

Advanced Fiction Workshop 4905

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Course meeting times & locations: Monday, Periods 9-11 (4:05 pm-7:05 pm), MAT 009

Office Hours: by appointment

Course website: Canvas

In this class, we'll focus on becoming better writers by gaining more and more control over our sentences, paragraphs, and stories.

Required Texts:

Stories by Students—At the very beginning of all class meetings, one student (sometimes two) will hand in nine copies of their stories: one for each member of the workshop, and one for me. If you miss class or come late, it is your responsibility to get hold of these stories. You must bring these to class on the days we are scheduled to discuss them.

Other readings—We will mostly focus on your own work, but on some weeks, we will also discuss one published story, or an essay on craft by an author. Every piece we are scheduled to discuss should be read at least twice before the start of the class during which we'll discuss it.

About the workshop:

Discussion—Apart from in-class exercises, which I might assign, workshop is 100% discussion-based. You must participate in discussion. Disagreements will arise during discussions, as they should. However, personal attacks will not be tolerated. You must conduct yourself in a manner that at all times respects the members of the workshop.

The Fiction of your Workshop peers—Most weeks, you will come to class having read two student stories. You must read every story twice. I ask you to approach the first reading the same way you would approach reading something you've elected to read on your own, for pleasure, and to treat it the same way. That is: I ask you to try to read the piece on its own terms, and as if it were already published—as if the writer has deep intentions behind every line (which hopefully they do), and you, the reader, want to understand those intentions, and to enjoy the process. I ask that you don't make notes or line-edits until the second time you read the piece, and at that point, that you make your notes and line-edits toward helping the writer achieve what

you have perceived them to be after. If a writer is working in a tradition you're not fond of, don't try to line-edit them into a different one: just try to help them to do what they want to do better, and note where their piece pulls you forward, where it stalls you out, where it gains and loses energy, and why. You'll want to map your comments to lines, phrases, words, and moments in the story. We want to use the story to discuss the story. We want to locate and then accurately describe problems. Same goes for victories: if something works, say it, and tell us why you think it does.

You are required to come to class:

- 1) having line-edited each piece of student work we'll be discussing that week
- 2) having written a list of **AT LEAST three questions** you have about each piece
- 3) having written a list of **AT LEAST three comments** you have about each piece
- 4) having written **one (or more) suggestion(s)** for each author, regarding how you think he might improve his piece.

These questions, comments, and suggestions, have to be handed out to the authors at the end of workshop, along with your line-edits on their stories.

Your Fiction—Over the course of the semester, you must turn in two stories. Their due-dates will appear on the calendar I will email you and post on Canvas by the end of the first week of class. You are responsible for taking note of the days your work is due, and due to be discussed, and for turning it in on time. You have to come to class with 9 printed copies of your stories on the day that they are due (that is: the week before we workshop them).

Over the semester, we'll talk about concision and tension a lot. For this reason, I'll ask that you turn in **carefully edited pieces** (i.e.: don't turn in something you wrote in a hurry the night before, but try to give the workshop pieces you've spent time on, pieces that you've thought about a lot already, that you think you've taken as far as you could on your own for the time being). **The stories you turn in should be 10 pages or less.**

All stories **MUST** be

- typed in 12-point Times or Times New Roman font
- double-spaced with reasonable margins
- PAGE-NUMBERED
- titled
- by-lined (i.e.: have your name on the title page)
- clean (i.e.: submit work that is in excellent shape, as devoid of errors in grammar, usage, and spelling as possible—no rough drafts, only pieces you feel you took as far as you could on your own)
- **LITERARY FICTION**, as opposed to genre fiction, or Young Adult (YA) Fiction.

Giving feedback—While giving feedback, consider what the author is trying to do. As author John Updike said, “Do not fault them for what they do not try.” Help your classmates to better do that which they're trying to do already.

Reading and workshopping others is as important here as writing your own pieces. Take it seriously. Critiquing others' fiction will get you thinking about fiction in general and yours in particular in ways that will help you become a better writer. By helping someone else solve a narrative/plot/dialogue problem, you might solve problems in your own work that you didn't even know you had.

As you prepare for workshop, read the stories up for critique closely, then turn your mind to the experience you've just had. Was there a place you found particularly moving? Something you resisted, or that confused you? A moment where you found yourself laughing, tearing up, getting annoyed? Thinking anew? Any lingering questions about the story?

Receiving feedback—When you receive feedback, please remain silent as you take notes. This is hard. Our first instinct is to defend our choices. The reason the writer whose work is being discussed should stay silent is simple: in the real world, your work will not be read while you're in the room. You won't get to defend your choices to every reader you encounter. So even if you feel that someone is misreading your piece during workshop, please refrain from replying, and listen to what might have caused the misreading in question. You will, at the end of your critique, have a chance to ask any questions you may have for your peers. Being critiqued can be hard, but receiving a dozen people's honest opinion about your work is extremely valuable—it will make you grow as a writer considerably.

Discussing published stories—Just as you are with student work, you're required to come to class with thoughts, comments and questions you have about the published pieces you read. Write these questions down before class. I may ask to see them at any point. Write down, also, where you thought the story was particularly successful (a scene you liked, or a bit of dialogue, for example), the key moments, how it surprised you.

Here are some examples of questions you might ask yourselves while reading stories:

- 1) What do we know about the protagonist? What do we suspect about the protagonist?
- 2) How close are we from the characters, the action?
- 3) In what kind of world is the story set (ours, ours+, fantastical, etc.)?
- 4) Where exactly is the story set? If this is unclear, make an informed guess. Be descriptive.
- 5) What is at stake? At what point do we realize what is at stake?
- 6) What questions does the story address?
- 7) What is/are the primary source/s of narrative tension? Another way to phrase this: what is propelling us through the story? (note: don't just say "the voice." If that's the answer, then describe the qualities of the voice that propel us.)
- 8) How are the sentences structured?
- 9) What is the author asking us to pay attention to? How do we know?
- 10) What are the scenes/images that stick with you the most? Why?
- 11) How would you describe the story to someone who hasn't read it?
- 12) What turns did the story take that surprised/thrilled you?

Etc. etc. etc.

Miscellaneous

Attendance/Punctuality—You will be allowed one absence for the semester. Barring very extreme circumstances, you will automatically fail the course if you miss more than one class. If you are more than twenty minutes late to class, you will be marked absent.

Plagiarism—Will lead swiftly to failure and lots of embarrassment.

Cell phones and Computers—The use of cellphones and computers is not allowed during class. You're expected to come to class with paper copies of the materials to be discussed at each meeting.

Calendar

August 29

- Introductions
- Quinton** turns in work for workshop the following week

September 5

- Labor Day/No class**

September 12

- Workshop **Quinton**
- Discussion: **George Saunders's "Pastoralia"**
- Nikki and Daniel** turn in for the following week

September 19

- Workshop **Nikki and Daniel**
- Gabrielle** turns in for the following week

September 26

- Workshop **Gabrielle**
- Discussion: **short story TBD, in-class exercise**
- Wasley and Antonia** turn in for the following week

October 3

- Workshop **Wasley and Antonia**
- Minna** turns in for the following week

October 10

- Workshop **Minna**
- Discussion **story TBD, in-class exercise**
- Alex and Madison** turn in for the following week

October 17

- Workshop **Alex and Madison**
- Quinton and Daniel** turn in work for the following week

October 24

- Workshop **Quinton and Daniel**
- Nikki and Gabrielle** turn in for the following week

October 31

- Workshop **Nikki and Gabrielle**
- Wasley** turns in for the following week

November 7

- Workshop **Wasley**
- Discussion: **story TBD, in-class exercises**
- Antonia and Minna** turn in for the following week

November 14

- Workshop **Antonia and Minna**
- Alex** turns in for the following week

November 22

- Workshop **Alex**
- Discussion: **story TBD, in-class exercises**
- Madison** turns in for the following week

November 29

- Workshop **Madison**
- Discussion: **story TBD, in-class exercises**

December 6

- Last class, Concluding Remarks**