A Note from the Instructor:
One of the most famous remarks about novel-writing comes from Somerset Maugham: “There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.” This can actually be an encouraging idea. While it does mean that no one can give us the list of steps to writing a novel, on the other hand, it also means that we can each figure out how to write our own novel, the one which has never existed before and which could not exist without the work we do to discover it and bring it into being. We can help each other with this process of discovery through our online discussions of each other’s writing and of the novels we’re reading.

There’s something mysterious, even magical, about the power of a novel, its capacity to bring us (as writers and as readers) into another reality and to illuminate life in some way. A novel can be completely made up or drawn from life and, in either case, feel “real” to its readers. A novel can also feel “real” whether it offers a gripping, linear plot that relies on cause-and-effect events or experiments wildly with language, structure, and the incorporation of other media or genres (from graphic novels to novels that include passages of poetry). So what is it that lets us as writers create a book that feels both convincing and emotionally significant? In this online class, we’ll find ways to make use of a mix of informal written lectures, discussions, and writing exercises to help each participant explore character complexities, ways of developing rich arcs and plots/structures, time, pacing, narrative movement and narrative drive, point of view options, and the dramatic embodiment of thematic questions. We’ll also deal with process – from generating new ideas to working through “blocks” (and discovering what a gift a block can be) to revising our work.

As an aid to thinking about the possibilities and techniques of novel-writing, we’ll read and discuss a couple of very different short novels – Alice Munro’s *Beggar Maid*, structured as a series of third-person linked stories that covers decades, and Ernest J. Gaines’s high-stakes first-person tale that takes place in a short period of time. We’ll consider these novels (along with passages excerpted from other 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)?

Fundamentally, this is a workshop-based course – our main task starting in week four will be workshopping a chapter or selection from each participant’s novel. Writers expand and develop their knowledge of their own craft and aesthetics just as much in critiquing the work of others as in receiving critiques. As a community, we’ll give each writer supportive, helpful feedback on writing exercises and workshop pieces, working together to discover each novel’s largest possibilities. This course is for writers at every level: whether we’re trying (over and over) to start a first novel or we’ve written six of them, we’re always beginning all over again.

No matter what kind of novel you’re writing, and no matter where you are in the process of writing it – from a few jotted notes to piles of completed (or partially completed) drafts – by the time you finish this course, you’ll have made a whole series of discoveries about your own book, and you’ll have learned more about the art, the craft, and the process of novel writing.
**Required Texts:**
Feel free 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. I will occasionally post additional links to craft essays or other information that augments our topics for the week, but these readings will be optional.

*Alice Munro, The Beggar Maid*
*Ernest J. Gaines, A Lesson Before Dying*

You can purchase the course texts via Amazon.com by clicking on the link to access them directly, or you can buy them through your local or online indie bookseller.

**How This Course Is Structured:**
Every week of our ten-week course will focus on a different craft element that goes into the construction of a strong, intriguing, unique novel beginning. In weeks 1-3 you will do short (up to 750 words) writing exercises designed to help you generate or revise material from your novel. You’ll offer paragraph-length peer responses for these exercises to at least three of your colleagues. From week 4 on, after workshops begin, the writing exercises will be optional: we’ll be focusing on the workshop pieces in those weeks.

Beginning at the end of week 3, two to three students at a time will submit a full opening chapter (up to 7000 words) for the whole group to critique via a supportive and detailed letter of feedback. We’ll workshop 2-4 pieces a week, for which we’ll each write a page or so of thoughtful, generous, honest, and useful response. Our responses will include identifying the aims and accomplishments of each selection, offering specific praise for its strengths, asking equally specific questions, and suggesting areas for further development in the next draft. 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 rather than ready to throw out the book. The postings don’t have to be polished or perfect, but it’s crucial to be both kind and honest in critiques and discussions. We’ll also have ongoing discussions of readings, craft ideas, the progress you’re making on your own writing, and the questions and ideas that feel most helpful to you as you work on your novel.

**Chat/ZOOM:**
For the first two weeks of the term, and in the final week as well, we’ll have an hour-long live Zoom chat session: an audio/video mixture of office hour and informal discussion of art, craft, process, the nature and purpose of fiction, additional thoughts about the readings, and so on. I’ll schedule it at as convenient a time as possible, but everyone has different work hours (and sometimes time zones), so attendance is optional. If you can’t make the chats, they are recorded and uploaded as untitled videos to Youtube (I’ll send you a link, but they won’t be searchable), and our primary place for conversations about the reading and writing will be in our online discussions. After the first couple of weeks, each person has the option of making an appointment for a 20-30 minute phone or Zoom individual conference at some point during the term, a chance to talk with me one-on-one about your novel and your writing.

**Priorities:**
Some people will have many hours a week for the class, and others may have substantial work and family responsibilities. In our online class, you can make progress in either case, with enough flexibility to make it work with your life and schedule. If you are pressed for time in any given week, here’s an
order of priorities:

1. Post your exercises for the first three weeks and the final week, and post your workshop piece by the Friday at noon before the time slot you’ve signed up for. Post on time to give everyone the maximum time to respond (pretend, if necessary, that your work is due a day early – great practice for making friends with your editors).

2. Write thoughtful, thorough responses to each of the workshop pieces (these responses are mandatory).

3. Write thoughtful, though briefer, responses to your classmates’ exercises (at least three, more if you have time, rotating responses so that the later posters get some as well -- i.e. if someone already has three responses, move on to pieces that don’t have as many comments, coming back to respond to others only if you have time). These are mandatory in the first three weeks of class and optional once workshop begins.

4. Engage as fully as you can in the reading and craft discussions, but when you’re busy, you can post just a paragraph or so, and still learn from thinking about the art and craft questions for that week.

Grading:
I recommend taking the course for Credit/No Credit (C/NC). This gives you a record of having taken the class. Another possibility is to take the course No Grade Requested (NGR). Either of these lets you focus on the work itself, without worrying about results (good practice for all writers). You can receive credit by submitting your workshop piece and at least three writing exercises (during the course of the quarter – not all at the end), commenting on your classmates’ workshop pieces, and actively participating in most discussions, including discussions of the writing exercises.

If you want a grade, note that grading is based on

1/3 participation in the discussions
1/3 writing exercises (only the mandatory ones) and workshop submission
1/3 quality of peer responses

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 thoughtful commentaries on your fellow writers’ pieces, rather than on “quality.” This gives you the most freedom to take risks with your exercises and drafts. It doesn’t work to grade 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 your sense of passion and inner purpose. (You do need to make sure that your writing is fairly well copy-edited for obvious spelling and grammar errors and is on time.)

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.
Please try to stay active in the online forums. You’ll get the most out of the class if you put attention into the reading and your responses to your classmates as well as your own work. And yet, 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.

**Preliminary schedule:**
Here is a preliminary schedule for topics that we’ll consider in relation to the novels we’re reading for class as well as the novels you’re writing (it’s subject to change, apart from the required readings). You’ll have writing exercises for each of the topics (optional exercises for the second half of the class). We’ll explain and explore each of the topics to develop a shared vocabulary and set of concepts, then consider them in our discussions from a variety of angles, including, among other questions, those listed below.

**Week 1: Beginnings/Setting the Stakes**  
Alice Munro, *The Beggar Maid* (Chapter 1)  
Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (Chapters 1 through 4)

What mysteries does the beginning offer, or what concerns does the beginning raise, and what makes these mysteries or concerns intriguing or engaging? How does the opening handle the tension between offering information and getting the book moving?

**Week 2: Narrative Motion**  
Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (Chapters 5 through 16)

What is the nature of the central character’s predicament, of the other characters’ predicaments? Which moments make these plain? What is the difference between a situation and a predicament?

**Week 3: Point of View**  
Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (Chapters 17 through 30)

Who is telling the story and how? What level of distance does the narrative voice have (even if that voice is a character in the story)? Why might you choose one POV over another, and what are the artistic and emotional possibilities of each?

**Week 4: The Role of Place/Significant Detail**  
Alice Munro, *The Beggar Maid* (Chapters 2 through 6)

How do the different physical, emotional, and societal settings affect the characters, the scene, and the novel as a whole? How do we discover the essential details for our particular world and novel?

**Week 5: Dialogue and Subtext**  
Alice Munro, *The Beggar Maid* (Chapters 7 through 10)
What moves forward because of the conversations? What different kinds of work does the dialogue do? How do the voices of the different characters differ in their word choice, the kinds of things they will and will not say, their rhythms?

**Week 6: Time in the Novel**  
Workshop pieces

How do time and pacing work in the book, including time transitions, flashbacks, time leaps, and the period of time covered? In what ways does the handling of time relate to the mood and subject matter of the novel?

**Week 7: Repetition and Variation**  
Workshop pieces

When and how does repetition become an essential part of the meaning and nature of a novel – what makes the repetition feel deliberate and necessary? How do certain ideas, characters, and themes mirror each other in the course of the book, and how does the writer vary and develop them? How do we develop our language and imagery while staying true to our natural voices as writers?

**Week 8: Narrative Shapes**  
Workshop pieces

What possible narrative shapes can you use to structure and sequence your work? How does the novel’s narrative shape support the character development, the character constellations, and the narrative tension?

**Week 9: Endings/Keeping Our Promises**  
Workshop pieces

What makes a novel ending feel both surprising and inevitable? How does it either satisfy or upend our expectations? How does it keep any promises made by the beginning? How does it work with the characters, ideas, and tone it set at the start? And then how does it alter and deepen them?

**Week 10: Revision/Next Steps**  
How do we make effective use of workshop feedback, and what methods and approaches serve us best as we re-enter a novel? How do we revise at the macro-level (major overhauls in structure, character, etc.) and at the level of line, detail, and language?

Note: you don’t need to know what any of this means in order to function happily in the class – we’ll look at these terms and concepts in the lectures and in the process of our investigations. And there will be some topics, like character construction and complications, which we’ll be working with all through the course.