Course Title: The Waiting Game: Creating Suspense in Fiction
Course Code: WSP 28
Instructor: Sarah Stone

Course Summary:
“There is a distinct difference between ‘suspense’ and ‘surprise,’ and yet many pictures continually confuse the two. I’ll explain what I mean. We are now having a very innocent little chat. Let’s suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us. Nothing happens, and then all of a sudden, ‘Boom!’ There is an explosion. The public is surprised, but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene, of no special consequence. Now, let us take a suspense situation. The bomb is underneath the table and the public knows it, probably because they have seen the anarchist place it there. The public is aware the bomb is going to explode at one o’clock and there is a clock in the decor. The public can see that it is a quarter to one. In these conditions, the same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: ‘You shouldn’t be talking about such trivial matters. There is a bomb beneath you and it is about to explode!’

“In the first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of surprise at the moment of the explosion. In the second we have provided them with fifteen minutes of suspense. The conclusion is that whenever possible the public must be informed.”

Alfred Hitchcock, quoted in “Alfred Hitchcock’s Bomb: Suspense, Surprise, and Emotion in Narrative”

This class is for writers working at any level, whether you’re just starting your first story or revising a novel you’ve been working on for years – whether you’re writing literary or genre fiction, stories drawn from life or completely invented. Suspense can heighten the tension in a life or death situation, like Hitchcock’s bomb under the table, but it can also be used in more quiet works. One of our biggest tasks as writers is learning to make suspense meaningful and authentic, based in the story’s realities and emotional logic. We’ll consider the ways in which suspense grows out of our characters’ lives, desires, actions, or moments of inaction, and how it reinforces the themes and values reflected in the larger work. Our in-class exercises and readings of selections from published writers – including Marilynne Robinson, Edward P. Jones, Suzanne Collins, Bharati Mukherjee, and others – will help you find the narrative tension in your own fiction and connect that tension to your story or novel’s character development, story arc, and larger vision.*

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

Grade Options and Requirements:
• No Grade Requested (NGR)
  o This is the default administrative option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.
• Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)
  o This is the option that will give you some sense of accountability but with fewer requirements than a letter grade. You’ll need to attend morning and afternoon sessions for both days and to participate in exercises, workshop, and discussions to receive credit.

• Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)
  o For a letter grade, you’ll need to attend morning and afternoon sessions for both days and to participate in exercises, workshop, and discussions, as well as to turn in the at-home exercise for small-group workshop on the second Saturday of class. Grades are based on your doing the work and being fully present and part of our processes rather than on the “quality” of your fiction so that you can feel free to take risks and experiment with your work.

*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.

Preliminary Outline:

Day 1
In preparation for the class, you might look at a couple of favorite novels or stories. Do they create a state of suspense in the opening pages? If so, what are you waiting for, and how has the writer captured your attention? What happens to either change or intensify the suspense as you continue reading? On our first day, we’ll combine reading, discussion, and writing exercises to explore how the craft of story-telling intersects with the art and meaning of the work. I’ll have handouts for you, with reading selections, questions, and ideas that you can use in your own work. We’ll delve into a range of strategies for creating and building suspense, including the uses of voice, POV, narrative action, and character contradictions and conflicts.

Between the Weekends
At the end of the first day of class, you’ll receive a writing prompt to help you either write or revise the first two double-spaced pages (up to 699 words) of a story, novel, or novella that somehow establishes the initial suspense of the work. You’ll receive feedback in small group workshops on the second Saturday (bring four copies for that second day).

If you finish your exercise by the Tuesday evening between classes, you have the additional option of emailing it to me. I’ll print it out, read it, and give you some written comments and questions. I’ll give these back at the end of the second day of class and allow some time at the end for any questions you have.

Day 2
On the second day of class, we will look at suspense within a scene or chapter, suspense in
summary, and suspense in the arc of a work as a whole. We'll do writing and reading exercises that grow out of those we did in the first week and will return to any individual questions and observations that remain from the first day. In our small-group workshops, you'll have a chance to explore different ways of creating and intensifying suspense and to get feedback on your own new or revised beginning.

In-class and at-home writing exercises
On each class day, we'll do a variety of writing exercises. You'll have a chance to share exercises by reading them aloud (reading aloud is always optional – we'll listen to whatever you want to share with an open, curious attention, rather than a critiquing mindset). At the end of the first class, I'll give you the prompt to help you create a new or revised beginning that incorporates a dramatic or subtle sense of suspense. You'll complete the exercise and bring four copies to the second class for the small group workshop.

I'll give specific guidance for the workshop – we'll engage in workshopping techniques that help to open up a work for the writer, mirroring and asking questions for further development rather than trying to “correct” the exercise. The workshop skills we'll develop in the process will help you not only to become a stronger, more subtle and helpful reader in this class and future classes or writing groups but also to strengthen your own ability to be the first reader of your own fiction.

General information
We'll start at 10 a.m. both days, with an hour break for lunch from 12:30-1:30, and finish at 4 p.m. I'll be around after class for any questions you may have.

You can write your in-class exercises in a notebook, on a laptop (with Internet disabled to help us stay focused in the world of the stories we’re writing and reading), or in any other way that works for you. If you want to do your exercise on the computer, please minimize the distraction as much as possible for others in the class. And if you have any special needs, please let me know.

By the end of the two days of class, you will have new or revised work to draw on as well as a stronger sense of how to electrify your fiction in new and surprising ways.