

**Graduate Creative Writing Workshop: Fiction**  
**English 531**  
**Syllabus**

Sam Houston State University

T 6-8:30 p.m. Location: Wynne Home, 1428 11th St.

Dr. Scott Kaukonen

Office: Evans 453 Office Phone: 936-294-1407

Office Hours: TR 9:30-11:00 a.m., by appointment, and by chance

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**Course Description**

Franz Kafka never enrolled in a creative writing workshop. Neither did Ernest Hemingway. Flannery O'Connor did—she was an early graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop—but later wrote, “The problem with workshops is that they don't scare off enough writers.” Still, here we are.

I mention this so that everyone understands my perspective on this class. I believe workshops can be beneficial to a developing writer, especially to a savvy writer who understands how to use the workshop to his or her advantage. The course is designed to give those writers an environment in which that may happen. But I also am aware of the system's limitations, especially when measured against a student's expectations. This course isn't a gate through which you must pass to become a writer. I am not a gatekeeper with the power to grant or deny you access to the magical world of creative writers. What I am is a resource—this course is a resource—for you in your development as a writer, regardless of where you might be in that journey.

As a class, we will read and discuss a handful of highly influential contemporary books and essays regarding the art and craft of fiction; we will analyze and critique a number of contemporary pieces of short fiction; we will carefully consider and offer constructive criticism upon each other's own work; and we will write. As for myself, I will encourage you, push you, challenge you, answer the questions that I can, try to entertain you with anecdotes, and tell the occasional bad joke. For the latter, I apologize in advance.

So I ask that you listen, consider, and be willing to learn—and, of course, that you write. Mostly, I ask that you write. I take the art and craft of fiction seriously, and given your presence in this course, I will assume that you do as well.

Given that this is graduate level fiction workshop, I shall assume that everyone enrolled has taken a previous workshop, and so I shall assume that everyone has a sense of how a workshop operates. If you are an exception to this rule, for whatever reason, please see me. Before the workshop process begins, we will discuss my particular approach to workshop and the pedagogical rationale for that approach.

**Course Objectives**

- \* To provide students with an environment in which to develop their craft as writers of fiction
- \* To sharpen students' critical skills, both as readers and editors, most importantly of their own work, but of fiction in general
- \* To introduce students to advanced discussions of craft and theory in the creation of fiction
- \* To push students from possibility to realization, from sentence to story, from creation to publication

## **Required Texts**

*Bird by Bird*, by Anne Lamott

*The Art of Fiction*, by John Gardner

*On Becoming a Novelist*, by John Gardner

*Best American Short Stories 2007*, edited by Stephen King

A Handful of Essays Likely to be Distributed in One Form or Another (Which is to Say, Most Likely Scanned and Posted to Blackboard as .pdf files):

“Reading,” by Richard Ford

“Reading as a Writer,” by R.V. Cassill

“Learning from Chekov,” by Francine Prose

“Writing Short Stories,” by Flannery O’Connor

“The Unconscious Mind,” by Madison Smartt Bell

“Against Epiphanies,” by Charles Baxter

“Dysfunctional Narratives or ‘Mistakes Were Made,’” by Charles Baxter

“Philosophy and the Form of Fiction,” by William Gass

“Why Stories Fail,” by Ben Nyberg

“Revising Your Prose for Power and Punch,” by David Michael Kaplan

“Perchance to Dream,” by Jonathan Franzen

“E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” by David Foster Wallace

“The Theory of Creative Writing I and II,” by Joe David Bellamy

“The Elephant Machine,” by D.G. Myers

## **Recommended Texts**

*The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk & E.B. White

*Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, by Janet Burroway and Elizabeth Stuckey-French [I highly recommend this textbook for those who have not previously had a creative writing workshop in fiction at the undergraduate or graduate level.]

## **Workshop**

Much of the course will take place in workshop fashion with your own work, your own stories forming the central element of the class. The purpose of workshop is not to bolster your own ego while destroying that of your peers. Our purpose is to assist each other in our respective development as writers. While this does include constructive criticism, it should all be done in an atmosphere of respect, both for the writer and for the work. I believe it is important to recognize that while some students carry their assumptions (about what should or should not be done, about what “works” and what does not) like a sledgehammer, others carry their assumptions like raw eggs, easily shattered. Writing involves elements that are subjective and will be a matter of taste, but it also consists of elements that we can identify and discuss that are clearly more objective in nature. It’s not just a matter of personal opinion.

## **Grades**

**Stories/Novel Excerpts** (50 percent): by the end, a minimum of 45 pages (three stories or three novel excerpts). Each student will have three opportunities to workshop material over the course of the semester. The material should be new to this particular workshop. (I’ll allow an exemption

for those who are working on novels and wish to continue forward with material begun in other workshops.) Each workshop could consist of entirely new material (in other words, your second and third workshops should not involve revisions of your first and/or second workshop stories or novel excerpts). All of this material should be revised and submitted for a final grade on the last day of class. Substantial revision is expected.

**Discussion Board** (20 percent): For each assigned reading there will be a forum on the Blackboard Discussion Board. All students are expected to contribute substantially each week. I'll contribute as well, but really this is for you, an opportunity for a group of emerging writers to throw ideas and opinions back and forth, to carry discussions beyond the classroom.

**Peer Critiques** (20 percent): The responsibility here belongs to the class as a whole. In joining this class, you accept a contract with each other—to present your best possible work, both as a writer and as a critic, in exchange for an equal commitment from your peers. I don't expect brilliance. I do expect effort. You will be responsible for posting peer reviews to Blackboard for all stories submitted to the class. In order to receive credit, these reviews must be posted before the class in which we workshop the story. [Each author and story will have its own forum for the reviews of his or her story. The author will be unable to read the reviews until after the workshop of his or her story.] Please pay close attention to the schedule. The author of each story will grade the peer reviews submitted on his or her own work. The reviews will be graded on a five-point scale based on effort and helpfulness. The author will submit these grades to the professor and the author's grades will remain confidential between the author and the professor. The professor encourages you to grade fairly and professionally. We'll discuss this in greater detail in the days to come.

**Participation** (10 percent): I expect all students to be in attendance each day and to participate significantly each day. This means not only being present, but talking.

**Extra credit** (up to 50 points total, up to 10 points apiece): by attending local readings (fiction, poetry, or creative nonfiction) and writing a brief 2-3 paragraph review.

### **A Note on Genre Fiction**

The focus of this class will be literary fiction as distinguished from genre fiction—romance, science fiction, mystery, horror and Western. Each genre has its own rules and traditions, and a workshop appropriate to genre stories would include the study of those genres. For this class, the work you submit should be literary fiction. In brief, I define literary fiction as work that is concerned not just with *what* happened, but with *why* it happened. It is character-driven and explores the motivations, desires, drives, and consequences of the complex human experience. It is interested as well in the formal aspects of writing, including structure, language, and metaphor, among other things. I will not exclude genre from this workshop (and if I end up regretting this, I will never do it again), but will expect writing that draws upon popular genres to succeed as literary fiction, not just as genre fiction.

### **Paper Format**

All stories should be typed double-spaced in a 12-point font with one-inch borders AND STAPLED. No wacky fonts, please. Any assignments longer than two pages must have page

numbers. Correct grammar, usage, punctuation and spelling are expected. Work flawed by pervasive mechanical errors will be penalized accordingly. Always be certain to keep a hard copy and a copy on disk. Title all stories. In the upper right-hand corner, type your name, e-mail address, and the story's word count.

### **Timely Submissions**

Any late work will be penalized one full grade for each class period it is late. Note: Because of the demands of distribution, stories for workshop will not be accepted late. Failure to submit the story in class on the date it is due will result in a zero for the story. Extensions will be granted only in advance and only in cases of emergency.

### **Attendance**

If you miss more than three classes for the semester (or two workshops), regardless of the reason, I may drop you from the class. If you know you will be absent in advance, be sure to let me know in advance. You are still responsible for work that you may miss. If circumstances arise during the course of the semester that interfere with your ability to attend class or to complete assignments, see me as soon as possible.

### **Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism**

Academic honesty is fundamental to the activities and principles of a university. All members of the academic community must be confident that each person's work has been responsibly and honorably acquired, developed, and presented. Any effort to gain an advantage not given to all students is dishonest whether or not the effort is successful. The academic community regards academic dishonesty as an extremely serious matter, with serious consequences that range from probation to expulsion. When in doubt about plagiarism, paraphrasing, quoting, or collaboration, consult the course instructor. *See Student Syllabus Guidelines (<http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus>).*

### **Americans with Disabilities Act**

It is the policy of Sam Houston State University that individuals otherwise qualified shall not be excluded, solely by reason of their disability, from participation in any academic program of the university. Further, they shall not be denied the benefits of these programs nor shall they be subjected to discrimination. Students with disabilities that might affect their academic performance are expected to visit with the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities located in the Counseling Center. *See Student Syllabus Guidelines (<http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus>).*

### **Religious Holidays**

Students are allowed to miss class and other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day, including travel for that purpose. Students remain responsible for all work. *See Student Syllabus Guidelines (<http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus>).*

### **Visitors in the Classroom**

Only registered students may attend class. Exceptions can be made on a case-by-case basis by the professor. In all cases, visitors must not present a disruption to the class by their attendance. Students wishing to audit a class must apply to do so through the Registrar's Office.

## **Instructor Evaluations**

Near the end of the semester, students will be asked to complete a course/instructor evaluation form.

## **Classroom Etiquette**

Cell phones, off. Period. If a cell phone disrupts class, or if a student is sending or receiving text messages during the course of class, I reserve the right to confiscate the phone for the duration of the class period. In the case of a second offense in the course of the semester, I reserve the right to remove the student from the class.

## **Introduction to the Class (Post to Blackboard Discussion Board before the second class)**

Write a letter of introduction to the class. In addition to the basics (name, year, hometown, career path, career goal, what you want to do with your life, etc.), the letter should include responses to each of the following:

Why are you taking this class?

What do you hope to gain from this class?

What previous workshop experiences have you had—in any genre? How were the workshops formatted? What was your experience like?

When you read (unassigned), what do you prefer to read? Why do you read?

What was your favorite book from last semester? Why was it your favorite book?

What was the last unassigned book you read? What did you think of it?

Name five books you want to read again and explain briefly why you'd want to read each again.

Name one book you hope you never have to read again and tell me why.

Name one book you secretly think is overrated.

Name your favorite poet.

Name the last book of poetry you read.

List three favorite movies and briefly explain why these are your favorite movies.

List three favorite musicians (or bands) and briefly explain why these are your favorite musicians.

Name your favorite living author. Why?

Name your favorite dead author. Why?

What is the best class you've had in college, undergraduate or graduate? Why was it the best class?

Describe yourself as a writer. What do you see as your material or space or subject? What do you regard as your strengths? Weaknesses? Which authors do you admire as writers? Are there writers you consider models for our own work—at least in terms of what you'd like to do or be as a writer? Why would you consider these writers models?

Tell me what you think you're getting yourself into.

### **Tentative Schedule (subject to change):**

January 22: *Bird by Bird*, by Anne Lamott

January 29: Gardner, "The Writer's Nature," from *On Becoming a Novelist* (1-72); "Reading," by Richard Ford; "Reading as a Writer," R.V. Cassill; "Learning from Chekov," by Francine Prose

February 5: Gardner, "Part I: Notes on Literary-Aesthetic Theory," from *The Art of Fiction* (1-94); BASS

February 12: Workshop 1; Gardner, "Part II: Notes on the Fictional Process—Common Errors and Technique," from *The Art of Fiction* (97-164)

February 19: Workshop 1; Gardner, "The Writer's Training and Education," from *On Becoming a Novelist* (73-97)

February 26—Workshop 1; Gardner, "Part II: Notes on the Fictional Process—Plotting," from *The Art of Fiction* (165-194); BASS

March 4—Workshop 1; "Writing Short Stories," by Flannery O'Connor; "Why Stories Fail," by Ben Nyberg; BASS

March 11—No class. Spring break.

March 18—Workshop 2; "The Unconscious Mind," by Madison Smartt Bell; BASS

March 25—Workshop 2; "Against Epiphanies," by Charles Baxter; BASS

April 1—Workshop 2; "Dysfunctional Narratives or 'Mistakes Were Made,'" by Charles Baxter; BASS

April 8—Workshop 2; "Revising Your Prose for Power and Punch," by David Michael Kaplan; BASS

April 15—Workshop 3

April 22—Workshop 3

April 29—Workshop 3

May 6—Some combination of the following mix: Gardner, "Publication and Survival" and "Faith," from *On Becoming a Novelist* (89-145); "Perchance to Dream," by Jonathan Franzen; "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," by David Foster Wallace; "The Theory of Creative Writing I and II," by Joe David Bellamy; "The Elephant Machine," by D.G. Myers

Note: As part of the arrangements for us to utilize the Wynne Home for the workshop, we will provide at least two public readings featuring readers from this workshop at the end of the semester. If you are finishing your MA at SHSU with an emphasis in creative writing (i.e., if you're doing a creative thesis), you can see participation in the reading as a requirement. We will also arrange another public reading from someone yet to be determined.

## **Readings**

### *Inprint Brown Reading Series at the Alley Theatre, Houston*

Sunday, February 17—Dave Eggers and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Monday, March 31—Alice McDermott and Laura Restrepo

Saturday, April 12—Iranian graphic novelist Marjane Satrapi

Monday, April 21—Poet Robert Hass (former U.S. Poet Laureate)

Monday, May 19—Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Tony Kushner

### *Brazos Bookstore, Houston*

Wednesday, January 23—Anne Carson (poet), 7:30

Wednesday, February 20—Chitra Divakaruni (fiction), 7:00

Monday, February 25—Steve Almond (fiction), 7:30

Monday, April 7—Kevin Brockmeier (fiction), 7:30

Thursday, April 17—Robin Romm (fiction), 7:00

We are also making arrangements to bring at least three other writers to campus this semester. I'll keep you informed of those developments.