FICT 53 W – Reading as a Writer: A Short Fiction Workshop

Course Code: FICT 53 W (Online Class)  Quarter: Fall 2015

Instructor: Seth Harwood

Weekly Chat Schedule: Thursdays 5PM PDT/8PM EDT for one hour.

Course Text(s): This course will use a selection of stories to be purchased online through the course site.

Requirements for a Letter Grade and/or Credit: Students have three grading options for Continuing Studies courses:

  - Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass) - written work is required
  - Credit/No Credit (CR/NC) - attendance and participation is required
  - No Grade Requested (NGR) - no work is required; No credit shall be received; No proof of attendance can be provided. (Not suitable for those requiring proof of attendance/completion.)

Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final class meeting, by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies department.

Your grade will be largely based on your level of participation in the class. Whether adding to the online forums, giving your peers feedback on their work, or completing class assignments to build your own writing, I’m looking for you to have fun and to stay engaged. I also know that life intervenes. If you’re worried about missing parts of the class, see below about my Open Door Policy.

Assignment for our first class:

Choose one of your favorite short stories and start thinking about what you’ve learned from reading it—what craft elements you’ve learned from your own careful reading. During the first five weeks of the class, you’ll have the opportunity to choose a paragraph or two to share and talk about what you learned. Sort of a mini-lesson of your own.
COURSE STRUCTURE (how the online classroom works)

WEEKLY ROUTINE:
Each week, you’ll log onto Canvas and read the “Start Here” page. A new week’s content will post every Friday. This section will include my introduction to that week’s published story and thoughts on what we can learn from it, how we will focus our discussion, as well as both writing and reading assignments, any optional materials or links, and other announcements. Below that, you’ll see threads/prompts for our Discussions and your Writing Assignment.

All the materials for the following week will become available Friday afternoon. This way you can start your work over the weekend, if you choose. Start responding to the week’s discussions.

MONDAY through WEDNESDAY: I start each week with an email on Monday afternoon, greeting you, summarizing the assignments, and giving you any additional class information you’ll need. Take these days to start your writing assignment (if not over the weekend) and begin posting comments in the Discussion threads for the week regarding your peers’ assignments, our craft reading and general questions.

THURSDAY: Writing Assignments and workshop feedback are due: Thursday at 5 p.m. PDT. Our weekly Zoom Chat will be Thursdays at 5:00PM Pacific Time. For the first four weeks, all writing assignments are required. Afterwards, they shift to optional as we focus more to workshop submissions and feedback in the rest of the course. I will respond to any writing assignments in the order they’re posted, usually by the middle of the following week.

FRIDAY: Continue Discussion threads on topics from earlier in the week and begin reading/responding to others’ writing assignments (in small groups).

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 (both Canvas and email) 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.

MY ROLE ONLINE:
In addition to posting each week’s craft lecture and running our Zoom Chats, I’ll moderate the discussions, including workshops. This means I’m reading all your work and responding closely to every workshop, sharing my line notes and overall comments with the writer as well as the class.

I will come into the online classroom three or four days a week and respond to work
in the order in which it was posted. I may not respond to every post in each discussion, but I’ll read everything that posts in the class, respond to all your written assignments and do my best to keep things active.

**THE WORKSHOP:**
In weeks five through ten, we’ll focus on workshop: the chance for each of you to post a short story of up to 3,000 words (a maximum of 12 pages, double-spaced) and get feedback as we practice using the tools we’ve learned by closely reading the work of published authors.

We’ll workshop 2-3 pieces a week, for which I ask that students write a page or so of thoughtful, honest feedback (250-300 words). Our responses will include identifying the aims and accomplishments of each selection, offering specific praise for strengths, and asking specific questions.

In these weeks, I’ll still put up optional writing exercises connected to the craft themes, but the workshops are the heart of the class, and you’ll learn at least as much from the process of thinking through your comments on others’ work, as from the feedback you receive on your own.

**GUIDELINES FOR READING DISCUSSIONS:**
Good writers are good readers. Each week you will have a few discussion points related to the background reading. Again, I will monitor and moderate the discussion, but this is a place for you to discuss and even politely debate ideas of literature with your peers. Hopefully, the reading will feed into your own work. It may inspire you, but even if you dislike it (this may be inevitable—tastes differ!), it will be good to know why you want to take a different path.

I look forward to these discussions being lively and energetic. Give to them and the class becomes much more interesting and exciting for us all. Plan to visit the discussions and spend 20-30 minutes reading and posting in them 2-3 times a week. At a minimum, I ask that you address the questions posted each week and respond to at least one of your classmate’s postings (this could be a question, a different take on their reading, or even a further exploration about what they have said).

**ETIQUETTE AND ACCEPTABLE ONLINE BEHAVIOR:**
Respect for your classmates is of utmost importance. Critical analysis of each other’s work should be done with tact and professionalism.

Sometimes you do need a thick skin to be an artist, but this should be a friendly and supportive environment in which to share and discuss each others’ work. While there will be many instances of casual interaction, any use of inappropriate
language, derogatory remarks, or attempts to monopolize the conversation will not be accepted. You will receive a personal email from me and if the unacceptable behavior continues, you may be dismissed from the online course with no refund of tuition and fees paid. The vast majority of students in the Online Writers' Studio understand the ethos of mutual respect intuitively and problems of this nature are extraordinarily rare. But if you are having a serious issue with another student that seems to be going undetected, please contact me about it.

**Chat/ZOOM**
During each week of the class, I'll hold an hour-long live chat session. This will be an audio/video discussion of art, craft, process, and our weekly topic. Because everyone has different work hours (and time zones), attendance is optional, though highly encouraged. I will always post a recording of the discussion to our class site after it’s over.

Our primary place for conversations about the reading and writing will be in our text-based discussion boards, but the Zoom Chats are often a fun, lively way to cover a lot of ground in a more personal, face-to-face manner. **A lot of the class bonding and community happens here.**

**OPEN DOOR POLICY**
**IMPORTANT!** Although many students take online courses with the absolute best intentions of doing every last little assignment, “real life”—in the form of business and family obligations or who-knows-what—can get in the way. Sometimes, the resulting frustration or anxiety causes students to drop completely out of the class. **Rather than adopting an “all-or-nothing” approach to your participation in the course, I recommend simply doing what you can, when you can.** If there are a couple of weeks in which you don’t get to the reading, or if there are times when you can’t complete a writing exercise, don’t worry. In terms of priorities within class work, please do your best to comment on your classmates’ submissions and work on your own piece for workshop. If you have to step away from the class for a bit, that’s fine. **You can always come back when things become more manageable.**

**Schedule for the Course/Weekly Outline:**

**Week One:**
Introductions, getting to know one another and our writing goals
Lesson: Writing toward an unknown end, developing character
Reading: Flannery O’Connor “Good Country People”
Week Two:
Writing in Scene and Crafting Transitions
Reading: Raymond Carver “Put Yourself in My Shoes”

Week Three
Exploring Voice: What is your most interesting self?
Reading: Junot Diaz, “Nilda”

Week Four
Developing Character through Description
Reading: Joyce Carol Oates, “Where are you going, where have you been?”

Week Five
Using Visual Details to Convey Emotion
Reading: Hemingway, “Big Two-Hearted River”
Student Workshops begin

Week Six
Narrative Distance
Reading: Patricia Highsmith, “The Terrapin”
Student Workshop

Week Seven
Examining Point of View
Reading: Russell Banks, “Sarah Cole: A Type of Love Story”
Student Workshop

Week Eight
Landscape as Character
Reading: E. Annie Proulx, “The Half-Skinned Steer”
Student Workshop

Week Nine
Craft Element: TBA
Reading: Chekhov, “Gooseberries”
Student Workshop

Thanksgiving Week (Break)

Week Ten
Thoughts on Revision, Submitting for Publication and Onward!
Reading: Student Workshops