Course Title: The Art of Plot
Course Code: EGL 53 W
Instructor: Michelle Richmond

Course Summary:
During the first half of this course, we will read and analyze a novella and a nonfiction book in order to gain a deeper understanding of various possibilities for plot development. Lectures will focus on specific strategies for designing a compelling, well-balanced plot. During the first five weeks, students will complete short assignments designed to help them think analytically about the plots of their works-in-progress. The second half of the course will be devoted to critiquing student work. Students will submit an excerpt of up to 5,000 words and will provide thoughtful critique on the work of their peers.

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.

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.

Required Texts:
The Comfort of Strangers, by Ian McEwan
Tangled Vines: Greed, Murder, Obsession, and an Arsonist in the Vineyards of California, by Frances Dinkelspiel

Recommended Reading:
(Including two great books on craft, plus five novels and nonfiction narratives with beautifully executed plots)

Wired for Story, by Lisa Cron
The Story Grid: What Good Editors Know, by Shawn Coyne
In Cold Blood, by Truman Capote
The Talented Mr. Ripley, by Patricia Highsmith
The Great Gatsby, by F. Scott Fitzgerald
Case Histories, by Kate Atkinson
Blood Will Out, by Walter Kirn

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
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Tentative Weekly Outline:

Week One: Three Kinds of Plot
This week, we will discuss the three primary forms of plot.

Assignment: Determine the kind of plot your novel or nonfiction book calls for, identify your novel’s genre (yes, even literary novels have genres!), and distill the book’s big idea in a single sentence.

Reading: The Comfort of Strangers
“What We Talk About When We Talk About Genre,” by Shawn Coyne (online)

Week Two: Constructing Scenes and Chapters
Lecture: Scenes and chapters are the building blocks of plot. This week, we examine how scenes and chapters are made. We’ll delve into inciting action, progressive complications, crisis, and climax.

Assignment: Write the global inciting action of your book and devise inciting actions for three key scenes.

Reading: Tangled Vines (pages TBA)

Week Three: One Book, Two Stories
Lecture: Most successful novels and works of narrative nonfiction do not exist on a single plane. We will discuss the intricate interplay of primary plot and subplot.

Assignment: Identify the external and internal plot lines, and consider how the two strands of plot work in tandem to express your book’s big idea.

Reading: Tangled Vines (pages TBA); excerpt from Wired for Story

Week Four: Character Drives Plot
Lecture: Plot never exists in a vacuum. Plot is the result of the choices your protagonist makes combined with forces beyond your protagonist’s control.

Assignment: Write a scene in which your protagonist reacts to a crisis. How does your character’s reaction at this crucial moment shift the direction of the story?

Reading: Tangled Vines (pages TBA)
Week Five: Pacing and Plot
Lecture: A well-paced plot requires a taut balance of summary and scene, compression and expansion. We’ll discuss when to expand a scene, when to summarize, and how to balance dialogue, description, and exposition in order to speed or slow the pace.

Assignment: Write a scene of crisis in which time is expanded to create suspense.

Week Six: Workshop*
Reading: Student submissions (chapters of up to 5,000 words)

Week Seven: Workshop*
Reading: Student submissions (chapters of up to 5,000 words)

Week Eight: Workshop*
Reading: Student Submissions (chapters of up to 5,000 words)

Week Nine: Workshop*
Reading: Student Submissions (chapters of up to 5,000 words)

Week Ten: Charting Your Way Forward with a Master List
While writing a novel or book of narrative nonfiction is, in large part, an act of discovery and intuition, a master list is an indispensable tool in fleshing out your novel when you get beyond inspiration and need to do the very hard work of getting the words on the page.

Assignment: Use the foolscap method (an explanation and sample will be provided) to create a list of essential scenes and their outcomes.

* Notes on the Workshop:

* All workshop pieces are due to me by email, as Word documents, by midnight on the Sunday of Week 5.

* In addition to submitting an excerpt from your work-in-progress for workshop, you will provide thoughtful, constructive written critiques on the work of your peers.

* Posted critiques should be 200-300 words and should a) address specifically what is technically adept, moving, or interesting about the submission, and b) make a specific comment about how the piece can be more engaging or clear, or how the author can build on the achievements of the piece.