The Art of Characterization: An Essential Craft
Spring Quarter 2015
Instructor: Lewis Robinson

REQUIRED TEXTS

Fiction Writer’s Workshop by Josip Novakovich
http://www.amazon.com/Fiction-Writers-Workshop-Josip-Novakovich/dp/1582975361/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1395670351&sr=8-1

The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Short Stories edited by Tobias Wolff

RECOMMENDED READING

Euphoria
Lily King
http://www.amazon.com/Euphoria-Lily-King/dp/0802123708/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&sr=1-1&qid=1420830466

The Imperfectionists
Tom Rachman
http://www.amazon.com/Imperfectionists-Novel-Readers-Circle/dp/0385343671/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1420830832&sr=8-7

Drown
Junot Diaz

A Note on the Recommended Reading:
These are books that offer some terrific examples of how to render emotionally-engaging, intriguing, unforgettable characters. This reading is entirely optional!

GRADING

Writing assignments/exercises: 40%
Workshop piece: 20%
Forum/workshop participation: 40%

Writing assignments/exercises: timely completion of the short exercises during weeks 1 through 5, and thoughtfully answering at least one of the discussion questions every week.
Participation in the workshop discussion and the forums: timely responses to work posted by your peers (short pieces written during the first half of the course and longer excerpts delivered in the second half of the course). Initially these responses will be succinct and informal, but as we move into the workshop phase of the class, each student will write a “letter of critique” in response to the 2,000-5,000-word works-in-progress posted. Compassionate, constructive, specific feedback wins the day.

**WEEKLY TOPICS AND READING:**

In each of the first five weeks, I will assign two stories from our anthology. Each week’s discussion questions and writing exercises will be based on a theme.

**WEEK ONE (March 30): Introductions, Source Materials, Beginnings**

Our very first assignment is designed as a meet-and-greet. It’s a series of questions about your life, your reading habits, your tastes. I’m hoping that by answering these questions, seeing the answers that others post, and commenting on those posts, we’ll all begin to get to know each other and establish a class culture. (It won’t be long before you’re sharing your creative work; to make that process more meaningful and comfortable, we should begin to know each other as people and not just as wellsprings of text!)

In this first week, too, we’ll identify sources of inspiration, and ways to begin new work.

Reading: anthology

**WEEK TWO (April 6): Action is Character**

How a character acts determines who they are to your readers. What your characters do when they face a choice, how they react in a given situation, the judgments they make—this is the meat of every story.

This week, we will practice writing short scenes, and we will discuss what we glean about characters from the actions they take.

Reading: anthology

**WEEK THREE (April 13): Delving Deep—Character Analysis**

Even if your story or novel doesn’t reveal the name of one of your characters, you should know it. And you should know what’s on the bottom shelf of their refrigerator, what they think about when they wake in the middle of the night, and the kinds of gifts they give. These may or may not be details revealed on the page, but the better you know your characters, the more vivid they will feel to your readers.
What might constitute a “perfect day” for your character? Does she have a hunch about how she might die? What is her most terrible memory? What kind of conversation might she have with that annoying person she sat next to on the flight back from Minneapolis? What about that shoebox full of letters she keeps in the back of her bedroom closet?

Reading: anthology

**WEEK FOUR (April 20): Point of View as the Engine of Engagement**

Whether you use a 1st, 2nd, or 3rd-person narrator, what is noticed—and how it gets noticed—goes a long way in helping your readers “get” your characters. Point of view is everything!

Description and setting and psychological complexity—and much more—are rendered by point-of-view. How might a grumpy misanthrope describe an elementary-school playground full of frolicking children? How would that image be rendered differently by an earnest young politician?

In our writing exercise this week, we’ll practice getting more out of point-of-view. Close reading, too, will be essential this week. We’ll pick apart excerpts from stories in the anthology.

Reading: anthology

**WEEK FIVE (April 27): Change, Growth, Surprise—Story Arc**

What impact do the events of a scene/story/novel have on the protagonist? How, if at all, has the character grown or changed?

The pace of a narrative depends on allowing your reader to anticipate what might happen to your characters. The more aware you are of what your reader might be anticipating, the better you’ll be able to sustain tension. We’ll take a close look this week at character-driven plot turns.

Reading: anthology

**WEEK SIX (May 4): Workshop**

Workshop 1
Reading: anthology

**WEEK SEVEN (May 11): Workshop**

Workshop 2
Reading: anthology
WEEK EIGHT (May 18): Workshop

Workshop 3
Reading: anthology

WEEK NINE (May 25): Workshop

Workshop 4
Reading: anthology

WEEK TEN (June 1): incorporating feedback, revision, finishing

The goal of workshop is not to write “by committee,” but rather, to get energized for the next phase of the process: sharpening the details, bolstering the characterization, reconsidering the balance of summary and scene. Some feedback will make perfect sense to you, and some feedback may not be of particular use. That’s okay. The process is not democratic, it’s a monarchy. Ultimately, the buck stops with you.

This week we’ll have a chance to share plans for revision. After the first draft, we see which scenes are essential. What are those moments in the story when we have the best opportunity to “see” your characters? Broaden the impact of those scenes, and polish the details. Find the sharpest description in your story, and see if you can bring the other details up to that level.

Spring Quarter ends June 5th.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

MONDAY: the class week officially starts with a Welcome to the Week email from me.

TUESDAY: 3pm (PST): Responses to reading discussion questions due.

WEDNESDAY: 3pm (PST): Writing exercise due (though if you’re able to post earlier, you’ll probably receive more feedback). I respond to these posts in the order in which they come in.

THROUGHOUT THE WEEK: Respond to posts, participate in discussion.

WEEKEND: If possible, use the weekend to get a head start on your weekly assignments or to write your workshop submission. The classroom is always open.

After we begin a new week, the previous week’s discussion ends and we won’t revisit those conversations.

MORE ABOUT WORKSHOP
A thoughtful and honest workshop atmosphere is worth striving for. Our goals for workshop will be: 1) to be compassionate in our attempt to understand a piece of writing from the inside, and 2) to separate the text from its author so that we can provide honest and constructive feedback. For example, each time we workshop we should be asking the following questions: what is the genius of the current draft? How might that genius be further capitalized upon and developed? It is important to remember that the more thoughtful and specific your written critiques are, the more you will hone the skills you need to revise your own fiction. (Each posted critique in weeks 6-9, should be 200-300 words, roughly.) The best workshops are compassionate, candid, and have a “quid pro quo” feeling.

**ALL STORIES/NOVEL EXCERPTS (OF UP TO 5,000 WORDS) FOR WORKSHOP ARE DUE TO ME VIA EMAIL, AS WORD DOCUMENTS, BY MIDNIGHT ON THE SUNDAY OF WEEK 5 (MAY 3).**

**A final note about the work in this class:**
It’s my hope, of course, that you’ll be able to do every single assignment throughout the quarter. Sometimes, though, life intervenes. It’s not the end of the world—and I won’t judge you—if you miss an occasional assignment. What I’d love to see, mostly, is that you have many opportunities to take creative risks. Write with abandon, and hope for both success and failure. Writers fail, we succeed; we succeed, we fail. And we try again. You will learn most in this class from putting yourself out there and trying.