

English 311
Fiction Writing
W/F, 2:20-3:30
Spring 2006

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and by appointment.

Course Goals and Structure

English 311, Fiction Writing, will provide (a) an in-depth study of the genre of narrative fiction, and (b) a workshop setting for practice in the writing of fiction, specifically the short story. Students enrolled in this course should be prepared to do a substantial amount of reading, discussing, writing, and rewriting; I really believe that you will not produce work of any significance without engaging fully in *all* of these tasks. In the words of John Gardner, author of *The Art of Fiction*:

. . . in order to achieve mastery [the student writer] must read widely and deeply and must write not just carefully but continually, thoughtfully assessing and reassessing what he [sic] writes, because practice, for the writer as for the concert pianist, is the heart of the matter. Though the literary dabbler may write a fine story now and then, the true writer is one for whom technique has become, as it is for the pianist, second nature. Ordinarily this means university education, with courses in the writing of fiction, and poetry as well. Some important writers have said the opposite--for instance, Ernest Hemingway, who is quoted as having said that the way for a writer to learn his craft is to go away and write. Hemingway, it may help to remember, went away for free "tutorials" to two of the finest teachers then living, Sherwood Anderson and Gertrude Stein. (Vintage 1991, page 9)

You will, then, read, discuss, and write about various writers' ideas on the art of fiction, as well as a range of fine examples of narrative fiction from Joyce Carol Oates's anthology *Telling Stories*. You will produce a body of short pieces, including one full-length short story--in both preliminary and revised drafts; this material will be presented to, and evaluated by, the instructor in midterm and final portfolios. You will share your work with others in the class and respond to one another's work with seriousness and careful attention. You will participate in a full-class workshop during the final three weeks of classes and in a full-class reading during the week of final exams. And you will write regularly in a Writer's Notebook, recording thoughts and reactions to assigned reading for this course, in- and out-of-class writing exercises, and any other material that strikes you as relevant to your own writing. In other words, you will begin to engage in the slow, ongoing, and deeply rewarding process of exploring the writing of fiction; your goal will be enhanced skills and understanding, not ultimate mastery. To quote Gardner again, "Mastery is not something that strikes in an instant, like a thunderbolt, but a gathering power that moves steadily through time, like weather" (15).

Required Texts and Materials

Kercheval, Jesse Lee. *Building Fiction: How to Develop Plot and Structure*. U of Wisconsin Press, 2003.

Oates, Joyce Carol, ed. *Telling Stories: An Anthology for Writers*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1998.

Ohlin, Alix. *The Missing Person*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

Photocopying of (a) one first draft during Week 3, 5, or 8 and (b) final revised story for full-class workshop sessions during Weeks 13-14.

Handouts provided by instructor and materials placed on reserve in Reeves Library, as needed.

Attendance Policy, and a Note on Plagiarism

We will meet twice a week (sometimes only once a week) for fourteen weeks; that isn't much time when you consider all we have to do. If you are serious about writing, you will show up on time, every time. More than two absences (excused or unexcused) will automatically lower your final grade by one-third. Your grade will drop an additional one-third for any additional unexcused absence (anything other than a medical excuse or a required activity for another course). I am serious about this.

I would hope that it goes without saying that any work you submit for this course must be your own; to plagiarize in an upper-level writing course is to convey a shocking disrespect for writers and their work. Refer to the College's policy on academic honesty (available in the Student Handbook, both print and online) for any needed clarification.

Small Groups, Full-Class Workshops, Writing Center Visits, Individual Conferences

We will negotiate the formation of small groups in class. For every assigned first draft that you write for this class (a total of four pieces), you will receive immediate feedback from a small group of your peers, plus a written response from one group member. In addition, you will receive full-class (plus instructor) workshop feedback for one of these first drafts. Finally, you will receive full-class (plus instructor) workshop feedback for a revised, full-length short story during the last two weeks of the course. Remember, too, that you are welcome to schedule an individual conference with me at any time. Also remember that there are fine readers of your work available to you at any time, in the College Writing Center.

Evaluation*

*Remember that English Track 3 (Writing) majors must submit formal portfolios of their work for various courses during the Spring semester of their junior year. If you are a Writing track major, then, you should get in the habit of retaining various drafts of assignments from all your writing classes.

Midterm Portfolio (35% of final grade)--due Friday, February 24:

- A. First-person exploration: first and revised drafts
- B. Editor's response to group member's first-person exploration (min. 1 page)
- C. Third-person exploration OR Reappropriation: first and revised drafts

- D. Editor's response to group member's third-person exploration or reappropriation (min. 1 page)
- E. Self-assessment/explanation of revision choices (min. 2 pages)
- F. Writer's Responses: Minimum 3 total pages in response to *The Missing Person* (minimum one page due during Week 2, Week 4, and Week 6).

Final Portfolio (45% of final grade)--due Friday, April 28:

- A. Short Short Story (maximum five pages): first and revised drafts
- B. Editor's response to group member's short short story (min. 1 page)
- C. Longer Story (minimum seven pages): first and revised drafts
- D. Editor's response to group member's longer story (min. 1 page)
- E. Self-assessment/explanation of revision choices (min. 2 pages)
- F. Writer's Responses: Minimum four total pages: minimum 3 pages on stories from Oates, Part VIII (due during Week 10); minimum one page on experimental fiction (due during week 13).

Participation (20% of final grade):

- A. Class discussions
- B. Workshop groups
- C. Notes in response to featured writers' work during Workshop weeks
- D. Final, full-class workshop sessions and final full-class reading
- E. Engagement during Alix Ohlin's class visit on Fri., Feb. 24.

Schedule

Week 1 (1/18, 1/20)

- Wed. Introductions, discussion of syllabus, etc.; reading and discussion of Chekhov's "The Student" (p. 7 in Oates) in class
- Fri. Oates, Introduction; Martin (72), Wilson (75)
Kercheval, Introduction and ch. 1; recommended exercises: 1-2 on pp. 10-11, and at least four of remaining exercises.

Week 2 (1/25, 1/27)

- Wed. Kercheval, ch. 4; recommended exercises: 7-9 on p. 61 Tallent (54), Viramontes (628), Banks (654), Moore (147)
- Fri. Ohlin, chs. 1-6 (pp. 1-90); writer's response due.
Discussion of first-person exploration; in-class writing
Setting up of small groups and procedures.

Week 3 (2/1, 2/3)

- Wed. Small-group Workshop 1: First-person exploration
- & Fri.

Week 4 (2/8, 2/10)

- Wed. Ohlin, chs. 7-15 (pp. 91-212); writer's response due.
Kercheval, ch. 3; recommended exercises: 1-4 on p. 43

- Fri. Hebrew Bible (203) and Ostriker (206); Ovid (218) and Ellison (221); Grimm's Fairy Tales (222) and Carter (225); McCullers (111); Mansfield (440)
Discussion of third-person exploration and reappropriation; in-class Writing.
- Week 5 (2/15, 2/17)
Wed. Small-group Workshop 2: Third-Person Exploration or Reappropriation
& Fri.
- Week 6 (2/22, 2/24)
Wed. Ohlin, chs. 16-22 (pp. 213-292); writer's response due
Fri. Class visit by Alix Ohlin, followed by reading
Midterm Portfolios due.
- Week 7 (3/1, 3/3—no class; conferences on Thursday, 3/2 and Friday, 3/3 as needed)
Wed. Kercheval, ch. 2; recommended exercise: 5 on page 21
Oates, Part I (pp. 3-5); Davis (46), Borowski (32), Gordimer (39), Dybek (57)
Discussion of short short story; in-class writing.
- SPRING BREAK**
- Week 8 (3/15, 3/17)
Wed. Small-group Workshop 3: Short Short Story (max. 5 pages)
& Fri. Selection of stories from Oates, Part VIII for Weeks 9-10.
- Week 9 (3/22, 3/24)
Wed. Kercheval, ch. 8; recommended exercises: 1-2 on p. 129
Stories from Oates, Part VIII (as assigned)
Fri. Stories from Oates, Part VIII (as assigned)
Discussion of longer story; in-class writing.
- Week 10 (3/29, 3/31)
Wed. Stories from Oates, Part VIII (as assigned)
In-class reading and discussion of final, longer story openings
Fri. Kercheval, ch. 9 (handout); recommended exercises: 1-5 on pp. 142-143
Oates, Part IV (pp. 179-198)
Writer's responses on Part VIII stories due.
- Week 11 (4/5, 4/7)
Wed. Small-group Workshop 4: Longer short story (min. 7 pages)
& Fri.
- Week 12 (4/12, 4/14—no class)
Wed. Kercheval, ch. 12 (handout); Calvino (35 and 37), Borges (277), Updike (295), Barthelme (475), Lightman (60), Frazier (588)

Distribution of stories and scheduling for full-class workshop sessions.

Week 13 (4/19, 4/21)

Wed. Writer's responses on experimental fiction due.
Full-class workshop
Fri. Full-class workshop.

Week 14 (4/26, 4/28)

Wed. Full-class workshop
Fri. Course evaluations
Final Portfolios due.*

*Note that writers whose work is discussed on Wed., 4/26 may turn in their portfolios by noon on Monday, 5/1.

Final Exams Week: Required Full-Class Reading in *The Doghouse* (to be scheduled).