

English 4381

Advanced Creative Writing: Fiction

Sam Houston State University
Spring 2018
TR 12:30–1:50 p.m., Evans 351

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COURSE OVERVIEW

Franz Kafka never enrolled in a creative writing workshop. Neither did Ernest Hemingway. Flannery O'Connor did—she was an early graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop—but later wrote, "The problem with workshops is that they don't scare off enough writers." Yet creative writing workshops thrive across the country, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, in face-to-face settings and online. Every semester, thousands of students enroll in creative writing workshops, some just testing the waters, others with dreams of seven-figure advances and international bestsellerdom, some who talk a good game, a handful who just put their heads down and keep writing, keep reading, keep writing.

I mention this so that everyone understands my perspective on this class. I believe workshops can be beneficial to a developing writer, especially to a savvy writer who understands how to use the workshop to his or her advantage. The course is designed to give those writers an environment in which that may happen. But I also am aware of the system's limitations, especially when measured against a student's expectations. This course isn't a gate through which you must pass to become a writer. I am not a gatekeeper with the power to grant or deny you access to the magical world of creative writers. What I am is a resource—this course is a resource—for you in your development as a writer, regardless of where you might be in that journey.

As a class, we will read and discuss a number of published contemporary stories; we will carefully consider and offer constructive criticism upon each other's own work; and we will seek to demystify the world of creative writing as much as possibly can be done given our limited time together. As for myself, I will encourage you, push you, challenge you, answer the questions that I can, try to entertain you with anecdotes, and make far too many references to my son, who is six, and handsome, and charming, and the smartest kid in the world. I apologize in advance.

So I ask that you listen, consider, and be willing to learn—and, of course, that you write. Mostly, I ask that you write. I take the art and craft of fiction seriously, and given your presence in this course, I will assume that you do as well.

Given that this is an advanced level fiction workshop, I shall assume that everyone enrolled has taken previous fiction workshops, and so I shall assume that everyone has a sense of how a workshop operates. If you are an exception, for whatever reason, please see me.

REQUIRED TEXT

The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction (Second Edition), edited by Lex Williford and Michael Martone

WORKSHOP

Much of the class will take place in workshop fashion with your own work, your own stories forming the central element of the class. The purpose of workshop is not to bolster your own ego while destroying that of your peers. Our purpose is to assist each other in our respective development as writers. While this does include constructive criticism, it should all be done in an atmosphere of respect, both for the writer and for the work. I believe it is important to recognize that while some students carry their assumptions (about what should or should not be done, about what “works” and what does not) like a sledgehammer, others carry their assumptions like raw eggs, easily shattered. Writing involves elements that are subjective and will be a matter of taste, but it also consists of elements that we can identify and discuss that are clearly more objective in nature. It’s not just a matter of personal opinion.

GRADES

Reading Responses (200 points total): For each published story that we read, you will be required to write a brief, 500-word or so response and post it to the appropriate forum on Blackboard. Each response should address the following prompts: (1) What do you admire about this story? (2) What about this story surprised you? (3) What don’t you understand about or in this story? (4) What is your favorite line in the story and why is that your favorite line? and (5) What did you learn about fiction writing from this story? The responses should reflect a careful reading of the story and a thoughtful engagement with the art and craft of fiction. In a broad sense, your responses might consider characterization, plot, setting, point of view, structure, language, titles, beginnings and endings, genre, etc. The responses should also be well written in terms of grammar and mechanics.

Two stories (each initial workshop draft, 75 points; each final draft, 100 points; 350 points total): Over the course of the semester, you will write two stories and submit each to the workshop, then revise the stories and submit them to the professor for the final grade. The final drafts will be due on the last day of class. Stories submitted to the workshop should be a minimum of ten complete pages, and final, revised stories must be a minimum of twelve complete pages each (see paper format guidelines below). Revision means revision, not a new or a second story. I encourage students to trust the process in the development of a story and to avoid the temptation to quickly jettison a story in its early stages. Of course, there are always exceptions to this rule. (See, for example: the story of the talking cat who’s possessed by alien beings that are attempting to overthrow the government of Thailand so that they can operate all the nation’s McDonald’s and horde all the Monopoly game pieces. I mean, maybe that will work, but. . .) Also, the stories you submit to this workshop must be original to this workshop. They may not be stories originally written for and submitted to a previous workshop. If I learn that a story you submit to this workshop has been submitted to another workshop, you will receive a zero for the assignment.

Note: Students will be required to make and distribute photocopies of their stories to the entire class. Bear in mind that you are required to submit two stories to the workshop this semester, and with fifteen students in the class, that's more than a few pages. So plan accordingly.

Peer reviews (200 points total): The responsibility here belongs to the class as a whole. In joining this class, you accept a contract with each other—to present your best possible work, both as a writer and as a critic, in exchange for an equal commitment from your peers. I don't expect brilliance. I do expect effort. You will be responsible for posting peer reviews to Blackboard for all stories submitted to the class. In order to receive credit, these reviews must be posted before the class in which we workshop the story. [Each author and story will have its own forum for the reviews of his or her story. The author will be unable to read the reviews until after the workshop of his or her story.] Please pay close attention to the schedule.

Book Review Assignment (50 points): The review will examine a single collection of short stories by a contemporary literary writer (to be determined in consultation with the instructor). Copies of each book report will be posted, by the author, to the appropriate Blackboard discussion forum. Due Tuesday, April 4. See assignment sheet.

Attendance and Participation (150 points): I expect all students to be in attendance each day and to participate significantly each day. For the non-workshop readings each day, I expect all students to have read the material under consideration, to have written notes in the margins of their books, and to come to class ready to engage actively in analysis and discussion of those works. It isn't sufficient to merely show up and be physically present.

Public Readings (50 points): You are required to attend two public readings by established authors over the course of the semester, and to provide me with a one- to two-page response paper. The readings may include those held on campus or in the surrounding area (Conroe, Houston, College Station, etc.). The authors must be writers of literary fiction or poetry. I will keep you apprised of events on campus, most notably the National Book Awards at Sam Houston.

Extra Credit may be earned by attending additional readings and by writing a brief response paper about your experience, and then submitting it to the professor. (10 points per event, up to 50 points total)

1000 Points Available: 900-1000 A; 800-899 B; 700-799 C; 600-699 D; 599 or less F.

A NOTE ON GENRE FICTION

The focus of this class will be literary fiction as distinguished from "genre" fiction—romance, science fiction, fantasy, mystery, horror, Western, etc. Each genre has its own rules and traditions, and a workshop appropriate to genre stories would include the study of those genres. For this class, the work you submit should be literary fiction. This requires a much longer discussion, but in brief (and by means of significantly over-simplifying), I believe that literary fiction is often marked by a concern not just with *what* happened, but with *why* it happened; these stories are character-driven and explore the motivations, desires, drives, and consequences of the complex human experience. Writers of literary fiction are interested as well in the formal aspects of writing, including form, structure, language, metaphor, and theory (including genre and the bending and breaking of genre), among other things. Writers of literary fiction, I believe, still aim

towards Ezra Pound's modernist injunction to "Make it new!" They privilege art over commerce, though they will not turn down a healthy paycheck if one becomes available. I will not exclude "genre" from this workshop, but will expect writing that draws upon popular genres to succeed as literary fiction, not just as genre fiction.

PAPER FORMAT

All stories should be typed double-spaced in a 12-point font with one-inch borders AND STAPLED. No wacky fonts, please. Any assignments longer than two pages must have page numbers. Correct grammar, usage, punctuation and spelling are expected. Work flawed by pervasive mechanical errors will be penalized accordingly. Always be certain to keep a hard copy and a digital copy in at least two locations. Title all stories. In the upper right-hand corner, type your name, e-mail address, and the story's word count.

TIMELY SUBMISSIONS

All work is due in class. Any late work will be penalized one full grade for each class period it is late. For example, if the assignment is due on Tuesday and it is submitted to me the following morning, the grade will be reduced one full letter grade. If I receive it in class the following Thursday, the penalty is the same. Note: Because of the demands of distribution, stories for workshop will not be accepted late. Failure to submit the story in class on the date it is due will result in a zero for the story. Extensions will be granted only in advance and only in cases of emergency.

ATTENDANCE

If you miss more than four classes for the semester (or two workshops), regardless of the reason, I may drop you from the class. If you know you will be absent in advance, be sure to let me know in advance. You are still responsible for work that you may miss. If circumstances arise during the course of the semester that interfere with your ability to attend class or to complete assignments, see me as soon as possible.

RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS

Students are allowed to miss class and other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day, including travel for that purpose. Students remain responsible for all work. See Student Syllabus Guidelines (<http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus>).

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY AND PLAGIARISM

Academic honesty is fundamental to the activities and principles of a university. All members of the academic community must be confident that each person's work has been responsibly and honorably acquired, developed, and presented. Any effort to gain an advantage not given to all students is dishonest whether or not the effort is successful. The academic community regards academic dishonesty as an extremely serious matter, with serious consequences that range from probation to expulsion. When in doubt about plagiarism, paraphrasing, quoting, or collaboration, consult the course instructor. See Student Syllabus Guidelines (<http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus>).

DISABILITIES POLICY

Also note: It is the policy of Sam Houston State University that individuals otherwise qualified shall not be excluded, solely by reason of their disability, from participation in any academic program of the university. Students with disabilities that might affect their academic performance are expected to visit with the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities located in the Counseling Center. See Student Syllabus Guidelines (<http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus>).

VISITORS IN THE CLASSROOM

Only registered students may attend class. Exceptions can be made on a case-by-case basis by the professor. In all cases, visitors must not present a disruption to the class by their attendance. Students wishing to audit a class must apply to do so through the Registrar's Office.

CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE

Be kind. Be helpful. Be supportive. Ask good questions.

No cell phones. Period. If a cell phone disrupts class, or if a student is sending or receiving text messages during the course of class, I reserve the right to confiscate the phone for the duration of the class period. In the case of a second offense in the course of the semester, I reserve the right to remove the student from the class.

Tablet computers and e-readers are welcomed in this class as long as they are used for classroom purposes and only for classroom purposes. Should I become aware—or even sense—that these devices are being used otherwise, I will ask that you put them away.

INSTRUCTOR EVALUATIONS

Opportunities to provide evaluations of the professor and the course will be distributed near the end of the semester in accordance with university policy.

THE WRITING CENTER

Sam Houston Writing Center, located in Farrington 111, is open from 8 a.m. until 7 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 8 a.m. until 3 p.m. on Friday, and 2 - 7 p.m. on Sunday. Writing tutors will work with you one-on-one at any stage of the writing process (brainstorming, generating a draft, organizing a draft, or revising a draft) for any written assignment. The Writing Center operates on an appointment system, so please call (936) 294-3680 to schedule a session with a writing tutor. In addition to offering one-to-one writing conferences, the Center also offers a computer lab, handouts, style manuals, dictionaries, thesauruses, and handbooks for client use.

TENTATIVE DAILY SCHEDULE (SUBJECT TO CHANGE)

Thursday, January 18—Introduction to the class. Distribution of syllabus. Distribution of “Primary Sources,” by Rick Moody.

Tuesday, January 23—Due to Blackboard: Primary Sources assignment. A Type of Story: “Sarah Cole: A Type of Love Story,” by Russell Banks, and “Car Crash While Hitchhiking,” by Denis Johnson.

Thursday, January 25—Coming of Age: “Communist,” by Richard Ford, and “The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas,” by Reginald McKnight.

Tuesday, January 30—Childhood: “Pilgrims,” by Julie Orringer, and “The School,” by Donald Barthelme.

Thursday, February 1—Family: “Tiny, Smiling Daddy,” by Mary Gaitskill, and “Sea Oak,” by George Saunders.

Tuesday, February 6—Marriage: “The Caveman in the Hedges,” by Stacy Richter, and “Jealous Husband Returns in the Form of a Parrot,” by Robert Olen Butler.

Thursday, February 8—Mock Workshop. STORIES DUE FOR Workshop 1.1 and 1.2.

Tuesday, February 13—Workshop 1.1

Thursday, February 15—Workshop 1.2

Tuesday, February 20—Workshop 1.3

Thursday, February 22—Workshop 1.4

Tuesday, February 27—Workshop 1.5

Thursday, March 1—Workshop 1.6

Tuesday, March 6—Workshop 1.7

Thursday, March 8—No class. Association of Writers and Writing Programs Annual Conference.

March 12–16 Spring Break

Tuesday, March 20—Sex: “Never Marry a Mexican,” by Sandra Cisneros, and “Lust,” by Susan Minot.

Thursday, March 22—Identity: Excerpt from *The Leavers*, by Lisa Ko (handout), and “Xmas, Jamaica Plain,” by Melanie Rae Thon.

Tuesday, March 27—War: “The Pugilist at Rest,” by Thom Jones.

Thursday, March 29—Because: “A Real Doll,” by A.M. Holmes, and “The Ceiling,” by Kevin Brockmeier.

Tuesday, April 3—Because: “In the Heart of the Heart of the Country,” by William Gass (handout). Book review due to Blackboard.

Thursday, April 5—Workshop 2.1

Tuesday, April 10—Workshop 2.2

Thursday, April 12— Workshop 2.3

[National Book Awards Festival, Monday, April 16, to Wednesday, April 18]

Tuesday, April 17—Workshop 2.4

Thursday, April 19—Workshop 2.5

Tuesday, April 24—Workshop 2.6

Thursday, April 26—Workshop 2.7.

Tuesday, May 1—Revision Workshop.

Thursday, May 3—Final class: What now?

Monday, May 7—Revisions of both stories due to Blackboard forum by 5 p.m.

Book Review Assignment
Dr. Kaukonen
Creative Writing Workshop

When I began to write fiction as an undergraduate, one of the greatest challenges I faced was a lack of knowledge of which contemporary writers I should read or even which writers I might consider reading. [Remember, this was before the Internet became a regular feature of our lives—before Yahoo! and Amazon’s ‘You Might Be Interested in. . .’ and Google.] There were those established writers who had found their way into the canon and whose stories I could find in anthologies, but I wanted also to read writers who were writing and publishing now, who were—relatively speaking—my immediate predecessors (at least, that was my hope). My undergraduate institution had (and still has) an exceptionally good reading series, and though I attended occasionally, when I look back at the roster of those whom I missed, I can only shake my head. So, in part, this assignment seeks to expose you to a wide variety of contemporary literary writers whose works might be worth your consideration—as a writer, not just as a reader.

The assignment also reflects my belief that writers should be readers and should be aware of both the tradition in which they work (why you should read those “classic” short stories) and the times in which they work (which includes not just the world around you, but the literary world around you). While I don’t believe writers should obsess about other writers, I think it is important to understand the relationship between your own work and the work of others and to know what has been done and what is being done.

To these ends, over the course of the semester, you will provide the class with a book review. You will select a collection of short stories by a contemporary author, read those stories, and then write a 3-4 page review. The review should be written from a writer’s perspective and should address such issues as narrative techniques (use of structure, point of view, humor, character development, etc.), prose style, and themes. In short, why should a writer read the collection? What might a writer learn from these stories?

Without engaging in a discussion of the canon (old, new, or otherwise) or of the politics of publishing or of high culture versus low culture, I offer a list of contemporary short story writers (and novelists) who have found some degree of critical success. I’ve tried to keep those authors included on the younger side of the scale. The list is far from exhaustive and I will consider other suggestions. Hopefully this list serves as a good starting point.

A few guidelines:

1. Select your author and obtain your book as soon as possible. Do not wait until the last minute. Check various libraries first, if you wish. Then consider both brick-and-mortar bookstores (both new and used) and online bookstores. If you choose the latter, allow sufficient time for delivery.
2. Read the entire book. You are to review the entire collection, not the three stories you manage to read the night before the assignment is due.
3. Avoid summarizing the plot of the stories. Analyze the collection. Identify the elements that connect the various stories. Use examples from specific stories to support the claims you are making about the collection as a whole.
4. Read various professional reviews for models. By professional, I don’t mean reviews on Amazon (as helpful as some of those can be). I can provide models, if you’d like.

5. I don't need to know the author's birthdate. If you incorporate biographical information in the review, make sure it's relevant to your analysis. How might certain elements of the author's biography help us to understand the concerns of the work itself?

Note: Authors will be assigned on a first-come, first-serve basis. When selecting a specific book by an author, be certain to select a collection of short stories (and not a novel or collection of essays or poems). Additional note: If you have already read a book by this author for another class—for example, a Caribbean writer for Dr. Shemak's class or an Irish author for Dr. Demson's class—you may not select that author. The goal of the assignment is to introduce you to authors new to you.

Author List: A Start

Lorrie Moore	Ryan Harty	Nell Freudenberg	Edwidge Danticat
Junot Diaz	Mary Yukari-Waters	Michael Martone	Wendy Rawlings
Nathan Englander	Louise Erdrich	Anthony Doerr	Alice Munro
David Foster Wallace	Sandra Cisneros	Mary Gaitskill	Chris Offut
Antonya Nelson	Richard Russo	Amy Bloom	Lauren Groff
Jhumpa Lahiri	Ron Carlson	T.C. Boyle	Pinckney Benedict
Ha Jin	Barry Udall	Peter Ho Davies	Tony Earley
Rick Moody	Matthew Klam	Bharti Mukharjee	Column McCann
Kevin Brockmeier	Jennifer Egan	Lee K. Abbott	Alice Munro
Ron Carlson	Melanie Rae Thon	Barry Hannah	Richard Ford
Ethan Canin	Edward P. Jones	Andre Dubus	Tobias Wolff
Charles Baxter	Robert Boswell	Judith Ortiz Cofer	Rick Bass
Gish Jen	Russell Banks	Dagoberto Gilb	Thom Jones
Jamaica Kincaid	Stuart Dybek	E. Annie Proulx	Amy Tan
Helena Viramontes	Richard Bausch	Lan Samantha Chang	George Saunders
Ana Castillo	ZZ Packer	Denis Johnson	Dan Chaon
A.M. Homes	Margaret Atwood	Michael Chabon	Elizabeth McCracken
Christie Hodgen	John McNally	Sherman Alexie	Julie Orringer
Trudy Lewis	Joan Silber	Erin McGraw	Daniel Wallace
Anthony Varallo	Brock Clarke	Steve Almond	Karen Russell
Steven Millhauser	Deborah Eisenberg	Kyle Minor	Angela Pneman
Anne Enright	Hannah Tinti	Miranda July	Kelly Link
Aimee Bender	Amy Hempel	Aleksander Hemon	Allegra Goodman
Daniyal Mueenuddin	Miroslav Penkov	Etgar Keret	David McGlynn
Lauren Groff	Lori Ostlund	Nancy Zafris	Mark Jude Poirer
Doug Dorst	Chimamanda Ngozi	Daniel Alarcón	Ron Rash
Manuel Munoz	Adichie	David Means	David Shields
Patrick Michael Finn	Donald Ray Pollock	Yiyun Li	Alan Heathcock
Adam Haslett	Caitlin Horrocks	Matt Bell	Benjamin Percy
Jim Shepherd	Claire Vaye Watkins	Benjamin Percy	Alan Heathcock
Susan Minot	Mark Slouka	Brian Evenson	Ron Rash
Donald Antrim	Sam Lipsyte	Lucy Corin	Wells Tower
NoViolet Bulawayo	Jack Driscoll	Tao Lin	Percival Everett

