ENG 4763-001: Advanced Fiction Writing

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SYLLABUS

Instructor: John Kilgore. Office: 314K Coleman Hall. Office Hours: MWF 12-2, T 11-3, and by appointment. Phone: 581-6313 (office), 345-7395 (home). Please feel very free to call my home at reasonable hours. Include date and time of call when leaving voice-mail messages at the office, and don't trust voice-mail at all if your message is urgent--try me at home instead.

Required texts:
From TRS:
Gardner, On Becoming a Novelist
Cassill, ed., The Norton Anthology of Contemporary Fiction (NF)
LeGuin, ed., The Norton Book of Science Fiction (BSF)

A copy of Writer's Market, 1994 is on reserve for this class at Booth Library.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS: regular attendance and class participation; one short oral report on an author of your choice; a brief workbook; and either 3-5 short stories or one novella, about 30-50pp. of polished, mature prose in either case. The final grade will be determined approximately as follows: novella or stories--65%; participation--15%; report, workbook, and intangibles--20%.

DUE DATES. The workbook will be due February 3. There are three basic due dates for stories--2/17, 3/10, and 4/14--and one for an optional rewrite, 4/28. Hand in a finished story on each due date, and a rewrite if you choose on the last due date. If you are writing short-short stories and want to submit a fourth story (not a rewrite), use all four due dates; see me if you want to write five stories. If you are working on the novella option, submit portions of your novella in lieu of short stories on the first two dates, and give me the completed manuscript by 4/23. If you choose to do three stories with no rewrite, you may use the 4/28 date rather than 4/14 for the final story.

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. Skip an extra space between paragraphs of single-spaced manuscripts (i.e., follow the format you see in front of you.) You will need to provide extra copies of all workshop stories.

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 February 3. 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. If your journal turns out to be a major project, exceptionally well done, you may wish to submit it in Week 15 in lieu of an optional rewrite; see me to make arrangements.

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 judgement of a story’s overall artistic success. By this I mean success as written; I try my best to read the story that actually is here, not the one that potentially could be. Details matter, readability counts, and I take for granted a basic control of grammar, spelling, and punctuation; if you still have trouble at these levels, this may not be the course for you.

REPORTS. Will be ungraded oral presentations of about ten minutes, scattered throughout the term. Choose an author who is important to you and introduce us to his or her work. Biographical background is fine if you have it, but concentrate on your own reader’s response. Why do you find this writer’s work so appealing, and what writing lessons can you learn from him or her? Try to answer these questions with some precision. See me to arrange the date for your presentation.

ATTENDANCE. A writing workshop can be effective only if all members feel responsible to the group, as well as to their own writing; so I will be taking attendance at each meeting. The resulting record will count for about 75% of your participation grade, on the following scale: 1-2 absences = A, 3 = B, 4 = C, 5 = D, 6 = F, 7 = -1.0, 8 = -2.0, etc. Note that you have two free absences; then I lower the boom. Use the free absences as insurance to protect you in case of illnesses, car breakdowns, deaths of pets, and other circumstances beyond your control. I will listen sympathetically to excuses, BUT I WILL NOT AWARD ATTENDANCE CREDIT FOR ANY CLASS YOU HAVE MISSED. Not automatically, anyway; in cases where absences seem truly unavoidable, I may be willing to give extra assignments for make-up credit. Such assignments are guaranteed to be more difficult and painful than just coming to class would have been. I take attendance by handing around a sign-up sheet at each meeting; be sure to sing up each time.

SCHEDULE. Due to the unpredictable time requirements of workshop discussions, we will need to make frequent adjustments in the schedule. Please bring the syllabus to every class and take note of changes. Try be alert and conscientious in preparing for class meetings. In particular, it is crucial that you read your classmates’ work, very carefully, in advance of workshop discussions. Try to plan ahead so that you will be writing -- and rewriting -- steadily. Feel free to show me drafts in advance of the due dates.

CONTRACTS. Due February 12, on forms I will hand out, these will commit you to either the short story or the novella option. The basic guideline for the course is “30-50 pp. of polished, mature prose” (exclusive of exercises), and what I want is a clear though tentative plan for fulfilling this criterion. If your short stories are exceptionally short, you should probably write four rather than three, making arrangements with me for due-dates.

Everyone must have at least two stories (or novella sections) in workshop. Story #1 goes into workshop automatically; for the second round, you may choose Story #3 instead of Story #2 if you prefer.

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. When you hand in a story that will not be in workshop, one copy will do. Be sure to keep at least one xerox 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 third grade (e.g., from “B” to “B-”) for each day late, weekends 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.

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SCHEDULE

NOTE: Please have all readings completed before the indicated class sessions.

1) Jan. 13, 17  
   Course Introduction  
   BEGIN WORKBOOK  

2) *Jan. 22  
   Gardner, On Becoming a Novelist, Chapter 1.  
   Shaw, "No Place to be on Christmas," NF436.

3) Jan. 29, 31  
   Readings from workbooks.  
   BEGIN FIRST STORY ASAP

4) Feb. 3, 5  
   WORKBOOK DUE ON MONDAY  
   Phillips, "Souvenir," NF391; Carver, "Where I'm Calling From," NF64.

5) Feb. 10, 12  
   BRING DRAFT OF FIRST STORY TO CLASS ON MONDAY  
   In-class critiques.  

6) Feb. 17, 19  
   FIRST STORY DUE ON MONDAY — MULTIPLE COPIES  
   Workshop.

7) Feb. 24, 26  
   Costello, "Murphy's Xmas," NF100.  
   Workshop.  
   CONTRACTS DUE ON WEDNESDAY

8) March 3, 5  
   BRING DRAFT OF SECOND STORY TO CLASS ON MONDAY  
   In-class critiques.  
   Oates, "How I Contemplated the World . . . .," NF355.  
   Workshop.

9) March 10, 12  
   Walker, "Everyday Use," NF496.  
   Workshop.  
   SECOND STORY DUE WEDNESDAY — MULTIPLE COPIES IF YOU ELECT TO HAVE THIS STORY IN WORKSHOP  
   ***SPRING BREAK***

10) March 24, 26  
    Updike, "The Other," NF480.  
    Workshop.
11) March 31, April 2  
   Coover, "The Babysitter," NF78.  
   Workshop.

12) April 7, 9  
   Visitor, reading, or in-class writing TBA.

13) April 14, 16  
    **ON MONDAY: THIRD STORY DUE -- MULTIPLE COPIES FOR THOSE WHO ELECT TO HAVE THIS STORY IN WORKSHOP**  
    Readings from journals or workbooks.  
    Kessel, "Invaders," BSF830.

14) April 21, 23  
    Workshop.  
    **NOVELLAS DUE ON WEDNESDAY**

15) April 28, 30  
    **REWRITES DUE ON MONDAY**  
    Workshop.  
    Group reading.
WORKBOOK REQUIREMENTS

DO 1 AND 2; PLUS ANY FOUR OF THE OTHERS. HAND IN FEBRUARY 3.

1) [Required.] Do the following in preparation for your "favorite author" report, to be delivered in class some time during the semester. A: Write a 1-2 page statement of appreciation, more or less verbatim as you will want to read it in class. B: Copy down word for word ALL of any quotes you will want to use during your presentation. C: Type up in fragmentary form any other notes that may be useful to you. These need not be especially readable.

2) [Required.] Type up, rather rapidly, making minimal revisions only, the paint-by-numbers story you wrote in class at the second meeting.

3) 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 of time that separates the narrator speaking "now" and his 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.

4) Rewrite the first page of Shaw's "No Place to Be on Christmas," NF436, telling the same event from the points of view of two other characters, not Gary. Give both thoughts and perceptions. STICK TO THIRD PERSON, NOT FIRST.

PURPOSE: To practice control and awareness of third-person, limited omniscient point of view.

5) Sketch from direct observation two people you do not know, concentrating on physical details, about 150 words each. Then invent a plausible personal background for one of the two, 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.

6) 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 3-500 word summary 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.

7) 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 3-500 words.

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

8) 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 emotion. Concentrate instead on capturing the physical milieu, 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.

PURPOSE: To appreciate 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.

9) Write a long monologue by a speaker who is in some sense sharply differentiated from yourself. (She may have the same build, clothes, fingerprints, and birthday; but we should feel her as someone different from the author.) Do everything you can to make the monologue FEEL as real as a transcribed tape-recording; but keep it from being boring. Let your speaker tell a story if she seems inclined to do so.

PURPOSE: To develop control and appreciation of voice in fiction.

10) Write a dialogue of about three pages. Then rewrite the dialogue at the length of about half a page, using the narrative voice to fill in any content that is lost from the original. (Hand in both versions.)

PURPOSE: To teach the need for compression and cutting in dialogue.

11) Write something about 3-500 words long in which you deliberately try to shock the audience. OR: Either confess to, or narrate, the commission of some shameful act.

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

12) Using the voice of some character who is not quite yourself, briefly express two or three of the following attitudes: drugs are good; women are inferior to men; blacks are inferior to whites (or vice versa); sex is over-rated; children are irritating; sexual harassment is normal; child molestation is nothing to get too excited about; too much fuss is made by and for the handicapped; young people are self-centered; old people are useless.

PURPOSE: I'm not sure.