Course Title: Discovering Your Novel’s Secret Center
Course Code: NVL 18 W
Instructor: Sarah Stone

Course Summary
Novelists are always looking for ways to bring fiction to life and also find its unique shape and meaning. Orhan Pamuk describes every novel as having a secret center – a “profound opinion or insight about life, a deeply embedded point of mystery, whether real or imagined.” A novel may be totally invented or else lifted from experience (with certain key changes to keep our friends and families from disowning us). Maybe your novel-in-progress began from an interaction or situation you saw or lived through, an experience you need to understand, transform, and share. Maybe it came from an old family story, something you read in the newspaper and can’t let go of, or even a dream. Or maybe you have an imaginary set of characters haunting you, the sense of unlived lives that only you can bring into being. In this course, for writers at any level, you will have the chance to discover your novel’s secret center – its one-of-a-kind nature – along with ways to adapt both classic and innovative craft techniques to your own needs.

In our writing exercises and online discussions, we’ll explore individual characters and character constellations, narrative tension and plot structures, POV, the handling of time, setting, detail, language, imagery, beginnings, middles, and endings. We’ll also take on questions of how and when we write, what to do about any blocks or difficulties that come up, and how to develop an effective writing practice. Fundamentally, this is a workshop-based course – our main task, starting in week four will be workshopping a chapter or selection from each participant’s novel, giving you a chance to develop your ideas about fiction and your tool box for writing, both in giving and receiving responses. As a community, we’ll give each writer supportive, helpful feedback on writing exercises and workshop pieces, working together to discover each novel’s largest possibilities. No matter what kind of novel you’re writing, and no matter where you are in the process of writing it – from a few jotted notes to piles of completed (or partially completed) drafts – by the time you finish this course, you’ll have made a whole series of discoveries about your own book, and you’ll have learned more about the art, the craft, and the process of novel writing. * (Please see course page for full description and additional details.)

Required Texts
We’ll read and discuss two novels – feel free to read these books in any edition or format you like – we’ll find ways of referencing lines and chapters in our discussions that don’t rely on page numbers or e-reader locations. We’ll consider these books in craft terms, but also as human beings, as writers and as readers. What makes us believe in the characters and story (to the extent that we do), and what makes these books matter to us (if they do matter to us)? We’re going to explore our own preferences as readers as well as ways of opening up to a wider range of work. I will occasionally post additional links to craft essays or other information that augments our topics for the week, but these readings
will be optional. You can purchase the course texts via Amazon.com by clicking on the link to access them directly, or you can buy them through your local or online indie bookseller.

(Required) Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion*
(Required) Daniel Alarcón, *At Night We Walk in Circles*

**Writing Exercises**
In the first three weeks of the course, you will do short (up to 750 words) writing exercises to help you generate or revise material from your novel. You’ll respond to at least three of your classmates’ exercises a week and receive responses from them. Our exercises will be a chance to put into practice the concepts from the week’s lectures (you’ll find our topics at the end of the syllabus, in the “Schedule” section. I’ll give you individual responses for all of the exercises in the first few weeks. After workshops begin, the writing exercises will be optional: we’ll be focusing on the workshop pieces in those weeks. I will respond to optional exercises, though, after you’ve posted your workshop responses, and I encourage you to do so for each other if you have time.

**Workshop**
Beginning at the end of week three, two to three class participants at a time will submit a selection of novels-in-progress (up to 5000 words) for the whole group to workshop via a supportive and detailed letter of feedback. We’ll each write a page or two of thoughtful, generous, honest, and useful response. Our responses will include identifying the aims and accomplishments of each selection, offering specific praise for its strengths, asking equally specific questions, and suggesting areas for further development in the next draft. I’ll give guidance on all of this too, since there’s an art to usefully reading each other’s work in ways that make workshop fun and leave the writer eager to get back to work rather than ready to throw out the book. The postings don’t have to be polished or perfect, but it’s crucial to be both kind and honest in critiques and discussions.

**Weekly Routine**
Every week of our ten-week course will focus on different aspects of the art and craft of novel writing. Each week, you’ll log onto Canvas and work through the week’s module, which will include my lecture (a set of art/craft/process thoughts to start the week), writing and reading assignments, any optional materials or links, and other announcements. The lecture and assignments for the coming week will available on the Friday before the week begins. This way, if you know you're going into a busy period, you can get ahead on your work. In the first three weeks you will do short writing exercises designed to help you generate or revise material from your novel. Afterward, you’ll post a selection from your novel in progress. Throughout the course, we’ll have ongoing discussions of readings, craft ideas, the progress you’re making on your own writing, and other questions and ideas that feel helpful to you in in getting your work done.

**Monday through Friday:** Post your responses to the readings and discussion questions, respond to the work of your peers, ask any questions you have. I’ll come into the online classroom at least three times during the week – generally on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays – and will respond to work in the order in which it was posted (responding to required work before additional discussions, in order to make sure everyone is getting their responses). I read all of your responses to
each other as well and chime in when I have something to add. If there are more posts than I can do justice to at one time, I’ll get to the rest when I return to the classroom. I also check email at least once each week day, in case of urgent questions, and will email you all if there’s some announcement or discussion thread I want to make sure we all see.

WEDNESDAY: Your 750-word writing assignments in weeks 1-3 will be due by 2 p.m. PT every Wednesday (all times in the course are Pacific Time). You’re welcome to post earlier, including the weekend ahead of time, if that suits your schedule better. As long as you’re posting by the deadline, you will also receive my feedback on these pieces by Friday. Otherwise, I’ll get to them as soon as I can, usually in the following week. In workshop weeks, your responses to the pieces (posted the Friday before) are also due Wednesday by 2 p.m. as are your responses to discussion questions. As always, if it works for you to post earlier, please do so. The earlier you post, the more time the rest of us have to respond to your writing and ideas.

FRIDAY: During the first three weeks of class, everyone will read and respond to at least other three other students’ writing exercises by 4 p.m. PT on each Friday. Also, and this is the most important deadline for the class, if you are up for workshop, you’ll be posting your piece no later than Friday at noon (many people post on Thursday, to avoid running into last-minute technical troubles).

WEEKENDS: Here is a chance for you to get ahead on the week’s work if you wish to post exercises or responses to discussion questions for the following week. I’m offline on the weekends and am a believer in the benefits of taking an Internet break and restoring our single-tasking brains and our ability to concentrate. If it works for you to post on the weekends, though, please do. Come by the classroom whenever it works for you. The beauty of an online class is that we can all do our work when our schedules permit; we don't have to be working simultaneously. So log on when it's convenient for you, morning or night, weekday or weekend.

At the end of the week, we move into a new week in the forum. At the end of the day on Monday, the previous week will become closed for posting, though it will remain available for reading throughout the course. If you are late with an assignment (after Friday at 4) please post it in the new week, where there will be a thread for work from previous weeks. This is a way to make sure that we keep moving forward, and that no one's submissions get overlooked.

Chat/ZOOM
We’ll have a weekly live video chat/ZOOM session/live office hour on Fridays from 12-1 p.m. PT for the first five weeks of the term. After this, I’ll be available by appointment for anyone who wants a one-to-one chat after their workshop, unless the group strongly prefers to stay together for group Zoom chats instead. These sessions are an audio/video mixture of office hour and informal discussion of art, craft, process, the nature and purpose of fiction, and additional thoughts about the readings, along with some writing exercises. I record and upload the chats to Youtube (you’ll have a link, but they won’t be searchable), so you can watch them even if you can’t attend. Since everyone has different work hours (and we’re in multiple time zones), attendance is optional. Our primary place for conversations about the reading and writing will always be in our online discussions.
Grade Options and Requirements

• **No Grade Requested (NGR)**
  o 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)**
  o This is the option I recommend: it will give you some sense of accountability but with fewer requirements than a letter grade. You can receive credit by submitting your workshop piece and at least three writing exercises (during the course of the quarter – not all at the end), commenting on your classmates’ exercises and workshop pieces, and actively participating in most discussions, including discussions of the writing exercises.

• **Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)**
  o 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. For this option, you will also need to submit your workshop piece and at least five writing exercises (during the course of the quarter – not all at the end), comment on your classmates’ workshop pieces, and actively participate in most discussions, including discussions of the writing exercises and thoughtful, insightful responses to workshop pieces.

*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.*

Since writing breakthroughs happen at different speeds and different times – troughs that appear endless to us may be followed by huge leaps, but sometimes not for a while – your grade will be based on turning in your work and writing helpful commentaries on your fellow writers’ pieces. It doesn’t work to grade writing based on its “quality,” because a) this kind of grading is highly subjective, and b) writing for a grade gets in the way of your sense of passion and inner purpose. Still, to get the most helpful reading from the rest of us, please make sure your writing is fairly well copy-edited for obvious spelling and grammar errors and is on time. Your peer responses should be thoughtful and detailed enough to be useful to the writer and should demonstrate evidence that you are absorbing the craft lessons. Note the importance of turning in your work (including critiques) on time, and keep in mind that computers break down, people get sick, bosses suddenly come up with large last-minute projects… you may want to post your assignments and workshop responses before the deadlines, especially if you know you find deadlines challenging.

You’ll get the most out of the class if you stay regularly active in the forums and put attention into the reading and your responses to your classmates as well as your own work. Of course, life comes along, and there may be moments when you have to miss an exercise or can’t comment as fully as usual on others’ writing exercises. Email me if you run into trouble. Don’t lose heart! We are often most frustrated just before we make a big breakthrough. William Stafford famously wrote a poem a day and is often quoted (or misquoted in various versions – but he may have talked about this subject several times) as saying that he never had writer’s block. “When all else fails, I lower my standards
and keep going.” Paradoxically, it’s when we’ve lowered our standards that we take the biggest risks, and often do our most exciting work.

**Etiquette and Acceptable Online Behavior**
It can be hard to understand tone sometimes online, whether in email or on the boards. As much as possible, let’s give each other the benefit of the doubt. If someone has said something that feels problematic, you can email them to work it out privately (by clicking on their name in the post) and/or let me know. The vast majority of misunderstandings just come from each of us living out our own narratives and seeing through our own blinders. That said, very occasionally something does need to be worked out. So let’s do it with as much affection and compassion as possible.

Keep in mind that some people are in a moment of their life where the course can be central, others have multiple outside obligations. If all you can do is the minimum requirements, it's still enough to make tremendous progress on your book and to be a full member of the community. Don't worry about what anyone else is doing! To help keep the workload manageable and to make sure that you’re getting your own writing done, if you are pressed for time in a week, here’s an order of priorities:

1. Post your exercises for the first three weeks and the final week, and post your workshop piece by the Friday at noon before the week you’ve signed up for. Post on time to give everyone the maximum time to respond (if necessary, pretend that your work is due a day early – great practice for making friends with your editors).

2. Write thoughtful, thorough responses to each of the workshop pieces (required).

3. Write thoughtful, though briefer, responses to your classmates’ exercises, at least three, more if you have time, rotating responses so that the later posters get some as well -- i.e. if someone already has three responses, move on to pieces that don't have as many comments, coming back to respond to others only if you have time (required in the first three weeks, optional after workshop begins).

4. Engage as fully as you can in the reading and craft discussions, but when you’re busy, you can post just a paragraph or so and still learn from thinking about the art and craft questions for that week. If time is tight for you in a given week (or always!), you can spend minimal time on the reading and craft discussions and skip the optional exercises, responses to those exercises, and responses to workshop responses.

And from Stanford: students in this course are expected to behave with good academic citizenship. Good academic citizenship essentially means respect and honesty. It includes professionalism, fairness, and generosity to fellow students; openness to suggestions from fellow students and instructors; and reasonable expectations about the course and the instructor. Students are asked to treat both their instructor and their colleagues with the same respect that they would like to receive. The kinds of activities that will not be tolerated include repeatedly stirring controversy, insulting or broadly characterizing large groups of people (e.g. women, members of a particular race), fixating on another student whose views are different, seeking confrontation, being dismissive of other students’ comments or writing, seeking to undermine an instructor’s authority, and demanding an unreasonable
or disproportionate amount of attention from the class or the instructor.

Schedule
Here is a preliminary schedule for topics that we’ll consider in relation to the novels we’re reading for class as well as the novels you’re writing. You’ll have writing exercises for each of the topics, which will be optional once workshop begins. We’ll explain and explore each of the topics to develop a shared vocabulary and set of concepts, then consider them in our discussions from a variety of angles. Note: you don’t need to know what these terms mean in order to function happily in the class – we’ll look at these concepts in the lectures and in the process of our investigations.

Week One: Initial Hints and Questions
Daniel Alarcón, *At Night We Walk in Circles*, Chapter 1

Week Two: Storyteller, Characters, Perspective, POV
Jeanette Winterson, parts 2 and 3, “The Queen of Spades” and “The Zero Winter”

Week Three: Open Destinies – Plot and Outlining
Jeanette Winterson, part 4, “The Rock”
Daniel Alarcón, *At Night We Walk in Circles*, Chapters 2-5

Week Four: Character Constellations
Workshop pieces
Daniel Alarcón, *At Night We Walk in Circles*, Chapters 6-12

Week Five: Language, Imagery, Texture
Workshop pieces
Daniel Alarcón, *At Night We Walk in Circles*, Chapters 13-19

Week Six: Tangible Places
Workshop pieces
Daniel Alarcón, *At Night We Walk in Circles*, Chapters 20-24

Week Seven: Moving through Time
Workshop pieces

Week Eight: The Long Middle: Narrative Tension and Character Complications
Workshop pieces

Week Nine: Surprising, Satisfying Endings
Workshop pieces

Week Ten: Revision and Rediscovery
Revision discussion and moving forward plans

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
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