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ENG 5020-001: Graduate Workshop in Creative Writing: Fiction

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SYLLABUS
English 5020, Section 001, Spring 2010
Graduate Workshop in Creative Writing – Fiction
Wednesdays 7:00–9:30pm, Coleman 3159, EIU

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(for questions only; do not e-mail assignments without my permission)

Objectives

This class assumes that students already have an advanced understanding of and practice in fiction writing, and that they are serious and active writers of prose fiction. The course requires students to produce and revise a significant amount of original creative fiction, either short stories or chapters of a novel, with a goal of balancing experimentation, generation, and revision. However, writing is not the only requirement of this class. The desire to write often develops from a need to connect; as such, students must also examine and discuss contemporary works of fiction in terms of their craft; provide substantive and constructive critiques of their peers’ writing; and participate in creative writing-related events in the community.

Grading Breakdown

You may have heard about the “three R’s,” that ancient formula for three key areas of studies: “reading, ’riting, and ’rithmetic.” Yeah, I know: pretty lame. Nevertheless, this class will update those three R’s, in a way that is appropriate for a graduate creative writing course, by stressing reading, ’riting (couldn’t do anything about that one) and “relating” (it sounds all touchy-feely, but it works, sort of). The percentage of the final grade for each area is noted below, and this syllabus will go into excruciating detail about each as well.

- Reading15%
- Writing.....45%
- “Relating”—workshop.....30%
- “Relating”—event participation.....10%

(Note that these percentages are strictly relevant to this class; in “real life,” reading would command the greatest emphasis. You can be a reader without being a writer; you cannot be a writer without being a reader—why would you even want to?)

Reading

We will be reading four books this semester, two novels and two collections of stories. You will be responsible for finishing each book by the date noted in the schedule. We will have various activities in class related to these texts. Do the reading. There’s not much more to be said here.

Writing

You will each produce 100 pages of prose fiction this semester. That's right, one hundred. I am not kidding. The 100 pages will be divided into three areas: Experimentation, Revision, and Generation. It is up to you how many pages you allocate to each area (though you must produce something for each area), and there are no page restrictions other than the 100 page total. Here are detailed descriptions of each area:

Experimentation

One of the problems with sharing stories in a writing workshop is that it can sometimes make writers too aware of audience reception, which can sometimes stunt our more creative, risk-taking impulses. We all want to be taken seriously as writers, and while we appreciate honest, helpful feedback on our work (none of that hand-holding sugar-coated "it was good, I liked it" crap you get in intro courses), we also don't exactly want to get eviscerated by our peers. As a result, we may only workshop stories about which we feel reasonably secure—and, eventually, we may end up only writing stories about which we feel the same. Another problem with the traditional workshop is that typically the author is not allowed to speak until everyone is finished commenting. There are good reasons for this—it forces the writer to listen and encourages the class to give uncensored critiques—but I can appreciate the frustration of not getting to "defend" your work, and I suspect that this might also contribute to writers not wanting to take more risks in the writing they do for class.

The Experimentation writing you do for class is meant to curb some of these risk-averse tendencies. Your Experimentation writing will be workshopped, but rather than sitting there in silence while we rip it to shreds, you will first get the opportunity to talk about the work yourself. Specifically, you will 1) discuss what you wanted to do with your Experimentation writing and why, and 2) create a writing "challenge" for the other writers in the class based on the challenges you gave yourself for this work. We will discuss ideas for experimentation in class; the main idea is to get out of your comfort zone and surprise yourself with your own writing.

Your Experimentation writing can be either a short story or a chapter, and it should be complete and self-contained (meaning that if you provide a chapter, it should be one that can be workshopped on its own, not one that contains so many references to past chapters that it becomes nearly incomprehensible). The grade on your Experimentation writing is based equally on 1) what goals and challenges you set for yourself in your writing, and 2) how you met those goals and challenges.

Revision

Many creative writing instructors admonish students not to hand in work that they have already completed before the start of the class. While there are obvious reasons why this makes sense as a rule, I do find that a lot of students sincerely want feedback on their existing writing and really would benefit from helpful critiques. At the same time, there are also students who simply want to be praised and have no intention of making any changes to their work. The point of this class

isn't to determine whether you're a good writer or not; the point of this and any creative writing class is to continue to develop your writing. As such, the Revision portion of this class allows you to use work that you have already written before the start of this semester (though it can also consist of new work you write during the semester if you prefer).

Here's the main thing: you *must* revise the work you submit for this portion of your writing. In fact, the page count for this area solely comes from the revision, not the original. In other words, if you write a 15 page story for the workshop, you will be expected to write a revision of that story; if the revision is also 15 pages, your page count is 15, not 30, and you still need to produce 85 pages that come from your Experimentation and Generation works.

I put no restrictions on how much revision you need to do; the point of revision is what *you* as the author feel you needed to do. As such, you will be required to write a brief (a page or so), informal discussion of what you did for your revision and why. Your Revision is due one week after it is workshopped (in other words, the following class).

Your Revision writing can be either a short story or a chapter, and it should be complete and self-contained (meaning that if you provide a chapter, it should be one that can be workshopped on its own, not one that contains so many references to past chapters that it becomes nearly incomprehensible). The grade on your Revision writing is based on what you did in the revision (rather than the original) as well as your informal discussion.

Generation

The remainder of your 100 pages falls under the heading "generation." In other words, if you write a 10-page story for your Experimentation work and a 20-page chapter for your Revision work, you'll need to produce 70 pages of Generation writing. Don't freak; it's a lot easier, a lot more fun, and a lot more useful than it may seem.

The point of the Generation portion of your writing is, as the name suggests, to generate writing: lots and lots and lots of it, page after page after page. We're talking quantity here, not quality. If you are familiar with NaNoWriMo, you'll understand what I'm getting at. (I'll explain what that means right now, verbally, before we continue. There, I've done it; now we can continue.)

The generation writing you do will *not* be workshopped; rather, you will discuss the work in an individual conference with me at the end of the semester, during exam week. You can turn in your Generation portfolio at any point in the semester when you have met the page requirement; you do not have to wait until the end of the semester, though you do have until the last class (April 30).

Your Generation writing will not be graded on content *at all*; rather, it will be graded objectively, on whether you in fact made the 100 page total. In other words, you have absolute free license to simply sit down and write absolute garbage until you hit page 100. Really. In fact, I *encourage* this. What's the value in such an exercise? Well, for one thing, you'll have a hundred pages of completely new and original writing. That's no small accomplishment. This is particularly useful if you are writing a novel, because sometimes the sheer amount of writing that goes into a

novel can seem daunting until you just start writing, but it is also useful in general because the goal here is to force yourself to write. It doesn't matter how many splendid ideas you have for stories dancing around in your head if you never get them written down in actual words.

What you do in your Generation writing can be anything you want, though you should try to focus on the creation of prose fiction. You can freewrite, you can jot down ideas for stories or novels, you can dabble in different genres, you can experiment with new techniques, anything. These can be complete or fragmented, and as rough as you like. If you think that writing a nonfiction "journal"-type entry in your own voice will help you produce fiction, that's fine too, though I would caution you against doing too much of this. It won't lower your grade if you do (remember, you aren't being graded on *what* you write for Generation, only on whether you made the page count), but you might not find it all that helpful to your fiction writing. Then again, you just might—that's up to you to figure out. We will discuss some possibilities in class.

The one thing you absolutely cannot do for your Generation writing is use anything you've written before this semester; it all must be new. You have *nothing* to lose here, and a lot to gain, and I cannot believe that anyone, even a grad student, is so incredibly busy that you wouldn't take the small amount of time required to fulfill this part of the class as specified. In other words, don't be a schmuck; do the writing.

"Relating"

Nobody writes in a vacuum; it's too noisy and the dust gets in your eyes. OK, I meant the metaphorical kind of vacuum, not a Hoover Deluxe, and what I meant by *that* was simply that writing is about connecting. As such, a substantial portion of the course involves interacting with other writers as well as reading before an audience, as detailed here:

Workshopping

Each writer in class will be workshopped twice, once for the Experimentation writing and once for the Revision writing, though the order doesn't matter—that's up to you. I will provide a sign-up sheet for you to pick a date to be workshopped; if you know you already have something ready to go, I encourage you to volunteer to be workshopped early.

You must provide copies of your story/chapter for everyone in the class and me *the class period before you are scheduled to be workshopped*. (I'll provide the total number once the class list is set.) You *must* bring in copies; emailing is not acceptable because I've found that too many people don't bother to print out hard copies of stories that are emailed to them—and hard copies are essential (it has been proven time and again that we read less thoroughly on a screen than on a page). If you don't bring in copies, your story will not be workshopped; moreover, your grade on that story/chapter will be dropped one full grade (that is, from A to B, A- to B-, etc.). This may sound excessively harsh, but the point is simply that there is no way around this—the workshop cannot function without these copies.

For every story/chapter that is workshopped, everyone in the class (other than the author) must read the work thoroughly and write a detailed, substantive, constructive critique of roughly one

to two pages. You should also make comments on the pages of the story itself as appropriate so that you can point to specific areas of interest. Print TWO copies of your critique—one, attached to the story, will go to the author, and the other will go to me. We will discuss as a class what criteria should be addressed in these critiques.

Workshopping is a huge part of this course in part because at the advanced level many writers need feedback on their writing more than anything else. It is in everyone's best interest to take workshops seriously, not just because they account for 30% of your grade (in terms of both your written comments and your discussion in class), but because your contributions to a lively and insightful discussion are necessary to make the class interesting and effective.

Event Participation

Writing isn't just about words on a printed page. Writing is borne out of a need to communicate, and communication doesn't just occur between individuals but among communities (hence the common root word). You are right now part of a unique community of writers the likes of which you will likely never find again once you graduate, and as such it might be a good idea to explore just what this community can offer you—as well as what you can offer it.

For your "Event Participation," you will be required to attend or create at least two different writing-related events this semester. These can be readings, workshops, or other activities; they can EIU events, they can be events in Charleston, or they can be events that take place elsewhere (including creative writing conferences that you attend or participate in). Note that I said "attend or create": you can decide to organize a reading event yourself as one possibility. For each event you will need to write up a brief description and commentary (2-3 pages) about the event, with particular attention paid to discussing the impact the event had on you and others, and how it might contribute (or not) to a writing community.

Note that I'm not looking for fake answers about how you got a warm, fuzzy glow from hearing Mr. Famous Author read his work; in fact, I'm not "looking" for *anything* myself. The point of this assignment is for *you* to reflect on the experience. You may decide that you find readings disappointing and unhelpful to you as a writer because authors are never as exciting in person as they seem to be on the page. Or you may realize that hearing Famous Author give vague, mumbly, rehearsed-sounding answers to questions made you realize that you should work harder on your own Q&A skills for when you hit the big time. That's up to you.

Other important stuff to note about writing

This should be obvious, but I'll say it anyway, as it always somehow manages to elude some folks: *everything* you hand in for this class should be typed and printed, using a reasonable font and reasonable margins, double-spaced, with your name on the first page, all pages stapled or clipped together, all pages numbered. I reserve the right to refuse to accept any piece of writing that doesn't follow these very basic criteria (which you should have mastered sometime way back in the last millennium), as well as other unstated criteria that should be common sense.

One additional, important note: for the stories you have workshopped, please be sure to note whether it is your Revision work or your Experimentation work (you can just write the appropriate word under your name on the first page).

Attendance

As much as is humanly and reasonably possible, don't miss class. It's that simple. Each period isn't just one class; it's a week's worth of classes. Moreover, some aspects of this class simply cannot be made up if you miss them unless you have a time machine; for instance, if you miss a workshop, you can certainly email the written comments to me that night, but there is no way you can contribute to the discussion if you aren't physically present. The reasons why you are absent don't change anything, not even if these reasons are things beyond your control (illness, weather, car breakdown, etc.). Don't misunderstand me: I am certainly not advocating that you come to class if you have a fever of a hundred and five. My point is this: if you miss class, rather than expending energy on a detailed account of why you were absent and how sorry you are, skip all that. Instead, make sure you take care of whatever can be made up yourself; don't expect me to tell you how you can "make up" for your absence.

Second-to-last note

This syllabus is not an all-encompassing contract, and by that I mean that you are still accountable for items not mentioned here that fall under the heading of "common sense."

Final note

Syllabi are some of the least creative writing in existence, so please don't imagine that this class is all about rules and page counts and grading criteria. Simply put, I love to teach creative writing, and I'm thrilled to be able to spend a semester working with a group of serious writers, so I hope you will be equally thrilled from start to finish.

Basic schedule, subject to change as necessary

January 12: Introductions; syllabus; writing and discussion activities

January 19: Ron Hansen, *Mariette in Ecstasy*

January 26: Gerard Donovan, *Julius Winsome*

February 2: Workshop 1, 2, 3

February 9: Workshop 4, 5, 6

February 16: Workshop 7, 8, 9

February 23: Workshop 10, 11; writing activities

March 2: Workshop 12, 13; discussion about publishing

March 9: Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About...*

March 16: Spring Break; no class

March 23: Lydia Peelle, *Reasons for...*

March 30: Workshop 1, 2, 3

April 6: Workshop 4, 5, 6

April 13: Workshop 7, 8, 9

April 20: Workshop 10, 11; discussion of reading/writing events (all event write-ups due)

April 27: Workshop 12, 13; Generation Portfolio due; final wrap-up