This course examines two dominant elements that shape a narrative: character and idea. In the first weeks of the course, we will read how writers like Junot Diaz, Reginald McKnight, Russell Banks, and Jhumpa Lahiri create real people on the page, and what it means to make character-based fiction. We will use local and autobiographical writing prompts to capture our own overzealous, innocent, earnest, dangerous, and conniving characters in stories. Later, we will explore how authors use idea to sculpt fiction, from the fantastic forays of Angela Carter to the formal antics of Tim O’Brien and Susan Minot to George Saunders’ absurdism. In addition, we will spend a week on novel openings, and study guest author Antonio Ruiz-Camacho’s linked story collection for how character and idea also shape books.

Students will also be responsible for reading, writing, workshopping their own fiction and others’, and weaving a tight community that summons all its writers to do their very best work.

**REQUIRED TEXTS:**

Lex Williford and Michael Martone, eds., *The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction*

Antonio Ruiz-Camacho, *Barefoot Dogs*

**Writing assignments (35%)**

Several short exercises (250-500 words)

One 10-15 page story or chapter that you will revise for the final portfolio

*Late assignments automatically receive a C grade.*

We’ll also do in-class writing. Bring paper and pen/pencil to every session and be prepared to share your work.

**Class participation (35%)**

You will receive full credit for class participation when you:

1) Come to every class on time.

2) Lead the discussion on one assigned reading, and participate in the rest.

3) Write thoughtful 2-3 paragraph critiques of fellow students’ 10-15 page stories/chapters. Hand them in on the designated workshop day.

4) Help to create a supportive but challenging atmosphere in the writing workshop. Snarky comments will not be tolerated.
If you must miss class for illness, sports, etc: 1) let me know in advance. 2) expect some make-up work. Unexcused absences will lower your grade by a half-letter each time, i.e. one unexcused absence knocks A down to A-, etc.

**Final portfolio (15%)**

Include the revision of your story/chapter, a copy of the first draft, and a 2-paragraph explanation of your revision process.

**Reading attendance (15%)**

Attend three readings (poetry, fiction, or nonfiction) on campus this quarter and submit a brief, typed response for each. Sign up for the Creative Writing Events Listserve by going to [http://mailman.stanford.edu](http://mailman.stanford.edu) and joining “cw-undergrad”

**ABRIDGED CALENDAR**

**Week 1: What is a story, where do you find your stories, and how do you render your worlds?**

Rainer Maria Rilke, “The Sirens;” Joyce Carol Oates, “Lethal;” Reginald McKnight, “The Kind of Light that Shines on Texas” (handouts)

Junot Diaz, “Nilda” (Scribner)

**Week 2: Showing, telling, and narrative modes**

Raymond Carver, “Why Don’t You Dance?”; Elizabeth Tallent, “No One’s a Mystery” (handouts)

James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues”; Robert Stone drafts (handouts); Jhumpa Lahiri, “A Temporary Matter”; (Scribner)

**Week 3: External avenues to the interior: setting, comparison, concrete detail**

Rick Bass, “The Hermit’s Tale;” Z.Z. Packer, “Brownies” (Scribner)

Julie Orringer, “Pilgrims”; Ron Hansen, “Wickedness” (Scribner)