Introduction to Creative Writing: Fiction
English 381W, Section 1
Syllabus

Sam Houston State University
Spring 2008
TR 2:00-3:20, Evans 262

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Course Overview
At some point when I was an undergraduate, I decided I wanted to be a writer. Mostly, because I
didn’t want to hold a real job, but also because I was in love with the idea of being a writer. It
was a romantic notion. I imagined a life of French cafés on the Left Bank of the Seine; bullfights
in Madrid; Underwood typewriters; nicotine-stained fingertips; truth, beauty, and blazing guns;
tortured souls and unrequited love and women; immortality through the written word; black
coffee; black-clad intellectuals; royalty checks…. But, as I eventually discovered, being a writer
is not the same thing as writing. We all want to be writers, to walk into a café or a bar or Wal-
Mart and have people turn and whisper to one another, “There goes a writer.” But to be writers—
real writers, not just poseurs—we have to do the writing. And that’s the hard part, the decidedly
unromantic part. It can be, in fact, a grind.

I start here not because I wish to depress you on the first day of class—we’ll have plenty of time
over the course of the semester for that!—but to put in front of you from the very beginning the
most important thing you must learn as a young writer and the most important thing you must be
able to do in order to succeed in this class. There’s much that you can learn in this class about the
craft of writing and there’s much that you can learn on your own, but the one thing no one can
Teach you is to sit yourself down in front of your notebook or your computer or your slate tablet
or your chalkboard or your napkin (or whatever else you write upon) and to do the work.

Course Objectives
Since this is a beginning-level course in creative writing, I will assume no prior experience in
writing short fiction. Therefore we will begin with an examination of the various elements of
short fiction—plot, character, point of view, setting, etc.—and we will closely read and discuss
published stories from the perspective of writers. In any given story, an author has made literally
thousands of decisions about these elements, and we will identify those decisions and seek to
understand why those decisions were made and the impact each had on the story. Further, we
will engage in a variety of writing exercises, both in class and outside of class, building toward
the workshop (see below) portion of the semester in which each student will submit a story to the
class for its consideration and feedback. Toward this end, we will seek to develop a common
language in which to discuss not only the work of our peers, but our own work. The course is
designed to immerse the student in the process of creative writing, from the initial spark to the
first draft and onward through multiple revisions toward a completed story. It is my hope as well
that the close reading skills—the attention to detail, to the nuances of language and grammar, to the complexity of a well-told tale—required not only for a writer, but for a student of literature, will be beneficial beyond the creative writing classroom. Lest this not be enough for you, we will also have a lot of fun.

**Required Text:**

**Workshop**
Much of the second half of the semester will take place in workshop fashion with your own work, your own stories forming the central element of the class. The purpose of workshop is not to bolster your own ego while destroying that of your peers. Our purpose is to assist each other in our respective development as writers. While this does include constructive criticism, it should all be done in an atmosphere of respect, both for the writer and for the work. I believe it is important to recognize that while some students carry their assumptions (about what should or should not be done, about what “works” and what does not) like a sledgehammer, others carry their assumptions like raw eggs, easily shattered. Writing involves elements that are subjective and will be a matter of taste, but it also consists of elements that we can identify and discuss that are clearly more objective in nature. It’s not just a matter of personal opinion.

**Grades**

**Short Exercises** (50 points): In the first few weeks of the semester, I will provide you with a number of writing exercises, some of which we will begin in class, some of which will be out-of-class assignments. On several occasions, I will ask you to fully develop one of these exercises and submit it to me for feedback.

**Quizzes** (50 points): Over the first half of the semester, the professor will administer quizzes based on the day’s readings from Burroway’s *Crafting Fiction*.

**Individual Conference and Exercise** (100 points): Near the mid-point of the semester, you will be required to bring a 4-5 page scene (or pair of scenes) to an individual conference with the professor. These scenes should be developed based upon writing exercises we will do over the first half of the semester, and should, ideally, build toward the story you will submit to the workshop.

**Story** (workshop draft, 150 points; revised draft, 250 points): Over the course of the semester, you will write one story and submit it to the workshop, then revise the story and submit it to the professor for the final grade. The final drafts will be due on the last day of class. Stories submitted to the workshop should be a minimum of eight complete pages and final, revised stories must be a minimum of ten complete pages (see paper format guidelines below). Revision means revision, not a new or a second story. Also, the stories you submit to this workshop must be original to this workshop. They may not be stories originally written for and submitted to a previous workshop. Additionally, students are required to meet with the professor for an
individual conference prior to the submission of the first draft to the class (see the tentative schedule below).

Note: Students will be required to make and distribute photocopies of their stories to the entire class. Bear in mind that even though you are only required to submit one story to the workshop this semester, with more than 20 students in the class, that’s more than a few pages. So plan accordingly.

Peer reviews (200 points total): The responsibility here belongs to the class as a whole. In joining this class, you accept a contract with each other—to present your best possible work, both as a writer and as a critic, in exchange for an equal commitment from your peers. I don’t expect brilliance. I do expect effort. You will be responsible for posting peer reviews to Blackboard for all stories submitted to the class. In order to receive credit, these reviews must be posted before the class in which we workshop the story. [Each author and story will have its own forum for the reviews of his or her story. The author will be unable to read the reviews until after the workshop of his or her story.] Please pay close attention to the schedule. The author of each story will grade the peer reviews submitted on his or her own work. The reviews will be graded on a five-point scale based on effort and helpfulness. The author will submit these grades to the professor and the author’s grades will remain confidential between the author and the professor. The professor encourages you to grade fairly and professionally. We’ll discuss this in greater detail in the days to come.

Book Review Assignment (100 points): The review will examine a single collection of short stories by a contemporary writer (to be determined in consultation with the instructor). Copies of each book report will be posted, by the author, to the appropriate Blackboard discussion forum. See assignment sheet.

Attendance and Participation (100 points): I expect all students to be in attendance each day and to participate significantly each day.

Extra credit (up to 50 points total, up to 10 points apiece): by attending local readings and writing a brief 2-3 paragraph review.

1000 Points Available: 900-1000 A; 800-899 B; 700-799 C; 600-699 D; 599 or less F.

A Note on Genre Fiction
The focus of this class will be literary fiction as distinguished from genre fiction—romance, science fiction, mystery, horror and Western. Not that I’m some sort of raging, anti-genre snob. But for this class, the work you submit should be literary fiction. In brief, I define literary fiction as work that is concerned not just with what happened, but with why it happened. It is character-driven and explores the motivations, desires, drives, and consequences of the complex human experience. Each genre has its own rules and traditions, and a workshop appropriate to genre stories would include the study of those genres. For a further, brief discussion of genre fiction, see the appropriate appendix in Burroway’s Crafting Fiction.
Paper Format
All stories should be typed double-spaced in a 12-point font with one-inch borders AND STAPLED. No wacky fonts, please. Any assignments longer than two pages must have page numbers. Correct grammar, usage, punctuation and spelling are expected. Work flawed by pervasive mechanical errors will be penalized accordingly. Always be certain to keep a hard copy and a copy on disk. Title all stories. In the upper right-hand corner, type your name, e-mail address, and the story’s word count.

Timely Submissions
All work is due in class. Any late work will be penalized one full grade for each class period it is late. For example, if the assignment is due on Tuesday and it is submitted to me the following morning, the grade will be reduced one full letter grade. If I receive it in class the following Thursday, the penalty is the same. Note: Because of the demands of distribution, stories for workshop will not be accepted late. Failure to submit the story in class on the date it is due will result in a zero for the story. Extensions will be granted only in advance and only in cases of emergency.

Attendance
If you miss more than four classes for the semester (or two workshops), regardless of the reason, I may drop you from the class. If you know you will be absent in advance, be sure to let me know in advance. You are still responsible for work that you may miss. If circumstances arise during the course of the semester that interfere with your ability to attend class or to complete assignments, see me as soon as possible.

Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism
Academic honesty is fundamental to the activities and principles of a university. All members of the academic community must be confident that each person's work has been responsibly and honorably acquired, developed, and presented. Any effort to gain an advantage not given to all students is dishonest whether or not the effort is successful. The academic community regards academic dishonesty as an extremely serious matter, with serious consequences that range from probation to expulsion. When in doubt about plagiarism, paraphrasing, quoting, or collaboration, consult the course instructor. See Student Syllabus Guidelines (http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus).

Americans with Disabilities Act
It is the policy of Sam Houston State University that individuals otherwise qualified shall not be excluded, solely by reason of their disability, from participation in any academic program of the university. Further, they shall not be denied the benefits of these programs nor shall they be subjected to discrimination. Students with disabilities that might affect their academic performance are expected to visit with the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities located in the Counseling Center. See Student Syllabus Guidelines (http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus).

Religious Holidays
Students are allowed to miss class and other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day, including travel for that purpose. Students remain responsible for all work. See Student Syllabus Guidelines (http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus).
Visitors in the Classroom
Only registered students may attend class. Exceptions can be made on a case-by-case basis by the professor. In all cases, visitors must not present a disruption to the class by their attendance. Students wishing to audit a class must apply to do so through the Registrar's Office.

Instructor Evaluations
Near the end of the semester, students will be asked to complete a course/instructor evaluation form.

Classroom Etiquette
Cell phones, off. Period. If a cell phone disrupts class, or if a student is sending or receiving text messages during the course of class, I reserve the right to confiscate the phone for the duration of the class period. In the case of a second offense in the course of the semester, I reserve the right to remove the student from the class.

Introduction to the Class (Post to Blackboard Discussion Board before the second class)
Write a letter of introduction to the class. In addition to the basics (name, year, hometown, major, career goal, what you want to do with your life, etc.), the letter should include responses to each of the following:
Why are you taking this class?
What do you hope to gain from this class?
When you read (unassigned), what do you prefer to read? Why do you read?
What was your favorite book from last semester? Why was it your favorite book?
What was the last unassigned book you read? What did you think of it?
Name five books you want to read again and explain briefly why you’d want to read each again.
Name one book you hope you never have to read again and tell me why.
Name one book you secretly think is overrated.
Name your favorite poet.
Name the last book of poetry you read.
List five favorite movies and briefly explain why these are your favorite movies.
Name your favorite living author. Why?
Name your favorite dead author. Why?
What is the best class you’ve had in college? Why was it the best class?
If you were to write a novel, it would be about…
If you were to write the story of your life, the first sentence would be…
Complete this sentence: Creative writing is…
Tentative Schedule (Subject to Revision)

Thursday, January 17
Distribution of syllabus. Creative Introductions Exercise.

Tuesday, January 22
Due: Introductory Post to Blackboard.

Thursday, January 24
Burroway, Chapter 2: Showing and Telling
“The Things They Carried,” Tim O’Brien
Assignment for Tuesday: A Politically Subversive Act

Tuesday, January 29
Discussion: A Politically Subversive Act
“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” Joyce Carol Oates
In-class Exercise: Because They’ve Gotta Move

Thursday, January 31
No class. Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference

Tuesday, February 5
Burroway, Chapter 3: Characterization, Part I
“Gryphon,” Charles Baxter
In-class Exercise: Scene/Specification Exercise

Thursday, February 7
“Every Tongue Shall Confess,” ZZ Packer
In-class Exercise: Character/Interior Voice
Exercise: Givens (Burroway p. 24, #6)

Tuesday, February 12
Burroway, Chapter 4: Characterization, Part II
“Bullet in the Brain,” Tobias Wolff
“Rock Springs,” Richard Ford
Exercise: From Object to Story (Burroway, p. 79, #9)

Thursday, February 14
“Tandolfo the Great,” Richard Bausch
In-class Exercise: Character/Interior Landscape
Exercise: From Image to Story (Burroway, p. 24, #8)

Tuesday, February 19
Burroway, Chapter 5: Fictional Place
“The English Pupil,” Andrea Barrett
In-class Exercise: Character/Observation/Perspective
Exercise: Character/Three Periods

Thursday, February 21
“Love and Hydrogen,” Jim Shephard
“Wickedness,” Ron Hansen
Collaborative Exercise: A Room of Her Own (Burroway, p. 216, #7)
Exercise: A Working Life (Burroway, p. 135, #3)

Tuesday, February 26
Burroway, Chapter 6: Fictional Time
“The Swimmer,” John Cheever
In-class Exercise: Character/Exterior Landscape
Exercise: Architecture of a Life (Burroway, p. 135, #2)
Exercise: Spectrum of Settings

Thursday, February 28
Scenes due for Individual Conference

Burroway, Chapter 7: Story Form, Plot and Structure
“The Use of Force,” William Carlos Williams
“Happy Endings,” Margaret Atwood
Collaborative Exercise: Scene or Summary? (Burroway, p. 258, #7)

Tuesday, March 4
INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCES. Book Review Selection and Approval Due (for those who conference on this day). Note: Additional conferences will be held on Monday and Wednesday.

Thursday, March 6
INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCES. Book Review Selection and Approval Due (for those who conference on this day).

Tuesday, March 11
No class. Spring break.

Thursday, March 13
No class. Spring break.

Tuesday, March 18
“Everything That Rises Must Converge,” Flannery O’Connor
Collaborative Exercise: Thinking Metaphorically (“As/Like/Finish the Sentence”)
In-class Exercise: Associative Thinking

Thursday, March 20
Distribution of Workshop Guidelines
Burroway, Chapter 8: Point of View
“Orientation,” Daniel Orozco
“Who’s Irish,” Gish Jen
Exercise: Point of View Three-for-One

Tuesday, March 25
Due: Stories for workshop # 1
Distribution of story for Mock Workshop
Burroway, Chapter 9: Comparison.
“The First Day,” Edward P. Jones
“Hotel Touraine,” Robert Olen Butler
In-class Exercise: Dialogue

Thursday, March 27
Due: Stories for workshop #2
Mock Workshop

Tuesday, April 1
Due: Stories for workshop #3
Workshop #1

Thursday, April 3
Due: Stories for workshop #4
Workshop #2
Tuesday, April 8
Due: Stories for workshop #5
Workshop #3
Thursday, April 10
Due: Stories for workshop #6
Workshop #4
Tuesday, April 15
Due: Stories for workshop #7
Workshop #5
Thursday, April 17
Stories due for workshop #8
Workshop #6
Tuesday, April 22
Workshop #7
Thursday, April 24
Workshop #8. Book Review Due.
Tuesday, April 29
Burroway, Chapter 11: Revision
“Notes on ‘Keith,’” Ron Carlson
“Keith,” Ron Carlson
Thursday, May 1
Small Group Revision Workshop.
Tuesday, May 6
Small Group Revision Workshop.
Thursday, May 8: Last day of class. Story due.
Book Review Assignment

When I began to write fiction as an undergraduate, one of the greatest challenges I faced was a lack of knowledge of which contemporary writers I should read or even which writers I might consider reading. [Remember, this was before the Internet became a regular feature of our lives—before Yahoo! and Amazon’s ListMania and Google. Yes, I am that old.] There were those established writers who had found their way into the canon and whose stories I could find in anthologies, but I wanted also to read writers who were writing and publishing now, who were—relatively speaking—my immediate predecessors (at least, that was my hope). My undergraduate institution had (and still has) an exceptionally good reading series, and though I attended occasionally, when I look back at the roster of those whom I missed, I want to flog myself. So, in part, this assignment seeks to expose you to a wide variety of contemporary literary writers whose works might be worth your consideration—as a writer, not just as a reader.

The assignment also reflects my belief that writers should be readers and should be aware of both the tradition in which they work (why you should read those “classic” short stories) and the times in which they work (which includes not just the world around you, but the literary world around you). While I don’t believe writers should obsess about other writers, I think it is important to understand the relationship between your own work and the work of others and to know what has been done and what is being done.

To these ends, over the course of the semester, you will provide the class with a book review. You will select a collection of short stories by a contemporary author, read those stories, and then write a 3-4 page review. The review should be written from a writer’s perspective and should address such issues as narrative techniques (use of structure, point of view, humor, character development, etc.), prose style, and themes. In short, why should a writer read the collection? What might a writer learn from these stories?

Without engaging in a discussion of the canon (old, new, or otherwise) or of the politics of publishing or of high culture versus low culture, I offer a list of contemporary short story writers (and novelists) who have found some degree of critical success. I’ve tried to keep those authors included on the younger side of the scale though I didn’t bother to check I.D.’s. The list is far from exhaustive and I will consider other suggestions. Hopefully this list serves as a good starting point.

Lorrie Moore  Ryan Harty  Nell Freudenberg  Edwidge Danticat
Junot Diaz  Mary Yukari-Waters  Michael Martone  Wendy Rawlings
Nathan Englander  Louise Erdrich  Anthony Doerr  Alice Munro
David Foster Wallace  Sandra Cisneros  Mary Gaitskill  Chris Offut
Antonya Nelson  Richard Russo  Amy Bloom  Marly Swick
Jhumpa Lahiri  Ron Carlson  T.C. Boyle  Pinckney Benedict
Ha Jin  Barry Udall  Peter Ho Davies  Tony Earley
Rick Moody  Matthew Klam  Bharti Mukharjee  C.E. Povern
Kevin Brockmeier  Jennifer Egan  Lee K. Abbott  Alice Munro
Ron Carlson  Melanie Rae Thon  Barry Hannah  Richard Ford
Ethan Canin  Edward P. Jones  Andre Dubus  Tobias Wolff
Charles Baxter  Robert Boswell  Judith Ortiz Cofer  Rick Bass
Gish Jen  Russell Banks  Dagoberto Gilb  Thom Jones
Jamaica Kincaid  Stuart Dybek  Annie Proulx  Amy Tan
Helena M. Viramontes  Richard Bausch  Lan Samantha Chang  George Saunders
Anna Castillo  ZZ Packer  Denis Johnson  Dan Chaon
A.M. Homes  Margaret Atwood  Michael Chabon  Elizabeth McCracken
Christie Hodgen  John McNally  Sherman Alexie  Dan Chaon
Trudy Lewis  Joan Silber  Erin McGraw  Julie Orringer
Anthony Varallo  Brock Clarke  Steve Almond  Daniel Wallace

Note: Authors will be assigned on a first-come, first-serve basis. When selecting a specific book by an author, be certain to select a collection of short stories (and not a novel or collection of essays or poems).