Course Title: Thickening the Plot: The Art of Short Story Design  
Course Code: FICT 60W  
Instructor: Ryan McIlvain

Course Summary:

Thickening the Plot: Short Story Design

You’ve got an idea of your character, let’s say, your setting, your tone and mood, but now what? What to do with all this stuff? How to make a story go? In this course for writers of all levels, we’ll investigate what Vladimir Nabokov called “the mystery of literary form,” or, more specifically, the mystery of plot! Not quite as mysterious as it might at first seem, this fundamental aspect of fiction writing will become clearer to us as we practice techniques like incitement, reversal, the withholding of information, and the crucial development of character desire. Robert McKee’s (in)famous Story will be a grain-of-salt guide to the perplexed (we’ll also watch Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman’s arch skewering of this book in Adaptation), and several stories from master plotters like Ian McEwan, Arthur Conan Doyle, Lorrie Moore, Agatha Christie, Hilary Mantel, etc., will help build on and helpfully complicate our notions of story “structure.” By the second half of the course we’ll begin putting our practices and exercises to live-wire use in a full-length draft of a well-plotted story (10-20 pages) to be presented to the workshop for critique.

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

Course Texts:

Most of our readings will come from

- Alice LaPlante’s The Making of a Story, a wonderful anthology/how-to guide, and
- Robert McKee’s Story, a guide to plot construction for screenwriters, novelists, and really anyone working in narrative.

Please buy these provocative, ambitious books to own, then mark them up, argue with them, hallelujah and amen them up and down the margins. This will help your reading experience and our weekly discussions tremendously. The books will cost you thirty, maybe forty dollars. You won’t regret the outlay.
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)**
  - Students must attend at least 80% of class sessions.

- **Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)**
  - Students must attend at least 80% of class sessions, participate fully in workshop critique, and complete a 10–20 page draft of a plotted story (to be discussed further in class).

*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 ONE: INTRODUCTIONS/TRIANGULATIONS**

- Brief overview of the classical plot structure (feat. Freytag’s triangle!)
- Read LaPlante’s chapter 4, on the shapely story
- Read McKee “Introduction” and “The Story Problem”
- Exercise: an interview exercise à la Deborah Solomon, with focus on a telling anecdote/story from your partner’s life

**WEEK TWO: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER (TAKE ONE), OR, TWO HANDS ON THE KEYBOARD**

- What makes a “story” anyway? The music example: leaving “home,” returning “home” (Mozart’s father and the story that isn’t a story, leaving your listener hanging)
- Thoughts from Forster’s Aspects of the Novel
- Short readings from Jamaica Kincaid, Justin Torres, and George Orwell, paired with short exercises in character design (and desire!), conflict, and development

**WEEK THREE: PLOT FROM CHARACTER, CHARACTER FROM PLOT**

- Looking at “Girl” again, with an eye toward specificity in plot and character, and character desire—Vonnegut’s two cents
- Read LaPlante’s chapter 10, on character, and Akhil Sharma’s autobiographical masterpiece, “Surrounded by Sleep,” with an eye toward how your own stories can inform your plots
- Read McKee “Structure and Character,” on character through story (cf. Mr. Aristotle)
• Exercise: What happens when your character from WEEK TWO (or another, if you prefer) encounters a problem?

WEEK FOUR: INCITING INCIDENTS
• How to get a story off the ground? How to make it a proper “story”? Looking again at the Orwell example.
• Read Lorrie Moore’s gut-wrenching “People Like That Are the Only People Here” (paired with an interpretive essay on the same story)
• Read McKee “The Inciting Incident”
• Exercise: “I need you to do something for me . . .” (à la Charles Baxter)

WEEK FIVE: DEVELOPING THE CONFLICT
• Thoughts on a plot’s “spine”—South Park’s “therefore,” “but,” as tools for causal development—more from Mr. Aristotle: events from each other, not just after
• McKee “Act Design,” on complication and rising action
• Read Joyce Carol Oates’s “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”
• Exercise: Two “therefore” developments

WEEK SIX: LONG LINES AND SHORT LINES—ON TENSION
• How to make scenes “add up,” and to more than the sum of the parts
• Read Chekhov’s “The Lady with the Little Dog” and Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues”
• Read McKee “Scene Design,” on scene-based “beats” or intervals of rising action
• Workshopping begins
• Exercise: A scene like a nesting doll

WEEK SEVEN: NECESSARY SKEPTICISM
• What if all these “forms” really are “formulas”?
• Reread LaPlante chapter 9, on plotting, paying particular attention to the section on Johnson’s “Emergency”
• Read Denis Johnson’s “Emergency” and Hong Kingston’s “No Name Woman”
• Watch Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman’s Adaptation
• Workshopping continues

WEEK EIGHT: MYSTERIES! SURPRISES! STRANGE REVERSALS! (AND MORE)
• Withholding information, creating and undercutting reader expectation
• Read McKee “Structure and Genre”
• Read Hilary Mantel’s “The Long QT” and “Winter Break” (PDFs)
• Workshopping continues
• Exercise: “What’s in the box?” Planting a mystery (that you know the secret of but that the reader doesn’t)
WEEK NINE: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER (TAKE TWO)
- Two hands on the keyboard again, but this time with feeling!
- Read excerpts from McEwan’s *First Love, Last Rites* and *Amsterdam* (PDF)
- Plenty of room for play, too, in a plotted, character-driven story, but now the eternal question: are plotted stories and character-driven stories finally at odds?
- Workshopping continues—wraps up
- Exercise: Another character, another conflict—now what?

WEEK TEN: TO OUTLINE OR NOT TO OUTLINE, OR, REVISIONING A SHAPED DRAFT
- How Karen Joy Fowler’s wisdom cuts through the rigorous planners v. fly by the seat of their pantsers enmity—the *outline post facto*
- Also, Tobias Wolff on the “exploratory draft”
- Read LaPlante chapter 13, on “exercise-based revision” and Anne Lamott’s “Shitty First Drafts”
- Exercise: a revision plan/how to keep on keeping on