Fall 8-15-2002

ENG 2007-002: Creative Writing: Fiction

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Eastern Illinois University

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English 2007-002
Creative Writing: Fiction
Fall, 2002
TR 2-3:15, Coleman Hall 3139
Prof. Kilgore

Next Class: Read Burroway, Chapter 1.

Last update 8/20/02

SYLLABUS

Course Description: An introductory, workshop-style class primarily devoted to discussion of the students' own work. Early on the approach will be fairly prescriptive, with discussion of model stories and blunt how-to advice on plot, character, style, and narrative form. Later on, in very careful discussion of stories by class members, we'll appreciate and applaud what works, then try to fix what doesn't, finding ways to disagree productively while developing plans for revision. Students will be asked to keep a reading journal, to complete a number of exercises, and to write three stories in all, submitting two of these for workshop discussion. Attendance and participation will be very important. Prerequisite: English 1002C. A writing-centered course. To access an updated version of this syllabus (if you are seeing it in hard copy), visit my home page at http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/~cfjdk/

Instructor: John Kilgore. Office: 3331 (314K) Coleman Hall. Hours: WF 11-4, TR 12:30-1. Phone: 581-6313 (office), 345-7395 (home). E-mail: cfjdk@eiu.edu. When leaving voice mail at the office, include date and time of call, and do not trust voice mail for urgent messages—try me at home instead.

Required Texts:

Burroway, Writing Fiction, fifth edition (WF)
Kenison & Tan, eds., Best American Short Stories, 2001 (BSS)
Dozois, ed., The Year's Best Science Fiction 18th ed. (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; group exercise; 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 and group exercise 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 activities: 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:

- Use a pocket folder, NOT a spiral notebook, NOT a loose leaf binder, so that you and I can conveniently reshuffle assignments.
- Write your name in large, clear letters on both the inside and the outside of the folder and on every assignment.
- Type every assignment. In-class writings done by hand will sometimes 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 date, your name, and a heading and exercise number drawn from the table below (e.g., “Exercise #1, Reading Response.”). I will not read or give credit for items that lack headings.
- Since I will often collect several assignments at a time, the due dates (see table below) do not always correspond to the pick-up dates. Try hard, nonetheless, to do the assigned writings on schedule. You will get more out of class discussions, and have more to contribute to them, if you do.
- Put new work waiting to be graded in the right-hand pocket of the folder, in chronological order, earliest to latest. Old, already-graded exercises can be stored in the left-hand pouch, together with other class handouts if you like—but you will probably run out of room by about mid-semester. I recommend that you keep a separate folder for handouts and your classmates’ stories. In any case, please be aware that I will read and accept only what is in the right-hand pouch, and that only the exercises that are due belong there. If I have to sort through drafts, class notes, etc. looking for what I am supposed to be reading, I become borderline psychotic and assign grades accordingly.
- Many of the exercises are reading responses, usually consisting of brief essays (about 2-300 words) on assigned works which appear in the schedule below. Their purpose is to ensure a thoughtful, explicit response to the readings. The schedule gives further guidelines for each essay.
- Other 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 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 explanations will be given in class.
- Be alert for announcements of possible changes of due / pick-up dates.

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—two for me, one for every other member of the class. Skip an extra space between paragraphs when single spacing (following the format you see on this page). Please use no fonts smaller than 10 point. The final story will not go into workshop, so it should be DOUBLE-SPACED with twelve-point font, 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. I will feel free to read aloud—or even to copy and distribute—anything you hand in that does not bear this warning, though I will not announce your name in doing so.

**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 discussion, will be used to figure a participation grade equal to about 15% of the final grade for the course. Scale for the participation grade: 0-1 absences = A, 2-3 = B, 4-5 = C, 6-7 = D, 8-10 = F; more than 8—continuing, proportional grade penalties (the attendance grade will become a negative number, averaged into your overall course grade). The effect of this formula, by design, is that perfect or near-perfect attendance will give your grade a healthy boost, while chronic absenteeism will make it impossible for you to pass the course.

**Note that you have 1-2 “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, 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, to make arrangements for make-up work if necessary, and to ascertain that the record has been corrected when the make-up work has been done.

**Late work.** Always get in touch with me BEFORE the deadline if you expect to be late with an assignment; the chances are pretty good that I can grant you a short extension. Otherwise late work will be penalized one grade step (e.g., from B+ to B) for each calendar day of lateness, weekends and holidays included. Pick up the phone, dial my number, and save yourself from this demoralizing fate.

**Miscellaneous.** There will be no midterm or final examination.

I will be more than happy to grant reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Contact me or the Office of Disability Services (581-6583) if you will be needing such an accommodation.

**SCHEDULE**

**Writing Assignments:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>DUE</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>STORIES AND REWRITES:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(For these, hand-in date = due date.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Short Story</td>
<td>10/8; earlier from volunteers.</td>
<td>Multiple copies for workshop discussion.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Second Short Story | 11/5 | Early stories VERY welcome. Hand in multiple copies for workshop discussion.
---|---|---
Optional Rewrite | Th 12/5 | Hand in w/ earlier draft & my comments.
Third Short Story | Th 12/12 | No extra copies; 2-space instead of single.

**WORKBOOK EXERCISES:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exercise #</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
<th>Instructions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1, Reading Response</td>
<td>8/28</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>#2, 6-day Journal</td>
<td>9/2-9/9</td>
<td>Hand in Exercises 1-2 on 9/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3, Reading Response: WF Chapters 1-3 &amp; either Hood or O'Brien.</td>
<td>9/12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4, Paint-By-Numbers Story</td>
<td>9/17</td>
<td>Write in class, revise out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5, Narrative Expansion</td>
<td>9/21</td>
<td>Hand in Exercises 3-5 on 10/1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6, Character Studies</td>
<td>10/17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7, Summaries of all stories chosen by Groups</td>
<td>10/24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8, Review of story chosen for Group</td>
<td>10/31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#9, Parody of story from Group project.</td>
<td>11/7</td>
<td>Hand in exercises 6-9 on 11/2.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reading and Discussion:**

Note: READ AHEAD to make time for writing projects. Be sure to read the stories included in the chapters in WF when they are specifically scheduled for discussion; otherwise they are optional. Exercises are listed the week before they are due. For changes in due dates, which are likely, consult updated version of the above table on the web at [http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/~cfjdk/Litclas/2007/Syl/028.htm](http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/~cfjdk/Litclas/2007/Syl/028.htm). Make a habit of bringing hard copy to class to note other changes.

1) **August 26, 28**

**READING:** WF, Chapters 1-2. Williams, "The Use of Force," WF 42; Sanford, "Nobody Listens When I Talk," BSS 271.

**Exercise #1, Reading Response (about 500 words):**

A) Take a very close look at the beginnings of both Williams' story and Sanford's. In each case, how is it that we immediately understand that we are reading fiction rather than nonfiction? What's different in the prose? Is there a technique or trick for beginning a story that you can spot here? 

B) Write the beginning of a story, one that you have no intention of finishing. Don't decide anything about the characters or the plot. Just "jump in," putting us in the midst of an interesting moment of some kind.

**TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION:** The writing process. The rhetoric of beginnings.

2) **September 3, 5**

**READING:** WF, Chapter 3. O'Brien, "The Things They Carried," WF 67.

**EXERCISE #2, Journal:** Write on six different days during the period 9/2-9/8, about 75-200 words per day. If an entry takes off on you, you may continue it for a maximum of one additional session. Suggested topics: [Feel free to substitute exercises of your

own invention. But the first two here are highly recommended.]

- 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 "then." Feel free to fictionalize and invent.

- Capture in writing the voice of someone you know well. As your speaker narrates some fairly ordinary episode, let his or her character emerge vividly, though perhaps inadvertently, through choice of language and detail.

- In the first-person, confess to the commission of some evil or illegal or shameful act. Feel VERY free to fictionalize and invent.

- Describe some person you dislike, using a made-up name, bringing the portrait to life with significant, vivid detail. Fictionalize as freely as you like.

- In a sketch of at least 100 words, capture the most interesting thing that has happened to you in the last three days. Avoid summary. Tell us nothing that we could infer for ourselves.

- Overhear a dialogue in some public place. Transcribe exactly what you hear. Then edit the transcript and write an imagined continuation of the dialogue. Note: you won't have to overhear much—dialogue fills up the pages in a hurry.

- Remembering that the impact of fiction depends less on what happens than on how vividly that "what" is realized, write something shocking. Write rapidly and continuously for no more than 40 minutes. If you then can't stand to show me the results, file them and hand in something else.

- Picture the worst thing you can imagine happening to you, happening. Write a sketch that makes this horrible fantasy real. Feel better now?

- In the third person, write a detailed sketch describing yourself engaged in some characteristic activity, perhaps a sport or hobby at which you are proficient. Keep to the third person, but get us into the character's point of view, letting us know what "he" or "she" thinks and sees as well as what he is doing.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Invention; showing vs. telling; candor and confidentiality.

3) September 10, 12


Exercise #3, Reading Response: (About 300 words total.) A) Try to summarize in 1-2 sentences each the overall or chief lesson of each of Burroway's first three chapters. B) In a paragraph or two, state your overall response to either O'Brien's story or Hood's. Make this a short but perceptive critical assessment—not a mere expression of personal feelings.

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

OTHER: Begin Story #1 whenever you feel ready.

4) September 17, 19


EXERCISE #4, In-Class Story: In-class, paint-by-numbers story, revised out of class. (Separate instructions will be issued.)

OTHER: Work on Story # 1.

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

5) September 24, 26

READING: WF, Chapter 6, pages 181-87 only; Chapter 7, all (but stories are optional). Wolff, "Bullet in the Brain," WF 190. Moody, "Boys," BSS 146.

EXERCISE #5, Narrative Expansion: Write the same event or sequence of events as A) a sentence; B) a paragraph; C) a sketch of one and a half to two pages.

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

6) October 1, 3


TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Point of view.

7) October 8, 10

READING: Stories for workshop discussion.

STORY #1 DUE–IN MULTIPLE COPIES.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Workshop.

8) October 15, 17

READING: Stories for Workshop discussion.

EXERCISE # 6, Character Sketches: Sketches of 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..

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Workshop.

9) October 22, 24

READING: WF, Chapter 4.

Group Assignment: Meet with Group and read chosen stories. (See separate instructions.)

OTHER: Do exercises associated with Group assignment. Begin Story #2 when you feel ready

10) October 29, 31

READING: WF, Chapter 5. Read stories from Groups other than your own.

OTHER: Exercises from Group assignment.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Finish Group presentations.

11) November 5, 7


OTHER: Exercises from Group assignment.

STORY #2 DUE—IN MULTIPLE COPIES.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Science fiction and genre writing.

12) November 12, 14

READING: Stories for Workshop discussion.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Workshop.

OTHER: Begin Story #3.

13) November 19, 21


TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Workshop.

Thanksgiving Break, November 25-29

14) December 3, 5

READING: story TBA.

OTHER: Work on optional rewrites. Write and revise Story #3.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Workshop and assigned stories.

THURSDAY: LAST DAY FOR OPTIONAL REWRITES

15) December 10, 12

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Revision and editing; style and voice.

STORY #3 DUE—THURSDAY