Preliminary Syllabus
Course Title: Short Story Writing with the Greats
Course Code: FICT 61 W
Instructor: Joshua Mohr

Course Summary

The goal of this course is to showcase tenets of the modern short story, letting students explore a variety of styles and aesthetics as both readers and writers. Each week, we will read from at least one “master” of a certain genre/sub-genre, and using that master text as our guide, we will all test-drive that particular narrative sensibility.

We will share these stories with one another, and these shorter assignments will culminate in a longer submission toward the end of the quarter. This will be the course’s workshop component, allowing each student to produce a longer work and hear from a cross-section of other aspiring authors, getting comprehensive feedback to guide them into the revision process.

Certain weeks, we will also look at a contemporary example of how a writer working in 2017 can import these seemingly “old” techniques to produce the mesmerizing fiction of today. Remember, no one makes art in a vacuum, and to evolve into the best storyteller you possibly can be, it behooves you to know all your narrative options on the page.

By the end of the quarter, students will have been immersed in a quarter chockful of reading and writing, experimenting and growing.

Required Texts
The Story and its Writer, by Ann Charters.
ISBN: 978-1457664618

Grading

Students have three grade options for Continuing Studies courses:

- No Grade Requested (NGR) – No credit shall be received; No proof of attendance can be provided. (Not suitable for those requiring proof of attendance/completion.)
- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass) - written work & evaluation is required
- Credit/No Credit (CR/NC) - participation as determined by the instructor is required

Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final
class meeting by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies department.

If you decide to take the course for Credit or a Letter Grade, your grade will be equally based on participation, writing assignments, workshop critiques and your final workshop piece.

**Tentative Weekly Outline**

Week 1: Surrealism (Franz Kafka and Rebecca Brown): Filmmaker David Lynch is quick to point out that the majority of the word surrealism is *realism*. What does he mean by that? How can we use a recognizable reality as our narrative canvas, and yet imbue a short story with one or two odd details to allow it to bloom into something wonderfully surreal?

We will let Franz Kafka be our spirit animal as we launch our course!

Week 2: Stream-of-Consciousness (Virginia Wolff): At the beginning of the 20th century, the tradition of modernism was ushered in, with writers like William Faulkner and Virginia Wolff leading the charge in a new kind of narration, named stream-of-consciousness. How is this way of rendering the internal and external world different than, say, a Henry James' novel in the 19th century? Students will analyze the tenets of this typically arcane strategy and will leave the week with the vocabulary to articulate its necessary ingredients.

Week 3: The Secular Epiphany (James Joyce): Few authors get to add “I Changed The World” to their resume, but Joyce does have that feather in his cap. When his first book, *The Dubliners*, was first published, a new technique called the secular epiphany was ushered en vogue and is still widely used (and abused) today. How can we as writers constructing stories in the 21st century use this technique as an asset, instead of a liability?

Week 4: Magical Realism (Clarice Lispector and Gabriel Garcia Marquez): Let us travel to Latin and South America for this chunk of our curriculum. Magical realism represented the perfect marriage of the miraculous and the mundane, using “impossible” details to imbue the text with vibrant and lush life. Students will have the opportunity to dislocate their narratives from the rules of reality and let their imaginations loose do to their worst.

Week 5: Minimalism (Ann Beattie and Raymond Carver): Minimalism was a style of storytelling that valued compression above all else. How can we use the fewest words possibly to convey our thoughts and intentions on the page? Carver, probably regarded as the Godfather of Minimalism, abhorred the term, preferring to
think of himself as a miniaturist; however we’re qualifying the tradition, it’s
deceptively difficult to construct stories that strip down the prose to its base boards
and still elicit an emotional response in a reader.

During this week, we will also select our workshop slots for the quarter’s
culminating experience.

Week 6: Maximalism (David Foster Wallace): If we’re going to talk the positive
attributes of minimalism, it only seems fair to discuss its diametric opposition,
maximalism. This school was a direct response to the 1970s and 1980s that saw
minimalism as the Aesthetic Emperor, thus making the 90s a decade of decadence,
authors erring on the other side, trying to extract every single drop of dramatic juice
from their material they possibly could.

Week 7: Postmodernism (Donald Barthelme and Angela Carter): Postmodernism is
the hardest aesthetic for us to define this quarter, as it’s an umbrella term and
underneath it lives all sorts of traditions. Whether, we’re talking metafiction or
intertext, self-reference or irony, the postmodernism movement ushered in a more
playful era in America, allowing the artists to feel free to construct outlandish and
cerebral pieces.

Week 8: Dirty Realism (James Baldwin and Denis Johnson): Dirty realism is a
tradition that came to mainstream popularity in the late 1970s in America, yet
authors like James Baldwin had been practicing it for years. Dirty realism is the
tradition situated far away from the suburbs of Cheever and Updike. These are
stories about the often marginalized people, stories that seek to humanize the voices
often unheard in mainstream media outlets.

We will also use the James Baldwin story “Sonny’s Blues,” as a way for us to examine
how Joyce’s secular epiphany evolved as the 20th century progressed.

Week 9: Prose-poems (Jamaica Kincaid): The prose-poem is a hard to define genre,
as its meaning mutates a bit based on who happens to be offering the definition. To
my eye/ear, prose-poetry cherry-picks the best details of each school. These stories
have to be poetic, emphasizing language, rhythm, and cadence. And yet they also
must have a recognizable narrative, a beginning, middle, and ending that takes the
reader on a satisfying journey.

We will also examine some more experimental examples of the genre, mining the
work of Kathy Acker, Susan Steinberg, and Gary Lutz.
Week 10: Our Foundation (Anton Chekhov): For our final week, we will end at the beginning (since we’re all now blossoming post-modernists). We will end with the great Anton Chekhov, who is credited (maybe too much) with ushering in the epoch of the modern short story. In the mid-19th century, Chekhov, along with Dostoyevsky, rejected the elaborate narrative styles of the Victorian Novel, with its moral editorialization, its leading-the-witness style. It was Chekhov who sought to strip these embellishments away and let each story, each character speak for herself.

As a contemporary companion, we’ll also examine the work of Hilton Als and Roxane Gay.