Course Title: Secrets of the Short Story  
Course Code: FICT 18 W  
Instructor: Val Brelinski

Course Summary:  
This course will focus on the skills, processes, and techniques essential to the short story. As we study the craft of short fiction, we will observe and analyze (and perhaps emulate) the ways in which such authors as Denis Johnson, Alice Munro, Mark Richard, and Wells Tower have attempted to illuminate both the worlds they are writing about and our own. We will look at the short story’s compression of time and space and its supposed moment of revelation that contains within it (as Wallace Stegner says) the “whole of the world.” We will become expert readers, ever-improving literary analysts, and beginning writers. We will try our hands at producing a short story of our own, and we will come to know the joys and sorrows (as every writer should!) of the writing workshop. This course is appropriate for writers of all experience levels.

*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)  
  - Score will be determined by student attendance and participation.  
- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)  
  - Written work, as assigned by the instructor, will determine a student’s grade.  
    - Writing Exercises: 20%  
    - Workshop Submissions: 40%  
    - Participation: 40%

*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.*
Tentative Weekly Outline:

**Title for Week One:** Getting Started

**Week One: To Read This Week**
Chapter 1 in *Writing Fiction* (Burroway’s story examples are optional) “Boys” by Rick Moody “Lust” by Susan Minot

**Week One: Writing Assignment**
Make a list of all the things that keep you from writing. Be honest. And specific.

**Week One: Discussion Points**
--Susan Minot and Rick Moody obviously used list-making as a way in to jumpstart the story- writing process. Other writers have utilized this tool as well. Tim O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried” and Stuart Dybek’s “We Didn’t” obviously began as lists.
--What is it that transforms a list into a “story?” Use Minot’s and Moody’s stories as examples.

**Title for Week Two:** Seeing Is Believing

**Week Two: To Read This Week**
Chapter 2 in *Writing Fiction* (Burroway’s story examples are optional) “Evacuation Order #19” by Julie Otsuka

**Week Two: Writing Assignment**
Think about a time when you were decidedly embarrassed (most of us won’t have to think back very far). Remember what was taking place and how you felt about what was occurring. Now, re- create this scene in writing without using the word embarrassment or shame or any synonym thereof. Simply place a character into this situation and let it unfold without telling us how this character is feeling; instead, show us his or her response(s).

**Week Two: Discussion Points**
--Otsuka’s story does a great deal of “showing,” much more even than most stories. Why do you think she felt this was particularly necessary? --In your opinion, which abstract concepts does Otsuka “show” most vividly/creatively? --Which of her techniques would you like to “swipe” for your own writer’s toolkit?

**Title for Week Three:** Creating Characters That Matter

**Week Three: To Read This Week**
Chapter 3 in *Writing Fiction* (“Gryphon” is especially good) “Memorial Day” by Mark Richard “Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned” by Wells Tower

**Week Three: Writing Assignment**
Choose a character to write about. Now, have that character walk into a convenience store and purchase some items. Let us, as readers, watch and listen. Let us find this character interesting, believable and worth caring about because of what he looks like, what he does, and what he says. Put this scene in third person.

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365 Lasuen St., Stanford, CA 94305
continuingstudies@stanford.edu
650-725-2650
Let the scene be as long as it needs in order to fully reveal this particular character.

**Week Three: Discussion Points**
--Mark Richard takes on the especially daunting task of creating “Death” as a character. How does he go about making Death “believable,” “interesting,” and “worth caring about?” --How well does Wells Tower succeed in getting us to care about and identify with his unlikely and unlovable characters?

**Title for Week Four:** Characters, Part Deux

**Week Four: To Read This Week**
Chapter 4 in *Writing Fiction* (story examples optional) “Sea Oak” by George Saunders

**Week Four: Writing Assignment**
Characters whose insides (thoughts, dreams, feelings, opinions, etc.) are in conflict with their outsides (actions, speech, appearance, etc.) can be made to seem pitiful, desppicable, foolish, and sometimes strangely brave or wonderful. Decide ahead of time how you want your reader to feel about your character. Now create a few scenes (as many as it takes) in which we come to that understanding of your character via conflicting characterization.

**Week Four: Discussion Points**
--In “Sea Oak” what are the three best examples of direct characterization coming into conflict with indirect characterization? --Which character reveals the largest disconnect between internal reality and external? Why?

**Title for Week Five:** Setting--A Place To Hang Your Story’s Hat

**Week Five: To Read This Week**
Chapter 5 in *Writing Fiction* “Travis, B.” by Maile Meloy “Charity” by Mark Richard

**Week Five: Writing Assignments**
Introduce a couple of characters into your “Laundry Room” setting and use the conflict inherent in its “strangeness” as a starting point for action and dialogue.

**Week Five: Discussion Points**
--How do Meloy and Richard use setting to their own writerly advantage? --Are their characters products of their own environments, or do they act in opposition to them?

**Title for Week Six:** Bending Time To Your Will/Workshopping

**Week Six: To Read This Week**
Chapter 6 in *Writing Fiction* (plus Carver’s story) “Incarnations of Burned Children” by David Foster Wallace “Zog-19” by Pinckney Benedict

**Week Six: Writing Assignments**
1. Turn D.F. Wallace’s story into complete summary. 2. If you were to turn your current day’s activities into a “story” which of today’s events should be in scene and which should be in summary? 3. Complete Writing Exercise #3 on page 257 in *Writing Fiction*
Week Six: Discussion Points
--How do Carver’s and Wallace’s choices in the manipulation of time affect the stories they are telling? Why? --Benedict breaks every possible short story writing rule about the use of time (and space!) in his story. How does he get away with this?

Title for Week Seven: Plotting/Workshopping

Week Seven: To Read This Week
Chapter 7 in Writing Fiction “The Baker’s Wife” by Sara Powers “The Paperhanger” by William Gay

Week Seven: Writing Assignment
Complete Writing Exercise # 3 on page 293 in Writing Fiction (notice how closely this aligns with this week’s two short stories)

Week Seven: Discussion Points
--Do our two short stories follow the Desire + Danger = Drama formula? If so, how so? And if not, how not? --Look up/Google the phrase “Triangulation of Desire.” How does this concept have anything to do with this week’s stories?

Title for Week Eight: Point Of View/Workshopping

Week Eight: To Read This Week
Chapter 8 in Writing Fiction (story examples optional) “Ranch Girl” by Maile Meloy “White Angel” by Michael Cunningham

Week Eight: Writing Assignment
Complete Writing Exercise # 5 from page 334 of Writing Fiction

Week Eight: Discussion Points
--When you write, which point of view feels most comfortable to you? Do you naturally start writing from one particular POV? If so, why? --Why do you suppose Meloy chose the 2nd person POV? What are its advantages in this particular story? Wouldn’t 1st person or 3rd person POV been just as good, if not better? --What happens to a story once the “focus character” is gone?

Title for Week Nine: Workshopping

Week Nine: To Read This Week
Workshop stories

Week Nine: Writing Assignment
Prepare for the next workshop—read and critique student stories

Week Nine: Discussion Points
--What questions would you like answered about your story when it is workshopped?
Title for Week Ten: Workshopping And Final Notes

Week Ten: To Read This Week
Workshop stories

Week Ten: Writing Assignment
Critiques of workshop stories

Week Ten: Discussion Points
--What specific questions do you still have about short stories, and writing in general? --
What stories, authors, publishers, writing programs, etc. would you like to know more about?

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