Course Title: Raising the Stakes: Writing the Compelling Story
Course Code: FICT 35 W
Instructor Name: Matthew Iribarne

Course Description:
The objective of this course is to write and in so doing, create compelling narratives. Our work will be inspired by readings in craft and technique and the examination of the work of other writers. In our study we will consider point of view, characterization, place, voice and style, dialogue and the spoken word, revision, and more as we read the work of the wide variety of authors. In each piece we will consider strategies employed by the writer, and how these approaches speak to our own work, especially how they may introduce techniques or open up topics worthy of further exploration. In studying the work of these writers and the tools they used to create these pieces, we will write our own short pieces as we look toward the idea of taking our work further, pushing ourselves toward truth and, ultimately, publication. Students will complete two short stories, each to be workshopped in the class.

Weekly Writing Assignments:
Each week, there will be several short (500 words or less) writing exercises based in some way upon the week’s topic. You will be asked to take on one of these writing exercises, with the hope that it might steer you toward material that surprises you and takes you to a place you might not have expected to go. Please keep in mind these exercises are not meant to generate finished work (i.e. a complete story), but to used as explorations and beginning points. It’s my hope that these exercises will prompt you to go further, and that you might well continue with the work after you have started it. As well, these exercises could well end up being one of the pieces you submit for the workshop, something that begs expansion and that you feel excited about. What’s important is that you feel inspired by the work, that you take on these exercises that end up pushing you toward surprising places.

Your responses to the exercises will be posted in the forum by Thursday afternoon, so your classmates will have the opportunity to read and offer comments on them (I’ll post feedback as well). Although your comments on these exercises won’t necessarily be as in-depth as your comments on the full-length pieces we’ll be workshopping in the second half of the quarter, it’s critical that we all become comfortable with reading and discussing one another’s work, and I’ll be giving explicit instructions on what you should be looking for each week.

Please note that once we begin workshop in the second part of the term, all writing exercises will be entirely optional.
The Workshop:
At the end of week five, each student will turn in a short story, as we begin workshop. Over the course of the next five weeks the entire class will read and offer in-depth, detailed comments on them. Ideally, this piece will be an extension and expansion of one of your early exercise responses, but it doesn’t have to be.

Responses and suggestion in the workshop will be aimed at helping the author explore her/his work and getting aid in getting a manuscript to the NEXT step of development. Revision will be seen as an on-going process of exploration. We will discuss stories always remembering to look at the larger intent of the work, pointing to elements of craft and how the writer might best use the tools discussed in the readings, where it is we can see the piece heading. The work will be examined for the balance of craft that makes it a successful portrayal of the author’s vision inside that particular world, how this draft could be developed to the next point in the creative process.

What’s most important, that we feel safe in exploring those areas that open up these areas in our own creative development, and we will establish guidelines in helping us achieve such a goal. This class is indeed all about pushing ourselves further as writers, and in order to do as much of this type of work we’ll be sure to create an environment that makes as much possible.

In the last week of instruction you will also be asked to submit a second short story. This work will not be expected to be a full-length work, the best way to think of it would be as a work-in-progress. This piece will be discussed in less detail (a paragraph or two in the way of feedback).

Chat:
Near the end of each week, I will host an hour-long “chat” session via ZOOM. This session is an online “office hour” of sorts, but in a group context. Attendance is optional, and the session will be recorded if you can’t make it. This is where I’ll address your issues of craft and process, talk about these readings covered and how we might apply them to our own material. We’ll discuss the exercises, questions that might have come up for you this past week as related to the readings and your own work, continue the conversations regarding student work posted in the forum. In the second half of the quarter, chat will continue our discussions of the workshopped student pieces. My greatest hope is that we all can nurture one another’s work here, gently push each other further. As well, that we can simulate the traditional classroom environment, all of us contributing to the conversation and coming up with answers and inspiration in a true dialogue which inspires.
Your Weekly Responsibilities:
Log onto Canvas, and read through the entire “Schedule” page. This page included my “lecture” for the week, as well as assignments, supplemental readings and links, and other reminders.

Read the assigned texts, and post your responses to the discussion section in the forum.

Weeks 1-5: Respond to ONE of the Writing Exercises, post your response in the forum, and read/comment on one other student piece as described below.

Weeks 6-10: Provide in-depth (roughly a page) of comments for each full-length student piece submitted in the forum, checking back later in the week to continue your involvement in the conversation.

First (full-length) short story (2000-5000 words).
Second short story (1000-2000 words).*

* For second short story, please provide a paragraph (or two) of feedback.

Participate in an hour-long “chat” session via ZOOM, hosted by me (optional).

What I’ll be Doing:
Sending out a weekly email containing general class information and the upcoming reading and writing assignments.

Setting up the forums and moderating the discussion within. I will generally check in at least once every weekday, although I don’t generally post on weekends.

Reading and commenting on all student work in a positive and helpful manner, keeping in mind the goals of this class, to push ourselves toward raising the stakes in our creative work. For short exercises, my responses will be a couple of paragraphs long, with perhaps a few lines of technical advice. For the full-length pieces, I’ll provide a page or so of comments, plus some line-by-line suggestions on the attached word document.

Hosting the weekly online “chat” sessions.

Grading:
For those of you who are taking this course for a grade, the breakdown is as follows. Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final class meeting (Friday of the last week of class) by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies Department).
Writing Exercises (Weeks 1-5): 20%
Full-length piece: 30%
Shorter work in different genre: 10%
Forum/Workshop Participation: 40%

Preliminary Syllabus:

Week 1: A Safe Place (3/30 – 4/3)
What Is This Thing Called Creative Writing? pp. 1-28, Method and Madness
Emergency by Denis Johnson
Silver Water by Amy Bloom
Journal exercise

Week 2: The Bat Cave: Showing and Telling (4/6 – 4/10)
The Gift of Not Knowing, pp. 29-53, Method and Madness
Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been? by Joyce Carol Oates
Details, Details, pp. 61-78 and pp. 92-95, Method and Madness
Nebraska, Ron Hansen
Description Exercise

Week 3: Dialogue is What We Do to Each Other (4/13 – 4/17)
He Said, She Said: Crafting Effective Dialogue, pp. 257-272, Method and Madness
Hills Like White Elephants by Ernest Hemingway
Raising the Curtain: Beginning Your Story, pp. 366-376
Dialogue Exercise

Week 4: Au contraire! Just When You Thought You Knew; Surprise is
All (4/20-4/24)
Recognizable People: Crafting Characters, pp. 326-365, *Method and Madness*

*Bullet in the Brain* by Tobias Wolff

*The Management of Grief* by Bharati Mukherjee

What Does My Character WANT? Exercise

Week 5: You Can Take the Boy/Girl Out of Kansas But You Can't Take the Kansas Out of the Boy/Girl: The Role of Place (4/27 – 5/1)

The Short Story: Defining and Shaping, pp. 96-116 and pp. 137-146, *Method and Madness*

What Makes a Short Story? by Francine Prose

*Fiesta* by Junot Diaz

What’s This Story Really About? pp. 397-406, *Method and Madness*

Place Writing Assignment

Week 6: Somewhere in Time, How We Write About the Past and Present and Now (5/4-5/8):

Why You Need to Show and Tell, pp. 147-189, *Method and Madness*

*Brownies* by ZZ Packer

*Everything That Rises Must Converge* by Flannery O’Connor

OPTIONAL Time Exercise

Workshop Begins!


What Happens Next: Figuring the Plot, pp. 278-325, *Method and Madness*

*Sonny’s Blues* by James Baldwin
Optional Multi-genre exercise

Workshop continues!

**Week 8: The Ghost in You: Point of View, How to Tell the Freakin’ Story (5/18-5/22):**

Who’s Telling the Story? Point of View, pp. 190-219, *Method and Madness*

*The Lady With a Little Dog* by Anton Chekhov

How Reliable Is This Narrator?, pp. 234-242

Optional Voice Exercise

Workshop continues!

**Week 9: Revise, Revise, Revise (Drat!) (5/25-5/29):**

Learning to Fail Better, pp. 427-463, *Writing Fiction*

*Shitty First Drafts* by Anne Lamott

*The Bath* by Raymond Carver

*A Small, Good Thing* by Raymond Carver

Workshop continues!

Second short story due.

Optional Revision Exercise

**Week 10: You Made It, Some New Discoveries, Some New Friends, Compelling Fiction Realized! (6/1-6/5):**

Getting Published, pp. 481-487

Optional Writing Exercise

Workshop (as necessary)