Preliminary Syllabus
The Writing Life: Form and Theory of the Novel
Online Certificate Program in Novel Writing
Fall 2016
Instructor: Stacey Swann

“Form and theory” are how we discuss what holds a novel together, the things that make a work of sequential prose feel like a three dimensional reality in both time and space. “The writing life” are the habits by which the novelist gets there, from the initial inspiration through the long haul of drafting, organizing and revising the material.

In this course, students will amass skills and concepts for understanding not only how successful novels are constructed but also for working with their individual creative processes so that their own novels become realized. To this end, each week will ask a key question linking both form and process, and will offer writing exercises that encourage students to advance on their novel drafts while at the same time enlarging their toolbox of both applicable techniques and productive habits of mind.

Writers will read a craft book on story structure as well as two novels and will analyze the choices these authors made with an eye to what is transferable to their own projects. Supplemental craft essays will be available on core fiction components such as characterization, plot design and approaches to revision, while supplemental material on process will help students consider day to day necessities such as willpower, time management, research and staying organized. Because the course is designed as a “sampler platter” of approaches, students will be continually encouraged to self-evaluate, to decide what kind of writer they are in regards to process and intent, and to identify and seek out the skills and resources they will need to succeed as that writer over the long haul.

During the last week of the course, students will look both backwards and forwards, considering their own experience in order to create a working plan for their two-year transit through the program and the adventure of writing their novel.

GRADING:

- 65%: completing the required coursework in a timely fashion. This includes posting short writing assignments, posting a workshop submission, and answering the required discussion points questions.

- 35%: creating a welcoming and productive atmosphere for other writers. This includes writing feedback to short writing assignments, doing workshop letters and responding to other students’ discussion points answers.

Each week, I will make it clear which components are required. Though other activities and readings are offered, completing them or skipping them will not impact a student’s grade.
BRIEF SYLLABUS:

Week One: Introductions (To Each Other and to the Writing Life)
Why do we read? Why do we write? Let’s offer up bold goals for the books we will write. What are our hopes and fears? How can we turn our initial inspirations into full-fledged novels?
READINGS: “Beginnings” from The Modern Library Writer’s Workshop by Stephen Koch and “Fake Rocks, Salami Commanders, and Just Enough to Start” by Merlin Mann

Week Two: Diving into Craft: Beginnings
What are the components of a successful novel opening? What draws us in? We’ll explore character, complication, point of view, and voice.
READINGS: Beginnings, Middles and Ends, Chapters 1 and 2 and In the Woods, Chapters 1-6

Week Three: Moving Past Chapter One
How do novels sustain momentum after their openings? We’ll study techniques from Tana French’s In the Woods.
READINGS: Beginnings, Middles and Ends, Chapters 3 and 4 and In the Woods, Chapters 7-12

Week Four: To Outline or Not to Outline and Characterization
How do novels gain tension and complexity as they move through their middles? What keeps us wanting to turn the page?
READINGS: Beginnings, Middles and Ends, Chapters 5 and 6 and In the Woods, Chapters 13-18

Week Five: Building Tension and Working Towards a Climax
How can writers set up a powerful climax—even if they don’t know what’s going to happen yet?
READINGS: Beginnings, Middles and Ends, Chapters 7
Writing the Breakout Novel by Donald Maass, Chapter 3 “Stakes”
In the Woods, Chapters 19-25

Week Six: Honing in on the Heart of your Novel
How do writers identify their character’s stakes from the outset? What kind of novel world do you want to explore? What is at the heart of your own work?
READINGS: The Turner House, Week One and Workshop Excerpts

Week Seven: A Closer Look at Scene Composition and Structure
How do novelists choose when and how to use backstory? Also, how does one decide between summarizing events and showing them in scene? We’ll look at the foundational structure at the heart of every chapter and scene.
READINGS: The Turner House, Week Two and Week Three and Workshop Excerpts

Week Eight: Preparing for the Writing Journey
Where does the emotional energy to continue drafting a novel come from? How should you handle personal material? We’ll peer into the process of writing and further aspects of the Writing Life.

READINGS: The Turner House, Week Four and Workshop Excerpts

**Week Nine: Bringing It All Together**

What makes an ending feel satisfying and complete? How does one reverse engineer the most powerful conclusion to the book?

READINGS: The Turner House, Week Five, Workshop Excerpts, and Beginnings, Middles and Ends, Chapters 8 and 9

**Week Ten: How to Write a Book in Two Years**

How will your initial inspiration become a full-fledged novel? We’ll forge a blueprint for your upcoming Novel classes, and we’ll discuss ways to keep absorbing novel knowledge outside of class.

READINGS: “Working and Reworking” from The Modern Library Writer’s Workshop by Stephen Koch

**OUR WEEKLY SCHEDULE:**

MONDAY: I will send out an email to the class introducing the week and directing you to the new Forum threads, including your Discussion Points about the week’s readings and your weekly writing exercises. I will create the Forum threads where you will turn in your exercises, but you won't actually post them there yourselves until Wednesday.

WEDNESDAY: You should post your weekly writing assignment by Wednesday at 5pm (Pacific Time), although you may do so as early as you are ready.

THURSDAY: You should post your discussion point responses by 5pm (PST), though it’s better to get these up as early in the week as possible to allow for more conversation.

I will hold a live office hour every Thursday for the first five weeks and in Week Ten. In the first week of class, I will poll students on their time preferences and create a schedule that allows most students to attend at least one. You’re not required to come, and feel free to drop in for shorter periods of time within that hour. All group chats will be recorded, so students unable to attend can view them later. In the second half of the class, we’ll switch to one-on-one conferences to discuss your work and workshop. (These conferences are also optional.)

Weekend: Get a jumpstart on doing the reading, answering the discussion points for the next week, experimenting with the coming week's writing prompts and especially working on your novel. I won't be in the classroom over the weekend but you're welcome to start posting for the next week starting the Friday of the week before. The classroom is always open!

This framework may sound complex in theory but tends to flow quite naturally in practice with each participant doing the bulk of their work when it best fits their particular schedule.
WORKSHOP RULES AND REQUIREMENTS:
During weeks six through nine, students will post one longer piece for discussion by a larger group. As the Program in Novel Writing moves forward, the MFA style workshop will become a key component. Our version of the workshop will involve shorter submissions and flexible responses in order to help writers at different stages in their process get useful attention. To this end, workshop submissions may be up to 3500 words and should be either an excerpt of a novel in progress or other work the writer is considering using for a novel project. You are welcome to use an expanded version of writing you did for an earlier prompt, and you will be free to tell us where and how your piece might fit into the novel. You will receive detailed feedback from me and other students, with an eye towards both helping you continue to draft and to prepare for your workshop in Novel 1.

GUIDELINES FOR READING DISCUSSIONS:
Good writers are good readers. Each week you will have a few discussion points related to the background reading. Again, I will monitor and moderate the discussion, but this is a place for you to discuss and even politely debate ideas of literature with your peers. Hopefully, the reading will feed into your own work. It may inspire you, but even if you dislike it (this may be inevitable—tastes differ!), it will be good to know why you want to take a different path. For Discussion you are expected to address the questions posted each week and engage with the thoughts of your classmates.

A FINAL NOTE:
An important note: although students who come to the OWC program tend to be highly motivated and have every intention of doing every assignment, changing professional deadlines, family needs, illness and other crisis can make this impossible. Please check in with me via email if you are having personal difficulties that make it hard to keep up with the required assignments. If the situation is not confidential, post to the Thoughts/Questions/Procedural Concerns board if you will be travelling or otherwise offline for a period of time so that other students know when to expect you back.