since the publisher's, Amazon's, and Google's links change often, we suggest searching for the most current version. (People always find books from our sample selections that they want to read in their entirety, which is great. If you've read ahead of our selection, please find ways to write about it without plot spoilers.)

Recommended Readings

Here are a few recommended books you may find helpful as craft references – you’ll have optional readings from these books in the course of class, so you might take a look at each of them to see whether they call out to you at this moment in your writing life. I’ll also provide supplemental, optional literary links along the way.

The Secret Miracle: The Novelist’s Handbook, Daniel Alarcón

The Art of Subtext: Beyond Plot, Charles Baxter

The Art of Time in Fiction: As Long As It Takes, Joan Silber

Chat/ZOOM Schedule (optional but strongly recommended)

We’ll have a mixture of informal and optional weekly live group video chat/ZOOM chats, a mix of close reading and craft discussion, writing exercises, open Q&A, and post-workshop author questions. 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. And anyone who wants a 20-30 minute individual chat with me can schedule that at some point after the workshop. If you can’t make a given group 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. The Zoom sessions are optional, but highly recommended. Still, 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.

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 respond to posts M, T, W, and Th afternoons (with a brief midday visit on Friday for urgent questions only). As much as possible, 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.

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.

Each Monday, I will close the threads for the previous week. If you still owe an author a workshop response, it will be your responsibility to get it to that person (and copy me so that you can get credit). Since workshop pieces come in on Thursdays, you always have a full weekend ahead of workshop to do your workshop responses then, if necessary.

Please post any 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 any questions about assignments, readings, or course content in the Questions about Course Content thread for everyone to see, rather than sending it by email. If you have a question about course material, someone else does too, and that person might be too shy to ask. Feel free to use the course Inbox (in the red bar at the left of your screen) to contact me if you have an urgent, private question or concern. Although I only respond to posts and email M-Th 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

OWC requires letter grades for all classes.

1/3: Workshop submission. 3500-4999 words, submitted on the date that you sign up for and formatted for reading: uploaded as an attachment in Word or RTF (not as a PDF, Pages, or Google Docs), spell-checked and proofread, double-spaced, in a 12 point font with page numbers. You'll also want to paste a version into your workshop thread, to make sure everyone gets to read it. Important note: if you're behind on your workshop responses for your colleagues, then responses from the class become optional.

1/3: Workshop Responses. Workshop responses are mandatory for everyone in your own workshop group. Many people also write responses for those in the other group, deepening their own learning and supporting the classroom community. Your workshop response letters should be respectful, honest, and specific, about 600-750 words long, including both specific praise and questions for revision. Strike a balance between mirroring (see the workshop guidelines), supportive feedback, and constructive questions or suggestions for revision. These should also be posted on time, so that we have a full discussion. If a real emergency comes along and you must be late, please post them as soon as you can. You might look at what people have already posted, particularly if the writer is asking questions, so you can see what you can add to the conversation.

1/3: Overall participation. Includes three mandatory writing exercises in the first two weeks of class (including the bio/introduction). Since writing breakthroughs happen at different speeds and different times – sometimes troughs that appear endless to us are followed by huge leaps, but sometimes not for a while – your grade will be based on whether you’re turning in your work and writing thoughtful commentaries on your fellow writers’ pieces. This gives you the most freedom to take risks with your exercises and drafts. I do not grade your writing based on its "quality," because a) this kind of grading is totally subjective, and b) writing for a grade gets in the way of writing out of a sense of passion and purpose. Please be a good community member in all the ways spelled out here, plus those others you know all about, and make sure that your writing is fairly well copy-edited for obvious spelling and grammar errors and that it shows substantial engagement. 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.

Let your colleagues in class, and me, know if you run into trouble -- these classes are wonderful communities to help with a range of questions and issues, from process questions to work-life balance. And sometimes all of us will get frustrated with our own novels. It’s part of the process: don’t lose heart! This often happens just before we make a big breakthrough. William Stafford famously wrote a poem a day and is often quoted 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 allowed ourselves that freedom that we take the biggest risks and often do our most exciting work.

Overview of Class Readings and Topics:

Please see above for info on the novel beginnings we’ll be reading.
Writing exercises and discussion questions become optional once workshop begins.

Week 1: Promises: Beginnings Strategies

Writing Exercises: Bio/Intro, The One-Way Gate

Assigned Readings (any amount you can download will work fine – you only really need the first few pages, and in a pinch, for this first week, you can work with the amount we’ve quoted in the lecture):

Natalie Baszile, *Queen Sugar*

Jill Ciment, *The Body in Question*

Recommended Reading:

Daniel Alarcón, *The Secret Miracle*, Chapter 2, “Getting Started”

Charles Baxter, *The Art of Subtext, Beyond Plot*, “Introduction” and “Creating a Scene”

Week 2: The Tripwire

Writing Exercise: Outrunning the Critic

Assigned Reading:

Helen Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox*

Joan Silber, *Improvement*

Recommended Reading:

Daniel Alarcón, *The Secret Miracle*, Chapter 5, “Writing”

Week 3: Desire and Subjectivity: Character and POV

Writing Exercise: Five Things (optional)

Assigned Reading:

Workshop pieces

Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*

Brian Morton, *Florence Gordon*

Recommended Reading:

Daniel Alarcón, ed., *The Secret Miracle*, Chapter 4, “Character and Scene”

Charles Baxter, *The Art of Subtext, Beyond Plot*, “Loss of Face”

Week 4: Building and Sustaining Tension

Writing Exercise: The Weight of the Unsaid (optional)

Assigned Reading:

Workshop pieces

Chimamanda Ngozi, Adichie, *Americanah*

Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl*

Recommended Reading:

Charles Baxter, *The Art of Subtext, Beyond Plot*, “Digging the Subterranean”

Week 5: Time In Fiction

Writing Exercise: Curveballs (optional)

Assigned Reading:

Workshop pieces

Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West*

Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

Recommended Reading:

Joan Silber, *The Art of Time in Fiction: As Long As It Takes*, “Introduction” and “Classic Time”

Week 6: Language as Lens

Writing Exercise: Inhabiting Prose (optional)

Assigned Reading:

Workshop pieces

Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*

Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*

Recommended Reading:

“Style and Dialogue,” from Stone and Nyren, *Deepening Fiction: A Practical Guide for Intermediate and Advanced Fiction Writers*

Week 7: Story World

Writing Exercise: The Setting Interferes (optional)

Assigned Reading:

Workshop pieces

Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*

Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story*

Recommended Reading:

Malena Watrous, [“Setting Matters”](#)

Joan Silber, *The Art of Time in Fiction: As Long As It Takes*, “Switchback Time”

Week 8: Theme and Meaning/Premise

Writing Exercise: Novel in a Nutshell (optional)

Assigned Reading:

Workshop pieces

Michael Cunningham, *The Hours*

Carolina De Robertis, *Cantoras*

Recommended Reading:

Joan Silber, *The Art of Time in Fiction: As Long As It Takes*, “Time as Subject”

Daniel Alarcón, ed., *The Secret Miracle*, Chapter 6, Revision

Week 9: Narrative Design/Structure and Outlining

Writing Exercise: Instabilities (optional)

Assigned Reading:

Workshop pieces

Maria Semple, *Where’d You Go, Bernadette?*

Jennifer Egan, *A Visit From The Goon Squad*

Recommended Reading:

Joan Silber, *The Art of Time in Fiction: As Long As It Takes*, “Slowed Time” and “Fabulous Time”

Week 10: Moving Forward

Writing Exercise: Moving Forward Plans (optional)

Assigned Reading:

Workshop pieces

As many of your colleagues’ Moving Forward Plans as possible.