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ENG 2007-001

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SYLLABUS

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Required Texts: Burroway, Writing Fiction, third edition (WF)
Proulx, ed., Best American Short Stories, 1997 (BA)
Dozois, ed., The Year's Best Science Fiction (SF)

Course requirements: regular class attendance and participation; assigned readings in the texts; very careful reading of work by other students; assigned exercises in workbook; three short stories of about 1200-2500 words each, the first two of these to be distributed for class discussion; optional rewrite of first or second story, with new grade replacing the old. The three stories will count for about 60% of the final grade, the workbook for about 25%, participation and intangibles about 15%. I reserve the right to depart somewhat from these percentages.

Exercises may serve "double duty"--i.e., be revised and handed in as stories.

The textbook. Burroway's Writing Fiction is a comprehensive, readable, wise how-to manual for fiction writers. Liberal chunks of it have been included in the assigned readings, and the book is certain to be helpful—eventually—to anyone who does the readings faithfully. There will not be much time, however, for direct discussion of Burroway's advice, as we need to devote precious class time to more focused exercises: writing, brainstorming, critiquing one another's work, arguing about published stories. But please do this part of the reading patiently and carefully; eventually you will start seeing some important connections and your writing will benefit from it.

The workbook. Will be a place where important basic exercises are done all semester long, and where (with luck) many stories start. Please be aware, though, that your workbook can be very difficult to read and evaluate unless you take special pains to keep it organized. Accordingly, please observe the following guidelines, on pain of a horrible, lingering death:

**Use a pocket folder, NOT a spiral notebook, NOT a loose leaf binder, so that you and I can conveniently resuffle assignments.

**Write your name in large, clear letters on both the inside and the outside of the folder.

**Type every assignment. In-class writings done by hand will often serve as drafts for assigned exercises, but should then be typed up out of class, with revisions as you see fit. If you want to keep the handwritten version, store it elsewhere—NOT in this folder.

**Make sure every assignment has a heading, a date, and your name. I will not read or give credit for entries that lack headings.

**Use one pocket of your workbook for reading responses, the other for exercises. Label each pocket. Within each pocket, arrange all assignments chronologically, earliest to latest. (The most recent work should be on top.)

**Reading responses will consist of brief essays (about 2-300 words) on assigned works given in boldface in the schedule below. Their purpose is to ensure that you do the reading, and to stimulate a thoughtful response to it. The schedule gives further guidelines for each essay.

**Exercises are creative projects that try to a) drill you in fairly specific skills needed by fiction writers; b) stimulate story ideas. With luck some of these will "take off" and turn into stories, and you are welcome to turn in the same prose twice, though of course extensive revisions should normally take place between the workbook stage and the finished-story stage. The schedule lists only titles or brief descriptions for each exercise; more detailed explanation will be given in class.
**INCLUDE NOTHING ELSE IN THE WORKBOOK.** No class notes, no xeroxes, no scratch paper, no handwritten first drafts of stories or exercises. Just the reading responses and the exercises, neatly arranged.

**Keep your workbook up to date, as I will be collecting it frequently during the semester, not always with much advance notice. Due dates are listed in the schedule, but will be shifted around rather frequently: be alert for such announcements.**

**STORIES.** Should be the fruit of long and thoughtful revision—third or fourth drafts, put into the very best form you can manage at the moment, though subject (of course) to further revision should you have new ideas after workshop discussion. Grading will be "holistic"—a single grade, based on the overall aesthetic success of your story, as best I can estimate it. But this does NOT mean we will or can overlook sloppiness in the basic writing. Clear and articulate writing at the sentence level is a must (yes, even for first-person stories in dialect) because everything starts there.

**MANUSCRIPT FORM.** All assignments must be typewritten. Workshop stories should be SINGLE-SPACED (to save copying expense), and you must provide multiple copies—one for each member of the class. Skip an extra space between paragraphs when single spacing (as I am doing on this page). The final story will not go into workshop, so it should be DOUBLE SPACED, and no extra copies will be necessary. Ditto for rewrites. Omit extra spacing between paragraphs on double-spaced manuscripts.

Whenever you hand in something you prefer not to have read by the rest of the class, write "DR" ("don't read") at the top of the first page. Anything else is fair game, and I will assume that I have your permission to copy it and hand it out to the class.

**ATTENDANCE POLICY.** Attendance and participation are key aspects of your performance in English 2007. Accordingly, I will take attendance (by means of a sign-up sheet) every session. The resulting record, adjusted slightly for the quality of your class participation, will be used to figure a participation grade equal to about 15% of the final grade for the course. Scale for the participation grade: 0-2 absences = A, 3 = B, 4 = C, 5 = D, 6 = F; more than 6—every absence will lower the course GPA by approximately fifteen percent.

Note that you have 3-4 "free" absences. Use these if you have to, but otherwise keep them as insurance. I will listen sympathetically to excuses, but I will not normally award attendance credit for any session that you have missed. In truly exceptional circumstances, however, when you really can't be blamed for missing either the free days or days beyond that, I MAY be willing to assign difficult and challenging make-up work for attendance credit. See me if you prefer make-up work to taking the absence. (Hint: It's easier just to be here. Honest.) Note: it is your responsibility to find and sign the attendance sheet at each session.

**LATE WORK.** Always get in touch with me BEFORE the deadline if you expect to be late with an assignment. Often I will grant extensions for valid reasons. Otherwise late work will be penalized one full grade for each calendar day of lateness. Pick up the phone, dial my number, and save yourself from this demoralizing fate.

**MISCELLANEOUS.** There will be no final examination.

Please make a habit of bringing this syllabus to class, as it will be adjusted rather frequently during the semester.
SCHEDULE

NOTE: PLEASE COMPLETE ALL READINGS BY THE BEGINNING OF THE WEEK IN WHICH THEY ARE ASSIGNED. BE SURE TO READ THE STORIES INCLUDED IN THE CHAPTERS IN WF WHEN THEY ARE SPECIFICALLY SCHEDULED FOR DISCUSSION; OTHERWISE THEY ARE OPTIONAL. EXERCISES SHOULD BE DONE BY MONDAY OF THE WEEK AFTER THEY ARE ASSIGNED.

1) January 11-15


READING RESPONSE: What are the chief sources of conflict in "Under the Pitons," and what possible outcomes do we envision at different points in the story? Consider both external conflict (between and among characters and circumstances) and internal (in the characters' natures or psyches).

EXERCISE: In the first person, write a reminiscence of a time, a place, or an action that comes from at least five years back in your past. Make the reader aware of the lapse in time that separates the narration "now" and the experience itself. Feel free to fictionalize and invent. OR: In the first-person, confess to the commission of some evil or illegal or shameful act. Feel VERY free to fictionalize and invent.

OTHER: Be thinking about topic for 1st story.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: The writing process. The rhetoric of beginnings. Tell story in class.

2) January 19-22

(No class on Monday)


READING RESPONSE: How do you like this story? Why? What works and does not work for you?

EXERCISE: Five days of consecutive daily entries, 75-200 words per day, January 20-25. Some suggested topics: reminiscence of a time, place, event or person from your past; commentary on an event from the news—your sense of how such a thing could happen; a list of 20 details that define you as a person; 3rd-person description of someone performing a skilled activity you are proficient in; five strong sensations or images from the past 2-3 days of your experience; a suicide note; an overheard dialogue; interesting information. To be avoided: factual summaries and diary-style entries.

OTHER: Begin Story #1 whenever you feel ready.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Sensory detail; information versus experience; concrete language; imagery and metaphor. Readings from the workbooks.

3) January 25-29


READING RESPONSE: Discuss the importance of particular details in the characterizations of Connie and of Arnold Friend. What do specific items of clothing, speech, history, etc. tell us about each character?

EXERCISE: In-class, paint-by-numbers story, revised out of class.

OTHER: Begin Story # 1.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Story form and structure. Narrative passages and scenes; chronological vs. topical organization.

4) February 1-5

READING: WF, Chapter 6, pages 181-87 only; Chapter 7, including "Girl," Kincaid, WF223 and "Hips," Cisneros, 225.

READING RESPONSE: None. (See next week.)

EXERCISE: Capture a voice in a sketch of at least 3-400 words.

OTHER: Write and revise Story # 1.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Distance and empathy in first-person narration. Point of view.

5) February 8-12


READING RESPONSE: In the three stories "Girl," "Hips," and "The Point"—perhaps especially the last of these—analyze in some detail the author's choice of diction. How do the expressions used by the narrator establish his or her character? Be specific.

EXERCISE: None.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Point of view. Story conferences as needed.
6) February 15-19

READING RESPONSE: None.
EXERCISE: None.
OTHER: STORY #1 DUE—IN MULTIPLE COPIES.
TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Workshop.

7) February 22-26

READING RESPONSE: None.
EXERCISE: Character sketches; 2-3 strangers observed on the sly, about 150 words each. Plus: a character study profiling someone you know well, filled with the concrete details that show who this person is; about 250 words.
OTHER: Begin Story #2 when you feel ready.
TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Workshop; assigned stories.

8) March 1-5

READING RESPONSE: Analyze the control of point of view in two out of three of: "Eternal Love," "Very Old Man With . . .," and "Gryphon." For two of the three stories, choose a specific passage, copy it verbatim, then discuss how particular word choices used to describe something or someone convey a vivid sense, not just of the thing seen, but of the person seeing.
EXERCISE: None.
OTHER: Begin Story # 2 when you feel ready.

9) March 8-12

READING RESPONSE: None.
EXERCISE: Visualize a moment of intense grief, shame, anger, or emotional hurt from your past. Then sketch the moment as fully and thoroughly as possible without ever once making direct reference to any emotion, or relying on obvious physical cues (tears trickling down cheeks, long sighs, etc.) to evoke emotion. Concentrate instead on capturing the physical details that define the moment, bringing in background as relevant. Continue the sketch for about 500 words, letting it begin to turn into a story if it seems to want to.
OTHER: Work on Story # 2.
TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Assigned stories. Conflict in characters; character presentation.

SPRING RECESS, MARCH 13-21

10) March 22-26

READING RESPONSE: Write tight, vivid, readable capsule summaries, 1-2 paragraphs each, of "Ralph the Duck," "Even the Queen," and "Snodgrass." In each case, give a reader who has not read the story a clear sense of its tone and content.
EXERCISE: None.
OTHER: STORY # 2 DUE—IN MULTIPLE COPIES.
TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Science Fiction and genre writing.
11) March 29-April 2
  **READING:** Stories for Workshop discussion.
  **READING RESPONSE:** None.
  **EXERCISE:** Write a summary in which a substantial bit of time—hours or days—passes quickly, in 1-3 paragraphs; followed by a scene in which time is suspended for an opening description, then moves slowly forward for 1-2 pages. Include dialogue in the scene, and make the scene a continuation of the summary.
  **TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION:** Workshop.

12) April 5-9
  **READING:** "A Small, Good Thing," Carver, WF 344. Stories for Workshop discussion.
  **READING RESPONSE:** None.
  **EXERCISE:** In the third-person, write a scene based on an ordinary, not obviously dramatic moment in your recent personal experience. Stick as closely as you can to the facts, but lend interest to the action by filling in interesting, appropriate background.
  **OTHER:** Begin Story # 3.
  **TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION:** Workshop.

13) April 12-16
  **READING:** Edgerton, "Send Me To the Electric Chair," BA215; "Shipmates Down Under," BA 273.
  **READING RESPONSE:** Write an imitation or parody of one of the three stories: "A Small, Good Thing," "Send Me To the Electric Chair," or "Shipmates Down Under." About 500 words.
  **EXERCISE:** None.
  **OTHER:** Work on optional rewrites. Write and revise Story #3.
  **TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION:** Workshop and assigned story.

14) April 19-23
  **READING:** WF, Chapter 11. "Powder," Wolf, BA301.
  **WORKBOOK DUE.**
  **LAST DAY FOR OPTIONAL REWRITES.**
  **TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION:** Revision and editing; style and voice.

15) April 26-30
  Review and catch-up.
  **STORY #3 DUE.**
  Group reading.