Course Title: Writing Compelling Characters  
Course Code: WSP 34  
Instructor: Ron Nyren  

Course Summary:  
This course is designed to give you tools and inspiration for writing fiction with compelling characters. In each class, I’ll provide handouts with craft strategies and excerpts of published short stories and novels, which we’ll use to discuss the ways authors make their characters come alive for readers. In-class writing exercises will help you generate new material and practice new approaches (bring a notebook or laptop to class to write with). This class is for short story writers and novelists at any level, from those starting their first short story to those revising a novel that’s already in process.

*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)  
  - To receive credit, you will need to attend and participate in the morning and afternoon sessions of both class days.

- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)  
  - Grading is based on your attendance and participation in the morning and afternoon sessions of both class days; in addition, you’ll need to turn in your completed at-home exercise for small-group workshop on the second Saturday class.

*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 One**  
In preparation for this class, think of a highly memorable character from either a novel or a short story you’ve read (recently or long ago). What makes this character so memorable? How did events change this character over the course of the story or novel? What hidden depths or unexpected qualities came to light about this character by the end of the story? We’ll share our thoughts with each other at the start of the first class.

I’ll be giving you handouts in class with excerpts of some stories and novels so we can discuss how the authors portray characters. I’ll also give you in-class writing exercises to
help you generate new characters or deepen characters you may already have created. We’ll talk about strategies for developing a better sense of the key moments of a character’s past, choosing the right point of view, and giving your characters believable complexities and unexpected layers.

**At-Home Exercise**
At the end of the first day, I'll give you a take-home writing assignment: to produce two double-spaced pages (no more than 700 words) of a scene in which you introduce a character to the reader for the first time. You’ll have two options: 1) write a story/novel fragment about a brand-new character or 2) revise a piece of an in-progress story/novel of yours to discover new layers and complexities. You'll bring four copies of these two pages to our second Saturday class so you can receive feedback in small group workshops.

Make sure your assignment is stapled, double-spaced, page-numbered, with margins of one inch, in a typeface that’s easy to read (no smaller than 12 point Times Roman).

For those who finish the assignment by Tuesday evening before the second class, you have the option to email it to me. I’ll print it, read it, jot down comments and questions, and hand it back at the end of the second day of class. I’ll leave time for questions you may have.

**Day Two**
In the second class, I’ll give you in-class writing exercises designed to help you further round out your characters. We’ll consider how we can generate plots that emerge naturally out of the personalities and desires of our characters. And we’ll investigate the possibilities of using dialogue and setting to both reveal who our characters are and advance the story.

We’ll also break into small groups to workshop the at-home writing exercise you completed. We'll be workshopping with an eye toward helping each writer get a better sense of the work’s essence, identifying both what it’s doing well and where it offers potential for revision.

I have this notion we’re not just born as human beings, but that we actually have to learn how to become human beings, and many of the characters in the novel [*The Satanic Verses*] are for a long time not really unitary selves, they’re just collections of selves. They’re kind of masks, they put on this or that role, and they can change very dramatically. And I think that’s also true about people, that we are not unitary selves, we are a kind of bag of selves, which we draw out from; we become this or that self in different circumstances.

—Salman Rushdie, from *Conversations with Salman Rushdie*