

English 303—Introduction to Fiction writing (workshop)

Instructor: David Treuer

Tuesday 2—4 :20 THH 109

Office hours: 9-11 Tuesdays or by Appointment/404 THH

Catalog Description:

Our focus will be on short fiction. We will bring our own work to class and have it workshopped by our peers and the professor with an eye toward the formal and stylistic properties of contemporary (and historical) short fiction. Class time will be divided between readings in the form, exercises, and workshop—when we practice the form ourselves—though most class time will be devoted to workshop and discussion.

Course Description:

There is life—which often seems confusing and poorly ordered and we, as we live it, try and avoid conflict, generally. And there is fiction: where there is supreme order AND supreme misbehavior and disorder. Fiction is where bad things happen, where we *want* them to happen, if only to better see our way around them. Bad deeds in fiction are where the meaning is. In this course we will make virtues of our vices—misbehavior, extreme obsession, soul errors, errors in judgment, willful disobedience, and the unforeseen effects of noble sentiments—these are at the heart of great fiction. In this course we will do four things as we work our way toward the great goal of thrilling prose. We will read and we will write and we will edit and we will discuss. Most of the work we will discuss will be your own, though there are some outside readings (some craft-based, some creative) that we will use as ways into various issues of the “writing process.” We will workshop each other’s work with an eye toward perfecting them. At times we will focus on specific elements of the craft (pace, structure, characterization). Ideally, our work here will lead us not to the perfection of a piece or pieces of writing (which is one thing) but to the development of a certain skill-set that will help you as grow as a writer.

Class time will be divided between discussion of assigned reading, exercises, and workshops of student work, with the lion’s share of attention directed at student stories. Participants will receive at least one formal workshops over the course of the semester—the first time the work should be new or in progress, the second may be either a new story or a revised version of the first one submitted.

Required Texts: I will provide pdfs of all required texts. There are no books to buy at the bookstore for this course. I will, instead, assign readings on an ad hoc basis depending on what aspects of story writing we are struggling with the most. A sample of some of the stuff we might be reading: Charles Baxter, *The Art of Subtext*; James Woods, *How Fiction Works*, Philip Roth, *Goodbye Columbus*, Gustav Flaubert, “A Simple Heart”; Louise Erdrich, “The Red Convertible”; Vladimir Nabokov, “The Visit to the Museum”; Alice Munro, “Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You”; Richard Bausch, “What Feels like the World” and “The Man Who Knew Belle Starr,” Charles Baxter, “Fenstad’s Mother,” James Orozco “Orientation,” and others.

Each one of the writers listed above among the required readings is an accomplished, excellent writer. Each writer also clearly excels at or exemplifies a few of the aspects of craft that we will explore over the term. Loosely grouped, we could think of them (and think of our schedule) in terms of:

Weeks 1-3: Questions of form: What makes writing a story? What are its basic elements? We will explore plot, character, action, and conflict

Weeks 4-6: Voice. Ahh, that indefinable, damning thing known as voice—how a story (rather than a character or a writer) sounds, and the sense that that sound imparts. Alice Munro, and Philip Roth will be on display these weeks.

Weeks 7-9: Time. How we pace our stories hinges on many things (what kind of action accounts for dramatic action, what kind of focus we achieve, and style). We will look at radically different approaches to time in the works of Flaubert, Richard Bausch

Weeks 10-14: Drama. How do we create a sense (visceral) of drama, of real tension, of things hanging in the balance? This is one of the truly difficult aspects of fiction. We will look at two of the masters, Alice Munro and Louise Erdrich for guidance.

Course Policies

Attendance: There is no grade for attendance, but there is a grade for class participation. Because the success of a writing workshop depends entirely on students’ regular preparation for and attendance in class, missing more than one class with or without an excuse will lower your grade. Missing more than two classes for any reason (medical appointments, athletic events, official school functions) may cause you to fail the course. Missing your writing workshop day or turning in your stories after the

deadline is a great imposition on your peers, your instructor. Don't do that! If you are ill, there is a family emergency, or you are feeling generally overwhelmed, please **do not hesitate to come and speak with me in office hours or contact me via email.**

Assignments:

Creative work (worth 60% of your course grade). You will sign up for 1 slots during which your story will be workshopped by the course. The stories will be handed out to the class a week before they are workshopped. Your smaller exercises (no more than six) also make up this part of your grade.

Class Participation: (worth 10% of your grade) You are expected to show up for class ready to discuss the published work and the work of your peers. Not everyone is as vocal in such a context but everyone should make an effort to be a part of the discussion. On workshop days, students will discuss each other's writing for about an hour, referring to their comments on the printed copy. You will be graded on the quality and quantity of your comments; I will periodically collect the comments for evaluation. We will go over the commenting process during the first class so that you get a sense of the kinds of comments that are most valuable. Participation in workshop is **required**. Also—please do not be late. Also also—please do not text during class. Don't even have your phones on during class. Perhaps don't even bring them with you.

Weekly Assignments: (worth 30% of your grade) Every week you will be expected to write a reaction paper to the published reading, provide a critique of the work handed in by your fellow students, and write responses to the occasional readings. No late papers will be accepted without a doctor's note.

Evaluation criteria and requirements: This course is traditionally graded using a 100-point grading scale (93-100 = A, 90-92 = A-, 88-89=B+, etc). Factors I take into account when grading assignments: *effort* (completion of assignments, coverage, length); *quality* (depth, detail, style, structure, imagery, originality); and *progress* (improvement over time, thoroughness and quality of revisions).

Academic Integrity and information for students with disabilities: 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 (or to TA) 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](tel:2137400776).

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/>.

In the context of this class, copying another person's **words** or **ideas** (even if paraphrased or changed to your own words) without attribution is plagiarism. Handing in a story that you did not write is a form of academic dishonesty. **Handing in a story you have submitted for another course** (without discussing the situation with me first) **is also academically dishonest**. Plagiarized or non-original work will receive a grade of F.

*** a note on tact and tactics: creative writing workshops only work because we, collectively, agree on two foundational principles. Namely, that 1) all of us are capable of being better writers and that's why we are in this class, and 2) by "better" we don't mean more commercially successful or more popular. "Better" in our context means—better equipped to make our writing do what we imagine it will do before we sit down to write it. More effective, more moving, more curious, more gripping, more surprising, etc. We will do our best to live by those principles while we are together.