

Introduction to Creative Writing: Fiction
English 381W, Section 1
Syllabus

Sam Houston State University
Fall 2007
TR 2:00-3:20, Evans 262

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Course Overview

At some point when I was an undergraduate, I decided I wanted to be a writer. Mostly, because I didn't want to hold a real job, but also because I was in love with the idea of being a writer. It was a romantic notion. I imagined a life of French cafés on the Left Bank of the Seine; bullfights in Madrid; Underwood typewriters; nicotine-stained fingertips; truth, beauty, and blazing guns; tortured souls and unrequited love and women; immortality through the written word; black coffee; black-clad intellectuals; royalty checks.... But, as I eventually discovered, being a writer is not the same thing as writing. We all want to be writers, to walk into a café or a bar or Wal-Mart and have people turn and whisper to one another, "There goes a writer." But to be writers—real writers, not just poseurs—we have to do the writing. And that's the hard part, the decidedly unromantic part. It can be, in fact, a grind.

I start here not because I wish to depress you on the first day of class—we'll have plenty of time over the course of the semester for that!—but to put in front of you from the very beginning the most important thing you must learn as a young writer and the most important thing you must be able to do in order to succeed in this class. There's much that you can learn in this class about the craft of writing and there's much that you can learn on your own, but the one thing no one can teach you is to sit yourself down in front of your notebook or your computer or your slate tablet or your chalkboard or your napkin (or whatever else you write upon) and to do the work.

Course Objectives

Since this is a beginning-level course in creative writing, I will assume no prior experience in writing short fiction. Therefore we will begin with the examination of the various elements of short fiction—plot, character, point of view, setting, etc.—and we will closely read and discuss published stories from the perspective of writers. In any given story, an author has made literally thousands of decisions about these elements, and we will identify those decisions and seek to understand why those decisions were made and the impact each had on the story. Further, we will engage in a variety of writing exercises, both in class and outside of class, building toward the workshop (see below) portion of the semester in which each student will submit a story to the class for its consideration and feedback. Toward this end, we will seek to develop a common language in which to discuss not only the work of our peers, but our own work. Lest this not be enough for you, we will also have a lot of fun.

Required Text:

Burroway, Janet and Elizabeth Stuckey-French. *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* (Seventh Edition). New York: Pearson Longman 2007.

Recommended Text:

Strunk, William and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style* (Fourth Edition). New York: Pearson Longman, 2000.

Workshop

Much of the second half of the semester 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

Short Exercises (50 points): In the first few weeks of the semester, I will provide you with a number of writing exercises, some of which we will begin in class, some of which will be out-of-class assignments. On several occasions, I will ask you to fully develop one of these exercises and submit it to me for feedback.

Quizzes (50 points): Over the first half of the semester, the professor will administer quizzes based on the day’s readings from Burroway’s *Crafting Fiction*.

Individual Conference and Exercise (100 points): Near the mid-point of the semester, you will be required to bring a 4-5 page scene (or pair of scenes) to an individual conference with the professor. These scenes should be developed based upon writing exercises we will do over the first half of the semester, and should, ideally, build toward the story you will submit to the workshop.

Story (workshop draft, 150 points; revised draft, 250 points): Over the course of the semester, you will write one story and submit it to the workshop, then revise the story and submit it to the professor for the final grade. The final drafts will be due on the last day of class. Stories submitted to the workshop should be a minimum of eight complete pages and final, revised stories must be a minimum of ten complete pages (see paper format guidelines below). Revision means revision, not a new or a second story. Also, the stories you submit to this workshop must be original to this workshop. They may not be stories originally written for and submitted to a previous workshop. Additionally, students are required to meet with the professor for an individual conference prior to the submission of the first draft to the class (see the tentative schedule below).

Note: Students will be required to make and distribute photocopies of their stories to the entire class. Bear in mind that even though you are only required to submit one story to the workshop this semester, with more than 20 students in the class, that's more than a few pages. So plan accordingly.

Peer reviews (200 points total): 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.

Book Review Assignment (100 points): The review will examine a single collection of short stories by a contemporary writer (to be determined in consultation with the instructor). Copies of each book report will be posted, by the author, to the appropriate Blackboard discussion forum. See assignment sheet.

Attendance and Participation (100 points): I expect all students to be in attendance each day and to participate significantly each day.

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

1000 Points Available: 900-1000 A; 800-899 B; 700-799 C; 600-699 D; 599 or less F.

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. Not that I'm some sort of raging, anti-genre snob. But 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. Each genre has its own rules and traditions, and a workshop appropriate to genre stories would include the study of those genres. For a further, brief discussion of genre fiction, see the appropriate appendix in Burroway's *Crafting 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. When you submit a revised story at the end of the semester, include the workshop draft in a folder with the revised draft. 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

All work is due in class. Any late work will be penalized one full grade for each class period it is late. For example, if the assignment is due on Tuesday and it is submitted to me the following morning, the grade will be reduced one full letter grade. If I receive it in class the following Thursday, the penalty is the same. 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 four 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, major, 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?

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 five favorite movies and briefly explain why these are your favorite movies.

Name your favorite living author. Why?

Name your favorite dead author. Why?

What is the best class you've had in college? Why was it the best class?

If you were to write a novel, it would be about...

If you were to write the story of your life, the first sentence would be...

Tell me one thing I should know about your hometown—and, yes, I know it's hot and humid in Huntsville.

Complete this sentence: Creative writing is...

Tentative Schedule (Subject to Revision)

Tuesday, August 21

Distribution of syllabus. Creative Introductions Exercise.

Thursday, August 23

Due: Introductory Post to Blackboard.

Burroway, Chapter 1: The Writing Process.

Tuesday, August 28

Burroway, Chapter 2: Showing and Telling

“The Things They Carried,” Tim O’Brien

Assignment for Thursday: Burroway, p. 79, #7

Thursday, August 30

“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” Joyce Carol Oates

In-class Exercise: Burroway, p. 24, #8 or p. 79, #8

In-class Exercise: Scene/Specification Exercise

Tuesday, September 4

Burroway, Chapter 3: Characterization, Part I

“Gryphon,” Charles Baxter

In-Class Exercise: Observation/Perspective

Thursday, September 6

“Every Tongue Shall Confess,” ZZ Packer

In-class Exercise: Inner Life/Interior Landscape

Tuesday, September 11

Burroway, Chapter 4: Characterization, Part II

“Bullet in the Brain,” Tobias Wolff

“Rock Springs,” Richard Ford

Thursday, September 13

In-class Exercise: Character Development/Associative Thinking

“Tandolfo the Great,” Richard Bausch

“A Visit of Charity,” Eudora Welty

Tuesday, September 18

Burroway, Chapter 5: Fictional Place

“The English Pupil,” Andrea Barrett

Exercise: Burroway, p. 175, #7

Thursday, September 20

“Love and Hydrogen,” Jim Shephard

“Wickedness,” Ron Hansen

In-class Exercise: Spectrum of Settings

Tuesday, September 25

Burroway, Chapter 6: Fictional Time

“The Swimmer,” John Cheever

In-class Exercise: Inner Life/Interior Voice

Thursday, September 27

“Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter,” Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

In-class Exercise: Burroway, p. 258, #7

Tuesday, October 2

Burroway, Chapter 7: Story Form, Plot and Structure
“The Use of Force,” William Carlos Williams
“Happy Endings,” Margaret Atwood

Thursday, October 4

Scenes due for Individual Conference
“Everything That Rises Must Converge,” Flannery O’Connor
In-class Exercise: Burroway, p. 294, #14

Tuesday, October 9

INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCES. Book Review Selection and Approval Due (for those who conference on this day). Note: Additional conferences will be held on Wednesday.

Thursday, October 11

INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCES. Book Review Selection and Approval Due (for those who conference on this day). Note: Additional conferences will be held on Friday.

Tuesday, October 16

Distribution of Workshop Guidelines
Burroway, Chapter 8: Point of View
“Orientation,” Daniel Orozco
“Who’s Irish,” Gish Jen

Thursday, October 18

Due: Stories for workshop #1
Distribution of story for Mock Workshop
Burroway, Chapter 9: Comparison.
“The First Day,” Edward P. Jones
“Hotel Touraine,” Robert Olen Butler

Tuesday, October 23

Due: Stories for workshop # 2
Mock Workshop

Thursday, October 25

Due: Stories for workshop #3
Workshop #1

Tuesday, October 30

Due: Stories for workshop #4
Workshop #2

Thursday, November 1

Due: Stories for workshop #5
Workshop #3

Tuesday, November 6

Due: Stories for workshop #6
Workshop #4

Thursday, November 8

Due: Stories for workshop #7
Workshop #5

Tuesday, November 13

Due: Stories for workshop #8
Workshop #6

Thursday, November 15

Workshop #7
Tuesday, November 20
Workshop #8. Book Review Due.
Thursday, November 22
No class. Thanksgiving.
Tuesday, November 27
Burroway, Chapter 11: Revision
“Notes on ‘Keith,’” Ron Carlson
“Keith,” Ron Carlson
Thursday, November 29
Small Group Revision Workshop.
Tuesday, December 4
Small Group Revision Workshop.
Thursday, Dec. 6: Last day of class. Story due.

Book Review Assignment

When I began to write fiction as an undergraduate, one of the greatest challenges I faced was a lack of knowledge of which contemporary writers I should read or even which writers I might consider reading. [Remember, this was before the Internet became a regular feature of our lives—before Yahoo! and Amazon’s ListMania and Google. Yes, I am that old.] There were those established writers who had found their way into the canon and whose stories I could find in anthologies, but I wanted also to read writers who were writing and publishing now, who were—relatively speaking—my immediate predecessors (at least, that was my hope). My undergraduate institution had (and still has) an exceptionally good reading series, and though I attended occasionally, when I look back at the roster of those whom I missed, I want to flog myself. So, in part, this assignment seeks to expose you to a wide variety of contemporary literary writers whose works might be worth your consideration—as a writer, not just as a reader.

The assignment also reflects my belief that writers should be readers and should be aware of both the tradition in which they work (why you should read those “classic” short stories) and the times in which they work (which includes not just the world around you, but the literary world around you). While I don’t believe writers should obsess about other writers, I think it is important to understand the relationship between your own work and the work of others and to know what has been done and what is being done.

To these ends, over the course of the semester, you will provide the class with a book review. You will select a collection of short stories by a contemporary author, read those stories, and then write a 3-4 page review. The review should be written from a writer’s perspective and should address such issues as narrative techniques (use of structure, point of view, humor, character development, etc.), prose style, and themes. In short, why should a writer read the collection? What might a writer learn from these stories?

Without engaging in a discussion of the canon (old, new, or otherwise) or of the politics of publishing or of high culture versus low culture, I offer a list of contemporary short story writers (and novelists) who have found some degree of critical success. I’ve tried to keep those authors included on the younger side of the scale though I didn’t bother to check I.D.’s. The list is far from exhaustive and I will consider other suggestions. Hopefully this list serves as a good starting point.

Lorrie Moore	Ryan Harty	Nell Freudenberg	Edwidge Danticat
Junot Diaz	Mary Yukari-Waters	Michael Martone	Wendy Rawlings
Nathan Englander	Louise Erdrich	Anthony Doerr	Alice Munro
David Foster Wallace	Sandra Cisneros	Mary Gaitskill	Chris Offut
Antonya Nelson	Richard Russo	Amy Bloom	Marly Swick
Jhumpa Lahiri	Ron Carlson	T.C. Boyle	Pinckney Benedict
Ha Jin	Barry Udall	Peter Ho Davies	Tony Earley
Rick Moody	Matthew Klam	Bharti Mukharjee	C.E. Poverman
Kevin Brockmeier	Jennifer Egan	Lee K. Abbott	Alice Munro
Ron Carlson	Melanie Rae Thon	Barry Hannah	Richard Ford
Ethan Canin	Edward P. Jones	Andre Dubus	Tobias Wolff
Charles Baxter	Robert Boswell	Judith Ortiz Cofer	Rick Bass
Gish Jen	Russell Banks	Dagoberto Gilb	Thom Jones
Jamaica Kincaid	Stuart Dybek	Annie Proulx	Amy Tan
Helena M. Viramontes	Richard Bausch	Lan Samantha Chang	George Saunders
Anna Castillo	ZZ Packer	Denis Johnson	Dan Chaon
A.M. Homes	Margaret Atwood	Michael Chabon	Elizabeth McCracken
Christie Hodgen	John McNally	Sherman Alexie	Dan Chaon
Trudy Lewis	Joan Silber	Erin McGraw	Julie Orringer
Anthony Varallo	Brock Clarke	Steve Almond	Daniel Wallace

Note: Authors will be assigned on a first-come, first-serve basis. When selecting a specific book by an author, be certain to select a collection of short stories (and not a novel or collection of essays or poems).