

Course Title: Writing the Compelling Character-Driven Novel (online)

Course Code: NVL 26W – Summer 2018

Instructor: Sarah Stone

A Note from the Instructor

“Connecting with readers on an emotional level is one of the greatest things a writer can hope for.”
—Celeste Ng

“We discussed the popular idea that characters can run away from their creator. [Penelope Fitzgerald] said it was nonsense: you have to be in control. I told how EM Forster explained a 30-year silence by saying he had started a book in which all the characters waiting on a railway platform got on a train, went off, and he could never get them back again. ‘Whimsical creature,’ said Fitzgerald disapprovingly.”

—from an interview with Penelope Fitzgerald

When we write a novel, we’re embarking on serious play, discovering how compelling and memorable characters come from a mixture of art, craft, and the ability to convincingly transform reality (or invent a new reality). While we make discoveries at every turn, we also have choices and control over our decisions. Whether we’re writing a gripping page-turner, a deep character study, or a one-of-a-kind multigenre work, the relationship between the people and their actions and experiences can drive the story arc. And we aren’t at the mercy of the idea that characters can run away with the story or, worse, go away on a train and disappear altogether.

In this course for writers at any level, you will use craft exercises to help you create meaningful events and character choices, develop your voice, build effective scenes and dialogue, and find your novel’s shape and themes. You will learn to interweave place, time, and perspective in ways that reveal the deeper nature of the characters and help the plot (or alternative structure) unfold in ways that feel surprising but inevitable. We will read novels by Celeste Ng and Penelope Fitzgerald, learning how their characters and plots unite suspense and meaning. Each class participant will turn in a 5,000-word selection of a novel-in-progress for a supportive, helpful workshop. Whether you are just starting out or have been working on your novel for some time, you will finish the course with new craft tools, a stronger sense of your novel’s nature, and a plan for your next steps, balancing those unexpected findings with the knowledge of what you need to do to move forward with the book.

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 opening up to a wider range of work. I will occasionally post additional optional links and readings as well. 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) Celeste Ng, [*Everything I Never Told You: A Novel*](#)

(Required) Penelope Fitzgerald, [*At Freddie's*](#)

Writing Exercises

We'll have writing exercises all the way through the course, though they become optional after the first couple of weeks, as we move into full workshops. 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). They're 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. I'll give you individual responses for all of the exercises in the first few weeks. Once we're focusing on the workshop pieces. I will still respond to optional exercises, though more briefly than in the initial weeks, after you've posted your workshop responses, and I encourage you to respond to each other if you have time and especially if you're trying out the exercises yourself.

Workshop

Beginning at the end of the second week, 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. You'll post your workshop piece by 2 p.m. Thursday before your workshop week (we'll have a wiki sign-up sheet). In response to the workshop selections, we'll each write around 600-750 words of thoughtful, generous, honest, and useful response. (My responses tend to be somewhat longer, but I encourage the class to set approximately a thousand word maximum, to make sure you're each protecting your own writing time.) 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. Note that, for the sake of the class community, workshop responses become optional if you are missing any critiques or the piece is posted late or is over the word limit. If a writer is missing too many critiques, the piece may not be posted at all, though I will respond in any case.

Discussions

Every week, we'll discuss ideas and examples related to our week's topic. Participating in the reading/writing discussions is required for the first two weeks, then optional as workshops begin and our primary focus changes to workshop responses. The maximum limit for initial discussion responses is 250 words: this also helps to protect your writing time, acknowledges that workshop and exercise responses are a higher priority in terms of class work, and also, very importantly, allows the

discussion to be a discussion. When you keep your response thoughtful but brief, it creates room for other people to join the conversation. Your response doesn't have to be a full 250 words -- a substantive paragraph is enough when you're pressed for time. The ideal way to respond to a question is to enter into conversation with your colleagues. For this reason, I suggest replying to each other's posts, only starting your own thread if you want to address a really different topic. And I invite you to add additional thoughts and responses as the conversation unfolds.

Tentative Chat/ZOOM Schedule

We'll have a weekly live group video chat/ZOOM session/live (informal and optional) office hour for the first two weeks of the term, on Thursdays from 12 to 1 p.m. PT. We'll also have a final meeting in the last week of class on Thursday from 12-1 p.m. PT. I will post reminders and connection information in Announcements. I also record and upload audio and video versions of the chats, with embedded transcripts, so you can watch or listen to them even if you can't attend (keep in mind that, like everything in the course, they're confidential and not to be shared). 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 for anyone who wants a brief one-to-one chat about their writing. And if that time is impossible for you, but you'd like a chat, email me through the course Inbox, and we'll find a time. The best time to schedule these chats is usually a week or so 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.

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 "Home" or "Discussions." The lecture and assignments for the coming week will be 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 two 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 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 Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursday afternoons (though I'll usually drop by the classroom around midday Friday to check on pressing questions). During my classroom sessions, I 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 questions and will email you with class announcements and further thoughts about our discussions.

WEDNESDAY: In the first two weeks, we will have required writing exercises, and afterward these exercises will become optional as we move into workshops. Your writing exercises will be due Wednesdays by 2 p.m. Pacific Time (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, still in the same week if possible, otherwise in the following week.

In workshop weeks, your responses to the workshop selections (which will be posted the previous Thursday afternoon) are also due Wednesdays by 2 p.m. Pacific Time, as are your 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. After you've posted your own assignments, please respond to at least a few of your colleagues as well, over the course of the next few days or the following weekend. Note: the writers being workshoped each week will hold off on entering their own workshop discussion until 5 p.m. Pacific Time on Wednesday, to allow the conversation to develop.

THURSDAY: This is the most important deadline for the class: when you are up for workshop, you'll be posting your piece no later than Thursday at 2 p.m. Pacific Time on the day you've signed up for. (Since responses become optional if a piece is late or over the word count, many people post their pieces on Wednesday to avoid running into last-minute technical or other difficulties).

FRIDAY: If you are posting a discussion point or an assignment on Friday or afterward, it's often best to 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 also that, if you have questions or other people have further thoughts, we have a way to continue the conversation about your posting even after the week's threads close on Mondays.

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. 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 post any technical questions by opening a help ticket – clicking on the question mark in the vertical red bar at the left of your screen (Stanford Continuing Studies has an awesome, responsive, helpful admin team), and any questions about assignments, readings, or course content in the Questions and Comments 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 help ticket option for “contacting the instructor” if you have an urgent, private question or concern.)

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.

- *Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)*

This is the option I recommend: though not actually a letter grade, it still gives you a sense of accountability. To get credit, you’ll need to submit at least two of the exercises during the course of the quarter, turn in your workshop piece, give thoughtful comments on your classmates’ exercises and on all of the workshop pieces, and actively participate in most 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 also need to post at least two of the exercises during the course of the quarter, turn in your workshop piece, give thoughtful comments on your classmates’ exercises and on all of the workshop pieces, and actively participate in most 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.*

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.

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.

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 email them to work it out privately (by clicking on their name in the post). 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. 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.

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 you can only do the requirements, it's enough to be a full member of our classroom community. Don't worry about what anyone else is doing!

To keep the workload manageable and to make sure 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 two weeks on Wednesdays by 2 p.m. Pacific Time and your workshop piece no later than 2 p.m. Pacific Time on the Thursday you sign up for. Post on time to give everyone the maximum time to respond (it's a good idea to pretend that your work is due a day early – great practice for making friends with your editors). Keep in mind that 2 p.m. is the final deadline for workshop pieces, and responses from the group become optional for any piece posted afterward (or pieces over the word count or for anyone who isn't up to date with their own responses).
2. Write thoughtful, thorough responses, generally about 600-750 words and definitely no longer than a thousand words or so, 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 two weeks of class and optional once we begin preparing for workshop.
4. 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. These discussions also become optional once workshop starts. 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 with your thinking about the art and craft of writing fiction. 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.

Tentative Weekly Outline

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.

Week One: Entrances, Expectations, and Opening Narrative Maneuvers

Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You: A Novel*, Chapter 1

Penelope Fitzgerald, *At Freddie's*, Chapter 1

Week Two: Voice and Viewpoint

Penelope Fitzgerald, *At Freddie's*, Chapters 2-3

Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You: A Novel*, Chapters 2-3

Week Three: Time Signatures: Scene, Dialogue, Exposition, Backstory

Workshop pieces

Penelope Fitzgerald, *At Freddie's*, Chapters 4-9

Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You: A Novel*, Chapters 4-8

Week Four: Narrative Arcs and Alternate Structures: Varieties of Suspense

Workshop pieces

Penelope Fitzgerald, *At Freddie's*, Chapters 10-14

Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You: A Novel*, Chapters 9-12

Week Five: Character Complications

Workshop pieces

Penelope Fitzgerald, *At Freddie's*, Chapters 15-17

Week Six: Thematic Urgency

Workshop pieces

Week Seven: The Pressure of Place

Workshop pieces

Week Eight: Raising the Stakes, Upending Expectations

Workshop pieces

Week Nine: The Ending and the Beginning

Workshop pieces

Week Ten: Revision Strategies and Moving Forward Plans