

CRW 2100: Beginning Fiction Writing, Sec. 2333

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MAT 151

Wed Period 10-E1

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“‘The aim of literature,’ Baskerville replied grandly, ‘is the creation of a strange object covered with fur which breaks your heart.’” —Donald Barthelme, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*

“The writer’s business is to find the shape of unruly life and to serve her story.” —Dorothy Gallagher

“I am not here to write, but to be mad.” —Robert Walser

“Calmly write a not calm story.” —Padgett Powell

“Writing requires maximum ambition, maximum audacity, and programmatic disobedience.”
—Elena Ferrante

Required Texts:

Reading Like a Writer by Francine Prose

100 Years of the Best American Short Stories edited by Lorrie Moore & Heidi Pitlor

This course will be a continued introduction to contemporary short fiction. It will be structured as a survey of short fiction over the last 100 years, and we will be reading in some chronological order in order to gain some sense of the development of short fiction, both stylistically and thematically. We will also be reading a text on craft, which will hopefully give you a foundation for understanding how these stories work, and beginning the writing of your own stories. As this is a 2100 course, however, I expect you to have some foundation in place. I want to feel as though we can begin with everyone having a basic understanding of the conventions of narrative, so that we might delve more deeply into the individual elements of prose to see how they create whole, cohesive pieces. Rarely do we see these things working on their own, so one of my goals for this course is to examine how these elements work in tandem. How character is supported by setting, by dialogue, by structure. I want us to always be asking ourselves, Where is the tension? What is the conflict? How does the language aid this? What do the characters want? How do they get what they want? Without conflict there is no tension, and without tension there is no story. What this conflict and tension means, however, varies significantly, as we will see, and the way a story moves and pulls us can be achieved countless ways. Always stories are pushing, pulling, breathing, threatening, living things, and I want us to treat them that way.

Every week you will be engaging with these stories and craft elements, which you will then employ in weekly writing exercises. Following this, you will be writing and workshopping a complete story of your own, which you will revise as your final assignment for the course.

My expectations and goals are for you to leave this course a more engaged and voracious reader and a more controlled and surprising writer. With care and time and a little investment, I think this is easily achieved. We will move rapidly and cover a lot of ground in this course, but when our time is through will have seen many of the most exciting and influential literary voices of the last century, and have a solid understanding of how to employ many of their craft techniques in your own work.

We will read a lot. We will write a lot. It will be a good time.

Course Format:

1. **Readings** - To be a great writer you must read. We will be reading a variety of contemporary short fiction. Some of it deals with material that may be unfamiliar and potentially offensive or upsetting. Issues of sexuality, race, class, gender, and religion appear frequently. It is essential that I offer you as comprehensive a survey of voices as I can to build a framework for good writing.
2. **Writing** - To be a great writer you must write, and you must write frequently. You will be writing in class everyday. You will be writing extensively at home. You will be revising your work. This is work that takes time and thought. Last minute writing is not sufficient.
3. **Critiquing** - To be a great writer, you must critique thoughtfully and frequently, knowing that this close reading of another's prose should help your own. This will also make you a more thorough and decisive reader.

***This course is reading intensive and writing intensive. Do not fall prey to the pandemic impression that creative courses are easy. This course will be demanding. You will have upwards of 80 pages of reading a week. You will be writing every week.

Again, please be advised that the discussions in this course will be ones that may be sensitive, complex and difficult. As a writer and reader I am most interested in areas of moral ambiguity, and I want us to approach these stories and this class with an eye toward these moral gray areas, with as little judgment as possible. I think these are important conversations to have. However, it will certainly never be my intention to make anyone feel uncomfortable. You are under no obligation to agree with me, or anyone else. You are, however, obligated to be respectful of others opinions and to engage with sensitive material thoughtfully. If reading and discussing material dealing with issues of sexuality, gender, religion, etc will be upsetting to you, this may not be the best course for you.

Assignments:

Reading

Read. Class time is wasted if no one has anything to say about the reading. Because of this, I have required specific questions and reactions to the assigned works. I will know if you haven't done it. If I feel people are not reading, I will give quizzes. On the schedule, the "Reading" section tells you what you should have read by that date.

Writing

Critical Responses- You will complete six 800-word (~3 page) critical essays over the course of the semester. You may turn them in any week, on any readings. You may only complete one per week though, so you may not write three papers a week for the last two weeks of class. If it were me, I would get these out of the way in the first half of the semester, before workshops begin. If you decide to discuss more than one story, the essay needs to put the stories in conversation with each other. These essays will examine the assigned readings and discuss various aspects of content, style, craft, and form. These essays will be held to the conventions of general academic writing—if you make a claim, it must be supported by evidence (i.e., a quoted passage from the reading in question). These are not opinion pieces that discuss whether or not you “hated” or “loved” a story, but serious critical analyses, though I urge you to choose stories to discuss that entice/surprise/confuse/enrage/delight you, stories on which you have something to say. You can discuss perceived strengths and weaknesses of stories as long as you are addressing a specific element (character, structure, prose style, etc.) of the story and you support your claims with evidence. These essays will be discussed in greater detail as they are assigned. A rubric for these essays can be found in subsequent pages of the syllabus.

Stories- Beginning midway through the semester, we will be workshopping your original short fiction. This story will be under ten pages. It will be literary fiction. You will bring a copy of your story for each class member the week before you are scheduled for workshop. The Schedule is law. Do not upset the Scheduling Gods. Do not miss the class on which you are scheduled for workshop—consequences will be disastrous, grade-wise.

Following workshop you will revise your final story and turn this in as the course’s terminal (and most heavily weighted) assignment. This revision will be a total rewrite of your story, not simply corrections of grammar and a character name change. I want to see the application of workshop comments and the inclusion of the style and craft elements we have been discussing. I want risks being taken. I want better, livelier, more polished stories. Stories should avoid college tropes (parties, break-ups, dorm/greek life, drug/“trip” narratives) and genre (sci-fi, fantasy, zombie, vampire, My Little Pony fan-fic). These genres are specialized forms that require specialized knowledge to do well: you must learn to walk before you can run, and other such platitudes. There is a very slight amount of wiggle room here that will be addressed on a case-by-case, ad hoc basis, but I want you to be writing literary fiction. That is what we are reading, and therefore learning to write, and that is what I am qualified to teach. This doesn’t mean we can’t have fun. I like fun. We will read some really fun, zany stories. But your stories need to be character driven and written for an adult, literary audience.

“What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us. We live, true, we breathe, true; we walk, we open doors, we go down staircases, we sit at a table in order to eat, we lie down on a bed in order to sleep. How? Why? Where? When? Why?” —Georges Perec, “The Infra-Ordinary”

Workshop Letters- You will compose workshop letters (~one page, double-spaced) that offer thoughtful criticism of your peers’ work. You should be prepared to read these letters

aloud if called upon to do so. The general form of the workshop letter will be discussed in greater detail as the second half of the semester approaches.

Creative Exercises- (~one page) in-class and at-home assignments in the fictive mode will be assigned every week. Bring printed copies of at-home assignments to class.

Revision Response- Along with the revision you will be turning in an 800 word critical paper discussing your revision and revision process. This paper can bring in stories we looked at in-class or that you read on your own that you used to help structure/inform/enliven your story. It can directly cite helpful criticism you received in class. It can discuss difficulties or excitements of the revision process. It can move however you would like, as long as I get a clear understanding of how and why you revised the way you did. The real writing comes after the first draft (usually, for many people) and I want to see that reflected in both your actual revision and your response to that revision.

Warning: *There is no late delivery.* There is no switching. No last-minute writing. Get the work done. And remember: You are responsible for knowing the basic conventions of style and usage—see Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*, or me, for guidance.

It is required that you come to class each day fully prepared. We are here to study and create serious fiction, which requires serious work. **If you’re hoping for an easy A, this class is not for you.**

Graded Assignments and Other Course Components

| | |
|--------------------------------|------------|
| 1. Class Participation*: | 150 points |
| 2. Creative Exercises: | 150 points |
| 3. Critical Response Papers: | 300 points |
| 4. Story: | 150 points |
| 5. Critical Revision Response: | 75 points |
| 6. Final Story Revision: | 175 points |

1000 points total

**Class participation includes written and oral peer critiques as well as your presence and regular contributions in class.*

Attendance

You are allowed one absence *without explanation*, but **do not miss the day your story is workshopped**. Skipping your workshop will result in a failing grade for that story. Remember, this class meets once a week. If you miss one class, that is equivalent to an entire week. After your third absence you will fail the course.

There is **no distinction** between excused and unexcused absences. Arriving late to class is considered an absence. Leaving class early is considered an absence.

Meeting Outside of Class

I will give you a day during which you may meet with me about your story, after your story is workshopped. I am also happy to speak with you outside of class at any other point during the semester if you arrange a meeting with me.

Final Notes

1. **You are responsible for checking your university emails.** I will sometimes give or change assignments via email, as well as make any necessary changes to the schedule. *You are responsible for checking your email and approaching me with any questions.* If I have sent an email to you, I will assume you have read and understood it.

2. **I may change anything on this syllabus at any time.**

3. **Use of cell phones (with hands or ears) is NOT permitted in class.** (That is rude.) *The following is useful information on university policies you should know. Please read over the links provided.*

Statement of Writing Requirement (WR).

This course can satisfy the UF requirement for Writing. For more information, see: <http://gened.aa.ufl.edu/writing-math.aspx#Writing>

Statement of student disability services.

The Disability Resource Center in the Dean of Students Office provides students and faculty with information and support regarding accommodations for students with disabilities in the classroom. For more information, see: <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/>

Statement on harassment.

UF provides an educational and working environment for its students, faculty, and staff that is free from sex discrimination and sexual harassment. For more about UF policies regarding harassment, see: <http://regulations.ufl.edu/chapter1/1006.pdf>

Statement on academic honesty.

All students are required to abide by the Student Honor Code. For more information about academic honesty, including definitions of plagiarism and unauthorized collaboration, see: <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/honorcodes/honorcode.php>

Statement on grades and grading policies.

Note: UF has recently instituted minus grades. As a result, letter grades now have different grade point equivalencies. For more information, see: <https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>

Assessment Rubric for critical papers

Below are the criteria by which I will grade your critical response papers.

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| CONTENT | Ideas and analyses should be complex and critical. Papers should offer personal, fresh insights into the material. Go beyond surface matter! |
| ORGANIZATION AND COHERENCE | Use an orderly structure that facilitates reading, sustaining the reader's interest through effective paragraph development and use of proper transitions, presenting a logical flow of ideas. |
| RISK-TAKING | You must deal with the material in creative and challenging ways, developing main points based on self-initiated criteria independent of my class discussion comments, and avoiding summary unless necessary. |
| EVIDENCE | You must support your ideas with actual examples from the text, and use relevant details from stories that explain and support your main ideas. Try to use quotations from stories that support your points (one or two lines will do—you will be marked down for excessive use of quotations). |
| DEVELOPMENT | Analyze evidence in a way that supports your claims and overall thesis, including identifying literary devices/figures of speech and explaining how they contribute to the meaning of the text. AVOID SUMMARY. |
| MECHANICS | Spelling, grammar, punctuation must be correct. Papers must show careful proofreading, subject-verb agreement, no run-on sentences or sentence fragments, clear pronoun usage. |

Schedule

*Readings scheduled are the readings that will be **discussed** in class that day. They will come from your required texts, online (links provided), or as handouts from me.

ALL STORIES ARE CONTAINED IN *100 Years of the Best American Short Stories* UNLESS OTHERWISE SPECIFIED

August 24th: Orientation

We will meet, talk about the syllabus and class expectations, and do some creative exercises. Be prepared to discuss reading and writing and get to know each other. Building a congenial environment is essential to facilitate lively and respectful discussions. Please have read Joy Williams' essay in preparation for our first class, link below, as well as the introduction to *100 Years of the Best Short Stories*.

<https://extensivereadinguae.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/16-uncanny-the-singing-that-comes-from-certain-husks.pdf>

August 31st:

Read: In *Reading Like a Writer*- Section One

The Gay Old Dog

Brothers

My Old Man

Haircut

Write: Opening Paragraph Exercise
Due: First Writing Exercise on Prompt

Sept 7th:

Read: In *RLaW*- Sections Two & Three
Babylon Revisited
The Cracked Looking-Glass
That Will Be Fine

Write: Entrance Point Exercise

Due: Critical Response
Exercise

Sept 14th:

Read: In *RLaW*- Sections Four & Five
Those Are as Brothers
The Whole World Knows
The Enormous Radio

Write: Organizing Principle Exercise

Due: Critical Response
Entrance Point Exercise

Sept 21st:

Read: In *RLaW*- Sections Six & Seven
I Stand Here Ironing
Sonny's Blues
The Conversion of the Jews

Write: Character Sketch / POV Exercise

Due: Critical Response
Organizing Principle Exercise

Sept 28th:

Read: In *RLaW*- Sections Eight & Nine
Everything That Rises Must Converge
Pigeon Feathers
Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?
By the River

Write: Imitation Exercise

Due: Critical Response
Character Sketch/POV Exercise

Oct 5th:

Read: In *RLaW*- Sections Ten & Eleven
The School
The Conventional Wisdom

Write: Image Packet

Due: Critical Response
Confession Exercise

Workshop:

Oct 12th:

Read: *Friends*
Harmony of the World
Lawns

Write: Dialogue Exercise

Due: Image Packet
Critical Response

Workshop:

Oct 19th:

Read: *Communist*
Helping
Displacement

Write: Memory Exercise

Due: Dialogue Exercise
Critical Response

Workshop:

Oct 26th:

Read: *Friend of My Youth*
The Girl on the Plane
Xuela
If You Sing for Me Like That

Due: Critical Response
Memory Exercise

Workshop:

Nov 2nd:

Read: *Fiesta*
The Third and Final Continent
Brownies
What You Pawn I Will Redeem

Write: Origin Stories

Due: Critical Response

Workshop:

Nov 9th:

Read: *Refresh, Refresh*
Awaiting Orders
What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank

Write:

Workshop:

Due: Critical Response
Origin Stories

Nov 16th:

Read: *Diem Perdidit*

The Semplica-Girl Diaries

At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners

Write: Revisions!!

Workshop:

Nov 30th: Revision & Catch-Up

Workshop: (if needed)

Dec 7th: Wrap Up/ Final Revisions Due

“Art is not truth; art is the lie that enables us to recognize truth.”—Picasso