Course Title: Writing Your Debut Novel  
Course Code: NVL 163W  
Instructor: Diana Spechler

Course Summary: In this class, you will gather the tools you need to start and finish your first novel. Throughout the ten weeks, we will study two popular contemporary novels to figure out how they work and what makes them successful. Starting during week 2, we will meet on Zoom Chat every other week to discuss various elements of craft and process. In weeks one to five, you will shape the early pages of your project. In the latter half of the course, we will hold workshops and exchange feedback to help you to continue your manuscript once the class is over.

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

Grade Options and Requirements:

• No Grade Requested (NGR)  
  o 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)  
  o Students must attend at least 80% of class sessions.

• Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)  
  o Students must attend at least 80% of class sessions, and complete up to 5,000 words of a novel (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 and Formulating Your Premise  
Assignment (due 1/11):  
Reading:  
1. Chapter 2, “Premise” in Writing The Breakout Novel (focusing particularly on Brainstorming the Breakout Premise)  
2. The back (or flap) copies on The Book of Unknown Americans and Room.
Writing: I’d like us to take some time to get to know one another in the forums. Since we’ll be working extensively together this term – commenting on one another’s pieces, offering both encouragement and constructive criticism – it’s important that we become comfortable as a group.

**WEEK TWO:** The Inciting Incident
Assignment (due 1/18):
Reading:
1. The Book of Unknown Americans chapters 1-5
2. Writing The Breakout Novel, chapter 3, “Stakes”

Writing: Consider your premise and construct three possible inciting incidents. Just describe each in two or three sentences. Then pick your favorite and write out the scene in detail. Remember that you are not obligated to use this scene in your actual novel. Maybe you will, or maybe this exercise will just be practice. Focus on giving the scene its own arc, load it up with tension, and make the “stakes” high.

**WEEK THREE:** Grabbing the Reader From the First Sentence
Assignment (due 1/25):
Reading:
1. The Book of Unknown Americans, chapters 6-10
2. Writing The Breakout Novel, “Bridging Conflict,” pages 139-147
Go through the novels on your bookshelf and read the first sentences. Notice which ones hook you and which ones don’t. Can you tell why?

Writing: Write ten to fifteen sentences that could each be the first sentence of your novel.

**WEEK FOUR:** Pinpointing Your Climax To Understand Your Direction
Assignment (due 2/1):
Reading:
1. Writing The Breakout Novel, pages 133-139 and 147-161
2. The Book of Unknown Americans, chapters 11-15

Writing: Look at your inciting incident. Based on that scene and your narrative question, what could your climax be? Come up with five possibilities, two to three sentences each. Then choose your favorite and flesh it out into a scene.

**WEEK FIVE:** Climax
Assignment (due 2/8):
Reading:
1. Finish The Book of Unknown Americans
2. Writing The Breakout Novel, chapter 5, “Characters”
Writing: (up to) 5,000 words due! These pieces will be workshopped in the second half of the course.

**WEEK SIX: Contemporary Plot Techniques**
Assignment (due 2/15):
Reading:
   1. Writing The Breakout Novel, Chapter 7, “Contemporary Plot Techniques”
   2. Room, “Presents” (pages 1-50)

Writing: Write a scene about your protagonist that occurs five years before the beginning of your novel. This will help you remember that your protagonist has a past, that he wasn’t born on page one (unless, of course, you are beginning your novel with your protagonist’s birth, which is generally not advised). Show us how your character was different back then, and how he was the same.

**WEEK SEVEN: Advanced Plot Structures**
Assignment (due 2/22):
Reading:
   1. Writing The Breakout Novel, Chapter 9, “Advanced Plot Structures”

Writing: Comment on your classmates’ workshop pieces.

**WEEK EIGHT: Theme**
Assignment (due 3/1)
Reading:
   1. Writing The Breakout Novel, Chapter 10, “Theme”

Writing:
   1. Comment on your classmates’ workshop pieces.
   2. Isolate a scene from your novel. Flesh it out so it incorporates your theme.

**WEEK NINE: Point of View**
Assignment (due 3/8)
Reading:
   1. Writing The Breakout Novel, pages 181-195

Writing:
   1. Comment on your classmates’ workshop pieces.
   2. Try rewriting a scene from your novel from a different point of view (e.g. from the POV of a different character or in third person rather than first).
WEEK TEN: Outlining
Assignment (due 3/15):
Reading: Finish Room
Writing:
   1. Comment on your classmates’ workshop pieces.
   2. Write an outline for your whole novel.
   3. Write a sample agent pitch letter.