

## Advanced Fiction Workshop 3110

Instructor: Camille Bordas

e-mail: bordas.camille@ufl.edu

**Course meeting times & locations:** Tuesday, Periods 9-11 (4:05 pm-7:05 pm), synchronous sessions via Zoom

**Office Hours:** by appointment

**Course website:** Canvas

### About Our Class

*“Writing is routinely described as creative—this has never struck me as the correct word. Writing is control. Writing is all resistance.”*

*—Zadie Smith, from her essay “Peonies”*

*“Writing is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.”*

*— E.L. Doctorow*

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

**Required Texts:** we will mostly focus on your own work, but on some weeks (see calendar) we will also discuss one published story, or an essay on craft by a published 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.

**Discussion:** Apart from in-class exercises, which I may or may not 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 (sometimes three). You must read every story twice. I ask you to approach the first reading the same way you would approach reading a book 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, 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 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, are to be typed and sent to the authors at the end of workshop, and so are your line-edits on their stories. I may ask to see your lists of questions and comments at any given time. I may ask you to read them aloud during workshop. Even though this class is taught online, I still highly encourage you to print the stories that are up for discussion, and line-edit them by hand. If you do choose to line-edit a story using the Word commenting tool, I would still like you to print a copy of it before class. The reason for this is that I want us to look at each other during our Zoom meetings, not have our screens split between Word and the classroom.

**Your Fiction:** Over the course of the semester, you must turn in 2 stories. Their due-dates will appear on the calendar I will 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. Your story should be posted on the class's Canvas page before class starts on the day that it is due. **Email it to me on the day it is due (that is: a week before we will workshop it in class), and I will post it on Canvas for the rest of the class to see.**

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. The first story you turn in must be 10 pages or less. The second story you turn in must be 6 pages or less.

All stories **MUST** be

1. typed in 12-point Times or Times New Roman font
2. double-spaced with reasonable margins
3. PAGE-NUMBERED
4. titled
5. by-lined
6. **LITERARY FICTION**, as opposed to genre fiction, or Young Adult (YA) Fiction. If you're not sure whether what you write is genre or not,

run it by me, but as a general rule, I'm asking for no dragons, no spaceships, no vampires or mummies or shape shifters, etc. (Though it is always acceptable to play with those elements and with genre codes if they're not the primary source of intrigue and tension). If you're not sure whether what you write is YA or not, you can also run that by me, but as a general rule, I'm asking for no simplistic moral lessons, no virtuous heroes, no self-righteous politics.

Here's a definition of genre fiction you might find helpful: "Genre is defined by its reliance on tropes or themes that lie outside the story, and so it must obey rules, and expects the audience to be familiar with other stories from the genre. [...] This is why genre has difficulty becoming literature, and terrible genre always feels like checking off boxes: looming prophecy, evil empire, lovable rogue."

**Errors in grammar, usage, and spelling:** I expect your work to be devoid of them. If you have questions about grammar, usage or spelling, please make use of a dictionary, and/or Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*. Submit work that is in excellent shape. No rough drafts. Only pieces you took as far as you could on your own.

**Giving and receiving feedback:** While giving feedback, consider what the author is trying to do. As 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.

When you receive feedback, please remain silent and take notes. This is hard. Our first instinct is to defend our choices. Even if you feel someone is misreading your piece, refrain from replying. You will, at the end of your critique, have a chance to ask any questions you may have for your peers.

**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 we will be reading. 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) In what kind of world is the story set (ours, ours+, fantastical, etc.)?
- 3) Where exactly is the story set? If this is unclear, make an informed guess. Be descriptive.
- 4) What is at stake? At what point do we realize what is at stake?
- 5) What questions does the story address?
- 6) What is/are the primary source/s of narrative tension? Another way to phrase that: 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.)
- 7) What is the author asking us to pay attention to? How do we know?
- 8) What are the scenes/images that stick with you the most? Why?

### **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**

With the exception of using Zoom, the use of cellphones and computers is not allowed during class. You must have at hand a paper copy of the materials to be discussed at each meeting.