Spring 1-15-2004

ENG 4763-001: Advanced Fiction Writing

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English 4763-001—Advanced Fiction Writing  
Spring, 2004  
Dr. Kilgore

SYLLABUS

CURRENT ASSIGNMENT


BEGIN WORKBOOK

Next Hand-In Date:  
Tuesday, 1/27—Workbook

Check this space regularly for updates.  
http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/~cfjdk/litclas/4763/Syl041.htm, or  
go to my home page and click "English 4763."

INSTRUCTOR: John Kilgore. Office: 3331 Coleman Hall. Hours: TR 10-11, W 11-4. Other hours by arrangement. Phone: (217) 581-6313 (office); (217) 345-7395 (home). E-mail: cfjdk@eiu.edu. During registration (mid-February to early April), it might be best to call first before dropping by the office, as I will be having many advisement conferences. Please feel very free to call my home at reasonable hours. 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. I prefer that you NOT visit me with questions just before class begins; just after is fine.

REQUIRED TEXTS:
Bailey, On Writing Short Stories (B)  
Cassill, ed., The Norton Anthology of Contemporary Fiction (C)  
LeGuin, ed., The Norton Book of Science Fiction (L)  

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

○ Regular attendance and class participation. See below for particular requirements. 15%  
○ Oral report and presentation on author or story of your choice. 5%  
○ A brief workbook. 15%  
○ Either 3 short stories or one novella, about 30-50pp. of polished, mature prose in either case. 65%  
○ An optional rewrite of one of your three stories, with the final grade to replace the initial one.

The final grade will be determined approximately as follows: novella or stories—60%;
participation—15%; report, workbook, and intangibles—25%.

Please note the following:

- Please, in fairness to me and your classmates, submit new work only. Recasting old manuscripts that have been in your desk for years is an eminently worthwhile activity—but do it on your own time. Make this class an occasion for executing new projects, from start to finish.
- If you are writing extremely brief stories, you should normally write more than three. See me to negotiate separate requirements and due dates.
- If you are working on the novella option, submit portions of your novella in lieu of short stories on the first two dates, 2/12 and 3/11. Skip the 4/15 date, and give me the completed manuscript by 4/22. The rewrite option will not be open to you, but you should feel free to ask me to read portions of the story at any point in advance of the final due date.
- Two workshop submissions are required. The first will be your first submitted story (or first novella installment), and the second will normally be the second story or second installment you hand in on March 11. If you prefer, however, you may finish the third story or installment ahead of time and use that instead. See me to make arrangements for doing this. Remember to provide extra copies of workshop manuscripts.

WORKBOOK. Should be a folder or loose-leaf binder in which pages can be conveniently reshuffled. Keep the entries in chronological order, and type everything. The required work consists of a set of exercises (see below) due January 27. No further workbook writing will be required, but depending on your writing habits and creative chemistry, you might want to keep a journal for the rest of the term, a practice many writers find indispensable. Once you have made some progress, start bringing the workbook to class with you, as there will be some unscheduled opportunities to read aloud from it.

REPORT. Early in the course, you should choose a writer to tell us about, a selection of that writer's work to distribute and assign to the rest of us, and a date for your presentation. See the schedule below for tentative dates of presentations, and try to make your reservation early, before the schedule fills up. Select a writer to whom you feel an important kinship—one whose work you deeply respect and feel moved to emulate. Keep the reading selection to reasonable length—nothing much more than a short story—and the presentation ditto (about 15 minutes). It's always nice if you know a little background on your author. Tell us what other works (if any) by this writer you have read, which you would recommend most heartily, and what you find especially admirable in him or her.

Finally, though, your chief focus should be on the work you have assigned to us. Discuss the story or excerpt in some detail, telling us what you find admirable, what particular writing lessons you find, what is especially memorable and worthy of imitation. In doing this you will of course touch on such conventional concerns as plot, character, and theme—but do remember that this is a writing class, not a literature class. The presentation should help us find and appreciate good work, but also, and perhaps more importantly, it should give us a sense of your tastes and artistic aspirations. N.B.: It's fine if discussion breaks out spontaneously, but don't take special pains to lead or invite it, as you just don't have much time.
Can't think of an author you want to do? See the end of the syllabus for a list of suggested authors and works. Too broke to make copies for us? Choose a story from one of our five anthologies.

**STORY GRADE** (65% of course total). For short story writers, will equal the average of the three short-story grades, with the rewrite grade (if any) replacing the initial grade on a rewritten story. For novella writers, grades on installments will be provisional and advisory; the final grade will be given on the completed manuscript.

All assignments must be typed. Single-space stories for workshop; double-space others and your workbook exercises. Skip an extra space between paragraphs of single-spaced manuscripts (as I am doing on this page). You will need to provide extra copies of all workshop stories.

**GRADING STANDARDS.** Are of course hard to define in a creative writing course, but probably less so than is commonly believed. Your stories will be subject to no *a priori* requirements as to form, content, or genre, but should be—quite simply—the best work you can do, and will be subjected to vigorous critical analysis by your classmates and by me. We will try to judge each story according to its own implicit aesthetic goals and standards, and I assign grades "holistically," according to my best judgment of a story's overall artistic success. By this I mean success *as written*; I try my best to read the story that is actually there, not the one that potentially could be. Details matter, readability counts, and I assume a confident control of grammar, spelling, and punctuation; if you still have trouble at these levels, this may not be the course for you. Start your stories early, get feedback as needed, and make sure you have fixed everything you can before the story reaches us in workshop.

Other things that make a story good: fresh observation; strong characterization; realism; strong voice; appeal to the senses; mastery of form and technique and genre; emotional appeal; intellectual appeal; truth to life; truth to fantasy; economy; candor; skepticism; creative madness; strangeness. There is no way to put all these things on any kind of quantitative scale, but we all know, mostly, when we have read a good story. Some students stories I have admired in the past are posted here.

I will be more than happy to make reasonable accommodations for any student with a documented disability. Please contact me if you will need such an accommodation; or call the Coordinator of the Office of Disability Services, 581-6583.

**ATTENDANCE.** A writing workshop can be effective only if all members feel responsible to each other, as well as to their own writing; so attendance in class is vital. I will take attendance at each meeting by passing around a sign-up sheet which you are responsible to find and sign. The resulting record will count for about 85% of your participation grade, on the following scale: 0 absences = A, 1 = C, 2 = F, 3 or more—continuing, proportional grade penalties (the attendance grade will become a negative number, averaged into your overall course grade).

So far this policy looks insanely stringent, but in fact it isn't. During week 9, just before spring break, attendance will be optional, and those who attend get an extra "attendance credit" that can be used to offset any absences. Then in the second round of workshop, weeks 10-12, you will be allowed two additional absences; here again, attendance beyond...
what is required may be used to offset absences. Finally, attendance at readings by visiting writers can also count for attendance credit; be alert for announcements of dates and places. Over the years I have found "excuses" to be an engaging form of fiction, but I have trouble sorting out the true ones from the false, and this way I don't have to. Try hard not to miss, but if you do miss, make up the absence; you should have all the opportunity you need.

**COPIES.** Due to budget constraints, you will be responsible for providing copies of your stories for workshop discussion. When you hand in a story that will be discussed in workshop, provide one copy for me, one each for everyone else in the class, plus a couple of extras. When you hand in a story that will not be in workshop, one copy will do. Be sure to keep at least one copy of anything—even a very rough draft—that you hand to anyone else.

**LATE WORK.** I will be fairly flexible if you get in touch with me before the missed deadline and have good reasons for being late. Otherwise late work will be penalized one grade step (e.g., from "B" to "B-") for each day late, weekends and holidays included. DO NOT expect me to grant extensions at the end of the term, as it may be impossible for me to read late work in time to file final grades.

**WORKSHOPS.** Some quick thoughts on what makes a workshop productive: first, sweat like a demon over your own fiction, getting it in the very best shape you can before we see it in workshop. A weak effort is not only embarrassing to you, but demoralizing to others. Second, take your obligation to your fellow writers very seriously. Come to workshop extremely well prepared, with comments you have given some thought to. Be an extremely conscientious critic whenever you are called upon, rigorous but generous, meticulous but open minded. Never be dismissive of the kind of thing a story is (or wants to be), but be a clear-sighted judge of how well it has met its own implicit goals. Make an extra effort to define what a story is doing well—because that tends to be strangely hard to do—but then feel free to address problems candidly and unapologetically. Never give or take criticism personally, and never hesitate to point out supposedly trivial issues like weak phrasing, ineffective sentence structure, incorrect punctuation, and so on: such discussions can be extremely valuable if undertaken in a genial, non-dogmatic spirit. (Feel free to question the colon in that last sentence, for instance!)

**NETWORKING.** I hope that in this class you will feel very free to ask for one another's advice on drafts before handing in the more-or-less final draft for workshop. I will circulate a list of telephone numbers and e-mail addresses. Don't be shy; decide whose advice you would like and ask for it. If you are asked to comment on your classmates' drafts—even if you are asked repeatedly—feel flattered, not put upon. You will probably be learning more than anyone else.

**SCHEDULE**

Note: Be on the alert for changes: check the "next class" window online regularly. Please complete readings assigned for any session before the class meets, and try to read workshop stories well in advance of the meeting.

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### Spring Break

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1) January 13, 15

Course Introduction

BEGIN WORKBOOK

2) January 20, 22

Sign up for reports.
Sterling, "We See Things Differently," L762.
Coover, "The Babysitter," C123.

3) January 27, 29

http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/~cfjdk/Litclas/4763/Syl041.htm
WORKBOOK DUE ON THURSDAY

Tuesday Reports:
Thursday Reports:

4) February 3, 5

Tuesday Reports:
Thursday Reports:

5) February 10, 12

Tuesday Reports:
Thursday Reports:

FIRST STORY DUE ON THURSDAY—MULTIPLE COPIES FOR WORKSHOP

6) February 17, 19

Workshop.

7) February 24, 26

Workshop.

8) March 2, 4

Workshop.

9) March 9, 11

Brainstorming sessions, clinic. Attendance optional.

STORY #2 DUE ON THURSDAY—MULTIPLE COPIES IF YOU WILL HAVE THIS STORY IN WORKSHOP.

SPRING BREAK, MARCH 15-19

10) March 23, 25

Workshop.

11) March 30, April 1

Workshop.

12) April 6, 8

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Workshop

13) April 13, 15

STORY #3 DUE ON TUESDAY
Reports and Readings TBA

14) April 20, 22

NOVELLAS DUE ON TUESDAY
Workshop

15) April 27, 29

OPTIONAL REWRITES DUE ON TUESDAY
In-class presentation of final stories.

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SUGGESTED AUTHORS AND STORIES FOR REPORTS

From B:

Anton Chekhov, "The Lady With the Pet Dog"
James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues"
Cynthia Ozick, "The Shawl"
Tim O'Brien, "The Things They Carried"

From C:

Margaret Atwood, "The Man From Mars"
Charles Baxter, "Snow"
Robert Coover, "The Babysitter"
Charles Johnson, "Kwoon"
William Kotzwinkle, "Follow the Eagle"
Jayne Ann Phillips, "Souvenir"
Amy Tan, "Rules of the Game"
John Updike, "The Other"
Tobias Wolff, "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs"

From L:

James Tiptree, Jr., "The Women Men Don't See"
Eleanor Arnason, "The Warlord of Saturn's Moons"
Ursula K. Le Guin, "The New Atlantis"
Joanna Russ, "A Few Things I Know About Whileaway"
Greg Bear, "Schrodinger's Plague"
Eileen Gunn, "Stable Strategies for Middle Management"
Paul Preuss, "Half-Life"
Margaret Atwood, " Homelanding"
Diane Glancy, "Aunt Parnetta's Electric Blisters"
John Kessel, "Invaders"
Other classic stories you might want to track down:

Isaac Asimov, "Nightfall"
Ambrose Bierce, "The Boarded Window"
Ray Bradbury, "The Small Assassin"; "Twilight"
Raymond Carver, "Where I'm Calling From"
John Collier, "Witch's Money"
William Faulkner, "Spotted Horses"
John Gardner, "Redemption"
Ernest Hemingway, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber"
Franz Kafka, "In the Penal Colony," "The Hunger Artist"
Jack London, "To Build a Fire"
Ian McLed, "Snodgrass"
Norman Mailer, "The Man Who Studied Yoga"
Joyce Carol Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been"
Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People"
Saki, "The Interlopers"
Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Gimpel the Fool"

WORKBOOK REQUIREMENTS

DO ANY FOUR, ABOUT 500-1000 WORDS EACH. NUMBER AND TITLE EACH EXERCISE. HAND IN JANUARY 27. YOU ARE OF COURSE WELCOME TO USE THESE EXERCISES AS DRAFTS FOR YOUR STORIES.

1) 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 narrator speaking "now" and his or her other self back in the past. Feel free to fictionalize and invent.

PURPOSE: To heighten awareness and control of point of view; to practice turning the self into a character; with luck, to make contact with some material that will become a story.

2) 3 X 3: From the point of view of A) a child; B) a woman troubled by recent bad news, perhaps from her doctor; and C) a man contemplating the best way to leave his lover, do the following: 1) Briefly describe a landscape or set a scene, making sure it is the same locale in each case; 2) now introduce a brief and simple action, unrelated to the character's ongoing conflict, but seen in a way that is expressive of his or her frame of mind; 3) now segue into some reminiscence by the character. All nine passages should be brief and fragmentary; imagine these as pieces of some larger whole, so that you can focus and visualize effectively. Let us hear the voice and diction of each character, but STICK TO THIRD PERSON, NOT FIRST.

PURPOSE: To practice control and awareness of third-person, limited omniscient point of view. To practice 3 different narrative modes: description, action, and reverie.

3) Sketch from direct observation two or three people you do not know, concentrating on physical details. Then invent a plausible personal background for one of them, fantasizing as freely as you like.
PURPOSE: To heighten powers of direct observation and skill in description; to practice seeing the connection between physical appearance and underlying personality.

4) With a tape recorder or, preferably, a small child as your audience, tell from beginning to end a story you invent as you go along. Then write an entertaining, readable 500-1000 word version of the story.

PURPOSE: To stimulate imagination; to teach the value of getting on with it—of not agonizing over details till you're ready.

5) Sit down without any clear intentions. Close your eyes for a moment and concentrate on what you see. Then open your eyes and write down exactly that. Let the piece develop into a sketch of at least 500 words.

PURPOSE: To develop the habit of "painting what you see."

6) Visualize a moment of intense grief, shame, 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 it. Concentrate instead on capturing the way powerful feeling shapes the perceptions of the physical milieu, and on the way specific memories and odd thoughts go whirling through the mind at such moments. The point is not so much to make the reader "guess" the feeling as to "show rather than tell..." Let the sketch begin to turn into a story if it seems to want to.

PURPOSE: To appropriate the energy of strong emotion without being swamped by it; to teach the importance of objectivity, distance, and restraint; to practice selection and use of expressive detail.

7) Write a dialogue of 2-4 pages, trying to adhere to the following guidelines: a) Think of this as a fragment of a much larger story, so that you can focus intensely; b) Remember that dialogue in fiction is enormously selective and brief compared to the long, meandering, dull conversations we have in real life; c) Start by clearly envisioning the scene and the speakers; d) Support the dialogue with appropriate visualization as needed as the conversation continues (don't let the characters fade out to mere voices); e) Incorporate indirect dialogue or summary along with the direct dialogue, as a way of deemphasizing the trivial and of reemphasizing that more has gotten said than the reader directly hears; f) Respect the obliqueness of real-life conversations: don't let the characters say speechy, stagey, hyperliterate things; have them say natural, believable things whose significance is clear to us—not necessarily to them—because of the careful way the conversation has been edited and presented; g) Study a published model, and make sure you are punctuating correctly (most student writers don't). Avoid belated tags, overly colorful tags ("hypothesized Irving"), tags that are not really tags, ("Good grief," Irving unwrapped the bandage.), and tags awkwardly coordinated with an action using "as" or "while" ("Seems about right to me," said Irving while he rotated the tires on his Chevy Blazer.)

PURPOSE: To learn that good dialogue is not a literal transcript, but a highly selective and artfully molded take on what was said. To practice the surprisingly complex mechanics of dialogue.
8) Write something in which you deliberately try to shock the audience. OR: Either confess to or narrate the commission of some shameful act, in a tone which should no doubt seem, given the foulness of the deed, shockingly cold-blooded. Let the sketch be detailed, but avoid corny overemphasis of such obvious attention-getters as gore or unsheathed body parts.

PURPOSE: To build courage, or anyway that peculiar variety of it that writers need.

9) Depict something you know well: a technique for scaling bass, strange speech habits in your own town, the best way of pissing off your mother-in-law—anything about which you are more or less an expert.

PURPOSE: to learn the effectiveness and importance of "insider's knowledge."

10) Write a 1-2 page summary of an event or action in strict chronological order, using phrases like "and then" and "a little later," "next," etc. Then go back and rewrite the sketch, doing everything you can to subvert chronology. Take tangents, omit events, above all find other ways to organize the material than temporal sequence. Omit temporal modifiers wherever possible. If you succeed in this, the second version should be three times more interesting than the first.

PURPOSE: To learn the terrible dullness and insidious tyranny of blow-by-blow organization; to learn non-chronological means of organization and presentation.

11) Either invent a purely imaginary place, or intensely visualize a place you know well. Describe it in vivid detail, bending over backwards to avoid adjectives and adverbs and forms of the verb "to be." Once you have a good detailed description, let something begin to happen in this place: make the transition from description to action or at least to narrative.

PURPOSE: To practice visualization, detailed observation, and compression. To get a feel for the relation of setting to action and character.

12) Choose from the newspaper 2-6 stories that you find somehow interesting or striking. Transcribe just the first paragraph or two of the story. Then write a loosely organized discussion, perhaps not much more than a long list of queries and speculations, of what is not in the newspaper story that would need to be there if you were to write it up as a short story. What sensory details, background facts, reveries, quirks of character, and acts of visualization would it take to "put us there," making us feel that we understood completely and had lived through the story?

PURPOSE: To practice "showing not telling"; to heighten your sense of what your fiction can uniquely offer that reportage cannot.