

English 70H: Advanced Fiction Workshop (8.9.19)

Rachel Pastan

Fall 2019

Wednesdays: 1:15-4:00

Office hours: Wednesdays 4-5, and by appointment, LPAC 208

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Required texts: Everything will be available on the Moodle.

Welcome to the Advanced Fiction Workshop! This class is for students who have already taken some fiction writing and are ready to do more intensive, independent work.

Reading: In addition to reading each other's work, we will also read short fiction by a range of writers. As we read, we will pay attention to how the authors approach fiction-making and what we can learn from them.

Writing:

Fiction: Three stories

1. During first half of the term we are going to develop one story in a very particular way. There will be lots of directions, but also lots of freedom. I hope you will find the constraints interesting and useful. You will turn in a new draft of this story every week.

2. You can write your second story (due after fall break) any way you want, BUT:

- You must do some research—at the library—on a subject of your choice. A profession for your protagonist perhaps, or some activity or thing (deep-sea diving, dog training, butterflies) that will play a significant role in your story. Incorporate what you have learned—but try not to be obvious (or boring!) about it. *You must submit a bibliography* with a list of at least two books or articles consulted, with your story. (You may also do online research, but at least two sources must be on paper. This is to encourage you to go into the library and poke around.)
- You must incorporate at least three techniques you have learned from the writers we have read earlier in the semester. You must write me a letter (1-2 pp.) explaining what techniques you have incorporated and from whom you learned them.
- The story must be 8-20 pages (double-spaced, Times or Times New Roman font).

3. Your third story is completely free. 8-20 pages.

4. You must revise one of your last two stories as a final project to be handed in at the end of the semester.

Four Short Craft Essays:

One each on four of the outside stories we will be reading, your choice.

Each month (September, October, November, and December) write a two-page essay that explores some aspect of the craft of fiction-making in some story we have read. Don't write a review or a summary. Write about the way the author carries out one technique (structure, point of view, diction...). Or write about the way this author introduces new characters, manages writing about groups, writes about children, writes dialogue, uses place, uses opening paragraphs, shows how people look, shows time passing....

It helps to ask yourself: *What is the effect, on the reader, of what the author is doing?*
Also: *What techniques might I steal and use myself?*

Make sure you use quotations to support your ideas, and explain *how* the quotations support the ideas.

Workshop: The workshop method we will use may be different from the way workshops have been run in other class you have taken. This method is based on Critical Response Process developed by Liz Lerman—originally for dance, though it has by now been used by many artists in many different disciplines. It aims to give the writer more agency in the way their story is discussed. This is how we will proceed:

1. **Statements of Meaning:** Responders state what was meaningful, evocative, moving, exciting, striking in the work they have just witnessed. Don't just say, "I liked this"! Try to locate specific aspects of the story that you responded to a particular way.
2. **Artist as Questioner:** The artist brings three questions about the work to class—things they want to know. Discussion follows, addressing these questions and also, to some extent, bringing up other points.
3. **Neutral Questions:** Responders come to class prepared with two neutral questions each to ask about the work under consideration. The artist responds. Questions are *neutral* when they do *not* have an opinion couched in them. For example, "Why is the ending so abrupt?" is not a neutral question. "What ideas guided your choices about the ending?" is. The point is to open the writer's mind to issues they might not have thought about, as well as to have a conversation about these issues that is useful to everyone.

One thing I like about this method is that it moves the instructor a bit out of the center of the discussion and puts the writer there instead. In this model, students take more responsibility for the discussion.

We will also do a fair bit of workshop discussion in small groups (without the instructor) in the first half of the term.

Deadlines and Written Critiques: Generally stories will be due Sundays at noon before our Wednesday class. Please post them to the Moodle.

** The exception to this is the first two weeks of workshopping, where we will just read the works out loud in class. Writers should bring enough copies for everyone in their group (and for me, even if I'm not in your group). But please post these to the Moodle too, for completeness sake. **

For stories submitted in advance of class, each of us readers will be responsible for reading the piece **at least twice**. I usually read a story through once just as though I were reading it in a book, then go back and read it as a critic the second time, marking it up with margin notes showing what I really liked, what I was confused by, what I thought was unnecessary or awkward. We'll turn in our marked-up copies to the writer at the end of class.

Also, we will each write a critique of the story, in the form of a letter, to the author. These letters should be at least two paragraphs long and begin, like a letter, "Dear _____," and be signed with our names.

In these letters you should say what you thought was working in the story (characters, plot structure, use of language, etc.) as well as what you thought could be changed and improved. Be as *specific* and helpful as you can. You will give these, along with the marked-up story, to the writer in class.

Bring a second copy of your letter to hand in to me.

It is important to tell the writer what's working—what the strengths of a piece are—as well as what you think the problems are, partly because most of us are not clear about where our strengths lie. This is useful information. Also, it is important to be honest about what doesn't work without being gratuitously hurtful. (You guys know this, right? But it bears repeating.)

You may skip two critique letters over the course of the term, but please email me to let me know you are skipping.

Manuscripts: All manuscripts, short and long, must be typed, double-spaced, in Times (or Times New Roman) 12 point. Margins must be 1 inch all around. Pages must be numbered.

Writing schedule: It's important to figure out when good times are for you to write. Everyone is different. Are you best in the morning or the evening? Do you write well in big chunks of time or shorter, frequent ones? What are your other responsibilities this term?

For the first few weeks of the semester (and maybe later on, too), I'd like you to make a writing schedule each week at the end of the class. Then, track your actual writing time and turn it in to me the next week in class. See how you might modify the schedule for the following week. You should be writing probably about six hours a week for this class (though some weeks, especially at the beginning of the term, it may be less, and other weeks it may be more).

Lateness: Late manuscripts are very unlikely to be discussed in class. You can ask me if you need an extension, but given the fact that we need time to read and comment on your work, it will be difficult to give them.

Attendance: This class is all about attendance. You need to be in class to hear your work discussed, to do in-class assignments, and to give critiques to your classmates. They are counting on you! Unless you're absent due to circumstances genuinely beyond your control, missing class is grounds for ejection from the workshop.

September 4:

INTRODUCTIONS

September 11

A two-page story in the first person. Ideally this should be an interesting anecdote from your life, something that happened to you that has meaning to you in some way (though you might not understand quite how). But really it can be any complete, two-page, first-person narrative.

Gish Jen, "Who's Irish"
Lucia Berlin, "Point of View"
Antonya Nelson essay

Weekly writing schedule

September 18:

Same story, expanded by 500 words, written from a different POV.

Antonya Nelson, "Eminent Domain"
Justin Torres, "Seven"
Review significant age section of Nelson essay.

Weekly writing schedule

September 25:

Same story, expanded by 500 words. Think about your protagonist's age. Consider changing it to make use of a particular moment in growing up, or growing older. Or if you don't change it, make enhanced use of the particular transition ("coming of age") available to you as is.

Sherman Alexie, "What You Pawn, I Will Redeem"
John Cheever, "The Swimmer"
Review clock section of Nelson essay

Weekly writing schedule

October 2:

Same story, expanded by 500 words, with a clock.

Julie Otsuka, “Evacuation Order No. 19”

Kelly Link, “The Faery Handbag”

Review props and objects section of Nelson essay.

Weekly writing schedule

October 9

Same story, expanded by 500 words. Consider your inventory of props and objects. Add a few useful ones. Make enhanced use of the ones you already have.

Barthelme, “The School”

Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues”

Review section of Nelson essay on an arc—or as I think of it, an escalation of something.

For next time:

Expand your story by 500-1,000 words. Add an arc!

(First 4 stories due Sunday, October 20)

No outside reading for next time.

FALL BREAK**October 23**

Stories with an arc!

START RESEARCH

October 30

Stories with an arc!

November 6:

Two research-based stories

Louise Erdrich, “The Flower”

November 13

Two research-based stories
George Saunders, “Jon”

November 20:

Two free assignment stories
Alice Munro, “Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage”

November 27: NO CLASS—Thanksgiving eve

December 4:

Two free assignment stories
Z.Z. Packer, “Brownies”

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 15:

FINAL REVISIONS DUE, 2 PM, hard copy in the box outside my office.

Revise one of your second-half stories.

Write a two-page essay about what you changed and why.

Note: If you want the story back with my comments, please include a large manila envelope with your address and stamps on it.