

## ENGLISH 90: FICTION WRITING

Fall 2015

Rachel Smith, rsmith4@stanford.edu

Mondays and Wednesdays 12:30 – 2:20, Room TBA

Office Hours: Monday 2:30 – 3:30 and Wednesday 11 – 12:20

Margaret Jacks Hall, Room TBA

“[Writing] is not an alternative to life, still less an escape from life, it *is* life: yet overlaid with a peculiar sort of luminosity, as if one were, and were not, fully inhabiting the present tense.”

—Joyce Carol Oates

This course approaches fiction writing through the short story: reading, writing, and putting into words what intrigues, delights, and moves us in a story. We'll spend a good deal of our time this quarter discussing how writers manage to create those seemingly magical, intangible qualities. We'll study formal elements of craft such as character, plot, point-of-view, dialogue, and style. Increasingly, you'll find you have a clearer and more complex view of why you like a story (or a detail, or a line of prose) and you'll be able to apply that depth of understanding as you revise your own writing. Throughout the quarter you will complete in-class writing exercises and take-home writing assignments. You will write one story of approximately ten to fifteen pages and have it workshopped by your peers. As a class we'll give one another feedback that is both constructive and deeply considered. It's a rare and (mostly) wonderful experience to have a room full of people dedicate themselves to serious reflection on your work. After your story is workshopped you'll have the chance to revise it and turn it in as a part of your final portfolio.

There are many reasons you may have chosen to take this course, but most likely you're here at least in part because stories have been important in your life and you believe that in some way they matter. I hope that our work together this quarter will strengthen your sense of the value of the writer's work, both in the process and on the page. I hope you will finish the course with a sense that as writers it is in our power to make our world richer, more interesting, and more vivid.

---

#### REQUIRED TEXTS & MATERIALS

- *The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction: 50 North American Stories Since 1970*, edited by Lex Williford and Michael Martone
  - *The Writing Life*, by Annie Dillard
  - A notebook dedicated to this class (no laptops)
  - You will be required to provide copies of your work to your peers. Please budget for this expense. You will also need to access a printer throughout the quarter.
-

---

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS & GRADING

### **Creative Work: 45%**

Short Writing Assignments (10%): Writing exercises and homework will be assigned throughout the quarter. These assignments will help you integrate elements of craft into your writing practice and they'll prepare you to write and revise your longer story. You'll share some of this work in class and receive feedback from your peers.

Story (15%): You'll write one story approximately ten to fifteen pages in length that you'll submit to the class for workshop. This should be a complete, self-contained short story. There are no further creative guidelines except that line by line the writing should be interesting to you and should reflect the full dedication of your energy, heart, and intelligence. You'll need to bring enough copies to distribute to each member of the class.

Final portfolio (20%): As Flaubert said, "Talent is a slow patience." Great writing takes time. You are not required to turn in very many items in your final portfolio because I know you will need as much time as you can get to do a really fine job on a single revision. The portfolio includes the following 3-4 documents:

- A comprehensive revision of your story, including a significant amount of new writing.
- A letter explaining your revision strategy, what workshop comments you found most valuable and why, and a discussion of further revisions you'd like to make in the next draft.
- A copy of the story draft you turned in to me for workshop, with my line edits
- Optional: One other revised piece of writing

### **Response Letters: 20%**

The value of the writing workshop isn't only in receiving feedback on the story you've written. You may find that the thinking you do in responding to your peers' stories is just as valuable, if not more so. For each workshop story you'll do at least two careful readings of the work and prepare comments in the form of a letter to the writer. Remember that it's valuable for the writer to know what you appreciated in the work, as well as what you see as working less well. We will be looking at early drafts in workshop, and our goal is to help the writer form a plan for improving the work. To that end, we'll give serious attention to our critique as well as what we admire in the work and what we see as its highest potential.

### **CW Reading Attendance: 10%**

Throughout the quarter, you'll attend three Creative Writing Program readings of your choice. You can find a list of this quarter's readings at <http://creativewriting.stanford.edu/>. If you like, you may attend an Art of Writing workshop or Poet's House in lieu of one reading. You won't need to type up a response to these readings, but take notes on a few things that strike you—a line, an image, a character trait, etc.—and come to the next class meeting prepared to share them with your peers.

### **Participation 25%**

This is largely a discussion-based class, so the quality of our collective experience depends on your engagement. This is true for our discussion of the published stories as well as the writing workshop. You should arrive on time, having read the assigned work carefully and prepared some points to offer the discussion. Listen to what the other members of the class have to say and feel welcome to respond or ask questions.

Absences: Attendance is essential to this course. If you have a legitimate reason for missing class, please arrange this with me in advance. Only in exceptional circumstances will an absence be counted as excused *after the fact*. More than one unexcused absence will reduce your final grade by 1/3 of a letter grade per absence. Chronic absence will significantly affect your grade. If you do miss a class, you are responsible for getting discussion notes, assignments, workshop manuscripts, handouts, or any other materials from one of your peers.

---

## **CLASS POLICIES**

### **Formatting**

- Typed & double-spaced, 1-inch margins, Times New Roman (12pt)
- Multiple pages stapled (the separate items of the portfolio should be paperclipped together)
- Pages numbered (upper right)
- Your name, date, & the assignment (and nothing else) on the first page (upper left)
- Thoughtfully titled, if applicable
- Free from spelling, grammar and punctuation errors

### **Laptops, Cell Phones, Food**

Your productivity as a reader and writer depend on your capacity for deep, sustained attention. The easy access to distractions that cell phones and laptops bring is incompatible with the deep attention that will benefit your writing. For this reason, cell phones must be turned off during class and laptops are not permitted except if we are having a lab class where you are working on your story. In this case, your wifi must be turned off. Food, on the other hand, is perfectly fine to have in class. You're also welcome to bring food to share.

### **Email**

I do not accept assignments by email (please leave them in the box outside my office). However, I welcome you to contact me by email (or during office hours) if you have questions, concerns, or comments about the course. If you need to find out what you missed during an absence, you should only contact me if you need further clarification *after* you've gotten notes, assignments, handouts, etc. from a classmate. I check email at least once a day on weekdays and will respond to you as promptly as I am able. I expect you to check your Stanford email daily on weekdays as well.

### **Late Assignments**

The highest possible grade for late work is a C. Late assignments may be handed to me in class or left in the box outside my office.

---

## MORE

### **Office Hours**

Please stop by my office hours to talk about the course, books, writing, or just to chat. I look forward to getting to know you. It may be especially helpful to schedule a meeting after your workshop to talk through your ideas for revision. If my office hours don't work with your schedule you can contact me to make an appointment at another time.

### **Academic Honesty**

All work submitted must be your own and *must be written this quarter, for this class*. Ideas, information, or quotes from other sources must be properly cited. If you're not sure how to properly attribute outside material that you're incorporating into your fiction, please ask me.

### Honor Code:

The Honor Code is the University's statement on academic integrity written by students in 1921. It articulates University expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work:

The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:

1. that they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading;
2. that they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.
3. The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code.
4. While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.

### **Students with Documented Disabilities**

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: <http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae>).

### **Class Calendar**

A week-by-week calendar will be available in the first week of class.