CRWR 210A – 50 – INTRODUCTION TO FICTION WORKSHOP, AUTUMN 2015
Fully Online Course

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   *note: my mailbox is alphabetized under “Zech” (the name under which I publish)

What are stories? Where do they come from? What are they made of? How do we find them? How are they organized and what makes them succeed or fail? This course is designed to be an introductory investigation of these, and many more, questions. We will seek to find out what makes stories tick through reading and discussing them, asking them about their parts and rules, imitating and dissecting them.

We will also investigate our own proclivities, strengths, and weakness as writers. What kinds of exercises, activities, experiences, memories, sensations, or prompts make us want to write? Is our best writing even driven by “want”, or is it driven by need, fear, frustration, confusion, hunger, despair, or…?

Over the semester we will use a variety of tools in this investigation: limiting exercises and story prompts, published and peer-written readings, critical thinking and online discussion as a group, revision of the pieces drafted in this course, and reflection on the writing and revising process.

MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS:
This course has several units (a schedule of assignments for each unit will be posted on Moodle prior to that unit beginning). Each unit has its own focus and specific length requirements for written work. Woven into these units will be an online discussion of some of the major components of short story writing, including voice, point of view, plot or story arc, scene vs. summary and backstory (show don’t tell), structure and white space, dialogue writing, and so on. We will also work on learning some of the terminology of story writing and building skills as critics of each others’ work and revisers of our own. In addition to the major assignments listed below we will periodically complete shorter assignments throughout the semester.

FLASH FICTIONS UNIT
You will write and share three very short stories, between 200 and 500 words, based on prompts and readings I assign.

SHORT COLLECTIONS/STRUCTURE UNIT – Here we will move into a more traditional workshop – insofar as we can make that happen online! please join me in trying! – that explores
structure in the short story. We will distribute, read, and respond to each others’ work. Everyone will write a story or series of interconnected short stories between 5 and 9 pages (typed, double-spaced). In this unit we will also begin composing critique letters responding to peers’ stories.

LONGER STORIES & STORY ARC UNIT
In this unit you will be writing your longest story of the semester, between 15 & 20 pages (typed, double-spaced). We will continue to hone skills in writing constructive critique letters.

CONFERENCES, REVISIONS & THE FINAL PORTFOLIO
Toward the end of the semester I will hold conferences for students who live locally and make time to respond at greater length via email for students who don’t live in Missoula. I will also put you in discussion groups on Moodle geared toward supporting your revision and writing process as you assemble your final portfolio. The final portfolio will consist of a reflective essay on your writing process, a substantive revision of one of the two longer (i.e. non-flash) stories you have written in the course, and a few pages (or more?) of new material. Specific guidelines and grading criteria for the final portfolio will be posted prior to beginning this final unit.

COURSE TEXTS:
All texts will be provided on Moodle or, the case of a Moodle breakdown, via university email until Moodle is back up and running.

COURSE POLICIES & REQUIREMENTS:
DEADLINES – If your story is going to be workedshopped in the coming week you are expected to post it by the date the story is due. You will also be responsible for writing a critique letter to the peer or peers being workedshopped in your group that week. Submitting either kind of assignment late will hurt your grade. In any workshop course the students, in large part, are responsible for generating the course material. Failure to submit that material on time is a waste of your peers’ and instructor’s time as well as your own – as giving less time for responses will negatively impact the quality of those responses. For this reason, submitting a story for workshop more than 48 hours late is unacceptable and will seriously jeopardize your ability to pass the course.

FORMATTING
All work submitted must be typed in an easily-readable 12-point font and formatted with standard margins. For longer stories submitted for workshop double-spacing is required. For the Flash Fictions Unit, any short assignments, and for critique letters single-spacing is acceptable.

FORUMS
Online discussion forums are where we will discuss the course’s reading assignments and respond to authors’ questions on our critique feedback. There will be one reading assignment per week and you
will have the week to comment on that reading assignment (the assignment may contain multiple pieces of writing, but I will always upload it as one document to keep things streamlined). Unlike some instructors I am not going to require a certain number of posts or questions per forum. As a guideline I would say that responding to any questions specifically posed to you about your feedback is required, and for reading discussions 3-7 posts would be a “normal” amount of participation for the weekly reading assignments – how many posts are appropriate depends on how long the posts are, and how engaged they appear to be with the discussion, etc. As with an in person class, I feel you will know when you are participating appropriately and what is enough. If you aren’t sure, email me to ask!

A NOTE ON STAYING IN TOUCH & MY AVAILABILITY:
I am committed to checking and responding to my email and the Moodle forums at least twice daily Monday-Friday. I encourage you to check up on the class as often as you can to stay engaged, at least three times a week. From Friday afternoon through Monday morning it’s the weekend for me as well as for you. Feel free to email me over the weekend, and I likely will get back to you, but don’t plan or depend on it. Accordingly, assignments will not be due on Mondays.

GRADING:
Participation is 100% of your grade.

Well, what does that mean? Concretely it means you are responsible for turning in all of your assignments on time – both creative writing assignments and responses to your peers writing. Less concrete, but no less important, are the guidelines for forum participation. The three major components of this course are reading assignments (graded under forum participation), written assignments – including the final portfolio (50% of your grade), and critical feedback/forum participation (50%). Descriptions of grading criteria for the three major components of the course are below. Please read them and post any questions you might have about grading on the forum regarding this syllabus so we might address them as a group. Building an understanding of how to be a strong member of a workshop is one of the course’s primary objectives and we will spend time over the semester discussing what that means and building skills as workshop participants.

Please look at the holistic participation grading as a good thing, rather than a frightening one. If you do what you are assigned, and work in earnest with your peers, you are doing your job and your grade is secure. I am here to help you improve your writing, not to grade the worth of your ideas before we get to the task of workshopping them – that would undermine the whole point of a workshop, wouldn’t it?

READING ASSIGNMENTS:
The published (i.e. things I post) reading assignments for this class will be listed on each unit’s schedule of assignments, which will be posted to Moodle as that unit approaches. You are also responsible for all assigned readings as well as for reading the work of your peers submitting for workshop that week. You are required to take part in both types of discussions.
WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS:
The course’s written assignments come in two parts: creative writing/exercises and critical feedback. For exercises and short creative writing assignments late work will negatively impact your overall grade as you will have not fully participated in that particular assignment by submitting late. However, failure to turn in one of the two major workshop pieces or your portfolio on time will that is due in advance of your workshop will result in a full grade drop in this category for each day it is late. Of course it is always best to turn in finished, polished (i.e. your best) work in advance of your workshop, but in the case of deciding whether to turn in something rough or nothing at all, it is always better to turn in the rough piece. The purpose of the workshop is to help you move forward with your writing, so if you haven’t fully resolved your ending, or perhaps you have a jump in time or location in the piece that you are struggling with, don’t view the piece as unfinished – think of it as in-process, turn it in, and let your peers and me help you work through it.

As for the critical feedback letters we will go over what those are and how to compose them a few weeks into the semester. They are important. Late feedback letters will hurt your grade, failure to submit these letters will seriously jeopardize your ability to pass the course.

FORUM PARTICIPATION:
To earn a strong grade in forum participation you must demonstrate having read and thought about all assigned material and take part in discussions of that material. In the case of peer work this means, in addition to critique letters, to check up on forums and answer any questions the author may have about your feedback. This engagement is crucial to building a strong workshop environment. We will spend some time discussing what a “strong workshop environment” is but, essentially, it means commenting in a way that is constructive as well as respects and seeks to understand the author’s paradigm (paradigm meaning, in this case: where the story is coming from, the world it inhabits). Criticism (or commenting/posting, for that matter) for its own sake will not improve your grade in this course – be thoughtful, give the kind of critiques your peers will be able to use, and that you would like to receive, ask questions you want answers to, and just be honest and engaged in the forums and we will all be able to get the most out of this course. For the published stories we will be reading in this course, critique and discussion should seek to understand the works’ strengths, weaknesses, and application to one’s own writing as well as be used as means to build skills toward respectfully and critically assessing the writing of your peers. Please feel free to be candid about whether you like or dislike assigned readings or aspects of those readings, but do always back those comments up with why. You will (I hope) be surprised at how much you can improve your own writing by thinking about what you like or don’t like, what you understand or don’t understand in other work.

PLAGIARISM:
See University Catalogue for UM’s plagiarism policy.

DISABILITIES INFORMATION:
Qualified students with disabilities will receive appropriate accommodations in this course. If you feel you need accommodations please come and see me. Be prepared to provide a letter from your DSS Coordinator.
FIRST WEEK ASSIGNMENTS:

UNIT 1 – INTRODUCTIONS – DUE SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 6th

1. Read posted excerpt from Richard Hugo’s *The Triggering Town*
2. Write a short introduction for yourself so we can all get to know you -- please include your name, where you’re from, what you like to read, what you like to write (and these two categories can be anything -- books, magazines, fan fiction, whatever it is that you really enjoy reading or writing), and either something memorable you did over the summer or something you are looking forward to doing this fall.
3. Please compose some thoughts/comments on the Richard Hugo reading assignment. What spoke to or inspired you in the reading? What did you find surprising or confusing? What do you agree or disagree with Hugo about and, importantly!, why?
4. Post your intro & comments on the reading in one post so the rest of us can begin to get to know you, your interests, and how you think.
5. READ EACH OTHERS’ INTROS. Commenting on the intro forum in addition to posting your own intro is not required, but is highly encouraged.
6. Read through the syllabus (congrats! You’ve made it this far!). In the comment thread on Moodle post any questions you might have on the syllabus. This is easier than email because if you have a question it’s likely some of your peers have the same question. This will help me ensure everyone is on the same page going into the semester.

AND, OF COURSE, A DISCLAIMER:

This syllabus is subject to change.