ENGLISH 90: INTRODUCTION TO FICTION

Character & Idea

INSTRUCTOR: Maria Hummel
Spring 2016, TU-TH 11:30am-1:20pm

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, Elizabeth Tallent, and Raymond Carver 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 Susanna Clarke 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 learn from guest author Rita Mae Reese how another writer’s work can cast a model for your own.

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
Rita Mae Reese, The Book of Hulga

GRADE:

Writing assignments (35%)

Many 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 Listserv 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?**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>DUE</th>
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<tr>
<td>March 29</td>
<td>Franz Kafka, “The Sirens;“</td>
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<td>Joyce Carol Oates, “Lethal;“</td>
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<td>Reginald McKnight, “The Kind of Light that Shines on Texas” (handouts)</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 31</td>
<td>Junot Diaz, “Nilda” (Scribner)</td>
<td><strong>DUE: I just want to... exercise. 150 words.</strong></td>
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**Week 2: Showing, telling, and narrative modes**

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>DUE (NONFICTION): Write about someone you loved who didn’t love you back. Minimize the talk about your own feelings. Instead, attentively describe the physical manner of the person, their habits, their dress, speech. 500 words.</th>
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<td>April 5</td>
<td>Raymond Carver, “Why Don’t You Dance?“; Elizabeth Tallent, “No One’s a Mystery” (handouts)</td>
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<td>April 7</td>
<td>James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues”; Robert Stone drafts (handouts)</td>
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**Week 3: External avenues to the interior: setting, comparison, concrete detail**

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>DUE: Write a scene in which one character seriously misunderstands another (or others). 500 words.</th>
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<td>April 12</td>
<td>Rick Bass, “The Hermit’s Tale,” Z.Z. Packer, “Brownies” (Scribner)</td>
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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).

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.