Reading as a Writer: A One-Week Intensive

EGL 70, Summer 2015
Mon-Fri, June 22-26, 12:30 - 5:30 pm
Stanford Continuing Studies
Jonah Willihnganz
Office Hours: by app.
jonahw@stanford.edu

"Read, read, read. Read Everything—trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read! You'll absorb it. If it is good, you'll find out. If it's not, throw it out the window."
—William Faulkner

“My advice to young writers? Read at least 1,000 pages a month. Every month.”
—Sherman Alexie

Course Goals and Format

This intensive seminar will immerse you deeply into story craft, giving you the chance to absorb a lot of strategies and craft in a way that will really stick. The goal of the course is to provide you with a new way of reading, a skill you can take with you to any text in the future, and an opportunity to try out techniques you uncover with that new way of reading.

The aim of skilled reading is skilled writing, but in contrast to traditional workshops we will not critique student manuscripts in this class. Instead, we will do short, shared exercises every day that build on the techniques we have just encountered. These exercises will help not only explore the techniques but also help you practice adapting to your own work craft elements you admire.

The daily schedule is relatively simple: we will alternate between examining texts and the short writing exercises. Each day we will look at about 4 pieces very closely and concentrate on 1 or 2 elements of craft that they teach powerfully. Since this is a long class, we will take 2 short breaks and everyone is encouraged to bring whatever beverages and snacks sustain you. We will begin and end class promptly.

Texts and First Assignment

As you will see from the schedule, readings will favor contemporary fiction and creative nonfiction since these blend so many writing techniques. Two books about reading and writing are required and can be purchased at the Stanford bookstore or from your favorite bookstore. The rest of the readings will be provided in the online course reader (via Moodle).

As you will also see from the schedule, there is a significant amount of reading for the course, the same as you’d expect from a course running 6-8 weeks (like those courses we meet for 20 hours, just compacted into 5 days). Since we meet just for the week, I encourage you to plan for the reading and either read ahead or budget sufficient time to read the pieces each morning before we meet. We will not discuss every piece in depth but we will touch on every piece in some way, through comparison, an exercise, or the like.

A final note: the schedule may change slightly and the online course packet may not be available immediately, but the schedule will be final and the packet will be available June 1.
Books to purchase:

- Francine Prose, *Reading Like a Writer*
- Catherine Brady, *Story Logic and the Craft of Fiction*
- Madison Smartt Bell, *Narrative Design: Working with Imagination, Craft, and Form*

For the first class, please read:

1. Francine Prose, *Reading Like A Writer*
   - Chapter 1, “Close Reading”
   - Chapter 2, “Words”

2. Catherine Brady, *Story Logic and the Craft of Fiction*
   - Chapter 1, “Story Logic”

3. Madison Smartt Bell, *Narrative Design: Working with Imagination, Craft, and Form*
   - Unconscious Mind
   - Linear Design
   - Peter Taylor, "A Wife of Nashville", including Bell’s notes

4. Three very short pieces from the online course reader:
   - Ernest Hemingway, “Indian Camp”
   - Joan Didion, “History Lesson”
   - Naomi Shihab Nye, “Someone I Love”