CRWR 210A Section 03
Introduction to Creative Writing: Fiction
Spring 2016

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Office Hours: Monday and Wednesday, 11:00-12:00, or by appointment
Classroom: LA 249
Class Meeting Time: MWF, 10:10-11:00

About the course:

It’s hard to “learn how to write.” Probably impossible, as far as concepts go. So, maybe, from the outset of this class, we throw that idea away. In this class we’re going to first focus on being better, sharper, keener readers, and from there, work on figuring out how to get out of our own way when we write.

We’re going to talk about technique, form, and craft. More than that, though, we’ll talk about story and how best to serve it. It’s that old cliché about finding the statue in a slab of rock—this class is going to be about learning how to see the statues for what they are, the rocks they came from, and how to find them.

Course Objectives:

The University lists its course objectives for this class as follows:

- Acquire foundational skills in reading, discussing and writing short fiction
- Demonstrate an understanding of the terminology and concepts that apply to fiction
- Practice the art of writing and revising short fiction
- Learn to critique the quality of your own work and that of fellow students.

I’d add to that that we’re going to learn how to say what it is we really want to say, both in our fiction and in class, to each other. We’re going to work on developing plot, form, structure, and essential elements such as believable, interesting characters, dialogue, scenes and consistent point-of-view. Initial writings will include character sketches, dialogue exercises, and description pieces. We’re going to look at the body holistically in order to get back to the heart of the thing—story, and whatever it is we want to say with it.

We’ll be starting by reading—reading a lot, and reading deeply. Consider this the part of medical school where you dissect a bunch of stuff to figure out how it works. During this period of the course, we’ll be doing a number of smaller writing exercises in order to parse out distinct elements of writing—creating your own brand new fingers, feet, spleens. Finally, as we enter the workshop portion of the class, you’ll be writing and critiquing complete stories: the weird,
supernatural work of creating and reshaping full, functional bodies. This metaphor got a little weird, but what is writing if not weird.

Course Texts:
_100 Years of the Best American Short Stories_, edited by Lorrie Moore and Heidi Pitlor
Photocopied readings as assigne

Materials:
You’ll need to bring a notebook and something with which to write, every single class.

There will be a number of handouts, photocopies, and pieces of paper in use in this class. Have a way to keep them with you, and organized. This may be a binder or folder. Up to you.

You will also be responsible for photocopying and distributing a copy of your workshop story to each of your classmates the class before you’re to be workshopped. This is fundamental, and not optional.

Course Requirements:

Writing Assignments and Exercises:
You’ll be asked to complete short writings and writing exercises both in and outside of class. Sometimes we’ll go over these as a class, sometimes you’ll just turn them in to me. They are always required.

Readings and Responses:
We’ll be reading a lot of published works in this class, particularly in the first half of the semester. You may occasionally be asked to write a short response to these works. You will always be required to come to class ready to contribute to discussion about them. This may mean you need to annotate them as you read. This may mean you need to read them multiple times. It’s your call, so long as you come to class ready to discuss.

Written Comments:
Each time we workshop someone in the class, you’ll need to come prepared with a 300-400 word typed letter to the author. These should include your thoughts on the piece, suggestions for revision, and anything else you’d like the author to note. Please bring two copies of your feedback — one for the writer, and one to turn in to me. You’ll additionally be expected to mark up a printed copy of the story we’re discussing for the author — line edits, thoughts, and marginal notes for their benefit.
Stories:
You will draft and revise two works of fiction over the course of this semester. One will need to be based on something out of reality. We’ll shoot for 6-10 pages per story. Slightly longer than 10 is permissible. Shorter than 6 is dubious.

Grading Criteria:
While grading a creative writing class is a little bit of a contradiction in terms, you will be graded on your active participation in class, your completion of assignments, your improvement from draft to revision, and your attendance.

- **60% of your grade is based on class participation.** This involves coming to class having actually engaged with the reading, ready with something to say about, and ready to engage with what others say in the class. You’ll have feedback for your peers, and responses to their thoughts in class.
- **30% of your grade is based on successful completion of all writing assignments.** All homework needs to be turned in on time, typed, and showcasing thoughtfulness and effort. Double spaced and double sided is preferred.
- **10% of your grade is based on your writing.** Your stories need to be printed out for the class in the class period prior to your workshop to be considered on time. You’ll have the opportunity to revise both stories for your final portfolio.

Attendance:
You’re expected to attend class, every time. In a small workshop environment, everyone’s voice is essential and useful. Missing more than three (3) days of class will count against your grade in this class (4th absence drops a letter grade, 5th drops again, 6th is an automatic failure of the course). Personal situations and required university events may arise that, on a rare occasion, make it impossible for you to be in class. However, remember that’s why a few absences are allowed – please reserve those for emergencies.

Class Policies:
- **Workshops:** If your story is to be workshopped you will be expected to provide hard copies to everyone in the class period before you’re to be workshopped. Bring copies of your story for everyone, yourself, and me. Be respectful of your classmates’ hard work and time. Come prepared, having read their stories, with written feedback, and ready to talk.
- **Stories and Assignments:** All of your manuscripts must be typed and titled. Please double space and use a 12-point font and Times New Roman font. You’ll be expected to revise these stories, so please have digital copies that remain accessible to you.
- **Conferences:** You’re highly encouraged to make use of office hours to discuss a specific piece, writing at large, writing at least, words and the difficulties they create, etc. You can come to my standing office hours, make an appointment with me, or shoot me an email to figure something out.
- **Late Work:** Will not be accepted or given credit.
**Final portfolio:**
Your final for this course will be a portfolio of full revisions. You will turn in a final one page reflective piece discussing how your revision(s) went, and why you made the changes that you did.

**Workshop Etiquette:**
This is a workshop. That’s a difficult, delicate thing. We’re here to help each other make our work as good as possible. Sometimes that involves being critical, but it never involves being disrespectful, hurtful, or shitty. The golden rule is often helpful to remember in communicating with each other here, but even more crucial to remember is this: we’re here to help each other. Make sure to say things in the most helpful, constructive way possible. Hopefully it goes without saying that discrimination or harassment of any kind will not be tolerated in our classroom community.

**Academic Conduct:**
All work submitted in this course must be your own and be written exclusively for this course. All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code, which is available for review online at [http://life.umt.edu/vpsa/student_conduct.php](http://life.umt.edu/vpsa/student_conduct.php)

**Students with disabilities:**
Qualified students with disabilities will receive appropriate accommodations in this course. Please speak with me after class or in my office hours, and please be prepared to provide a letter from your DSS Coordinator.

*This syllabus is subject to change.*

**What We’ll Probably Be Reading,**

**From the Anthology**

1. “Semplica Girl Diaries” by George Saunders
2. “The School” by Donald Barthelme
3. “Friends” by Grace Paley
4. “Brownies” by ZZ Packer
5. “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin
6. “The Whole World Knows” by Eudora Welty
7. “Lawns” by Mona Simpson
8. “Everything That Rises Must Converge” by Flannery O’Connor
9. “The Third and Final Continent” by Jhumpa Lahiri
10. “What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank” by Nathan Englander
What We’ll Probably Be Reading,

From Elsewhere

1. “Emergency” by Denis Johnson
2. “Substance” by Joy Williams
4. “It’s Going to Be a Quiet Day” by Amy Hempel
5. “Cathedral” by Raymond Carver
6. “Wickedness” by Ron Hansen
8. “Dog Heaven” by Stephanie Vaughn
9. “How to Talk to a Hunter” by Pam Houston

Note:

This is a class on realistic fiction. Speculative and genre fiction (fantasy, sci-fi, fan-fiction, etc) are different beasts, and are not what we will primarily be discussing or working with in this class. As such, we will not be workshopping any speculative or genre fiction. We will discuss this in the first day of class, but feel free to discuss this with me further if you have any questions.

Likewise, no stories in this class will include death in the present action. Someone can have died before the story begins, and someone can presumably die after the story is over. But death in the scene of a story is often a trick, and one we should learn not to rely on. No one dies in the story.

Also: no laptops in class.