Preliminary Syllabus
Stanford Continuing Studies
Fiction Writing: My Characters Wrote Their Own Story
FICT 52 W
Fall 2015

Course Description

This course is designed to give you the tools to begin writing a character-driven novel or short story. Although there are many roads into the creative process, the one that has worked for me has been to start with a main character, make him or her as complex as possible, and then add more characters and work out their relationships to the main character as well as to each other. By digging deeper and making each character more complicated, it is my belief that their story will begin to unfold almost by itself. We’ll start with writing exercises designed to explore what you already know about your protagonist, and then we’ll continue fleshing him or her out (keeping what works, discarding what doesn’t) while exploring other characters and their ties to the protagonist. During the final weeks we’ll begin writing opening chapters or the first pages of a short story; by that time we should have plenty of material (from writing exercises, prompts, and assignments) to cull from for a first draft.

Required Texts

• The Anatomy of Story, by John Truby.
• Atonement, by Ian McKewan
• Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama, by David Mamet

Grading

Students have three grade options for Continuing Studies courses:
• No Grade Requested (NGR) – No credit shall be received; No proof of attendance can be provided. (Not suitable for those requiring proof of attendance/completion.)
• Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass) - written work & evaluation is required
• Credit/No Credit (CR/NC) - participation as determined by the instructor is required

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

If you decide to take the course for Credit or a Letter Grade, your grade will be equally based on participation, writing assignments, workshop critiques and your final workshop piece.
Class Participation

Your participation is essential to this course. The wonderful thing about the Online Writer's Studio is that you can participate from anywhere that has an internet connection at anytime. Although your participation will be typed and posted, I think of our forums as being more of a discussion, so don’t worry about being too formal. It's really a conversation. And like a conversation, the more voices we hear, the more lively and engaging the talk will be. I expect everyone to post to the discussion boards every week, and to give each other’s work the time and attention it deserves.

In addition, I will be holding a live office hour on Zoom, an online video conferencing service, once a week throughout the class. In the first week of class, I will propose three different days of the week and times, and choose the session that works for the most students.

Written Work

This course is designed to give you the tools to write a character-driven novel or short story, and in the beginning there will be a lot of exercises to get you going. However, the exercises aren't just about making lists of character traits and archetypes (although that's important, too); they are also a way to actively think about certain story-related issues and to make decisions in a concrete way — on paper. This isn't to say you won't change your mind. You might change your mind scores of times. But if something feels right it will stick with you and grow and work itself organically into a story, and the story itself will be richer for it.

There will be one weekly writing assignment, and I will give several exercises to choose from in order to complete the assignment. In addition, I will give out morning prompts every day during the second week. Writing time for the prompts should be short: write for ten minutes without lifting your hands from the keyboard, and do not edit or re-write as you go.

In the last half of the course we will work on beginning chapters or short stories, and we will break into small groups for supportive feedback. I will also read and give feedback on your work, and will do the same for the writing exercises throughout the course.

Readings

The two books I recommend having on hand throughout the ten-week course are The Anatomy of Story (John Truby) and Atonement (Ian McEwan). Not only will we be reading much of Truby and all of McEwan, but these two books serve as complements to each other: one is about craft and the other is how that craft is realized in a complete work of fiction. I chose Atonement in part because at first glance it might not seem like a story that is character-driven, and yet I think that it follows many of the directives that Truby lays out. Besides being a really good read, Atonement is also a useful illustration of how we can apply Truby's (and other authors’) advice on character development across genres and styles.
I will also suggest short excerpts from other works (or in some cases videos) to go with the weekly topics. Some of these will be optional, based on your own time and interest, which I make clear in the syllabus.

**Workshops**

In weeks one through six, you’ll be reading and responding to each other’s work, and in weeks seven through ten, you’ll be critiquing each other’s opening scenes (chapters or short stories) in small groups.

**Etiquette and Acceptable Online Behavior**

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. Although this program takes place online, we are a very real group of people and it is important to be honest and respectful in our dealings with each other.

**Weekly Routine**

- Log onto Canvas and read the "Lecture" page. This will include my lecture to start the week as well as the writing and reading assignments and any optional material. **All of my lectures will be posted by Friday afternoon so that you have the weekend to read the lecture and get started on your assignments.**
- Complete writing assignment and post to discussion board by **Wednesday at 5 p.m. (PST).**
- Do assigned readings and respond to discussion questions by **Thursday at 5 p.m. (PST).**
- Read your classmates’ writing assignments and respond to at least three of them on the discussion board by **Friday at 5 p.m. (PST) at the latest.** *(If one of your peers already has three responses to his or her work, please choose another to respond to. We want to make sure everyone in the group gets their share of feedback.)*
- **Participate throughout the week** -- check the discussion boards and contribute
regularly. I’ve provided hard and fast deadlines for writing assignments, reading responses and discussion posts above, but remember that the sooner you post assignments, responses and critiques, the more time your classmates will have to respond. Try to think of your online posts as part of an ongoing discussion instead of simply an assignment to be completed.

- If your schedule allows, join in for the weekly office hour Zoom video chat. I will try to schedule different times and days for each video chat so that all of you can make it to at least a few of the chats.
- On Sunday evening the discussion boards for the week will be closed.

This weekly routine will make a lot more sense once you’ve familiarized yourself with Canvas and once we've gone through a week of posting assignments, reading responses, and small group discussions, but if you’re confused about what’s due when or how to post, please don’t hesitate to contact me.

**What You Can Expect From Me**

I’ll be on the course site and checking my email regularly during the week. I’ll provide written comments on each and every one of your writing exercises as well as an in-depth, page-long response to your final workshop piece. I’ll facilitate and participate in all of the discussions on readings and craft elements, and I’ll offer all the advice I can about the writing life and writing habits. I will usually respond to writing assignments in the order that they are posted. **I’m happy to respond to late work, but please keep in mind that it might take me up to a week to get to it.** If you finish an assignment after the week’s discussion board is closed, please feel free to email it to me because I won’t be checking the discussion boards after they’re closed for the week on Sunday evening. At the beginning of the course, I’ll put up a thread on the discussion board reserved for any questions or suggestions you might have, and you can also feel free to email me privately with any questions or concerns. Unless your question is delicate, however, I prefer that you post to the group, since others might have the same questions and can benefit from my response.

**Preliminary Syllabus**

**Week One: Exploring Your Protagonist, Building Characteristics, Defining Wants and Needs**

- John Truby, "Creating Your Hero."
- NoViolet Bulawayo: *We Need New Names*, Chapter One.
Week Two: Developing a Story Premise with Character in Mind
- *Atonement*, chapters 2 through 8.
- John Truby, "What is the Premise?"

This week, in addition to the choice of writing exercises, I will send daily morning prompts designed to help begin exploring characters.

Week Three: Supporting Characters and Character Webs
- *Atonement*, chapters 9 through 14 (to end of Part One).
- John Truby, Chapter Four, "Character."
- *On Story* (video clip), "Heroes and Anti-Heroes: Loving the Villain."
http://video.pbs.org/video/2365026098/

Week Four: Character Change
- *Atonement*, Part Two. (This reading can be broken up between Week Four and Week Five.)
- John Truby, "Creating Your Hero."

Supplemental reading (not required): Jane Smiley, 13 Ways of Looking at the Novel, pp. 216-228.

Week Five: Building Conflict
- *Atonement*, Part Two. (See note for Week Four.)
- Reread two or more first chapters (McEwan, Bulawayo, Patchett,) from Week One; or re-read one of these chapters and the first chapter of a novel or first scene in a short story from a work in your genre.

Week Six: Creating an Outside World for Your Particular Characters
*Atonement*, Part Three. (This reading can be broken up between Week Six and Week Seven.)
- John Truby, "Detailing the Story World" and "Connecting the World to the Hero's Overall Development."
- Supplemental study: Ursula LeGuin Interview, UC Berkeley (video clip).

Week Seven to Nine: Student Workshops
- Writing, reading, and giving feedback on student work in small groups.
- *Atonement*, Part Three. (See note for Week Six.)

Exercises
"Ten Ways to Begin" — multiples exercises to inspire opening pages as well as first and second and third chapters ... and on to the end.
Week Ten: How Not to Re-Write (or, Write the First Draft through to the End Before Starting Over)

- Continue writing, reading, and giving feedback on student work.
- "Novelists on First Drafts,"