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ENG 2007-002: Creative Writing

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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. 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: TR 12-2, W 11-3. 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 & Miller, eds., Best American Short Stories, 2002 (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 about 25%, participation and intangibles about 15%. I reserve the right to depart somewhat from these percentages.

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.
- Make sure every assignment has a date, your name, and a heading and exercise number drawn from the table below (e.g., "Exercise #1, Personal Statement."). I will not read or give credit for items that lack headings.
- Since I will collect several assignments at a time, the due dates 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.
- Make a habit of bringing the folder to class with you, as you will have the chance to read from it and get feedback.
- Put new work waiting to be graded in the right-hand pocket of the folder, in chronological order, with the most recent work on top. Old, already-graded exercises can be stored in the left-hand pocket, 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 pocket, and that only the exercises that are due belong there.
- In general the 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.

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. 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. Writing is endless labor (though endless pleasure as well), and publishing writers spend huge amounts of time and energy tinkering, revising, and polishing. They keep dictionaries and other resource books handy and know the rules of grammar (on some level, anyway) even when they decide to break them. Try to follow this example; cultivate your own readiness to take pains.

A word about grading. (Click here for my harangue on the topic.)

MANUSCRIPT FORM. PLEASE NOTE CAREFULLY! 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) in 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= B, 3= C, 4= D, 5= F; more than 5—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 “free” absence. Use this if you have to, but otherwise keep it 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

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.

1) August 26, 28

Exercise # 1, Personal Statement.

2) September 2, 4

EXERCISE #2, Reading Journal.

3) September 9, 11

Exercise #2, Reading Journal & Personal Journal.  
OTHER: Begin Story #1 whenever you feel ready.

4) September 16, 18

Exercise #3, Personal Journal.  
Workbook due on Thursday; include exercises 1-3.

5) September 23, 25

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READING: WF, Chapter 6, pages 181-87 only; Chapter 7, all (but stories are optional). Wolff, "Bullet in the Brain," WF 190.
OTHER: Start Story # 1.

6) September 30, October 2


7) October 7, 9

STORY #1 DUE--IN MULTIPLE COPIES.
READING: Stories for workshop discussion.
EXERCISE #4, Narrative Expansion.

8) October 14, 16

READING: WF, Chapter 8. Workshop stories.
Group Meetings out of class--prepare for presentations.
Start Story # 2 ASAP.

9) October 21, 23

READING: Workshop stories.
Meet with Group to choose story.

11) October 28, 30

Groups hand in copies of chosen stories on Thursday.
Workshop.
READING: WF, Chapter 5. Stories assigned by Groups.
EXERCISE # 5, Point of View Exercise.

12) November 4, 6

Group Presentations: 1 & 2 on Tuesday, 3 & 4 on Thursday.
STORY #2 DUE IN MULTIPLE COPIES ON THURSDAY.
Begin Story # 3.

13) November 11, 13

Workshop.

14) November 18, 20

Workshop.
Workbook due on Tuesday. Include Exercises 4 & 5.

15) December 2, 4
Workshop.
Tuesday: Optional Rewrites due.

16) December 9, 11

Story #3 due on Tuesday. Keep copy for your records.
Group reading.
Review and catchup.

Workbook Exercises

1. Personal Statement
   In about 1-2 pages, describe your previous reading experience and your goals as a writer. What do you look for in a story? What authors have you most enjoyed in the past? What kind of fiction do you aspire to write? Reach all the way back to childhood, if necessary, for examples of favorite reading. If you simply haven't read any fiction you can recall—well, explain how in that case you propose to write it. Where will you turn for models? (If you end up talking about favorite movies, TV shows, or even comic books, fair enough.)

2. Reading Journal
   A) Write tight, vivid, readable capsule summaries, about 1-200 words each, of at least five stories, choosing freely from any published works you like, including those in our three anthologies for the course; but include at least three stories that are not already in our required reading. Your summary should give a quick, memorable impression of the story TO A READER WHO HAS NOT READ IT. If you need a model for this kind of writing, look at the beginnings of a few book reviews in (say) The New Yorker or The Atlantic Monthly. The "Briefly Noted" column in The New Yorker might be an especially good model. You might think of each summary as the beginning of a review you don't go on to finish, or as the text for a book-jacket which aims to persuade the reader, in very few words, to buy the book. Think very hard about how NOT to be boring. A summary is a dull mechanical exercise only if you let it become that. The purpose here is to give you lots of practice thinking about the shape and form of stories, about how they are put together—knowledge which should be of direct benefit in your own writing.

   B) This part will be fun. Write either a parody or a serious imitation of one of your five stories. Make sure you note which one, and remember that your reader
may not have read the original. With luck you may find this growing into something you will want to finish; but for now, feel free to break off in the middle of nowhere. About 2-3 pp.

3. Personal Journal

Write on five different days during the period 2/4-2/11, about 1-300 words per day. If an entry takes off on you, you may continue it for a maximum of one additional session. The purpose here is to build the habit of daily writing; but avoid tedious summaries of the day's events; make the writing audience-friendly. Suggested topics:

**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.

**Go to some public place and "collect" a few of the people you see there. Describe 2-4 in terms of clothing and personal items; 2-4 in terms of physical characteristics; 2-4 in terms of tics and behaviors. Make this a double entry (count it for two days) and try above all to make your brief sketches vivid and concrete.

**Sketch from memory 3-5 places you know well, trying to "put us there" as directly and quickly and completely as possible. Notice how concrete details matter more than anything else in this effort.

**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.

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**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.


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.

5. Point of View Exercise.

In the third person, limited omniscient:

Render the same small event or scene or character from the perspective of three or four separate characters. About 2-4 pages. Pointers:

- Be SURE to read Burroway's discussion of point of view in Chapters 7 & 8.
- Remember to write in third person, not first.
- Nevertheless, the diction in each passage should suggest the inner speech of that character. Good third person narration feels “overheard.” The chief challenge in 3rd-person subjective point of view is finding the right mixture of character-language and author-language.
- In each passage, restrict yourself all but completely to the perceptions and thoughts of that character. Avoid “authorial intrusions.”
- Use the character’s name sparingly—ordinarily just to signal the transition into or out of the character’s point of view. Likewise, phrases such
as "Jean felt," "John thought," "reflected Bob," and so on should be kept to a minimum. If the point of view and language are being handled skillfully, we don’t need these constant reminders of whose eyes we are looking through.

- Sentence fragments and associative transitions can help portray the sense of overhearing a character’s thoughts.

- You may want one of these passages to consist largely of reverie; but for the most part, concentrate on capturing, not the character’s "inner thoughts," but the external world as it appears to that character.

- Try NOT to make any of the fragments a complete anecdote. Imagine each as part of some larger whole. In most cases you will be better able to concentrate on point of view if you don’t get busy finishing or developing the story.

- One or more of your characters may be an "unreliable viewpoint." In fact, point of view characters in third person fiction are nearly always at least a little unreliable.

- Remember that our emotions and beliefs color our perceptions, and try to capture this effect in your sketches.

- You may use different tenses for the different fragments, and you may want to have the characters recall or perceive the same event (or place, person, etc.) from different temporal distances.

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**Group Project — Special Directions**

** In week 8, everyone in class will be more or less randomly assigned to a study group. The groups will arrange to meet out of class.

** Each member of each group is to nominate a story to be read by the class as a whole. Provide copies for each member of the group, or refer your group to page numbers in any of our three anthologies. Choose stories that are NOT already included in the assigned readings (see syllabus); but you are quite welcome to nominate a story you read and discussed earlier for your Reading Journal.

** When everyone in a group has read all of the nominated stories, the group should meet separately from the class to decide which one story is to be read by the class as a whole. The meeting can be as long or short as you like, but MUST be face to face and MUST reach a decision about just one story to be assigned to the rest of us. You should also plan how you will present the chosen story.

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** Each group must provide copies of its elected story for the class as a whole—19 copies, minus 4 or 5 since you will already have made copies for your group discussions. The exception will be stories from any of our anthologies—for these, you merely need to give us the page numbers. Copies of stories—or page references—are due on Thursday, October 30. Groups 1 & 2 will present their stories on Tuesday, November 4; Groups 3 & 4, on Thursday, November 6.

** Presentations should begin with each member of the group stating BRIEFLY what story he or she nominated and why. Beyond that, the nature of the presentation will depend on the chosen story and your group’s preferences. Relax and have fun; there will be a grade of sorts—one grade for the whole group—but it won’t be heavily weighted. Remember that the class will have read the story you have chosen and be prepared to participate. In most cases you should explain your group’s reasons for choosing it, explaining what you find admirable, why you think this is good work. Then go on to explore the story with us, commenting on character, plot, theme, style, and any particular details of craft you find noteworthy. Some other questions you might want to pursue:

- What is the main conflict? Is the conflict convincingly resolved?
- What kind of person is the main character, and how do we see this? Is the character of the protagonist consistent with the action taken? Does the conflict grow convincingly out of the pattern of the character’s life, or does it feel imposed?
- How is the style of the story appropriate to the content? What instances of “showing not telling” and “putting us there” do you find especially compelling?
- What is the point of view of the story, and how is this controlled?
- What lessons about the craft of writing can be appropriately drawn from this work?

These are suggestions only, to get you started: do not feel limited to this list, and avoid proceeding through it as if it were a checklist: try instead to give your discussion inner logic and organic unity. All members of your group should participate in your presentation. If you feel like getting theatrical—e.g., staging a debate, Crossfire style—go ahead, but remember that your underlying purpose, still, is to show critical appreciation for the story chosen.

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