

MPW 960  
Fiction Workshop/Genre Fiction  
Units: 3  
Summer 2007 (May 17–August 2)  
Thursdays 6:00–9:10 p.m.

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*Office hours/consultation by arrangement.  
I will answer all e-mails and phone calls within 24 hours.*

## Introduction and Purposes

GENRE FICTION IS a term used to differentiate individual personalities within the story family. Referred to by most publishers as category fiction, its main branches are *adventure, mystery, romance, suspense, historical, science fiction, and fantasy*. Subsets within the genre family are *juvenile, young adult, police procedural, and horror*. *Science fiction* branches into *hard sciences* and *social science/psychology*. *Fantasy* has a number of forks in the road: *alternate universe, portal into another world, sword and sorcery*, to name a few.

In recent years, there has been a tendency within genera to crosspollination, particularly involving but not limited to historical, producing such mixes as historical romance, historical suspense, historical mystery, and historical adventure. By its very definition, fantasy is a history of another time or place, governed by different approaches to behavior than those found in mainstream stories. The great American invention, the Western, can be considered as an historical adventure or romance.

THE PURPOSE OF this twelve-week workshop/lecture course is to examine the present state of long- and short-form genre fiction, identify the inherent promises each category offers the reader, and isolate the aspects of craft necessary to pursue successfully realized genre work. After being given a brief historical-to-present-day tour of the various categories, you will launch a genre-fiction project (further described under “Semester Project Options”) or continue working on a project already begun (also discussed under “Semester Project Options”), the primary goal being completion of the project, the ultimate goal being publication.

As a major thrust of the course, we will:

- Identify the book and magazine publication prospects for the major genera today.
- Contrast genre fiction and mainstream fiction.
- Examine ways in which genre fiction techniques positively enhance the craft and scope of literary fiction.
- Use one novel (see “Reading Requirements”) as an archetype for constructing longform genre fiction.
- Examine ways to frame or pattern genre fiction on older classics (for example, the novel *Rebecca* from the novel *Jane Eyre*; or the new Jane Smiley novel *Ten Nights* from the Boccaccio story collection *The Decameron*; or the Valerie Martin novel, *Mary Riley*, from Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*).
- Examine ways in which all longform fiction is, in essence, mystery fiction.
- Examine some of the important fiction techniques used in genre fiction.

Upon successful completion of this course, you will be able to:

- Assess the relative artistic, intellectual, and financial worth of a project before embarking on it.
- Express in outline or synopsis form the thrust of a genre narrative.
- Find your own voice in a given genre.
- Discover ways to expand the conventions of a particular genre.
- Discover ways to “cross over” or mix various genera.
- Discover potential markets for genre fiction.
- Read published genre material in ways that will enhance your own creative performance.

THE COURSE BEGINS with an introduction to genre fiction and an overview of its component parts, followed by the differences from and similarities to mainstream/literary fiction. This is followed by a survey of genre promise—what dramatic elements the readers of a particular genre expect.

At this point, I’ll survey the class to determine which genera you and your classmates currently intend to pursue. You’ll be given a choice of three semester projects (described under “Semester Project Options”). Instruction focus will shift to a survey of how a particular genre introduces the story, followed by a survey of the narrative tempo and complexity of the genera to be studied for this class.

I’ll give you an annotated list of 100 genre novels, each of which I’ve chosen because it demonstrates one or more useful narrative and thematic traits.

You’ll have the opportunity to discuss in class the overall arc of the assignment option you’ve chosen.

Nearly all genre fiction is presented in the form of the scene, which is the basic personal unit of drama, stitched together and supplemented by narrative, which is the general thread of story throughline.

***Statement for Students with Disabilities***

*Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.*

***Statement on Academic Integrity***

*USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. Scampus, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A.: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/>. Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at: <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/>.*

## Course Requirements and Grades

### Reading Requirements

During the course of the semester, you will be expected to read:

- At least one Sunday *New York Times Book Review* mystery section
- At least one Sunday *New York Times Book Review* science fiction section
- At least one review from a genre publication I will suggest
- *The Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum
- *101 Best Scenes Ever Written* compiled by Barnaby Conrad (Quill Driver Press)
- *Rebecca* by Daphne Du Maurier
- *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett
- *Rosemary's Baby* by Ira Levin

In addition to short fiction texts I'll provide throughout the semester, you should read at least one genre novel published within the past five years, and be prepared to discuss the impact of the book's content, stylistic presentation, and audience.

The standard for usage convention—spelling, punctuation, abbreviations, compound words, etc.—in the world of book publishing (and in the MPW program) is *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th edition, published by the University of Chicago Press. Magazines, journals, and periodicals often have their own style guides, but *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage* and *The Associated Press Stylebook* are generally recognized as standards in serial publications. During the arc of this course, you should consult and use the appropriate style guides to the point where I will not have to call use of convention issues to your attention.

### Semester Project Options

YOUR GRADE in this course will be based on your performance in one of three project options.

Choose one of the following three options for your semester project:

**1. THE GENRE NOVEL-PRESENTATION, OPTION #1:** Prepare from scratch a competent presentation for a book-length work of fiction that has some reasonable potential for being taken on by an established book publisher. Your presentation should contain:

- (a) Enough actual text material to introduce most of the major characters and themes (at least 50 pages—12,250 words—of revised copy)
- (b) A two- to three-paragraph statement to indicate how the book will develop (not to be confused with an outline; the statement is to be thematic).

- (c) A brief note identifying the type of novel yours is to be, as well as the names of at least two works credibly similar to yours (see following examples).

EXAMPLE: My novel is a suspense-thriller with mystery and law-enforcement background, focusing on aspects of comparative morality in law enforcement and among criminals. *Mystic River* by Dennis Lehane and *North* by Frederick Busch are two recently published novels similar in nature and intensity to my work.

EXAMPLE: My novel is a police procedural featuring a law enforcement agency in the remote western portion of the United States featuring an overweight and self-piteous sheriff with a high cholesterol profile. A similar approach can be found in Craig Smith's series beginning with *The Cold Dish*.

**2. THE GENRE NOVEL, OPTION #2:** Continue working on a genre novel already in progress. Present the opening chapter in workshop setting, and then define the story arc to me and your classmates. Your presentation should contain:

- (a) An opening chapter revised in the light of concepts encountered in this class.
- (b) At least 10,000 additional words in which the main characters and issues are introduced.
- (c) A two- to three-paragraph statement to indicate how the book will develop (not to be confused with an outline; the statement is to be thematic).
- (d) A brief note identifying the type of novel yours is to be, as well as the names of at least two works credibly similar to yours (see the examples under "The Genre Novel, Option #1").

**3. THE GENRE SHORT STORY:** Submit at least three completed short stories totaling at least 50 pages of text in final draft. The stories may be all in one genre or in a combination of genera, the goal being that they are ready for submission to a hardcopy or electronic genre forum.

WHICHEVER YOUR CHOICE for semester project, you must declare it in writing no later than the third meeting of the class, **May 31, 2007**. Examples of written declaration:

My semester project for the class will be a science-fiction novel about the potential hazards of fish farming, set at the Institution of Oceanography, Woods Hole, Mass., at a more or less contemporary time.

My semester project will be a group of short stories, each from a differing genre, each focusing on an unusual quest.

My semester project will be a mystery novel in which a disgraced law enforcement officer hires a private detective to help her prove her innocence, only to discover that the private investigator is linked to the circumstances in which her reputation was compromised.

My semester project will be a woman-in-jeopardy novel in which the protagonist returns to the small town of her birth and upbringing to settle an aging parent into a managed-care home and in the process becomes involved in a deadly conspiracy.

I'll ask you to give a brief verbal summary of your written declaration in class. I want this assignment to develop into a book-contract arrangement for you, so I reserve the right to ask for some show of clarification or to veto the project and send you back to the drawing board if I believe your proposal is weak, unrealistic, overly derivative, or if there seems to be a paucity of story.

The completed semester project is due in my hands on or before **August 2, 2007**. This deadline allows me time to read your assignment before grades are due according to departmental and university requirements.

### **Words of Advice about the Assignment and Your Grade**

The standard for assigning the course grade is based on my experience over more than 30 years as an editor and consultant for book publishers, as a consultant to literary agents, as a reviewer of books for major periodicals, as editor of a literary journal, as a writer, and on my assessment of how your work would fare in the literary marketplace among such professional readers as editors, literary agents, reviewers, and librarians.

My basic approach as I look at your work is to wonder what the response will be from literary agents and editors who focus on the type of material you chose for your project.

I will also tend to measure your proposal against books currently being published or being accepted for publication. Given my need to assign a letter grade for all work done in the class, I think of myself as a realistic grader rather than easy or difficult. I have no qualms about assigning the grade of A to an entire class and, indeed, I have done so. If I'm not convinced your work will do well in the world of books, journals, magazines, and other periodical publications, I will express my misgivings to you in personal consultation, by memo, and by editorial commentary supplementing the work you submit.

Accordingly, a grade of **A-** expresses my belief that your project has a realistic expectation for publication, but may need some work.

Grade **B+** could still be in the running for publication but needs more work, attention to revision details, and substance.

Grade **B** means good, solid work, well worth your effort to pursue additional revision. It expresses my belief that you're onto a nice idea or ideas and are at the close-but-no-cigar level.

Grade **B-** means wake-up call; you need to read more contemporary material. Take a closer look at the books, journals, and magazines being published in today's literary and commercial venues. A grade of **B-** is a direct suggestion that you look deeper into yourself for clues, responses, and ideas.

Grade **C** means get with the program, or as Dean Cody puts it, "A **C** in graduate school is like a failure in undergraduate work."

Yes, sometimes a semester's work merits the unequivocal grade of **A**, but the grade of **A** is not a guarantee of publication; the grade of **A-** is not an indication that there is something wrong with the work or, indeed, your technique.

I've had more reason to assign a course grade of **B+** or lower when the student has submitted less than two pieces of material during the arc of the semester.

Because I want to provide some semblance of a positive contribution to your work, I hope to see material from you during the arc of the course, perhaps to offer suggestions, perhaps merely to offer encouragement, but certainly in hopes of seeing that you don't get caught up in a crisis of performance. I will be flexible, even indulgent through May, but **NB**, if you have not turned in any material, however first-draft its substance, by **June 7**, you will lose a half-grade so that **A-level** work becomes **A-**, **A-** work becomes **B+**, and on down the scale.

**You must submit material that will be part of your semester project at least twice during the semester; there is no maximum to the amount of material you can submit.** If you are interested in getting the most for your—or Sallie Mae's—money, you would be well advised to turn in as much material throughout the course of the semester as you possibly can. The more you submit, the more instructor feedback you get.

I cannot assign the grade **Incomplete** without authorization to do so from the department chair. If you believe you have a valid reason to apply for a grade of **Incomplete**, it is your responsibility to initiate and complete the relevant paperwork, which must be presented to the instructor by the penultimate meeting of the class, which, in this case is **July 26, 2007**. If circumstances force you to apply for the grade **Incomplete**, you must follow university guidelines for removing it. You will lose half a grade, meaning the highest grade you can hope for is **A-**. Unless your authorization for a grade of **Incomplete** is in the instructor's hands by the penultimate meeting of the class, there is a 50 percent probability that you will be assigned the grade of **F**.



**FORMAT FOR SUBMISSIONS:** With the exception of the declaration of semester project, material must be submitted in double-spaced print form on an 8½ x 11 sheet printed on one side. As in the publishing world, single-spaced material turned in for this class will be returned unread. While the semester project is to be submitted in printed form, you may e-mail incremental submissions to me in Microsoft Word, PDF, or RTF format.

You must follow the appropriate style guide for your work. If, after June 14, your instructor notices more than five errors in spelling, grammar, usage, or syntax, or if the material is presented in any format other than that outlined in the preceding paragraph, I will return the material to you unread.

IN THE MPW PROGRAM as well as The Writing Life after you receive your degree, some ideas and projects lose their initial splendor. Every writer has the literary equivalent of a graveyard somewhere in the file drawers or the mysterious reaches of the computer hard drive. Projects should always carry with them some kind of energizing force, whether that force is based on revenge, altruism, pure fun, or the energy of creative engagement. If the concept you have chosen for your semester project in this class loses its attractiveness to you by mid-June, you are wise to consider dropping it. You may accordingly submit plans for another project, but the due dates and the page-length standards still obtain, and you may not use the pages done on the abandoned project to count toward the text requirement.

YOUR PRESENCE IN CLASS assures you exposure to concepts and materials vital to your writing career. After two absences, I may lower your earned grade by half a point. Three absences will lower your grade by a full point.

YOU WILL BE GIVEN verbal and written commentary during the course of the semester on materials you turn in to me.

YOU SHOULD NOT turn in your only copy of a manuscript, nor should you ever submit to a literary agent or publisher your only copy of text without taking ample steps toward backing up the work in some photocopied or word processing format or, for that matter, both.

COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS ON the semester project are not acceptable. Your project for this course must be something you have originated and for which you could secure copyright.

## Calendar of Due Dates

**May 31:** Written statement of your chosen semester project due, along with a brief summary of the statement presented orally in class.

**June 7:** Date by which you must begin submitting material from your semester project.

**July 26:** If you have a valid reason to take an Incomplete in the course, deadline by which you must complete relevant paperwork.

**August 2:** Completed semester project due.