ENG 284 Beginning Short Story Writing—Winter 2020

Instructor: Daniel J. Cecil

Class Time: T & TH 10:30-11:50 p.m.

Class Location: RAI 107

Office Location: Padelford A405

Office Hours: T & TH 8:00-9:00am

**Course Description**:

What the hell is a short story?

Let’s figure it out together.

We’re going to look at the nuts and bolts of writing. Writing well, in many ways, requires an almost devote attention to detail. It’s not unlike worship.

In fact, let’s tease out that thread. Religions have precepts. Laws for good living. Buddhism, for example, has five precepts that must be recognized to achieve enlightenment. These include abstaining from:

* Harming living things
* Taking what is not given
* Sexual misconduct
* Lying or gossiping
* Imbibing in intoxicating substances

These rules are easy to remember, but sometimes hard to follow. Creative writing has its own precepts (called craft) put in place to help writers find the bones of a good story, and to live a good writerly life. These craft elements include:

* Character
* Detail
* Dialogue
* Image
* Metaphor
* Plot
* Point of view (POV)
* Scene and summary
* Setting
* Theme
* Voice
* Etc.

Again, these are easy to remember but sometimes hard to follow. Any one of these craft elements could take an entire class to cover. And swinging back to the Buddhist precepts engagement, craft elements are not really precepts, per say, as that suggests that all craft elements are prescriptive. That’s not the case — craft elements can be mixed and matched for different affect, and sometimes ignored completely if the expression requires it.

So, we’re going to focus on these elements of craft as best we can. We will keep them in mind with each reading. You’ll learn what each means, and how they might inform your work. However, our main focus here will be to use craft as a jumping off point for discovering expressive writing. I want you, dear student, to come away from this class with a greater understanding of how creative writing can act as an infinitely rich way to reflect on, analyze, and express your inner self. Writing is therapy. It’s a way to heal yourself and the world writ large.

More on this later.

**What will be expected of you:**

Being a good writer means reading. We’ll do some of that. We’ll look at essays on craft as well as exemplary short stories from a variety of voices. This isn’t me, your hard-ass teacher, making you read because I love making you weep. I assign these stories because they’ll be instructive for your writing. Maybe not today, but definitely tomorrow. Trust me: reading is important for your writing — so I expect you to come to class having read the assigned stories and essays.

We will also write. We will write a lot. Short writing exercises will be due each week, as well as in-class writing exercises. Eventually, these muscle building activities will lead to the composition of your own short story which we, as a group, will workshop. It’s going to be a hell of a lot of fun.

**A Word (or 360+) on Our Workshop Style:**

I’m sure many of you are familiar with the concept of workshop or have at least seen a workshop on television, or in the movies. If you’ve seen Lena Dunham on Girls toil away at the Iowa Writers Workshop, you know what’s up.

Our workshop, however, will run will be run a bit different.

How so? We will employ a variation of Liz Lerman, ***The Critical Response Process***. I’ve posted two short readings that explain what this means to Canvas, but here is a short synopsis:

—All members of the class will be required to read the submitted work for that week (I will break you into small groups to keep your reading focused on one or two stories)

—Those responding to the reading will be required to formulate a statement of meaning they believe the text is trying to communicate to the reader

—Those responding to the reading will also be required to write down three questions they would like to ask the writer. These are not yes/no questions, nor do they betray any opinion regarding the piece; these questions will act as neutral jumping off points for discussion. For example: “What kind of texture were you going for when making this cake?” instead of, “Why is this cake so dry?”

This workshop style is interesting because it asks the reader to focus on the “encoding” of the story rather than the “decoding.” I’ll discuss these concepts in class, but in short, I’m asking the reader to consider: What kind of *infrastructure* is the writer working within/for? Specifically, within what unique *articulation* is the writer working? Chicano magic realism? Black afro-futurism? White guy realism? 4th Wave Feminist Bey Fan Fiction?

I believe this workshop technique, if done correctly, allows the writer to “defend” their work on a philosophical/ideological/prose level, while at the same time asking them to deeply question their work. At this early stage of your writing career, ideology can be potentially poisonous (depending on your sensitivity to it) and can influence your work before you’re able to make a stand behind your prose style and message. Removing as much opinion from the room as possible allows your work to find stable footing.

**CANVAS**

We will use Canvas for all assignment submissions. If you have not used Canvas before, and have any problems submitting, please email me your questions (my email is at the top of the syllabus). I will explain, in class, how workshop assignments are handled, since it is a bit different from normal Canvas assignments.

**Word of Caution (about writing stories about classmates, assignments, or teacher)**

Don’t do it. Don’t write stories about your fellow classmates. Don’t write them about the assignments. And please don’t write them about me. That sucks. Sucks sucks sucks. Feelings often get hurt. Certainly, everything is ripe for satire, but out of respect for your fellows and to ensure a healthy learning environment, I ask that you refrain from doing any such thing. Stories that appear to lampoon anyone in the classroom or the assignment at hand will receive a failing grade for that assignment, and you may be asked to leave. Continuing these antics will earn you a failing grade in the course.

**Required materials**

--Pen, notebook, course readings (printed is best)

--$$$ for printing when necessary

**Reading List**

All readings are available on Canvas as Word Docs and PDFs. It is your responsibility to download and print copies of the stories for your personal use. I highly recommend bringing a copy of the text, with your notes, to class for use during discussion.

**Grading**

*Participation* *20%*

--Daily in-class writing assignments

--Engaged discussion of reading

--Attendance (Each class missed is 2 points off your final grade)

*Short Experiments 20%*

--Weekly 2-3 page writing assignments

--Typed, double-space, 12 pt. Times New Roman font

--Four required, one optional

*Manuscript 25%*

--A 10-15 page short-story

--Typed, double-spaced, 12 pt. Times New Roman font

--To be workshopped by a jury of your peers

*Questions Log 10%*

--Canvas module where you post 2-3 questions weekly

--About the critical readings, exemplary stories, or the art of story-writing

*Writing Conference 5% (TBD)*

--Meeting with me at some point in the quarter

--Discuss your manuscript, revisions, and vision for the piece

*Workshop 20%*

*--*Lead discussion on one of your classmate’s manuscripts

*-*-Present your manuscript to the workshop

*-*-Attendance (You will lose 10 points for missing a workshop, unless excused)

**GRADING SCALE**

Grading creative writing is a difficult thing. How to do so effectively is endlessly debated in the academic community because, well, assessing creative writing can be subjective as hell. I’ve included a grading rubric on Canvas that outlines how your writing will be assessed in class. It’s a generally accepted method and I’ve found that 99.99% of my students understand and appreciate the clarity the rubric provides.

Here’s a breakdown of how the overall grade for the class is determined:

**0.0-2.9:** a student who does not finish all the work; varies depending on lack of effort

**3.0:** a student who does all the work adequately, but whose stories lack originality. Alternatively: a student whose stories make me cry or laugh out loud, but who is obviously not putting in their full effort in other areas of the class.

**3.3:** a dogged and determined student who completes all the work with enthusiasm and visible effort, but whose stories lack originality, feeling, a kernel of creative energy.

**3.5:** a student who participates consistently and whose writing has a suggestion of something profound, buried beneath words that must still be chipped away.

**3.6-4.0:** an enthusiastic and insightful student who not only expresses thoughtful, incisive opinions and critiques but also shows creative potential in their own work and the potential to flourish in the creative writing track.

**LATE WORK**

I do not provide feedback for any manuscripts turned in late. No exceptions. Late assignments will also receive a one-point deduction from the final grade. Clemency may be granted if I am contact 12 hours before the due date. Requests made after this time will not be considered.

**ELECTRONICS**

Use of computers in class is allowed, if you stay on task. Yes, I can see you giggling at funny videos. Yes, I know when you’re chatting to a friend. Mobile phone use is strictly prohibited, and wearing headphones during class will result in points deducted from your final grade.

**TARDINESS**

I am arrive to the classroom on time—I expect the same of you. Arriving late is disrespectful to your classmates, especially during workshop. I will allow a 5-minute buffer, but after that, each 5-minute delay counts as a point deducted from your participation. I keep good records.

**CLASS CANCELLATION POLICY**

In the *highly* unlikely event that I would ever have to cancel a class, I would let you know by 8:00 am the day of class. However, if I am ill or have an emergency, it is most likely that you would simply have a substitute that day. If for some reason (also *highly* unlikely) that I am not present when class begins, please wait for twenty minutes (10.50 am) before leaving.

But for real, I take lots of vitamins, so don’t expect any sick days.

**SUBMISSION GUIDELINES**

We will be using Canvas to submit all our papers unless I specify otherwise for an assignment.

All assignments (unless otherwise noted) should be typed per MLA (Modern Language Association) guidelines. This includes (but is not limited to):

* 12 pt. Times New Roman font
* Standard Margins
* Double-spaced
* Page Numbers w/ Last Name

**Accommodations**

If you need accommodation of any sort, please let me know so that I can work with the UW Disability Resources for Students Office (DRS) to provide what you require. This syllabus is available in large print, as are other class materials. More information about accommodation can be found at <http://www.washington.edu/students/drs/>.

**ENG 284 Course Calendar**

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| **WEEK 1** | **feeling out The pace** | **Homework** |
| January 7 | **First day of instruction**  Discussion of syllabus.  Meet and greet.  Short exercise. | Readings:  Donald Barthelme: *The School*  George Saunders: *Rise, Baby, Rise* |
| January 9 | Discussion: *The School* and *Saunders*.  In-class exercise. | Readings:  George Saunders: *Sea Oak*  Rust Hills’ *Short Story, as Against the Novel and Sketch*  Writing Homework:  Short Exercise #1 |
| **WEEK 2** | **LET’S TALK THIS THROUGH.** |  |
| January 14 | Discussion: *Sea Oak* and *Hill*.  In class exercise.  Roundtable craft. | Readings:  Joy Williams’ *Stuff.*  John Barth’s *Incremental Perturbation* |
| January 16 | Discussion: *Stuff* and *Barth*.  In-class writing exercise.  **SE #1 due Friday, January 17.** | Readings:  Donald Barthelme’s *The Leap*  Annie Dillard’s *Fiction in Bits*  Writing Homework:  Short Exercise #2 |
| **WEEK 3** | **REACHING** |  |
| January 21 | Discussion: *The Leap* and *Dillard.*  In-class writing exercise. | Readings:  Denis Johnson’s *Emergency*  Charles Baxter *You’re Really Something* |
| January 23 | Discussion:*Emergency* and *Baxter.*  In-class writing exercise.  **S.E. #2 due Friday, January 24.** | Readings:  Alexander Chee’s *Girl*  Alice Laplante’s *Recognizable People*  Writing Homework:  Short Exercise #3 |
| **WEEK 4** | **WHAT’S THAT YOU SAY?** |  |
| January 28 | Discussion: *Girl* and *Laplante.*  In-class writing exercise. | Readings:  Mitchell S. Jackson’s *High Pursuit*  Alice Laplante’s *Who’s Telling This Story* |
| January 30 | Discussion: *High Pursuit* and *Laplante.*  In-class writing exercise.  **S.E. #3 due Friday, January 31.** | Readings:  Robert Glick’s *Undersize Negative*  Denman and Schoup’s *Revision*  Writing Homework:  Short Exercise #4 |
| **WEEK 5** | **CONNECT THE THEMATIC DOTS** |  |
| February 4 | Discussion: Robert Glick *Undersized Negative* and *Denman and Schoup.*  In-class writing exercise. | Readings:  Anne Carson’s *Short Talks*  Wassily Kadinsky’s *On the Problem of Form* |
| February 6 | Discussion: *Short Talks* and *Kadinsky.*  In-class writing exercise.  **S.E. #4 due Friday, February 7.** | Readings:  Jorge Luis Borges’ *Aleph*  Liz Lerman: *Asking Questions as a Way of Life*  Liz Lerman: *Critical Response Process*  Writing Homework:  Short Exercise #5 |
| **WEEK 6** | **METAPHOR** |  |
| February 11 | Discussion: *Aleph* and *Lerman.*  In-class writing exercise.  Lecture on workshopping | Keep working on your stories! |
| February 13 | **No class: Conferences February 13 and February 14 (15 if necessary)** | Polish your stories! |
| **WEEK 7** | **GET WRITING** |  |
| February 18 | Workshop (4) | Prepare manuscript and read classmates’ manuscripts. |
| February 20 | Workshop (4) | Prepare manuscript and read classmates’ manuscripts. |
| **WEEK 8** | **WORKSHOP** |  |
| February 25 | Workshop (4) | Classmates’ manuscripts. |
| February 27 | Workshop (4) | Classmates’ manuscripts. |
| **WEEK 9** | **WWORKSHOP*wrap up second sequence*** |  |
| March 3 | Workshop (4) | Classmates’ manuscripts. |
| March 5 | No Class | Classmates’ manuscripts. |
| **WEEK 10** | **WORKSHOP***don’t forget to give course evaluations* |  |
| March 10 | Workshop (3) | Michael Ventura: *The Talent of the Room*  Zadie Smith: *That Crafty Feeling* |
| March 12 | Discussion: *Talent of the Room;* *That Crafty Feeling*  **Last day of class. Donuts. Weep, for you have learned all I will teach you.** |  |
|  | **Final manuscript due Monday, March 16, 2020.** |  |

Last day of instruction: March 12, 2020