Course Title: Fiction Writing: Habits and Techniques  
Course Code: FICT 179  
Instructor: Ammi Keller

Course Summary:

*Fiction Writing: Habits and Techniques* welcomes anyone who is (or would like to be) writing fiction. Whether you have always wanted to write a short story or already have a novel halfway finished, this class will provide six weeks of applicable concepts, timed freewrites (individual and collaborative), community support, humor and a place to share your love of literature.

The course is build on the idea that a successful fiction writing habit requires three things:

1) Creativity - imagination, experience and a love of language  
2) Craft - a desire to learn techniques and improve one’s technical abilities  
3) Willpower - a determination to take part in and support the creative process

Every person who desires to write fiction has within him or herself all the inventiveness and life experience needed for a lifetime of novels. Because of this, we will focus on the later two categories, studying both the drafting/revision of fiction prose and the creative process.

Students will write in every class and share work in small groups. In addition, there will be four optional homework assignments (of 200-650 words) in order for writers to further practice technique and/or simply stretch their creative legs. Each homework assignment will receive verbal feedback from peers as well as written feedback from the instructor.

At the end of the class, each student will have an enhanced understanding of core fiction techniques, a clear map for how to continue to grow as a writer, and a body of short works that can be revised into finished short-shorts, developed in later classes into full fledged short stories or used as scenes for a novel.

*Please see course page for full description and additional details.*

**Grade Options and Requirements:**

- **No Grade Requested (NGR)**
  - This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.

- **Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)**

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
365 Lasuen St., Stanford, CA 94305  
continuingstudies@stanford.edu  
650-725-2650
Students who attend at least 4 out of 6 classes, do at least 2 optional homework assignments and offer supportive feedback to their peers will receive credit.

• Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)
  Students must attend at least 5 out of 6 classes, and do at least 3 of the optional homework assignments to receive an A. Consistent, supportive participation rather than the instructor’s perception of the student’s writing ability will determine the grade given, with each class missed subtracting a letter from the total (i.e., 4 classes attended = B, 3 classes = C, etc.) Students can change their grading option at any time before the end of the course.

*Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.

Course Reading:

Rather than using a book, students will be reading short stories online by Jhumpa Lahiri, George Saunders, Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, Alice Munro, Edward P. Jones, Octavia Butler, Haruki Murakami, Justin Torres and others.

Please purchase a short time digital or all access subscription to The New Yorker before our second class (at the time of this writing, a 12 week subscription is $12). Any other online archives we use may require a registration process, but will be free of charge.

Tentative Weekly Outline:

Week One: Fixed vs. Growth Mindsets, and the Modes of Fiction
Key questions: What is the #1 block to learning writing? What are the five building blocks of fiction prose?
Reading: “Years End” by Jhumpa Lahiri" and “The Effort Effect” by Marina Krakovsky

Week Two: The Four Stages of Learning, and Summary vs. Scene
Key questions: What are the four stages of learning? How can you identify missing skills and acquire versatile techniques? Also, what is the difference between summary and scene? How do you decide whether to use one or the other?
Reading: 2 short stories TBA
(Optional) Writing Assignment #1 due
Reading: “Birdsong” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche and TBA

Week Three: Problematizing the Problem, and Scene Design
Key questions: Should you avoid writing weaknesses or put them at the center of your practice? Also, how can identifying your character’s stakes help you amplify your conflict? And how can you best use this understanding when writing dialogue?

Reading: 2 short stories TBA

(Optional) Writing Assignment #2 due

Reading: TBA

Week Four: Grit vs. Gratification, and Point of View

Key questions: How can learning to delay gratification and cultivate grit help fiction writers? And conversely, how do you know when to just write what you love vs. trying to practice everything else? Also, how do you choose the most compelling point of view for each work? What is narrative distance and how can it add nuance to your work?

(Optional) Writing Assignment #3 due

Reading: “Tenth of December” by George Saunders and “The First Day” by Edward P. Jones

(Bonus story: “Adam Robinson” by Edward P. Jones)

Week Five: Cognitive Bias, and Suspense

Key questions: What are some common cognitive traps nearly all people all into? And how can we avoid letting these pull us off track when we write, receive feedback and move towards revision? Also, how can you cultivate suspense and tension? How do writers craft satisfying endings?

(Optional) Writing Assignment #4 due

Reading: “Speech Sounds” by Octavia Butler and TBA

Week Six: The Dangers of Perfectionism, and Revision as Play

Key questions: How can perfectionistic thinking hinder rather than help a creative work in progress? How can writers use big picture thinking to feel confident during the process of revision?

Reading: Reverting to a Wild State” by Justin Torres and “To the Measures Fall” by Richard Powers

A Final Note:

Although the grading guidelines are designed to push you to do as much writing as possible and attend as many session as possible, “real life” meaning family, illness, professional deadlines etc, can make attending every or even many sessions impossible. Sometimes, the frustration this causes prompts students to drop completely out of the class. Please don’t let this happen to you! Instead, try taking a do what you can, when you can approach, writing what you’re able, coming to class even if you haven’t been able to do the optional writing assignment or the reading, and returning even if you’ve been absent multiple weeks. This approach will set you up best to continue writing fiction in the long term and help you get the most—no matter what life throws at you—from your experience in this class.

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