Course Title: Writing the Groundbreaking Young Adult Novel  
Course Code: FICT 49 W  
Instructor: Malena Watrous

Course Summary:

Ever since the success of *Harry Potter*, Young Adult fiction has enjoyed a renaissance, as publishers became newly aware that kids aren't the only ones gobbling up “YA” and middle-grade fiction. These days, no subject is off-limits in “kidlit,” a category that runs the gamut from contemporary realism to fantasy, sci-fi to historical fiction, dystopian to biography. Writing for kids (or the young at heart) is incredibly fun and rewarding, but it's also harder than it looks. For these books to succeed, they need to be swiftly plotted, with compelling and believable characters, a sharp and distinctive voice, thematic resonance, and—to be truly groundbreaking—something special to set them apart in a crowded playing field.

In this course, students will work on developing a young adult (or middle-grade) novel. You will not be expected to jump in with a successful opening from week one. Rather, every week there will be a creative prompt coinciding with a craft point designed to help you to explore and build the world of your novel from the ground up. You’ll figure out the story you want to tell and the voice with which to tell it. We will work on characterization, plot, voice, dialogue, structure, and theme. Each week, you’ll have a 750-word exercise associated with the craft point of the week. You will submit your weekly writing into small groups of four, which will change (slightly) each week. Your response duties will be to read and comment briefly and supportively on the writing of the other three students in your group.

In order to preserve the momentum of the “discovery” draft, and to ensure that students spend a maximum amount of time working on developing their own novels rather than writing letters of response, **there is no large workshop in this course.** In the last three weeks of class, using what they’ve learned about their novels in the previous weeks, each student will draft an opening chapter of 1,500-2,000 words, to submit for feedback in small groups.

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

Grade Options and Requirements:

Students have three grading options for this Continuing Studies course:
1. **Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)** – Written work is required. In this class, letter grades will be determined as follows:

- Participation in Reading Week Discussions: 30%
- Weekly Writing Submission (3-5 pages, or more if you want): 30%
- Small Group Feedback: 30%
- Final Submission of Edited 1,000-1,500 Word Opening: 10%

2. **Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)** – Attendance and participation are required. You must receive at least 70% according to the letter grade formula to receive credit.

3. **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.

Whichever option you choose, do enjoy yourself, try new things, give back to your fellow writers, and be part of the writing community.

*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.

**Tentative Weekly Outline:**

**Week 1: Character** (protagonists and antagonists; iconic characters and characters who defy stereotype; making secondary characters pop)

☞ Read: *Ivan* for weeks 1-2

**Week 2: Voice** (Sarcasm can be funny, but it’s just one mode; how to sound like a kid in 2016; other forms of narrator besides the kid voice)

☞ Read: *Ivan* for weeks 1-2

**Week 3: Point of View** (the pleasures and pitfalls of first, close third, omniscient, and the fringe choices, too; the pleasures and pitfalls of one point of view vs. multiple points of view; how to change POV effectively to intrigue and not lose the reader)

☞ Read: *The Fault in Our Stars* for weeks 3-5
**Week 4:** Plot (when and how to introduce conflict; what’s an inciting incident; sustaining tension; modulation)

- **Read:** *The Fault in Our Stars* for weeks 3-5

**Week 5:** Structure (different scene launches; chapter lengths; chapter breaks; how much time to cover in the book as a whole; when to move between summary and scene; and what kinds of action necessitate each)

- **Read:** *The Fault in Our Stars* for weeks 3-5

**Week 6:** Dialogue (Dialogue is what people *do* to each other; the difference between ordinary real-life speech and effective dramatic dialogue; making effective dramatic dialogue *sound like* ordinary speech nonetheless; how to avoid the “info dump.”)

- **Read:** *Wonder* for weeks 6-7

**Week 7:** Setting (world building; incorporating setting detail into action; creating a place as vivid and indelible as your characters)

- **Read:** *Wonder* for weeks 6-7

**Week 8:** Language (controlling sentence structure, length, precision; making sure the language matches the tone and content of the book for its target reader)

- **Read:** *Where I Left You* for weeks 8-10

**Week 9:** Theme (figuring out the ideas the book is exploring beyond and through the story; finding ways to create resonance and significance through imagery, language)

- **Read:** *Where I Left You* for weeks 8-10

**Week 10:** Revision and Moving Forward

- **Read:** *Where I Left You* for weeks 8-10
Note: Throughout this course, we will work on identifying and writing for a specific target reader. This specific target reader may be different for each and every one of you. The fact is, while many adults read “kidlit,” it is still marketed and sold to particular age brackets. A six-year-old child will love Ramona, or Judy Blume’s Fudge. A sixteen-year-old will love The Fault in Our Stars or Eleanor and Park. A book like Wonder will fall somewhere in between. Not only is the language different depending on the book, so too are the ideas being raised, the questions being posed by the story.

At different developmental stages, kids have different things on their minds. Chapter books and middle-grade stories seldom have romance. Books for teens almost always do. If you have written only for adults before, this might be a new concept for you: picturing a very specific reader for your writing who is significantly different (in age at least) from you. As you think about the novel you want to write, start to think about your ideal reader. Let this kid take shape and guide you. It can be extremely helpful, inspiring even, rather than limiting, to have that person in mind. Maybe it’s your kid at a certain age, if you have one. Or maybe it’s the kid you used to be. What kind of book would he or she have loved?

Most of all, we will have FUN this quarter, reading and writing and thinking about these wonderful books for kids. We will let our imaginations roam, build worlds on the page, and take advantage of all of the kinds of liberties that kidlit affords. Prepare to remember why you loved this kind of book so much when you were a kid that you decided you couldn’t go another day without contributing to the genre!