Course Title: Novel Writing: Inventing Reality (online)
Course Code: NVL 10 W
Instructor: Sarah Stone

Course Summary

A note from the instructor: One of the most famous remarks about novel-writing comes from Somerset Maugham: “There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.” This can actually be an encouraging idea. While it does mean that no one can give us the list of steps to writing a novel, on the other hand, it also means that we can each figure out how to write our own novel, the one which has never existed before and which could not exist without the work we do to discover it and bring it into being. We can help each other with this process of discovery through our online discussions of each other’s writing and of the novels we’re reading.

There’s something mysterious, even magical, about the power of a novel, its capacity to bring us (as writers and as readers) into another reality and to illuminate life in some way. A novel can be completely made up or drawn from life and, in either case, feel “real” to its readers. A novel can also feel “real” whether it offers a gripping, linear plot that relies on cause-and-effect events or experiments wildly with language, structure, and the incorporation of other media or genres (from graphic novels to novels that include passages of poetry). So what is it that lets us as writers create a book that feels both convincing and emotionally significant?

In this online class, we’ll make use of a mix of informal written lectures, discussions, and writing exercises to help each participant explore character complexities, ways of developing rich arcs and plots/structures, time, pacing, narrative movement and narrative drive, point of view options, and the dramatic embodiment of thematic questions. We’ll also deal with process – from generating new ideas to working through “blocks” (and discovering what a gift a block can be) to revising our work.

As an aid to thinking about the possibilities and techniques of novel-writing, we’ll read and discuss two very different short novels – Alice Munro’s Beggar Maid, structured as a series of third-person linked stories that covers decades, and Ernest J. Gaines’s high-stakes first-person novel, A Lesson Before Dying, which takes place in a short period of time. Fundamentally, though, this is a workshop-based course – our main task starting in week four will be workshopping a chapter or selection from each participant’s novel. Writers expand and develop their knowledge of their own craft and aesthetics just as much in critiquing the work of others as in receiving critiques. As a community, we’ll give each writer supportive, helpful feedback on writing exercises and workshop pieces, working together to discover each novel’s largest possibilities. This course is for writers at every level: whether you’re still gathering your ideas for a novel or have written multiple drafts (or even multiple novels). No matter what kind of novel you’re writing, and no matter where you are in the process of writing it – from a few jotted notes to piles of completed (or partially completed) drafts – by the time you finish this course, you’ll be ready to take your work to the next level.
course, you’ll have made a whole series of discoveries about your own book, and you’ll have learned more about the art, the craft, and the process of novel writing.

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

**Required Texts**

We’ll read and discuss two novels. Feel free to read these books in any edition or format you like – we’ll find ways of referencing lines and chapters in our discussions that don’t rely on page numbers or e-reader locations. We’ll consider these books in craft terms, but also as human beings, as writers and as readers. What makes us believe in the characters and story (to the extent that we do), and what makes these books matter to us (if they do matter to us)? We’re going to explore our own preferences as readers as well as ways of learning to appreciate, and whenever possible to love, a wider range of work. I will occasionally post additional links to craft essays or other information that augments our topics for the week, but these readings will be optional. You can purchase the course texts via Amazon.com by clicking on the link to access them directly, or you can buy them through your local or online indie bookseller.

(Required) Alice Munro, *The Beggar Maid*
(Required) Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*

**Writing Exercises**

In the first three weeks of the course, you will do short (up to 750 words) writing exercises specifically designed to help you write or revise your own novel, working with your own materials and characters. You’ll respond to at least three of your classmates’ exercises a week and receive responses from them. We’ll have exercises all the way through the course, but they become optional once workshop begins. Our exercises will be a chance to put into practice the concepts from the week’s lectures (topics listed at the end of the syllabus, in the “Schedule” section). I’ll give you individual responses for all of the exercises in the first few weeks. After workshops begin, the writing exercises will be optional: we’ll be focusing on the workshop pieces in those weeks. I will respond to optional exercises, though, after you’ve posted your workshop responses, and I encourage you to do so for each other if you have time.

While writing letters of response takes time, you will learn as much from critiquing others as you will from their critiques. The letters of response are mandatory, and you won’t be able to post for workshop or pass this course without completing them for all of your colleagues.

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 others’ discussion postings are optional, based on your own schedule and the time you have available for the class.

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
365 Lasuen St., Stanford, CA 94305
continuingstudies@stanford.edu
650-725-2650
Workshop

Beginning at the end of week three, two to three class participants at a time will submit a selection of novels-in-progress (up to 5000 words) for the whole group to workshop via a supportive and detailed letter of feedback. We'll each write at least 650 to 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, asking equally specific questions, and suggesting areas for further development in the next draft. I’ll give guidance on all of this too, since 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.

Weekly Routine

Every week of our ten-week course will focus on different aspects of the art and craft of novel writing. Each week, you’ll log onto Canvas and work through the week’s module, which will include my lecture (a set of art/craft/process thoughts to start the week), writing and reading assignments, any optional materials or links, and other announcements. Writing exercises, workshop pieces, and discussion responses can be posted in the appropriate threads, which you can find by clicking either "Modules" or "Discussions."

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. In the first three weeks, you will do short writing exercises designed to help you generate or revise material from your novel. Afterward, you’ll post a selection from your novel in progress. Throughout the course, we’ll have ongoing discussions of readings, craft ideas, the progress you’re making on your own writing, and other questions and ideas that feel helpful to you in in getting your work done.

MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY: Post your responses to the readings and discussion questions, respond to the work of your peers, ask any questions you have. I’ll come into the online classroom at least three times during the week – generally on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons – 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). I read all of your responses to each other as well and chime in when I have something to add. 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 also check email at least once each weekday, in case of urgent questions, and will email you all if there’s some announcement or discussion thread I want to make sure we all see.

WEDNESDAY: Your 750-word writing assignments in weeks 1-3 will be due by 2 p.m. PT 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 generally receive my feedback on these pieces in the same week. Otherwise, I’ll get to them as soon as I can, usually in the following week. In workshop weeks, your responses to the workshop selections (which will be posted the previous Friday) are also due Wednesday by 2 p.m. as are your

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
365 Lasuen St., Stanford, CA 94305
continuingstudies@stanford.edu
650-725-2650
responses to discussion questions. As always, if it works for you to post earlier, please do so. The earlier you post, the more time the rest of us have to respond to your writing and ideas.

FRIDAY: During the first three weeks of class, everyone will read and respond to at least other three other students’ writing exercises by 4 p.m. PT on each Friday. Also, and this is the most important and firm deadline for the class, if you are up for workshop, you'll be posting your piece no later than Friday at noon (many people post workshop on Thursday, to avoid running into last-minute technical troubles). If you are posting a discussion point or an assignment after Friday at 4, please post it in the new week, where there will be a spot for late work. This is a way to make sure that we keep moving forward, and that no one's submissions get overlooked.

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.

At the end of the week, we move into a new week in the forum. On Mondays, the previous week will become closed for posting, though it will remain available for reading throughout the course.

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).

Please use the Help button top open a ticket for any questions about assignments, readings, or course content in the Questions about Course Content thread for everyone to see, rather than sending it by email. If you have a question about course material, someone else does too, and that person might be too shy to ask. (Though I check email at least once on weekdays, so feel free to use the course Inbox to send me an email if you have an urgent, private question or concern.)

Chat/ZOOM

We’ll have a weekly live group video chat/ZOOM session, an informal and optional office hour for the first two weeks of the term, on Thursdays from 12 to 1 p.m. Pacific Time (all times in the course are on Stanford’s local time). We’ll also have a final chat in the last week of class on Thursday from 12-1 Pacific Time. I will post reminders and connection information in Announcements. I also record the chats so you can watch them even if you can’t attend. Since everyone has different work hours (and we’re in multiple time zones), attendance is optional.

In the weeks in between, I’ll be available by appointment during the same Thursday 12-1 time period.

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
365 Lasuen St., Stanford, CA 94305
continuingsudies@stanford.edu
650-725-2650
for anyone who wants a brief one-to-one chat about their writing. If you want a chat, and that time is impossible for you, let me know, and we’ll work something out. The best time to schedule these is at least a week after your workshop, to think about any lingering questions you might have. All of this is completely optional, of course. Our primary place for conversations and classwork will always be in our online discussions.

**Grade Options and Requirements**

- **No Grade Requested (NGR)**
  This is the default administrative option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided. Note that, in order to be able to post your piece for workshop, you’ll need to be responding to your colleagues’ pieces, though I’ll give you a response in any case.

- **Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)**
  This is the option I recommend: it will give you some sense of accountability but with fewer requirements than a letter grade. To get credit, you’ll need to submit at least three of the exercises (during the course of the quarter – not all at the end), turn in your workshop piece on time, comment on your classmates’ exercises and respond to all the workshop pieces, and participate in many of the reading and craft discussions.

- **Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)**
  Grades are based on your doing the work and being fully present and part of our processes, rather than on the “quality” of your fiction, so that you can feel free to take risks and experiment with your work. For this option, you will need to regularly and fully engage in the course discussions and responses to your colleagues’ work, including posting at least five exercises (during the course of the quarter – not all at the end), turning in your workshop piece on time, commenting on your classmates’ exercises and responding to all the workshop pieces. This option is a good choice if you’re able to actively and regularly participate in the weeks’ reading and craft discussions.

*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.*

Since writing breakthroughs happen at different speeds and different times – troughs that appear endless to us may be followed by huge leaps, but sometimes not for a while – your grade will be based on turning in your work and writing helpful commentaries on your fellow writers’ pieces. It doesn’t work to grade writing based on its “quality,” because a) this kind of grading is highly subjective, and b) writing for a grade gets in the way of your sense of passion and inner purpose. Still, to get the most helpful reading from the rest of us, please make sure your writing is fairly well copy-edited for obvious spelling and grammar errors and 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 (including critiques) 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 the deadlines, especially if you know you find deadlines challenging. You’ll get the most out of the class if you stay regularly active in the forums and put attention into the reading and your responses to your classmates as well as your own work. Of course, 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. Email me if you run into trouble. 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.

**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 use the course Inbox email them to work it out privately. 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 (exercises and responses in the first few weeks, your own workshop piece and your responses to your colleagues’ workshop pieces), 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 each week for the first three weeks and your workshop piece no later than the Friday at noon when it’s your turn to be workshopped. Post on time to give everyone the maximum time to respond (if necessary, pretend that your work is due a day early – great practice for making friends with your editors).

2. Write thoughtful, thorough responses, at least 600-750 words, for each of the workshop pieces (these responses are mandatory).

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). These are mandatory in the first three weeks of class and optional once workshop begins.

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
365 Lasuen St., Stanford, CA 94305
continuingstudies@stanford.edu
650-725-2650
3. Engage as fully as you can in the reading and process discussions, but when you’re busy, you can post just a paragraph or so and still learn from thinking about the lessons and questions for that week. It’s preferable for you to post your discussion response as part of a dialogue with someone else, so that we have a real conversation going on in ways that support each of you and the group as a whole in your publishing process. If you have time, you can follow up in responding to the responses of others to exercises, discussion points, workshop pieces, and all the rest of our conversation. Some people will have the time and energy to engage very regularly in ongoing discussions, and others will dip in and out as their schedules allow. The priorities, though, are to do your own writing and to respond to your colleagues.

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 these classes are 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).

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

(Beginning of official Stanford information)

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.

The Stanford University Terms of Use includes these Rules for Online Conduct:
You agree to use the Sites in accordance with all applicable laws. Because Stanford is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization, you agree that you will not use the Site for organized partisan political activities. You further agree that you will not e-mail or post any of the following content anywhere on the Site, or on any other Stanford computing resources:

- Content that defames or threatens others
- Harassing statements or content that violates federal or state law
- Content that discusses illegal activities with the intent to commit them
- Content that infringes another's intellectual property, including, but not limited to, copyrights, trademarks or trade secrets
- Material that contains obscene (i.e. pornographic) language or images
- Advertising or any form of commercial solicitation
- Content that is otherwise unlawful

Copyrighted material, including without limitation software, graphics, text, photographs, sound, video and musical recordings, may not be placed on the Site without the express permission of the owner of the copyright in the material, or other legal entitlement to use the material.

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
365 Lasuen St., Stanford, CA 94305
continuingstudies@stanford.edu
650-725-2650
Stanford students using this Site are expected to abide by the Fundamental Standard which has set the standard of conduct for students at Stanford since 1896 and which provides: "Students at Stanford are expected to show both within and without the University such respect for order, morality, personal honor and the rights of others as is demanded of good citizens. Failure to do this will be sufficient cause for removal from the University."

Stanford employees using this Site are expected to abide by the University Code of Conduct, Administrative Guide Memo 1.

Although Stanford does not routinely screen or monitor content posted by users to the Site, Stanford reserves the right to remove content which violates the above rules of which it becomes aware, but is under no obligation to do so.

Finally, you agree that you will not access or attempt to access any other user's account, or misrepresent or attempt to misrepresent your identity while using the Sites. The complete Terms of Use is available here: http://www.stanford.edu/site/terms.html

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.

Preliminary Schedule

Here is a preliminary schedule for topics that we’ll consider in relation to the novels we’re reading for class as well as the novels you’re writing. You’ll have writing exercises for each of the topics, which will be optional once workshop begins. We’ll explain and explore each of the topics to develop a shared vocabulary and set of concepts, then consider them in our discussions from a variety of angles. Note: you don’t need to know what these terms mean in order to function happily in the class – we’ll look at these concepts in the lectures and in the process of our investigations.

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
365 Lasuen St., Stanford, CA 94305
continuingstudies@stanford.edu
650-725-2650
Week 1: Beginnings/Setting the Stakes
Alice Munro, The Beggar Maid (Chapter 1)
Ernest J. Gaines, A Lesson Before Dying (Chapters 1 through 4)

What mysteries does the beginning offer, or what concerns does the beginning raise, and what makes these mysteries or concerns intriguing or engaging? How does the opening handle the tension between offering information and getting the book moving?

Week 2: Narrative Motion
Ernest J. Gaines, A Lesson Before Dying (Chapters 5 through 16)

What is the nature of the central character’s predicament, of the other characters’ predicaments? Which moments make these plain? What is the difference between a situation and a predicament?

Week 3: Point of View
Ernest J. Gaines, A Lesson Before Dying (Chapters 17 through 30)

Who is telling the story and how? What level of distance does the narrative voice have (even if that voice is a character in the story)? Why might you choose one POV over another, and what are the artistic and emotional possibilities of each?

Week 4: The Role of Place/Significant Detail
Alice Munro, The Beggar Maid (Chapters 2 through 6)

How do the different physical, emotional, and societal settings affect the characters, the scene, and the novel as a whole? How do we discover the essential details for our particular world and novel?

Week 5: Dialogue and Subtext
Alice Munro, The Beggar Maid (Chapters 7 through 10)

What moves forward because of the conversations? What different kinds of work does the dialogue do? How do the voices of the different characters differ in their word choice, the kinds of things they will and will not say, their rhythms?

Week 6: Time in the Novel
Workshop pieces

How do time and pacing work in the book, including time transitions, flashbacks, time leaps, and the period of time covered? In what ways does the handling of time relate to the mood and subject matter of the novel?

Week 7: Repetition and Variation
Workshop pieces

When and how does repetition become an essential part of the meaning and nature of a novel – what makes the repetition feel deliberate and necessary? How do certain ideas, characters, and themes mirror each other in the course of the book, and how does the writer vary and develop them? How do we develop our language and imagery while staying true to our natural voices as writers?

**Week 8: Narrative Shapes**
Workshop pieces

What possible narrative shapes can you use to structure and sequence your work? How does the novel’s narrative shape support the character development, the character constellations, and the narrative tension?

**Week 9: Endings/Keeping Our Promises**
Workshop pieces

What makes a novel ending feel both surprising and inevitable? How does it either satisfy or upend our expectations? How does it keep any promises made by the beginning? How does it work with the characters, ideas, and tone it set at the start? And then how does it alter and deepen them?

**Week 10: Next Steps**
How do we make effective use of workshop feedback, and what methods and approaches serve us best as we re-enter a novel? How do we revise at the macro-level (major overhauls in structure, character, etc.) and at the level of line, detail, and language? What are your next steps for your novel?