Course Description:

“Only bad writers think that their work is really good.”

– Anne Enright

The adjective in the title of this course presumes that students have some working knowledge of the fiction-writing process. As such, we may skip over certain rudimentary elements of craft discussion (“If it’s so snowy out, shouldn’t the protagonist be wearing boots?”) in order to focus on more refined questions of narrative creation. (“Are the boots new? Are they waterproof? Do they hurt her feet?”) In the first part of the quarter, short exercises and prompts will be paired with readings from a short story collection and a book of craft essays. In the latter part of the quarter we’ll use the workshop method to critique and discuss student stories. At the conclusion of the course, each writer will turn in a revision of their workshop story, along with a short essay reflecting on the revision process.
Texts and Materials:

- *Last Night*, James Salter
- *Thrill Me*, Benjamin Percy
- Assorted handouts to be distributed in class
- Printing ability/budget
- A notebook, some pens, an open mind, a sense of humor, empathy, curiosity, etc.

Grading:

Creative writing is “subjective,” sure, but effort matters in this class. Being a godlike genius will not necessarily give you an edge, and being a piteous mortal will not hold you back. (This is also true of writing in general: talent is nice, but discipline is better.) You will not receive any official grade until your final one for the course. The breakdown for that grade will include:

- **Class participation: 40%**
  Participation includes coming to class on time and prepared, taking an active role in discussion each week, and making a good faith effort with whatever exercises and short assignments we get up to. You will also be required to write response letters to your colleagues’ workshop stories, and I hope that you’ll write the kind of thoughtful, constructive critiques that you would like others to write for you. One point of reiteration: attendance is crucial—if you need to miss class, let me know ahead of time and check with your colleagues (and Canvas) to keep current with assignments. Unexcused absences will significantly affect your participation grade.

- **Creative work: 40%**
  Your writing! Each student will submit a 10- to 20-page prose manuscript to be workshopped in class. At the end of the quarter you will be asked to submit a revision of this piece, along with a very short reflection on the process that took you from first to final draft. Again, the point here is not necessarily to flay open your soul in the attempt to write something immortal—though we’ll all try. The point is to think about art, practice techniques, put in work, and take a chance.

- **Reading responses: 20%**
  You are required to attend two readings hosted by the Creative Writing Program, and to write a short response to each. The responses are not in-depth assignments—just a few impressions to show me that you were there, and paid attention, and maybe even thought a bit about your own writing process or artistic identity. Readings are almost always interesting, often fun, and occasionally inspiring in a profound way. Also, they generally take less than an hour and you can usually score some cookies or soda. (Maybe some prosciutto depending on who organized it.) I’ll announce readings in class and you can find more at [http://creativewriting.stanford.edu/event-list](http://creativewriting.stanford.edu/event-list) and [http://events.stanford.edu/](http://events.stanford.edu/).

Attendance:

To be as clear as possible, the policy is: you are allowed two absences, no questions asked. You might be sick, or “sick,” or in Berlin, or “in Berlin”—whatever the case, those two are yours. Any absences beyond those two will result in a lowering of your final grade by one third of a letter. (E.g., an A- would become a B+.) If you have extenuating circumstances, just email me. An email sent three minutes before class is better than no email at all.
Distributing Manuscripts:

You must distribute hard copies of your manuscript in the class before the one in which you are scheduled to be workshopsed. For example: if your workshop is scheduled for Monday, May 7, then you should bring sixteen printed copies of your story to class on Wednesday, May 2 (one for each of your classmates and one for me). Bit of hard-earned wisdom: do this ahead of time. Printers can smell your fear, and they like to break down when you’re in a hurry.

Formatting:

To better assess more important differences in style, let’s standardize our output form. Please create all documents with one-inch margins, use 12-pt Times New Roman, double-space everything, make sure that your name is on the first page, and make sure that all pages are numbered. If your story seems to want to subvert these standards—how interesting!—just ask me about it. And please proofread: there’s nothing like a minor typographical error to get your readers slobbering with rage.

Etiquette:

Creative writing workshops are inherently weird spaces—here you are asked to write something personal, meaningful, and brand spanking new, then sit silently and listen while your peers focus on its faults and pick everything apart. Because of that, it’s especially important that all of our criticism is made in good faith, so we can all trust that the common goal is to help prod these manuscripts into becoming their best selves. Put phones and laptops away, be respectful, stay engaged. Be honest, but be cool.

Content:

In the published work we read and in the new stories we write, we will likely encounter the classic themes of literature: love, death, sex, violence, depression, madness, rage, trauma. Joy, too, but no one worries about encountering joy. Please bring your most mature and compassionate attitudes to class.

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.

**Attribution:**

The illustration at the front of this syllabus is “The Story Machine” by Scott McCloud.

**Calendar:**

The calendar and schedule, depending as they do on enrollment, will be made available as soon as the class roster has stabilized—most likely in the second week of the course.