University of Montana

Fiction 310

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The Beast: The Practice of Writing Short Fiction

Like most—maybe all—writers, I learned to write by writing and, by example, by reading books. ~ Francine Prose

If a true artist were born in a pigpen and raised in a sty, he would still find plenty of inspiration for his work. The only need is the eye to see. ~ Willa Cather

The novel and the short story are simply different animals. Or, should I say, beasts? In the spare style of the short story is the bedrock philosophy of less is more. This makes the labor over each paragraph, each sentence, intensely important. Every word must count in the short story, so the pressure of the writing experience is ratcheted down tightly on the author. 

Michael Connelly

Winter started today. The sky turned gray and the snow began to fall and it did not stop falling until well after dark. I sat in the darkness and watched the snow falling, and the flakes glistened and glimmered as they spun into the light and out again, and I wondered about where stories came from. 

Neil Gaiman

I believe stories and the writing and telling and reading of stories are the closet thing we have to acceptable magic. This semester, I hope that we will be able to create the kind of magic that inspires you to write through out your life, even if you never become a writer. Writing can guide you to understanding, and at times, provide peace. It can also give you a public forum where you can explore your tender secrets and even your deepest fascinations under the cloak of fiction. The only thing that limits you is your ability to make others willing and able to see the things you see. But how do you conjure up believable images for others? How do you make a reader suspend his or her disbelief? The solution to the problem is less than magical. I'm afraid but if you pay attention to story and human behavior, if you read fiction voraciously and if you commit to the process of writing and revision you will be able to transport a reader to the world you have created and that is MAGIC.

In this class we will reexamine some of the basic premises of fiction writing. Throughout the course, I will assign exercises specifically geared to help you to not only understand the craft of fiction but to employ these skills in your own writing. Assignments will address: characterization, voice and point of view, plot and storyline, scene and summary, dialogue development, techniques and terminology. We will also look closely at rhythm and repetition that can showcase the impact of language in fiction. We will discover the signals/signifiers (narrative hooks) in stories that compel readers to continue reading or not.

We will examine and discuss the craft of fiction by critiquing the assignments and exercises and the final stories you submit for workshop. You will be asked to submit a draft for conference and a final rewrite employing draft suggestions. Please note the final rewrite may take you several drafts.

The class is designed to provide a forum for the writer’s work to be read and considered by the class. Your comments should be guided by your desire to assist your colleagues with the development of their own vision and not to simply impose your own storyline or story ideas on another’s story. The practice of criticism requires careful consideration and although we may not impose our ideas on another’s story we can read stories looking for the signifiers that guide us to want a different plot scenario than the writer has conjured.
Course Goals

Some of the specific purposes of this course are:

- To gain a further understanding of the elements of the craft of fiction.
- To incorporate literary devices and constructs in your stories.
- To gain the critical acumen necessary to recognize common mistakes in the writing of fiction.
- To constructively criticize the work of peers employing specific and useful literary terms.

Texts and Materials

- *The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction.*
- Copies of the written exercises and final stories you deliver to the class.

Course Requirements

1. Major Writing Assignment: One polished original story that should not exceed 30 pages. **Major Writing Assignment is due on Tuesday, November 10:** One polished original story that should not exceed 30 pages. You cannot turn in any story or story that is composed of fragments from an old story that has been previously workshopped or used in any way in another class. All work must be original. No exceptions (Unless, of course, you are Cervantes reincarnate.) Most final stories run 12-15 pages in length. All students must provide copies of their stories to all the class members. Please distribute your copies one full week before your work is to be workshopped. It is your responsibility to keep track of distribution and workshop dates.

2. Conferences and Draft of Story: I will post a conference sign-up sheet on my office door by the 2nd week of class. Conferences will run from October 27-November 5. Come to conference with a draft of your story. The earlier you begin a draft and sign up for a conference, the more time you will have to rewrite or reconsider your work before it distributed for workshop. All students must sign up and attend a conference with me.

3. Signed Workshop Story Critiques: You must provide critiques on all workshop stories. All responses must be typed and must be no longer than a paragraph. Bulleted suggestions are preferred. Hand in one copy to the workshop participant and the other to me. You will not get credit for the critique if you simply say I liked this story or I disliked it. You must provide a respectful critique that addresses your suggestions for improvement and showcases your knowledge of the craft of fiction. Please keep in mind that a critique is meant to assist the writer with his or her work. It is helpful to point out confusing language or images, scenes that were slow or didn’t move the story forward, or character and storylines that seem implausible or difficult to believe. It is also important to tell the writer what you like about the story. Even if a story isn’t based in realism the characters and dramatic scenes should be plausible and convincing and hold the reader’s attention. All stories must have an element of tension, a rise in conflict.

4. Writing Exercises and Portfolio: Final Portfolios Due on December 10. I will assign stories and writing exercises and assignments to assist you in developing your creative writing skills. Though we may not examine all of the exercises in class you must keep copies of all of your work. The portfolio will include all writing and exercise assignments and copies of your critiques of all of the stories in order and numbered. Please do not include your final story. Please do not use page protectors.

5. Cabinet of Curiosities: The Google Alert or other search engine alerts. Keep a record of stories that catch your attention. I love the odd or peculiar story that pops up on my Google Alerts. What is your particular fascination? On October 25, we will post all these stories for discussion and have a story/Halloween party. Copy off all the stories that grab your attention and bring them to class that Thursday.

6. Suggested Events Record: Not required. If you choose to keep an Events Record this may be the most important element of the class. If you are serious about writing I recommend you actively keep a daily conversation record in which you record samples of conversation, how-to tips, and weird events. Your notes could be catch phrases you often hear or an eavesdropped conversation. Look to record tidbits of information especially when it is misdirected or just plain wrong. What fascinates you and how does it affect your writing?
We will discuss these ideas in class and explore them further in a coffee/tea environment that may or may not be more relaxed. The Events Record is only a suggestion and will not earn you extra credit or make up for any missing assignments or bad behavior in class. But if you wish to gather for coffee and good conversation about writing and discuss your Events Record, please see me. I’ll be setting up a few coffee klatches outside of class for this purpose. Please do not participate if you think it’s silly or have no time or inclination. No judgments. Your lack of participation WILL NOT AFFECT YOUR GRADE but your participation may help you to become a better writer.

Grading Policy

- Active Participation: 30% of your grade is based on active participation. Active participation means that you have read, considered, and provided written critiques of the workshop stories. It also means that you consistently participate in class and workshop discussions. In other words, you must speak in class. Showing up is not enough to earn you an A or even a passing grade. Note: Attendance Policy under Course Policies.
- 40% of your grade is based on the satisfactory completion of all assignments.
- 30% of your grade is based on your final polished story.

Always invest your best effort into your work. Make your stories, look like stories with titles that are NOT underlined at the top of the page. Make sure you submit clean copy to the class. Check for spelling and grammatical errors because I will mark down for them. Title and date (due date) all of your work including all assignments.

Course Policies

1. Attendance: Daily class attendance is required. You cannot ask your colleague to read and comment on your work if you have been absent when his or her work was presented. If possible, please let me know in advance if you cannot attend class. If you miss more than three classes it will result in a lowering of your final grade. If you miss four classes you will have failed the class. Proviso: Unique circumstances arise from time to time and I will make allowances for reasonable absences. In the event that you must or you have missed three workshops please come and see me.
2. Workshops: Workshops will be directed by rotating editors-in-chief and two editorial boards. We may try out several workshop options, if need be, to find a workshop method that suits this particular class.
3. Stories, Assignments, Exercises: All your stories and assignments must be typed and double-spaced. All fonts must be in 12 pica. You must keep back-up copies of all your work and bring all assignments to class every class period.

General Information

- Plagiarism – See University Catalog.
- Deadlines: Before the course has begun or during the first three (3) weeks of the semester you can drop the course on Cyberbear – http://cyberbear.umt.edu. The last day to drop/add, change option is noted in the course catalog. Please make sure that you are aware of the important dates that affect you. Undergraduates must obtain advisor’s signature after the drop date. After the 30th instructional day has passed, you must petition to drop. As always please check current information at U of MT online.
- Finals: We will meet during finals week at the assigned time: Tuesday, December 15 from 3:20-5:20. Please keep this date in mind when making travel arrangements.
- Students with Disabilities: Qualified students with disabilities will receive appropriate accommodations in this course. Please come and see me. Be prepared to provide a letter from your DSS Coordinator.
Important Dates

- October 25: Cabinet of Curiosities
- November 10: Final Story
- October 27-November 5: Conferences.
- December 10: Final Portfolio due.
- Tuesday, December 15 from 3:20-5:20. Please keep this date in mind when making travel arrangements.