

FICTION WRITING WORKSHOP I

Spring 2013

English 301W, Section 01

T/TH 12:15–1:15 p.m.; 640 College Hall

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Course Description

Of all the writing teachers I've learned from, no two would agree on the best book ever written, the most compelling style, the most talented author. But every one of these "teachers"—college professors, novelists, friends, classmates—*would* agree that if you want to get better at writing fiction, you need to read lots of it, write lots of it, and talk lots about it. So, in this class, that's what we'll do. We'll focus on the basics (character, voice, point of view, scene, and so on), but don't be fooled: these elements are anything but simple or rudimentary. Rather, they're the building blocks of all fiction, whether a 500-word story scribbled on the back of an Eat 'n Park placemat or Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1200+ pages!). We'll read the stories of published authors to see how they use these "building blocks," and we'll use what we've learned to try our own hand at building stories.

Course Policies, Requirements, Etc.

Required text:

- *Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction*, eds. Lex Williford and Michael Martone (ISBN-10: 1-4165-3227-7). You can find this book in the bookstore or online. I don't care where you get it, if it's new or used, but **get it now** and **bring it to class every day**. We'll read and discuss various stories in the collection, and how can you talk about a story if you don't have it front of you? How can you point to that great description on page 178 if it isn't in front of you? Bring the book. Some stories (including your peers' stories) will be available on the course Blackboard site—you **must print out** these stories and **bring them in** so that you have them in front of you. Bring in the book. Bring in the story. I can't say it enough.

Regular attendance:

- Attendance is mandatory. Seriously. You can't participate if you're not in class, and participation is a significant portion of your grade, so it makes sense that you need to be in class. You may miss three classes without it affecting your grade. These should be used for sickness, long-weekends, family emergencies, etc. A fourth missed class will lower your final grade by a full letter, and a fifth will do the same. **You cannot pass this course if you miss more than five classes.** If you contact me, I'll give you the assignment—but you will still be counted absent. Get to know your classmates so that you can get assignments from them as well.

Show up on time:

- Don't be late. Again: seriously. It's disruptive to everyone in the class. We'll usually start off class with a writing exercise or by jumping into discussion of a story we've read, and I expect everyone to be present for this. Being late for two classes equals an absence, and being more than 20 minutes late is the same as being absent.

Active participation:

- **Everybody reads, everybody talks.** No exceptions. This is a substantial part of your grade. There are many ways to participate. Offering your thoughts in class discussion or workshop is the easiest, but you can also volunteer to read, share regularly in small groups, or simply be enthusiastic in class. It's virtually impossible to get an A (or even a B) in this class if you don't engage.

Cell phones:

- Turn them off.

Assignments:

- **Two complete short stories**, 6-12 pages, typed and double-spaced, submitted through Blackboard. Number your pages. Proofread your work. Give your story a title. And use Times New Roman 12 pt. font even if you hate it. For the first story, I will give you guidelines. For the second, you may write about whatever you like, provided it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. I'm open to genre fiction, but no fan fiction please.

- **A substantial revision** of the first story, **due two weeks** after you are workshopped. You might think that revision involves cleaning up the little things, typos, changing the title, maybe adding a line here or there. That's not it. Revision is typically a multi-stage process, which sometimes involves adding five new scenes and coming up with a new ending. Or maybe you have to rearrange the order of scenes and rework some of the existing ones. Sometimes revision can even be about scrapping the whole story *except for one great line*. To do your revision, you'll need to incorporate the advice of your peers as well as the advice I give you in a meeting after the workshop. Set up this meeting with me when your workshop is finished—it's your responsibility to do so. This is a requirement of the class and will be considered an absence if you don't meet with me.

- **Peer reviews** of fellow students' stories. Every time someone has his/her story "workshopped," you will write a one-page, single-spaced, typed review of the work. We'll talk more about peer reviews and how to do one, but the point is to consider what is working, what is not, and how the author can improve the story. A peer review is a forum for neither blind cheerleading ("Your story is awesome! I wish I could write like you!") nor mindless disparagement ("This story's stupid! It doesn't make sense!"). It is a critical piece and shows not only your understanding of the craft, but also your respect for the work of your peers. **Bring two copies of each peer review to the workshop**—one for the author, one for me. Since we will be workshopping two stories per class, you will need to come with 4 pieces of paper, in addition to marked up copies of your classmates' stories (more on this later). Peer reviews are due the day a story is workshopped; late reviews will be accepted for partial credit at the

following class only—but coming to class without having even read the story is considered an absence.

- **Reading questions (RQ)** on published stories. I will post specific questions on Blackboard for many of the stories we read for class. These are not formal essays or arguments, but they should be written in complete sentences. Their purpose is to get you thinking about the pieces under discussion and the craft of writing. There's no word count to worry about— just be thoughtful and thorough in your responses. These are due an hour before our class (in other words, by 11:15 a.m.) on the day we discuss the stories. Once that time has passed, so has your opportunity to get credit for it.
- **Writing exercises**, both in class and for homework. These will help you to develop your writing craft in a variety of areas.
- **Reading attendance.** At some point during the semester, you must attend **two readings** (either here at Duquesne or elsewhere; fiction, poetry, or nonfiction). I will do my best to keep you informed of upcoming readings (particularly those on campus) but it's up to you to get to two readings by the end of the semester. **Everyone must attend Toi Derricotte's poetry reading on April 4.** Unlike in many classes, you will not have to turn in formal responses to the readings you attend. However, I expect you to be able to converse with the class about the reading. More info. on this as we get into the semester.
- **A final portfolio** of your work from the semester, due Friday, April 26 by 3:30 on my desk or in my mailbox. This portfolio should include both first drafts, revisions of both stories, a selection of writing exercises, and a typed, single-spaced, one-page self-critique assessing your progress over the semester. As with the first story, your second story should be substantially revised. Meeting with me after your second workshop is not required, but is strongly suggested.

A few important words on grading: Grades will not be assigned regularly during the course of the semester. I'll give you a midterm evaluation after the first workshop so you will have a rough sense of where your grade stands. There are no exams. Assignments are to be turned in on time, no excuses. Workshop stories, above all else, must be submitted by the assigned day/time; turning these in late inconveniences everyone in the class (and inconvenienced readers are rarely generous readers). Grades for late assignments will be penalized severely. Your grade will be calculated as follows:

Participation:	20%
Peer Reviews/Reading Questions/Writing Exercises:	25%
Story 1:	25%
Final portfolio:	30%

I encourage students to meet with me at any time during the course to discuss where their grade stands. **You must turn in all work to pass this course.**

Course Schedule

I will put together the daily course schedule in increments so that I can shape the course as we go along to best account for the needs of the class. The majority of our time will be spent workshopping, particularly as we move further into the semester. Keep in mind that your first story will likely be due by the fourth or fifth week of class. That's sooner than you think. I change things often so check your e-mail **every day**, talk to friends, or e-mail me. You are responsible for keeping up-to-date; if you must miss a class, get in touch with me or someone in class to find out what was covered, what's due, and if I've changed anything. The Scribner anthology is abbreviated (SA).

- TH 1/3 **Course Introduction**
- T 1/8 **Read:** "Shitty First Drafts" by Anne Lamott (Bb); "Nilda" by Junot Diaz (SA)
Write: RQ, Exercise
In class: Description, Image, and Significant Detail
- TH 1/10 **Read:** "Cathedral" by Raymond Carver (Bb); Student exercises
Write: RQ
In class: Character, Small group workshop
- T 1/15 **Read:** "The Things They Carried" by Tim O'Brien (SA); "The Story" by Lydia Davis (Bb); Excerpt from *The Art of Fiction* by John Gardner (Bb)
Write: RQ
In class: Point of View
- TH 1/17 **Read:** "Two Men" by Denis Johnson (Bb)
Write: RQ, Exercise
In class: Plot
- T 1/22 **No Class**
- TH 1/24 **Read:** "Reunion" by John Cheever (Bb); "A Temporary Matter" by Jhumpa Lahiri (SA); Student exercises
Write: RQ
In class: Scene and Action
- T 1/29 **Read:** Student stories (Bb)
Write: Peer reviews
In-class: First class workshop (group 1)

LATER ADDITIONS TO SYLLABUS:

- TH 1/31 **Read:** Student stories (group 2)
Write: Peer reviews (PR)

- In class:** Workshop
- T 2/5 **Read:** Student stories (group 3)
Write: Peer reviews (PR)
In class: Workshop
- TH 2/7 **Read:** Student stories (group 4)
Write: Peer reviews (PR)
In class: Workshop
- T 2/12 **Read:** Student stories (group 5)
Write: Peer reviews (PR)
In class: Workshop
- TH 2/14 **Read:** Student stories (group 6)
Write: Peer reviews (PR)
In class: Workshop
- T 2/19 **Read:** Student stories (group 7)
Write: Peer reviews (PR)
In class: Workshop
- T 2/21 **Read:** Student stories (group 8)
Write: Peer reviews (PR)
In class: Workshop
- T 2/26 **Read:** “Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot” by Robert Olen Butler (SA)
Write: RQ
In class: Flashback/Backstory
- TH 2/28 **Read:** “Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway (Bb)
Write: RQ, Dialogue exercise
In class: Dialogue, Small group workshop
- T 3/5 **No class—Happy Spring Break!**
- TH 3/7 **No class—Happy Spring Break!**
- T 3/13 **Read:** “The Flowers” by Alice Walker (Bb); “Four Lean Hounds, CA. 1976” by Maile Meloy (Bb); Excerpt from *Writing Fiction Step by Step* by Josip Novakovich (Bb)
Write: RQ
In class: Setting
- TH 3/14 **Read:** “Sea Oak” by George Saunders (SA); “In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is

Buried” by Amy Hempel (Bb)

Write: RQ

In class: Stories

- T 3/19 **Read:** Student stories (group 8)
Write: Peer reviews (PR)
In class: Workshop
- TH 3/21 **Read:** Student stories (group 7)
Write: PR
In class: Workshop
- T 3/26 **Read:** Student stories (group 6)
Write: PR
In class: Workshop
- TH 3/28 **No class—Happy Easter!**
- T 4/2 **No class—Classes follow Monday schedule**
- TH 4/4 **Read:** Student stories (group 5)
Write: PR
In class: Workshop
- T 4/9 **Read:** Student stories (group 4)
Write: PR
In class: Workshop
- TH 4/11 **Read:** Student stories (group 3)
Write: PR
In class: Workshop
- T 4/16 **Read:** Student stories (group 2)
Write: PR
In class: Workshop
- TH 4/18 **Read:** Student stories (group 1)
Write: PR
In class: Workshop
- T 4/23 **Class Wrap-up**
- *F 4/26 **Final Portfolio due in my mailbox by 3:30 p.m.**