Course Title: Novel 1: The Powerful Beginning
OWC Winter Quarter 2016
Instructor: Sarah Stone
Syllabus for OWC 303C

Course Summary

The goal of Novel 1 is to get you going with an opening of your book that will provide a sturdy platform from which to launch the rest of your project. While writing a novel is not a tidy process, a beginning that does certain things right will help sustain your writing and allow the story to unfold over the next however many hundred pages. What are those things? A compelling voice. Engaging characters. A sense of mystery. A propulsive incident. Interesting questions. Strong and unique language. Something fresh. An exciting story. A tall order? Of course. But writing a great opening will energize you to get to the end. It's also the part of your book that agents, editors, and eventually readers will look at when deciding whether or not to keep going. So it's important to create a powerful beginning–keeping in mind that you will be revising once you finish your draft.

Your first class in the OWC curriculum stressed process, exploration, and the discovery of your story world. We are now switching tracks to a workshop-based approach, where you will be submitting an opening of up to 5000 words for your peers and instructor to critique and discuss. Along the way, we’ll also have both required and recommended readings, and have discussion questions each week.

To help support you in writing even more over the course of the ten weeks of class, you’ll have a special thread where you can post weekly check-ins and supplemental writing, not for feedback but instead as a kind of touchstone to provide accountability as you work toward your personal goal. The collective goal from here to the end of the certificate program is for you to make steady progress toward the completion of your novel.*

*Please see course page for full description and additional details.

A Note on How We Built This Class

As colleagues for OWS, we (Sarah and Malena) were in the position to read each other’s curriculums and sit in on each other’s classes, and quickly came to realize that we share similar philosophies about novels and the teaching of writing. A couple of years ago, we began discussing what we thought would be most useful to students beginning the first course in a sequence intended to culminate in the completion of a novel. We identified the craft points that we thought students would benefit most from focusing on as they worked to create powerful beginnings, and we took turns being the primary writer on the lectures that resonated most for each of us, though we have reworked every lecture together. You will be working with one particular instructor but benefitting from a new curriculum which is its own creative collaboration, and proof that two heads are often better than one.
How This Course Is Structured

Every week of the ten-week course will focus on a different craft element that goes into the construction of a strong, intriguing, unique novel beginning.

In the first two weeks you will do short (up to 750 words) writing exercises designed to help you generate or revise material from your novel. You’ll offer paragraph-length peer responses to at least three of your colleagues. Beginning at the end of week two, two to three students at a time will submit a full opening chapter (up to 5000 words) for the whole group to critique via a supportive and detailed letter of feedback. From week 3 on, after workshops begin, there will be optional writing exercises, not for instructor or class feedback (we’ll be focusing on the workshop pieces in those weeks), but for accountability, a sense of community, and an additional chance to develop your craft.

During the workshop weeks, your primary course requirement will be writing constructive letters of response to the authors "up" for workshop, as you continue to work on your novel. This is in keeping with the MFA model of writing instruction, in which there is little to no time given to exercises, and almost all learning happens via workshop (though we will also have optional writing exercises for those who want to use them for generating new pages). While writing letters of response takes time, you will learn as much from critiquing others as you will from their critiques. For each workshop piece, we’ll all write a page or so 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, and asking equally specific questions and suggesting areas for further development in the next draft.

Before workshops begin, we will talk about how to write a useful letter of response, and will provide a sort of template that you can use to guide you, 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.

Each week we’ll also have a thread with discussion questions related to our readings and the week’s themes. Your responses to these are required; they can be as brief as a paragraph or as long as you want (keeping in mind that your first priorities are to work on your own novel and to respond to your colleagues’ creative work). If you have time and wish to respond to your colleagues’ ideas, this makes for a richer discussion. Responses to other’s discussion postings are optional, based on your own schedule and the time you have available for the class.

Grading

1/3: Workshop submission. It does not have to be a perfect chapter or a full 5000 words (that’s a maximum: we suggest a minimum of 3500 words, though most people will have longer sections, and there’s no official minimum) but it should be submitted on time (the date that you sign up for). You also need to make sure it’s formatted for reading: submitted in Word or RTF (not as a PDF), spell-checked and proofread, double-spaced, in a 12 point font with page numbers. You’ll also want to paste a version into your workshop thread, to make sure everyone gets to read it.
1/3: Letters of critique. These letters should be specific and strike the right balance between supportive feedback and constructive questions or suggestions for revision. These should also be posted on time, so that we have a full discussion (in a real emergency, you can write to me about an extension).

1/3: Overall participation. Includes 3 mandatory writing exercises at the start of class; small group participation; posting at least once each week on discussion questions.

Since writing breakthroughs happen at different speeds and different times – sometimes troughs that appear endless to us are followed by huge leaps, but sometimes not for a while – your grade will be based on whether you’re turning in your work and writing thoughtful commentaries on your fellow writers’ pieces, rather than on “quality.” This gives you the most freedom to take risks with your exercises and drafts. I do not grade your writing based on its "quality," because a) this kind of grading is totally subjective, and b) writing for a grade gets in the way of writing out of a sense of passion and inner purpose. I merely grade writing based on the fulfillment of the requirements: that it's fairly well copy-edited for obvious spelling and grammar errors and that it 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 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 Wednesday at noon, especially if you know you find deadlines challenging.

Please try to stay active in the online forums. You’ll get the most out of the class if you put attention into the reading and your responses to your classmates as well as your own work. And yet, 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. If life circumstances have gotten in the way, come back to class as soon as you can and find a way to use those circumstances (even if indirectly) in your work.

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.

Required Readings

This class is principally a workshop. We are not assigning complete novels. Instead, you will read samples of books each week, usually assigned (all of the required reading selections are the amount you’ll find in a sample: you can go to Amazon and look inside the book, or download the beginning for Kindle or Kindle app, or, if you prefer to read from a different source, you are welcome to do what works for you and your favorite reading device or computer). We’ve chosen a set of samples as common readings, but you’ll also choose one of your own. This will allow you to pick a book similar to the one you want to write. If you're writing a novel-in-stories, a multi-generational family story, a
thriller, a work of historical fiction, or a YA novel, or any other genre, form or situation, you can choose a novel that is in some way literary kin to your own work.

From among the samples (including your own choice and those we’ve assigned), you’ll decide on one of the books to read in its entirety. In the final week, there won’t be any other readings, but a set of discussion questions that you can apply to “your” book.

And one more note – people always find books that they want to read in their entirety, which is great. I ask only that, if you’ve read ahead of our selection, and want to note something, you might find ways to write about it without ruining the plot. (It’s a great skill for book reviewing later on, if you find yourself wanting to be part of the literary community in this way.) So instead of writing something like, “the death of so-and-so,” you might write, “the sudden and sad event in chapter three.” Instead of writing “when her brother turns out to be alive after all and running the camp” you might write “the moment in the camp when she learns family secrets that change her understanding of the past and her relationship to everyone around her.” (Some book reviewers, of course, feel free to give away plot twists, but it’s not the most helpful way to proceed, either for the writer who took the trouble to build the plot, or for readers who’d like to discover it for themselves.)

**Recommended Books**

In addition to our assigned readings, here are a few highly recommended books that you may find helpful as craft references – you’ll have optional readings from these books in the course of class. In the forums, I’ll also provide supplemental essays on craft where relevant. For those of you with extra time, I’m always happy to recommend books that you might enjoy or that might prove useful to you in craft or subject matter. Any edition of any of these is fine (used, library, e-book, etc…)

- **Title: The Secret Miracle: The Novelist’s Handbook**  
  Author: Daniel Alarcón

- **Title: The Art of Subtext: Beyond Plot**  
  Author: Charles Baxter

- **Title: The Art of Time in Fiction: As Long As It Takes**  
  Author: Joan Silber

**Deadlines**

Your 750-word writing assignments in the first two weeks will be due by 2 p.m. 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 instructor feedback on these pieces by Friday. You will be responsible for reading and responding to 3 other students’ writing exercises by 4 p.m. PT on each Friday of the first three weeks.

Your responses to discussion questions (one paragraph minimum) are also due on Wednesday by 2 p.m. PT, though if it works for you to post earlier, please do so.
You will pick your workshop submission date by signing up on a wiki page early on in the quarter (the page will open up once we’re all in the classroom and settled in). Your workshop piece (up to 5000 words, no minimum) will be due on Friday at noon PT before the week that you are “up.” Peer critiques will be due by the following Wednesday at noon but can be posted earlier. I post my own critiques by Wednesday at noon, so as to let the conversation unfold before I weigh in, as I would in a physical classroom.

For the first few days of the week, the whole group, minus the authors, will discuss the chapters: what’s working and what needs further consideration.

From Wednesday at 5 pm PT through the end of the week, the authors are invited to join in the conversation, asking and answering questions. Again, this is modeled on the MFA style workshop where the author remains silent at the table for the bulk of the conversation, absorbing but not yet pushing back or responding, as quick answers can have a way of shutting the conversation down and preventing fruitful detours.

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). 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 check email at least once on weekdays, in case of urgent questions. I’ll also email you all if there’s some announcement or discussion thread I want to make sure we all see.

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.

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. Just keep in mind that at the end of the week, we move into a new week in the forum. On Mondays, the previous week will become “closed for conversation,” though it will still be visible to you. If you are late with an assignment (after Friday at 4) please post it in the new week, where there will be a spot for late work. This is a way to make sure that we keep moving forward, and that no one's submissions get overlooked.

**Chat/ZOOM**

My weekly live video chat ZOOM session/live office hour will typically be held on Thursdays from 12-1 PST, although I may have to change it once or twice in the quarter if my schedule necessitates this, or in order to accommodate a range of time zones, and I will let you know ahead of time in that case. After workshops begin, the group chats give way to (also optional) brief individual meetings. The group sessions are an audio/video mixture of office hour and informal discussion of art, craft, process, the nature and purpose of fiction, additional thoughts about the readings, and so on. Since
everyone has different work hours (and sometimes time zones), attendance is optional. The chats are recorded and uploaded as untitled videos to Youtube (you’ll have a link, but they won’t be searchable), so you can watch them even if you can’t attend. Our primary place for conversations about the reading and writing will always be in our online discussions.

**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 in some way, 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 are just each of us living out our own narrative 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 any given 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 time slot 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.

**Week by Week Reading Schedule**

(The selections from the books will be the sample amount that you can read on a Kindle or Kindle app, though you’re welcome to read the selections available on Nook or Goodreads or whatever works for you. Since the Amazon links change often, sometimes hour to hour, instead of posting them, I’m going to suggest that you can find the Amazon versions, if that’s what you want to do, by pasting the author’s name and book title into Google: the page that takes you to where you can read the opening onscreen or download it to your own device will be in the top results. Or, if you find it easier, you can go to Amazon and search there.) Even the first few pages give a great deal of information about the book’s situation and concerns. And, of course, starting in Week Three, you’ll also have your colleagues’ workshop submissions.

**Week 1: Establishing the Contract**

Required Reading:
Edward P. Jones, *The Known World*
Also, individual choices of opening chapters (Choose a book that is close in some way to the one you are trying to write, whether in genre, structure, situation, or voice.)

Recommended Reading:

**Week 2: Starting the Engine**

Required Reading:
Emma Donoghue, *Room*
A.S. Byatt, *Possession*

Recommended Reading:
Charles Baxter, *The Art of Subtext, Beyond Plot*, “Introduction” and “Creating a Scene”

**Week 3: Desire and Subjectivity (Character and POV)**

Required:
Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*
Brian Morton, *Florence Gordon*

Recommended Reading:
Daniel Alarcón, ed., *The Secret Miracle*, Chapter 4, “Character and Scene”
**Week 4: Building and Sustaining Tension/Workshop begins**

Required Reading:
Chimamanda Ngozi, Adichie, *Americanah*
Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl*

Recommended Reading:
Charles Baxter, *The Art of Subtext, Beyond Plot*, “Digging the Subterranean”

**Week 5: Time In Fiction**

Required Reading:
Paul Park, *A Princess of Roumania*

Recommended Reading:
Joan Silber, *The Art of Time in Fiction: As Long As It Takes*, “Introduction” and “Classic Time”

**Week 6: Language as Lens**

Required Reading:
Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*

Recommended Reading:

**Week 7: Story World**

Required Reading:
Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*
Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story*

Recommended Reading:
Joan Silber, *The Art of Time in Fiction: As Long As It Takes*, “Switchback Time”

(And a note – depending on your speed as a reader, you may want to start on the book you choose for your complete novel, peeking ahead, if necessary, at the next few openings in case you’d like to read one of these.)

**Week 8: Narrative Design**

Required Reading:
Maria Semple, Where’d *You Go, Bernadette?*
Jennifer Egan, *A Visit From The Goon Squad*
Recommended Reading:
Joan Silber, *The Art of Time in Fiction: As Long As It Takes*, “Slowed Time” and “Fabulous Time”

**Week 9: Theme and Meaning**

Required Reading:
Michael Cunningham, *The Hours*

Recommended Reading:
Joan Silber, *The Art of Time in Fiction: As Long As It Takes*, “Time as Subject”
Daniel Alarcón, ed., *The Secret Miracle*, Chapter 6, Revision

**Week 10: Moving Forward**

As many of your colleagues’ Revision/Moving Forward Plans as possible.

Also, if you haven’t yet finished the complete book you’ve chosen (see “Required Reading” above), you’ll want to do that so you can then write something about what you’ve learned from the book, to share with your colleagues.