Advanced Fiction Workshop

This is an intensive, hard-working class for committed readers/writers. If you engage fully in the process, you will surely improve your writing.

Course Objectives

● Take the next step in your writing. Discover how spontaneity and momentum will help you get past inhibitions and blocks. Find heretofore unidentified territory that may turn out to be yours.
● Perfect your reading as a writer. Deepen and strengthen your understanding of good storytelling and recognize powerful prose.
● Expand your editorial skills. Learn how to avoid impasses, tedious verbosity and various other disastrous pitfalls.
● Work in a congenial and generous atmosphere, a good environment for learning which risks work for you and which to avoid.
● You should finish this course with at least three promising pieces and the basics of a writing practice.

Methodology

● In the first month of the semester, each class will include:
  --A craft discussion, using an assigned story for illustration.
  --Writing exercises in response to a prompt
  --Reading the exercises out loud and working together on the prose, pacing, shape.
● In the second month, we will continue this work in abbreviated form, but we will also workshop three student stories per class, between three and eight pages each. Each workshop will last 20 minutes.
● In the third month, stories may run from three to fifteen pages. Workshops will be 30 minutes each.
● Immediately after midterms, I will meet with each student for a half hour conference.

Homework Assignments

● Reading: Two or three short stories, whenever possible illustrating the craft element we have been discussing. Count on an average of 40 pages of reading per week.
● Writing: One two-page story, exploring a theme and/or applying the craft elements we have discussed in class. The two-page stories may be inspired by your classroom writing exercises, or you may start over. If all goes well, one of your two-page stories will then form the basis of a
workshop story. Each month, you will revise and improve at least one of your two-page stories (other than those you use for workshops).

- **Online Posting:** On our online forums, you will complement the classwork by responding to assigned reading, by contributing to a class writer’s notebook and by continuing our class conversation. Punctual participation required.

- **Workshop Responses:** Each student story will be posted on our class web site a week ahead of time, and each class member will post a written response prior to the workshop. This response will tell the writer what the story does well and will make specific suggestions for what needs to be improved. Each reader will also print the story, perform a line edit, and bring it to class. The responses and the line-edits will form the basis – or the beginning – of the workshop conversation.

- **At midterm and for the final,** you will gather your work into a portfolio, accompanied by a process note in which you review your progress and plan for what comes next.

**Grading**

- Punctual submission of the weekly two-page stories and of the two workshop stories.
- Punctual submission of required online posts, and of responses to assigned stories and to your classmates’ workshop stories.
- Class attendance and participation. More than one unexcused absence will lower your grade.

Your grade will depend on your willingness to meet your deadlines, on your diligence and your engagement, both in class and online. For my part, I will try to make the class exciting and fun.

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**Sample Class 1:**
Assigned reading: “Are These the Actual Miles?” by Raymond Carver; “Cell One” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

*Craft Discussion: Economy.* How to make a story feel compressed, explosive, and fast-moving? Begin in media res. Avoid static openings, exposition, repetition, unnecessary explanation, extra or pale words, flaccid verbs. Find fresh and vivid locutions. Think about sequencing, rhythm, pacing, narrative intimacy.

Discussion/Prompt/Writing Exercise/Discussion.

**Sample Class 2:**
Assigned reading: “Work” by Denis Johnson; “Mother” by Grace Paley; “Alma” by Junot Diaz.

*Craft Discussion: The use of resonant details.* Every element tells the story. Every detail of the setting and the situation helps to establish a mood and, most important, conveys the characters’ emotions and the writer’s attitude, whether these are explicitly stated or not.

Discussion/Prompt/Writing Exercise/Discussion.
Sample Class 3:

Craft Discussion: How to break your reader’s heart. What is the line between sentimentality and tragedy and how to stay on the safe side? Rely less on your characters’ vulnerabilities for drama, and look deeper into their ambivalence.
Discussion/Prompt/Writing Exercise/Discussion.

Note 1: This is a sample syllabus. The reading assignments and the craft elements we discuss will vary, according to the needs of the class.

Note 2: Although you should feel free to write in your own way and in your own style, and I encourage you to experiment as much as you dare with all the elements of writing, I ask you not to take this class if you are exclusively interested in a single sub-genre (for example, world-building, or romance). I'm fine with forays into the fantastic, the Gothic, the weird, the ignoble and occasionally even the parodically mannered. But my class is not very useful when it comes to straight-down-the-middle YA fiction or teen fantasy, and so on.