Course Title: Novel Writing: The Character-Plot Intersection  
Course Code: NVL 26 W  
Instructor: Sarah Stone  

Course Summary:
“...I thought of the plot in that novel [Jazz]... as the melody of the piece, and it is fine to follow a melody—to feel the satisfaction of recognizing a melody whenever the narrator returns to it. That was the real art of the enterprise for me—bumping up against that melody time and again, seeing it from another point of view, seeing it afresh each time, playing it back and forth.”

Toni Morrison

Sometimes we talk about plots as if they can be summed up in a single set of rules, but the characters in each book make their own plot. Or, rather, the author discovers the plot by watching and listening to the characters and seeing where the fault-lines in their lives lie, and putting the characters under more pressure. And then, just as life changes us, all of these pressures and events change the characters.

Reading and writing give us a chance to live multiple lives. Sometimes those lives are a marvelous escape. But they can also be a satirical, tragic, or philosophical reflection of the world we live in. One of the reasons we read, or write, is to inhabit the mysteries of how characters influence, bring about, or react to specific events. We want to find out how the particular reactions of the characters change the course of their eventual fates. We have the chance, in writing and revising, to remake worlds and lives and in the process to figure out something about chance and meaning.

We develop our mastery of the art and craft of plot and character by allowing ourselves to know more than we think we know. The more we learn, the more we can forget, and the more the “work” of writing returns to being serious play. A novel takes off when the characters, in the middle of the ongoing situations of their lives, experience a disruptive event or an unsettling encounter that sets the plot in motion. As the characters make choices, the unexpected consequences require further decisions. In this course for writers at any level, we will use exercises to help you find significant events and character choices that will drive a compelling and meaningful story, whether eventful or quiet. You will also have a chance to discover processes and techniques for writing effective scenes and dialogue, find your novel’s shape and themes, and interweave voice, place, time, and perspective in ways that reveal both plot and character. We will read novels by Celeste Ng and Penelope Fitzgerald, learning how the intersection of their characters and plots unites suspense and meaning.

Each class participant will turn in a 5,000-word selection of a novel-in-progress for supportive, helpful feedback. Whether you are just starting out or have been working on your novel for some time, you will finish the course with new craft tools, a stronger sense of your novel’s aims, and a plan for your next steps.
**Required Texts** We’ll read and discuss two novels – feel free to read these books in any edition or format you like – we’ll find ways of referencing lines and chapters in our discussions that don’t rely on page numbers or e-reader locations. We’ll consider these books in craft terms, but also as human beings, as writers and as readers. What makes us believe in the characters and story (to the extent that we do), and what makes these books matter to us (if they do matter to us)? We’re going to explore our own preferences as readers as well as ways of opening up to a wider range of work. I will occasionally post additional links to craft essays or other information that augments our topics for the week, but these readings will be optional. You can purchase the course texts via Amazon.com by clicking on the link to access them directly, or you can buy them through your local or online indie bookseller.

(Required) Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You: A Novel*
(Required) Penelope Fitzgerald, *At Freddie’s*

**Writing Exercises**
In the first three weeks of the course, you will do short (up to 750 words) writing exercises to help you generate or revise material from your novel. You’ll respond to at least three of your classmates’ exercises a week and receive responses from them. Our exercises will be a chance to put into practice the concepts from the week’s lectures (you’ll find our topics at the end of the syllabus, in the “Schedule” section. I’ll give you individual responses for all of the exercises in the first few weeks. After workshops begin, the writing exercises will be optional: we’ll be focusing on the workshop pieces in those weeks. I will respond to optional exercises, though, after you’ve posted your workshop responses, and I encourage you to do so for each other if you have time.

**Workshop**
Beginning at the end of week three, two to three class participants at a time will submit a selection of novels-in-progress (up to 5000 words) for the whole group to workshop via a supportive and detailed letter of feedback. We’ll each write a couple of pages (about 600-750 words) 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, asking equally specific questions, and suggesting areas for further development in the next draft. I’ll give guidance on all of this too, 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.

**Weekly Routine**
Every week of our ten-week course will focus on different aspects of the art and craft of novel writing. Each week, you’ll log onto Canvas and work through the week’s module, which will include my lecture (a set of art/craft/process thoughts to start the week), writing and reading assignments, any optional materials or links, and other announcements. The lecture and assignments for the coming week will available on the Friday before the week begins. This way, if you know you're going into a busy period, you can get ahead on your work. In the first three weeks you will do short writing exercises designed to help you generate or revise material from your novel. Afterward, you’ll post a selection from your novel in progress. Throughout the course, we’ll have ongoing discussions of readings, craft ideas, the progress you’re making on your own writing, and other questions and ideas that feel helpful to you in in getting your work done.
MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY: Post your responses to the readings and discussion questions, respond to the work of your peers, ask any questions you have. 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). I read all of your responses to each other as well and chime in when I have something to add. 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 also check email at least once each weekday, in case of urgent questions, and will email you all if there’s some announcement or discussion thread I want to make sure we all see.

WEDNESDAY: Your 750-word writing assignments in weeks 1-3 will be due by 2 p.m. PT 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 almost always receive my feedback on these pieces by Friday. Otherwise, I’ll get to them as soon as I can, usually in the following week. In workshop weeks, your responses to the pieces (posted the Friday before) are also due Wednesday by 2 p.m. as are your responses to discussion questions. As always, if it works for you to post earlier, please do so. The earlier you post, the more time the rest of us have to respond to your writing and ideas.

FRIDAY: During the first three weeks of class, everyone will read and respond to at least other three other students’ writing exercises by 4 p.m. PT on each Friday. Also, and this is the most important deadline for the class, if you are up for workshop, you’ll be posting your piece no later than Friday at noon (many people post on Thursday, to avoid running into last-minute technical troubles).

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.

At the end of the week, we move into a new week in the forum. At the end of the day on Monday, the previous week will become closed for posting, though it will remain available for reading throughout the course. If you are late with an assignment (after Friday at 4) please post it in the new week, where there will be a thread for work from previous weeks. This is a way to make sure that we keep moving forward, and that no one's submissions get overlooked.

**Chat/ZOOM**
We’ll have a weekly live video chat/ZOOM session/live (informal and optional) office hour for the first two weeks of the term, on Thursdays from 12 to 1 p.m. PT. We'll have a final meeting in the last week of class on Thursday from 12-1PT. I will post reminders and connection information in Announcements. I also record and upload the chats so you can watch them even if you can’t attend (you’ll have a link, but they won’t be searchable, and like everything in the course they're confidential and not to be shared). Since everyone has different work hours (and we’re in multiple time zones), attendance is optional. In the weeks in between, I’ll be available by appointment during
the same time period for anyone who wants a brief one-to-one chat about their writing. The best time to schedule these is at least a week after your workshop, to think about any lingering questions you might have. All of this is completely optional, of course. Our primary place for conversations and classwork will always be in our online discussions.

**Grade Options and Requirements**

- **No Grade Requested (NGR)**
  - This is the default administrative option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.

- **Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)**
  - This is the option I recommend: it will give you some sense of accountability but with fewer requirements than a letter grade. To get credit, you’ll need to submit at least four of the exercises (during the course of the quarter – not all at the end), turn in your workshop piece on time, comment on your classmates’ exercises, and actively participate in most discussions.

- **Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)**
  - Grades are based on your doing the work and being fully present and part of our processes rather than on the “quality” of your fiction so that you can feel free to take risks and experiment with your work. For this option, you will also need to submit five exercises (during the course of the quarter – not all at the end), turn in your workshop piece on time, comment on your classmates’ workshop pieces, and actively participate in most discussions.

*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.*

Since breakthroughs happen at different speeds and different times – troughs that appear endless to us may be followed by huge leaps, but sometimes not for a while – your grade will be based on turning in your work and writing helpful commentaries on your fellow writers’ exercises. It doesn’t work to grade exercises based on “quality,” because a) this kind of grading is highly subjective, and b) writing for a grade gets in the way of your sense of passion and inner purpose (this is always true, but perhaps most of all when the writing has to do with your query letters or publishing plans). Still, to get the most helpful reading from the rest of us, please make sure your writing is fairly well copy-edited for obvious spelling and grammar errors and 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 lessons. Note the importance of turning in your work (including critiques) 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 the deadlines, especially if you know you find deadlines challenging. You’ll get the most out of the class if you stay regularly active in the forums and put attention into the reading and your responses to your classmates as well as your own work. Of course, 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. Email me if you run into trouble so we can figure out a solution.
**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, you can email them to work it out privately (by clicking on their name in the post). And please let me know as well if you would like me to step in and assist you. The vast majority of misunderstandings just come from each of us living out our own narratives 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 begin playing the publishing game, and to be a full member of our classroom 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 even as you work on getting that writing into the world, if you are pressed for time in a 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 week 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 the following piece is from Stanford (please note that, while I deeply appreciate Stanford's thoroughness and attention to all of these details, the writers who show up in the Stanford Continuing Studies creative writing classes are absolutely among the most lovely, insightful, generous, and grown-up people I've ever worked with, so while I'd like everyone to be familiar with all of this official material between the two lines, it's very rare to have difficulties):

   E------------------------------------------
   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.

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Confidentiality & Ownership
Writing workshops are built on trust. This may be even truer in an online course where we’re not all sitting together in the same room. To this end, it’s important that we all agree that the work we present here and the personal information we share stays within this group. Sharing writing or personal information by group participants is not permitted without express permission from the writer.

Students occasionally raise concerns about their work being stolen or used without their permission. Since the enactment of the Copyright Act of 1976, a tangible work (can be seen or heard) is automatically copyrighted. Therefore, even though you may not have officially gone through the U.S. copyright process, your work is still protected.

(End of official Stanford information) ---------------------------------------------------------------------------

Tentative Schedule
Here is a preliminary schedule for topics that we’ll consider in relation to the novels we’re reading for class as well as the novels you’re writing. You’ll have writing exercises for each of the topics, which will be optional once workshop begins. We’ll explain and explore each of the topics to develop a shared vocabulary and set of concepts, then consider them in our discussions from a variety of angles.
Note: you don’t need to know what these terms mean in order to function happily in the class – we’ll look at these concepts in the lectures and in the process of our investigations.

Week One: Entrances, Expectations, and Opening Narrative Maneuvers
Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You: A Novel*, Chapter 1
Penelope Fitzgerald, *At Freddie’s*, Chapter 1

Week Two: Voice and Viewpoint
Penelope Fitzgerald, *At Freddie’s*, Chapters 2-3
Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You: A Novel*, Chapters 2-3

Week Three: Time Signatures: Scene, Dialogue, Exposition, Backstory
Penelope Fitzgerald, *At Freddie’s*, Chapters 4-9
Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You: A Novel*, Chapters 4-8

Week Four: Narrative Arcs and Alternate Structures: Varieties of Suspense
Workshop pieces
Penelope Fitzgerald, *At Freddie’s*, Chapters 10-14
Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You: A Novel*, Chapters 9-12

Week Five: Character Complications
Workshop pieces
Penelope Fitzgerald, *At Freddie’s*, Chapters 15-17

Week Six: Thematic Urgency
Workshop pieces

Week Seven: The Pressure of Place
Workshop pieces

Week Eight: Raising the Stakes, Upending Expectations
Workshop pieces

Week Nine: The Ending and the Beginning
Workshop pieces

Week Ten: Revision Strategies and Moving Forward Plans
Workshop pieces