Course Title: NOVEL 1: The Powerful Beginning  
OWC Winter Quarter 2017  
Instructors: Sarah Stone/Malena Watrous  
Syllabus for Sarah Stone’s sections

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. It’s in the process of rediscovery and revision that you find a compelling voice, intriguing and complex characters, a sense of mystery, and a memorable story or alternate structure. The beginning is also the part of your book that readers (including the professional readers you’ll partner with in your publishing journey) will look at when deciding whether or not to keep going. So as you develop your book’s beginning, you’ll be traversing a path between your sense of what the book wants or needs and your sense of how readers will experience it. Remember that you will be revising once you finish your draft, so you have room to play and make discoveries without worrying too much about the final result.

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 4999 words for your peers and instructor to critique and discuss. As a way of encountering and analyzing different aesthetics and traditions, we’ll be reading a range of beginnings, looking at each for how they’re working and what we might borrow for our own novels. We’ll have writing exercises throughout the course, required at first, then optional once we start workshops. We’re also including a special thread where you can post weekly check-ins and discussions of writing process, 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 in the Stanford CS online creative writing program, we (Sarah and Malena) were in the position to read each other’s curriculums and sit in on each other’s classes. We 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. Then we took turns being the primary writer on the lectures that resonated most
for each of us and reworked every lecture together. You will be working with one particular instructor but benefitting from a new curriculum which is its own creative collaboration.

**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 for 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 4999 words) for the whole group to critique via a supportive and detailed letter of feedback. From week three on, after workshops begin, there will be optional writing exercises for an additional chance to develop your craft. Our comments on these won’t be as substantial as our earlier exercise comments, but I invite those participating to respond to each other’s work, and I’ll respond briefly as well, once you’ve posted your workshop responses.

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 most of the learning happens via workshop. 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 at least 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, and asking equally specific questions and suggesting areas for further development in the next draft.

You’ll have guidelines to help make this process as useful as possible in both giving and receiving criticism. 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 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, first in the exercises and then in the workshops). 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.

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. Because it gets bewildering for everyone if we're trying to work in two or three different weeks at once, I'll only be responding to postings in the current week (which is why we close threads for comments after a final sweep on Monday, though you can also post work in the Work from Previous Weeks thread).

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Grading

1/3: Workshop submission. It does not have to be a perfect chapter or a full 4999 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. Important note: if your workshop submission comes in after noon on the Friday when it’s due, or you’re missing critiques, then responses from the class become optional, though I’ll respond in any case. And because experience teaches us that it does not work to post a workshop submission if the writer is missing more than a couple of critiques, you will need to stay up to date with your own responses.

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 (but if a real emergency comes along and you must be late, please post them as soon as you can). Workshop responses are required, unless the piece is posted after noon on the Friday it’s due or the writer is not up to date with their own critiques, in which case responses become optional (see above).

1/3: Overall participation. Includes 3 mandatory writing exercises at the start of class and posting 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. Instead, I 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. And though workshop responses are mandatory, if you find that you have to be late once or twice, you can...
find ways to incorporate previous responses in ways that extend and further the conversation. Let your colleagues in class, and me, know if you run into trouble -- these classes are wonderful communities to help with a range of questions and issues, from process questions to work-life balance.

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 some of the discussion questions will allow you to write about books of your own choice, perhaps books 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. And then if others have read the books you’re describing, they can respond to your posts.

And one more note – people always find books from our sample chapters 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 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.
Title: The Secret Miracle: The Novelist’s Handbook  
Author: Daniel Alarcón  
Any edition is fine (used, library, e-book, etc.)

Title: The Art of Subtext: Beyond Plot  
Author: Charles Baxter  
Any edition is fine (used, library, e-book, etc.)

Title: The Art of Time in Fiction: As Long As It Takes  
Author: Joan Silber  
Any edition is fine (used, library, e-book, etc.)

**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. Once you’ve posted your own assignment, please respond to at least three of your colleagues’ assignments (more if you have time). Your responses to discussion questions 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 4999 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 at some point Wednesday afternoon, 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. Please note that the authors don’t post any responses until 5 p.m. on Wednesday. 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.

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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 Work from Previous Weeks thread. 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 take place in the first three weeks of the term on Thursdays from 12-1:30 PST and will be open to both of my sections, so you’ll have a chance to see your colleagues in the program from previous (and/or future terms). 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, 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 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 two 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 (I’ll open up the threads early so that you have a chance to post ahead of time, to avoid last minute technical or life challenges. If necessary, you might 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, at least 600-750 words (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 two 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 information on online conduct 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 Online Writer's Studio and Certificate Program in Novel Writing 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):

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)
In my experience, as we approach our responses and those of others in good faith, it all works wonderfully well, and our online communications have a high degree of trust and community support.

**Week by Week Reading Schedule**

Even the first few pages of a book give a great deal of information about the book’s situation and concerns. The selections from the books for discussion 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. The most complete versions of opening chapters can often be found on a publisher’s website (type the name of the book in quotes into Google, or your favorite search engine, and add “excerpt” to find these). If you’d rather, you can just go straight to an online bookseller, find the book, and download the sample. Since the publisher’s, Amazon’s, and Google’s links change often, sometimes hour to hour, instead of posting them, we suggest searching for the most current version.

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”

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.