OWC 304 B: Novel II: Plot and Structure

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Novel II is designed to allow you to build on your hard work in Novel I. You’re at an exciting point in the process of writing, a place where you may begin to feel the book take its shape. We’ll talk about issues that many writers encounter mid-draft and we’ll discuss techniques for how best to work with the information you have about where you’re headed. We’ll also work hard to keep the sense of discovery alive. Surprising yourself, and letting what you’ve done so far speak to you in unexpected ways, is key to dynamic work.

Like Novel I, this class will focus on workshop. Everyone will produce between 30 and 40 (max) new pages of their book for one full-group workshop and one small-group workshop. Weekly “lectures,” (the introductions in our schedule) readings and writing assignments will center around issues such as managing scenes and sections, handling subplots and minor characters, thinking forward to the end, the joys and hazards of the writing life, and much more.

READINGS

*The Modern Library Writer’s Workshop*, Stephen Koch

*Old School*, Tobias Wolff

*The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri

Possible essays, interviews, novel excerpts to be provided by me.
HOW IT WORKS—IN BRIEF

Each week you’ll log into Canvas for a lecture/lesson that introduces the week’s focus, a reading assignment or suggested reading, a writing assignment, topics for online discussion, and other supplemental resources. You’ll also have an email from me every weekend that details the next week’s focus and reminds you of our ZOOM session. Starting in Week 3, our class priority will be workshop, and weekly exercises will be your carefully crafted responses to your classmates’ fiction. However, I’ll also include optional short writing assignments that complement the week’s topic. If you have a chance to complete these optional assignments, you’ll post them to our “discussions” thread as you will have done in Weeks 1 and 2, and you may expect my feedback there within three days. You may also receive feedback from the rest of the class, if they would like to give it.

Each of you will have a chance to submit two sections of your novel-in-progress. Feel free to divide the 40 pages (max) any way you’d like—20/20, 30/10, etc, as long as you have two separate submissions: one for our full group and one for your small group towards the end of the term. You’ll post your piece to the thread I designate in “discussions” before midnight on the Friday before your workshop week. My response and the mandatory responses from each of your classmates will be posted there, as well, by Thursday. After Thursday, feel free to respond to any and all workshop commentary on your piece as feels helpful to you (follow-up questions, etc.).

HOW IT WORKS—IN FULL

WEEKLY READING ASSIGNMENTS

Each week I’ll assign readings from our course materials to facilitate discussions of each week’s topic. Try to keep up with the readings as best you can, but prioritize reading your classmates’ workshop submissions. I’ll also start a class bibliography thread in which you can make your own suggestions for fiction readings.

While reading, ask yourself, What do I respond to, and why? Once you figure out what works in a piece and how a writer makes it work, you are near the point of bringing that technique to your own fiction. Identifying what works for you in the reading is a great topic for our discussions—even if it means disregarding some of the other discussion questions for the week. It’s also a great thing to include in your response letters—but more about their format later.
DISCUSSION THREADS IN WEEKLY MODULES

This is our virtual classroom, and I want everyone to feel comfortable participating. Remember that while courtesy is paramount, no one will be checking your grammar and spelling.

MY PRESENCE ONLINE

I will be online at least every other day. The advantage of an online format is that we can all do our work when our schedules permit. So log on whenever it’s convenient for you, morning or night, weekday or weekend. If you have a question about course content or class assignments, please post it under the Question and Comments thread rather than emailing me, so that everyone can benefit from the information. If you have a private question or concern, feel free to contact me via email.

I will check my email once a day and will respond as promptly as possible—at least within 24 hours.

OFFICE HOURS

Once a week, TBD, I’ll host a ZOOM, or “online office hour.” This is not a lecture, and is not a mandatory part of the class.

LATE POSTINGS

A workshop depends upon on-time submissions and responses. Completing each and every response to your classmates’ submissions is mandatory for satisfactory course credit. Late responses are still very valuable to the writer, but regular, on-time responses should be de rigueur for the highest grades.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION POINTS

I’ll post discussion questions each week. Please respond to one or two of the questions over the course of the week, or address other issues you think deserve attention. Please also feel free to ask your own questions about the readings or anything else. Again, starting in Week 3, the discussion questions are optional.

WEEKLY WRITING EXERCISES

Weeks 1 and 2 writing exercises should be posted to the designated thread in “discussions” by 11:59 p.m. Thursday (although the sooner you post assignments,
the more time you’ll have to receive and respond to feedback). PLEASE ADHERE TO THE WORD LIMIT. Weeks 3 on, these weekly exercises are optional; however, mandatory responses to your classmates’ workshop submissions are due by 11:59 p.m. Thursday of each week.

WORKSHOP

Workshop will begin during Week 3 and will continue until the final class. In order to get started, we’ll need to set up a schedule. Please check the discussion threads during Week 2 (the Week 2 module) for the thread marked Workshop Schedule to sign up for a slot. Slots will be assigned on a first-come, first-served basis. If you are planning to submit work you have begun prior to this class, please sign up for an early slot so that people submitting brand new work have a chance to prepare. Everyone will have the chance to submit twice during the term. Two students will be workshopped each week, depending on final enrollment. As mentioned, letters of response are mandatory!

FORMATTING GUIDELINES

All work should be double-spaced and in 12-point Times New Roman or similar font. Use standard margins, number your pages, and give your work a read-through for grammar.

Due dates: Workshop pieces are due by 11:59 p.m. the Friday before you are up for workshop. For example, if you are up for workshop during Week 7, you should post your chapter by 11:59 p.m. the Friday of Week 6. I’ll send reminder emails to keep the class on course.

TIPS FOR HELPFUL CRITIQUES

Each week of workshop, I’ll ask you to respond to your classmates’ work posted on the designated thread in “discussions.” Please strive to understand the writer’s specific goals for the piece, then offer suggestions that help them achieve these goals. Like the assigned published reading, you should read your classmates’ work twice—first for pleasure and a general sense for how it’s working, and second to understand why it affected you as it did. As a general rule, begin by identifying the writer’s strengths then move into a discussion of possible improvements in a brief paragraph. Remember to be sensitive and diplomatic so your classmates feel comfortable taking risks. We all deserve respectful feedback.

I’ll provide more specific guidelines for your feedback in Week Two.
MY COMMENTARY

I’ll comment on any short exercises as well as the longer pieces you turn in for workshop. My remarks on your short pieces will be brief but will be designed to help you develop the piece or think about how it might be extended into something longer (if applicable). I’ll post my comments on your chapters—in letter form—to the designated thread in “discussions” for everyone to read. In a live classroom I would make these comments to the class so that everyone could benefit and respond. I’m hopeful that we can achieve a similar back and forth in our “threaded” discussions. I’ll read your comments and respond, and you should do the same with mine and those of your classmates. The more conversational the class is, the more fun we’ll have and the more we’ll all learn.

GRADING

I would like you to prioritize accordingly over the course of the quarter:

Completion of 30 to 40 (max) new pages of your novel

Thoughtful feedback on your classmates’ submissions (Weeks 3 through 10)

Meaningful and frequent participation in our discussions of assigned reading, as well as feedback on your classmates weekly assignments as time permits

The grade breakdown will be as follows:

40%  30 to 40 (max) pages of new fiction
60%  Comments on your classmates’ work and participation on discussion threads

Let me know at any time if you have questions about grades.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Thanks for taking part in this course. So much of writing is done in solitude that I always welcome the opportunity to encourage a community of writers. I’m really looking forward to getting to know you and your work, if you’re new to me, and to catching up with what’s been happening with your projects if we’ve worked together before!
THOMAS H. MCNEELY BIO

Thomas McNeely is a former Stegner Fellow and Jones Lecturer in fiction at Stanford University, where he has been teaching since 2003. He holds an MFA from Emerson College. His stories have appeared in *The Atlantic, Ploughshares, The Virginia Quarterly Review, and Epoch*, and have been included in various textbooks and anthologies, including Algonquin Books’ *Best of the South: Stories from the Second Decade of New Stories from the South*. He is also the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in prose. His novel, *Ghost Horse*, was published in October 2014 as winner of the Gival Press Novel Award.