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ENG 4763-001: Advanced fiction writing

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SYLLABUS
English 4763 Section 001, Spring 2008
Advanced Fiction Writing
MWF 1:00 to 1:50pm, Coleman 3159, EIU

Professor: Dr. Letitia L. Moffitt
Office: Coleman Hall room 3821
Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays 2:00 to 3:00pm, Wednesdays and Fridays noon to 1:00pm
E-mail: llmoffitt@eiu.edu
(for questions only; do not e-mail assignments without my permission)

Objectives

This class assumes that students already have a solid understanding of and practice in basic fiction writing, and that they are serious and active writers of prose fiction. As such, our main objective is for students to produce a significant amount of original creative fiction, either short stories or chapters of a novel; students will also examine subject matter, theme, technique, structure, and style in their own writing, their peers’ writing, and in the writing of established contemporary fiction writers, and will develop and display a thorough and sophisticated understanding of how the elements of craft work in these texts.

(Please note that if you do not have experience in basic fiction writing, you might want to reconsider your presence in this class. If you have taken English 2007 at EIU, or any other creative writing course focused on fiction, and/or if you are or have been an active fiction writer, this is the course for you; if not, you may find yourself struggling to meet these objectives.)

Text

3 X 33: Short Fiction by 33 Writers. Ed. Mark Winegardner.

Assignments

First story/chapter, due as schedule for First Round Workshop.................................................. 15%
Second story/chapter, due as schedule for Second Round Workshop........................................ 15%
Third story/chapter, due during our “Final Exam” period......................................................... 15%
Workshopping, as scheduled .................................................................................................... 30%
Response papers, due first class of each week ........................................................................ 15%
Presentation, as scheduled ...................................................................................................... 10%

Stories/Chapters: You will write three stories or chapters for this class. Each story/chapter should be at least 6 pages, with a suggested maximum of 12-15 pages. I say “suggested” because there really is no upper limit, so don’t feel that you have to kill off all of your characters on page 15 because you’re afraid of getting penalized for going over the limit. Note, however, that longer stories/chapters tend not to be read and workshopped as thoroughly, so think twice before handing us a 30-page chunk of your novel (plus you’ll have to make copies of that chunk
for everybody). Moreover, longer is not necessarily better, so don’t assume that a 15-page story means an automatic “A.” A beautifully written 6-page story in which the author clearly invested much time, thought, and effort will always be more gratifying to the reader than a 15-page story that seems like it was written all in one sitting without any revising, editing, or proofreading.

Your stories/chapters should be typed and double-spaced, with default margins and font, all pages numbered and fastened together with a staple, your name on the front page. These criteria hold for every written assignment that you hand in for this class.

I know that many of you are already working on novels or stories outside of class and would love to have some of your existing writing workshoped. While I appreciate that this shows how serious you are about your writing, it still presents a problem of fairness for students who do not already have writing in existence and as such will end up doing far more work that those who choose to rely on existing stories or chapters. Therefore, I have some stipulations in this regard:

- **At least two** of your three stories or chapters must be completely new—that is, they must be written during this semester and cannot be taken from work that you have already written before the semester.
- If you wish to workshop a story or chapter that was written before the start of the semester, make sure that you are truly ready to workshop it (in other words, don’t print off the first 15 pages of your novel if that section is still rough and incomplete, and/or if you haven’t looked at it in years).
- At the same time, I don’t want to see stories that the author clearly has no intention of revising or continuing to work with, but simply wants to “show off” or to get an “A” without having to put any effort (in other words, don’t hand in a story that got you an “A” in another creative writing class and is simply being “recycled” for this one). The point of this class isn’t just to be praised for our writing (though of course we will praise what we consider effective and compelling); the point is to engage in the creative process, and that process always includes revision.

**Workshopping:** Two of your three stories/chapters will be workshoped in class; the third (due during the final exam period) will be graded but not workshoped. What this means is when you hand in your first two stories/chapters, you need to hand in not just one copy but enough copies for every member of the class. (What this also means is that there is no way you can simply wait until 20 minutes before class to start writing—you’ll still need enough time to make copies.)

We will set up a schedule for when each story/chapter will be workshoped (two per class for the first round, one per class for the second round). You must provide copies of your story/chapter the class period before you are scheduled to be workshoped. This is not complicated, but somehow it still manages to hopelessly confuse some students. What this means is, for example, if you are scheduled to be workshoped on the class that takes place on Wednesday, January 30, you must bring in enough copies for everyone in class and me on Monday, January 28. You must bring in copies; e-mailing is not acceptable. If you don’t bring in copies, your story will not be workshoped; 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.
On the day your story is workshopped, the class will have read the story and will discuss various aspects of its craft, providing specific and constructive critiques. For each story to be workshopped, you must come to class with a full page of clear, specific, constructive comments (I will provide a guide); you may also write comments in the margins to point out specific areas of note. I will collect these critiques on the day the story is workshopped and read them, and then return them to the writer the following class. Critiques will not be graded but will be given full credit (if work is satisfactory), half credit (if work could be more substantial, or if it is late by one class period), or no credit (if work is late by more than one class period, or if it is poorly written or insubstantial).

If you are the writer being workshopped, your job is to listen to the class with an open mind. Don’t take every criticism as a sign that you are a bad writer and a terrible person—keep in mind that our remarks will be suggestions, not judgments (I will stop anyone who makes personal attacks instead of professional comments). At the same time, don’t get so defensive that you close your mind to what may be extremely valuable observations on your writing. You will also have time to ask questions of us if there’s something in particular you want to focus on.

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.

Response Papers: For the first class of each week, students will be responsible for having read two stories in our anthology by the same author, as listed in the schedule at the end of this syllabus. For Weeks 2 through 7, I will assign the authors and we will discuss various aspects of their work (and occasionally do some relevant in-class writing exercises); for Weeks 8 through 15, authors will be chosen and discussed as part of group presentations. For each author in our anthology that you read for this class, you will write a 1- to 2-page informal (but still proofread) response paper; this includes both the authors I assign and the authors presented by the class. You have two options for your response papers:

- You may do an informal discussion (meaning that it doesn’t need to follow the structure of a “formal” essay, so long as it’s coherent, substantive, and free of technical errors) focused on various aspects of the author’s craft. In particular, consider these questions: What characterizes the author’s style? What theme(s) and subject(s) does the author seem interested in evoking in his/her work? How does the author’s use of style, technique, and/or structure relate to the theme(s) and subject(s) of the stories? (That is, how does the author wrote the story relate to what the story is about?)
- Alternatively, you may do a very short piece of your own creative work that mimics some aspect of the author’s subjects/style/themes/techniques/structures. You should include a brief paragraph that discusses what aspect of the author’s writing you mimicked.

Response papers are due on the day we discuss the authors; they will not be graded but will simply be given full credit (if work is satisfactory), half credit (if work could be more substantial,
or if it is late by one class period), or no credit (if work is late by more than one class period, or if it is insubstantial or poorly written).

You may be surprised to see how much reading and discussion of texts we will be doing in this class. You shouldn’t be surprised, though, because the first advice I would give anyone who wants to be a writer is to read, read, read. This is quite simply the best way to understand the possibilities of the written word. Moreover, the kind of reading and discussion of texts you do for other English classes tends to focus heavily on literary analysis rather than on aspects of a text that pertain to craft—and craft is exactly what we want to examine here.

**Presentation:** Students will be paired up, and each pair will be responsible for choosing an author from the anthology that we have not covered up to that point, then selecting two of that author’s stories to be assigned for the class reading. We will schedule these authors into our reading assignments, and on the day the class will have read your author’s stories, you will give a brief presentation (details forthcoming) and lead the class in discussion on this author’s works.

If there is an author that both of you can agree upon as someone you’d like to present but is not in the anthology (particularly someone who has influenced your own writing), check with me first; chances are it’ll be fine for you to do your presentation on that author. Keep in mind, however, that you will need to provide copies of the stories in advance for everyone in class!

**A Note on Attendance**

I don’t take attendance. *HOWEVER...!* In every single class, we will do something that counts toward your grade. Most of these activities cannot be made up if you are absent; for example, if you miss a particular workshop, there is no way you can contribute to the discussion unless you have a time machine. The reason why you were absent doesn’t matter, because it doesn’t change the fact that you still missed what happened in class. If you come up to me and announce “I was sick!” and stick a doctor’s note under my nose, all I can say is, “Sorry; hope you feel better,” because I can't realistically say “That’s OK, don’t worry, it won’t affect your grade,” given that it could very well affect your grade—after all, you are now one class behind everyone else. Notes do not change anything, and I never want or need to see them. I don’t say all of this to be mean, and my point is not that you should slavishly drag yourself to class when you have a fever of 104. It is natural to expect that events may occur that force you to miss class. My point is simply this: attend as many classes as you humanly can; if you miss class, for whatever reason, make sure you keep up with the work, and expect there to be consequences that range from negligible (if the absences are isolated incidents) to severe (if you make a habit of it).

**Grading Criteria**

“How can you possibly grade a *creative writing* class?” That’s a good question; let’s take it one term at a time:

**Creative:** A lot of times in introductory creative writing classes, there will be a few students who believe that effort is the sole requirement for getting an “A.” They claim that it’s impossible to grade “creativity,” and as long as you’ve tried, you’ve succeeded. At the advanced
level, I'd have to guess that most people would scoff at this notion (and rightly so), but it still
doesn't hurt to articulate why, so I will do just that.

A lot of times what we perceive as being “bad” about a piece of creative writing reflects one of
two things: either the writer attempted to reach a certain goal but was unable to achieve that goal
(for example, the writer wanted us to sympathize with the main character but created the
character in such a one-dimensional way that the reader simply cannot do so), or the writer was
successful in achieving his/her goals but didn't really accomplish anything by doing so (for
example, the writer wanted to tell a story whose “moral” is that you should live each day to the
fullest; this is a lovely sentiment but one that is so incredibly clichéd and bland—does anyone
really try to live each day to the emptiest?—that the writer need not have bothered to express it).

As discussed under the “Objectives” section, this course will focus on various aspects of fiction-
writing, including subject matter, theme, technique, structure, and style. As such, and in
accordance with what I have noted in the previous paragraph, a large part of your grade on your
stories/chapters derives from 1) your ability to show your mastery of these aspects through your
writing, and 2) your ability to make us see these aspects in a way that is original and compelling.

Writing: This may seem painfully obvious, but I'll say it anyway because it always seems to
escape some students’ notice: you can’t possibly pass a creative writing class without doing any
writing. Every semester I meet wonderful writers who end up with less than top grades because
they somehow have gotten the idea that writing is a state of mind, rather than an actual labor-
intensive endeavor. Put more plainly, this class is like every other class you’ll ever take at EIU
or anywhere else: you have to do the work. I can’t grade you on your intentions or your talent
unless I can actually see those intentions and that talent.

Thus it may dismay you to find that I am very strict on deadlines. Why? Speaking as a writer
myself, I assure you that no matter how imaginative you are, you won’t get any creative writing
done without discipline. (Many writers I know actually impose deadlines upon themselves—
they’ll say, “I’ll finish writing Chapter Three of my novel by the end of the week,” because they
know that if they don’t, “Chapter Three” will never exist.) Moreover, we are on a very
tight schedule, so there is no room for flexible deadlines.

Another thing that may horrify you: I expect you to proofread your writing just as you would for
any other class. Why? Well, if your reader can’t understand what you’ve written because there
are typos, spelling mistakes, random punctuation, etc., it won’t matter how creative you are—
we’ll be too distracted and annoyed to care. The best creative writing you’ll ever read is never
“dashed off at the last minute.” Writing is a process, and it involves a great deal of thinking,
experimenting, rewriting, revising, editing, and proofreading—yes, even in creative writing.

Other aspects of grading to note: I don’t provide “extra credit.” I don’t allow “make-up”
assignments. I don’t allow late assignments other than as described above. Grades are not
negotiable, and all grades are final. Again, I don’t make these rules to be mean, but to be clear,
so that you know exactly what you have to do as far as the “technicalities” and can focus your
energies on the fun stuff.
Basic grading rubric:

“A” range: Story/chapter is creative, well written and well thought-out in every way.

“B” range: Story/chapter shows some creativity and mastery of elements of craft, but perhaps needed more time and attention or might have tried something different in terms of subject, theme, technique, etc.

“C” range: Story/chapter fulfills the basic requirements but shows little sign that the writer has mastery of the elements of the work or has tried for originality or depth; it may also have numerous technical errors.

“D” or “F”: Story/chapter doesn’t fulfill many or any of the basic requirements.

Conferences

Twice during the semester, once at the beginning and once at midterm, we will cancel two regular class periods and instead I will hold brief individual conferences with each of you in my office. The purpose of the initial conference is for you to articulate your writing goals for the class; the purpose of the midterm conference is for us to discuss your progress toward these goals. Conferences are not optional, and you should come prepared to talk about your work and to ask any questions you might have about your writing or writing in general.

Plagiarism Warning

Plagiarism means word-for-word unacknowledged copying of another writer’s work or unacknowledged paraphrasing of another writer’s ideas. The minimum penalty is a grade of “F” on the assignment. In addition, you may fail the course, be placed on probation, or even be expelled from the university. It may seem silly to talk about plagiarism in a creative writing class, but I’ve actually caught several students in the past who plagiarized their stories. One student turned in a story that another student had written; another turned in a story by a published author—and then did it again, even after he’d been caught and reprimanded the first time. The first student received an “F” on the assignment, which substantially lowered her final grade (she would have gotten an “A” otherwise); the second student was kicked out of the class.

The saddest thing about this is that there is simply no reason for it. These are not 20-page research papers; they are short works of your own creative fiction. And yet this is precisely what leads students to think they can do nothing in this class and still get a good grade. Both of those students admitted that they waited until the last minute to do the assignments because they figured this was an “easy” class (and then, when they ran out of time, resorted to plagiarism— with disastrous results). Well, this is an “easy” class—if you do the work. The bottom line: absolutely do not for one second consider plagiarizing any part of any assignment, ever. If you are having trouble writing an assignment or meeting a deadline, please talk to me about it.

Final Word

*Keep this syllabus*, and refer to it whenever you have any questions about the class. A good half of the questions that are asked during the course of a semester have already been answered here. Do not let this document somehow fly out of your hands the second you leave the room!
### General schedule for the first half of the semester

*subject to change as necessary; workshopping and second-half schedule forthcoming*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>What we’ll do in this class</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday, January 7</td>
<td>Introductions; syllabus; set schedules for Conferences and First Round Workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, January 9</td>
<td>NO CLASS; Conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday, January 11</td>
<td>NO CLASS; Conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday, January 14</td>
<td>Discuss Junot Diaz’s “Fiesta, 1980” and “Ysrael”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, January 16</td>
<td>First Round Workshop (FRW) 1 &amp; 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday, January 18</td>
<td>FRW 3 &amp; 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday, January 21</td>
<td>NO CLASS; Holiday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, January 23</td>
<td>Discuss Joyce Carol Oates’s “Ghost Girls” and “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday, January 25</td>
<td>FRW 5 &amp; 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday, January 28</td>
<td>Discuss Robert Olen Butler’s “This Is Earl Sandt” and “A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, January 30</td>
<td>FRW 7 &amp; 8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday, February 1</td>
<td>FRW 9 &amp; 10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday, February 4</td>
<td>Discuss Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People” and “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, February 6</td>
<td>FRW 11 &amp; 12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday, February 8</td>
<td>FRW 13 &amp; 14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday, February 11</td>
<td>Discuss John Cheever’s “Goodbye, My Brother” and “The Swimmer”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, February 13</td>
<td>FRW 15 &amp; 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday, February 15</td>
<td>NO CLASS; Holiday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday, February 18</td>
<td>Discuss George Saunders’s “Sea Oak” and “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, February 20</td>
<td>NO CLASS; Conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday, February 22</td>
<td>NO CLASS; Conferences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Scheduling note: If you need to change the day of your workshop (or, later in the semester, your presentation), you need to find someone else in class to switch with and then let me know of the change, rather than simply coming up to me and announcing, “I’m going to be absent that day!” and expect me to come up with a solution on the spot.