READING & WRITING THE SHORT STORY

NYU Fall 2012
Mondays 6:20—9:00

Carol Zoref

COURSE OVERVIEW

This class begins with an agreement—perhaps our first and final agreement about fiction—that every writer is first and always a reader. With this covenant in mind, the spirit of this course is devoted as much to reading as it is to writing, whether we are reading published stories from the course anthology or reading works-in-progress by other students. The objective is for each workshop member to develop a vigorous relationship to the elements of fictional craft—often referred to as the writer’s tools—while exploring strategies for identifying his/her own most promising materials in two, longer stories.

Familiarity with the elements of craft—plot, characterization, voice, setting, point-of-view, etc.—does not imply that we will ultimately agree or even feel a need to agree about what constitutes a successful story. Rather, this information will provide students with a common language for discussing how different types of stories are made and how their own stories-in-progress might better achieve their intentions.

Finally, it is essential to remember our purpose: this is a creative writing workshop, not an editorial board or publishing house where market values or other unfixed dynamics result in publication. There are no correct or incorrect answers in this writing workshop, or ironclad rules to memorize and abide by. Success, instead, will be the measure of how hard you work. Success will mean that you’ve invested yourself in becoming a more knowledgeable writer than you were when you entered this class—whether you are a first-time writer or experienced writer—whatever the outcome on the page, be it an unsettled work-in-progress or a polished piece of prose. Success will mean that you treat every person in the workshop and approach every piece of writing with seriousness, respect, thoughtfulness, and a commitment to being constructive.

CLASS STRUCTURE

Each class will open with a discussion of an element of fictional craft, during which the assigned published stories will be referred to as examples. The topic and stories for each week are outlined on the syllabus.

During the first four weeks of the semester, class time will be spent writing and reading aloud in-class exercises. These exercises are intended to help you jump-start your stories. Beginning the fifth week of the semester, the lion’s share of each meeting will be devoted to student work, with each student presenting a longer sample of their work (as opposed to an exercise) for close discussion by the entire class on two occasions during the semester. Active, thoughtful, and serious participation is fundamental to your learning process and to the success of these discussions, and will represent a significant
component of your final grade. This does not mean that you must speak at great length; rather, you should comment on specific aspects of your classmates’ stories in order to help them to identify what you believe are their strengths as well as specific opportunities for further development.

WRITING

Exercises and Papers

These are detailed on the syllabus. You will work on some of these exercises in class and some of them at home. A small number of short papers will be assigned throughout the semester.

Writing Contracts/Creative Work

You are free to write about any topic that you please, however bear in mind that this course does not cover topics of singular importance to writers of fantasy, science fiction, or graphic novels.

Each student will on two occasions present longer, original manuscripts in class for workshop discussion. You will hand out copies of your story in class the week before your story is to be discussed so that each of us has ample time to read your manuscript and write a critique. You will also be handing in work to me only on other dates. Dates and details about each student’s individually assigned schedule appear on your Writing Contract. Writing Contracts will be distributed at the first class.

Your manuscript should run somewhere between 8-12 pages, doubled-spaced, 12-point font. Manuscripts must be proof read and corrected before distribution. Discussions about manuscripts that contain recurrent grammar and punctuation errors are sidelined by grumbling about mechanics rather than focusing on the story being told. Spell Check and Grammar Check highlight many errors, but there is no better method for finding errors than reading your own work aloud.

If your story is much longer than 12 pages, ask yourself if you have included more than you need, if you are unnecessarily repeating material, or if you have gone off topic. If your manuscript is much shorter than eight pages, ask yourself if your story is fully developed, if there is more to add that would enrich the story that you are looking to tell, or if you have spent enough time working on it.

There is no magic number of pages that constitute a short story – or a novel, for that matter. I do, however, want you to experience the authority of a fully developed story. While many published short stories run longer than 12 pages, I want you

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1 The syllabus is subject to change. Check with a classmate when in doubt.
experience the short story as an art of condensation as opposed to the novelistic world of elaboration. On a practical note, it is difficult to give due diligence to the workshop stories by others, as well devote ample writing time to your own stories, when reading long manuscripts in a workshop of this size.

Workshop Story Critiques

When you are reading the work of your classmates, do so with pen in hand and make succinct and legible notes on the manuscript. Also write a brief, narrative response to the work – a paragraph will suffice – in which you focus on some specific aspect of the story with respect to the manner in which it is crafted. While all authors need, appreciate, and deserve complements about things that are working well, be sure to use these critiques as an opportunity to identify what you believe is the point of the story, as well as the way in which the author might enrich the story through the further employment of an element of craft. For example: Is the dialogue moving the forward story, or is it merely filler? Is it possible to distinguish one character from another, or should the author further develop attributes of characterization. Be as specific as you can.

Print out your comments and give to the author along with your annotated copy of their manuscript. Be certain to sign your comments on both the manuscript and your note. Also, e-mail a copy of your comments to me no later than midnight Sunday night.

READING

Most of the assigned master stories are contained in the required The Art of The Short Story. This inexpensive paperback anthology, the only required text for the class, is available at the NYU Bookstore. Please bring your anthology to class every week so that you can refer to the stories during craft discussions, as well as during workshop critiques.

Other materials will be posted on Blackboard or distributed in class.

GRADERS

Nuts & Bolts

Earning an excellent grade in this class is simply a matter of working very hard and being respectful of every person and every piece of writing that we discuss.

You will do well if you write with serious intention (even when writing humorously); hand in all of your writing assignments on time; closely read all of the assigned stories; write useful and respectful critiques; are an active, purposeful, and constructive
contributor to class discussions; and have at least a very good if not perfect attendance record.

As pointed out earlier, a writing workshop is not a publishing house. The goal is to learn about story writing by writing stories. In fact, you can earn an excellent grade even if your two workshop manuscripts are stories-in-progress, not finely polished pieces.

Comportment

A writing workshop is predicated on each individual’s commitment to collaborative learning. This might sound like an oxymoron: the highly individualized act of writing fiction conjoined with a collaborative setting. Yet, it is a fact. A writing workshop is a place of learning. This means that you enter the room every Monday night with a commitment to being respectful, involved, and constructive.

Attendance

We only meet 13 times in class this semester, which does not afford much wiggle space. If you have to miss a class due to illness or an emergency, let me know by email. You will still be responsible for all assigned work, including returning annotated workshop stories to your classmates, along with the narrative commentary that you also email to me. Unfortunately, it won’t be possible for you to receive a passing grade if you miss more than two classes. Speak to me if you anticipate missing classes so that you can be in touch with one of the deans about finding a way to help you work this out.

Be on time to class. If you arrive late, wait outside in the hallway rather than opening the door and letting yourself in. Do not wander off, because you will be invited into the room when we reach a natural break in the action, much in the way that theatergoers who arrive late are ushered to their seats between scenes. Because of the nature of the workshop environment, it is disruptive waiting for latecomers to get themselves settled.

Two late arrivals to class or late returns from break equal one absence. Speak to me if you have another class that right before ours meets and you have to get to our class building from some distant NYU location. We will see if there’s a way to work it out.

Breaks

A 10 minutes break is scheduled at some point during class. Speak to me if circumstances necessitate your needing a regularly scheduled 2nd break, which I am glad to accommodate when I learn of it. A 10-minute break does not give you a lot of time to leave the building is search of something to eat or drink, so try to bring everything with you.
Cell Phones + Other Electronics

Regrettably, this bears repeating: Turn off your cell phones and other electronics before class. If you must be available to receive an emergency call, let me know in advance so that we can anticipate your leaving the room. Text messaging, web surfing, etc. during class are unacceptable and will be treated as an absence.

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism

Please familiarize yourself with the Gallatin School policy on Academic integrity.
Assignments

I. Discussion Topic: An Overview of the Semester

II. Writing Contracts: Distribution, Explanation, Signing

III. In-Class Writing Exercises
  1. The Story of Your Name
  2. Personal Chronology: Modelled After James Alloway "Provisional List (2) of Events Related to the Politicization of Artists" (from Rochelle Feinstein, Yale School of Art)

IV. Distribution of Materials
  1. Photo magazines
  2. Newspapers
  4. "Teaching Notes" — Paul Thek
  5. "Half In Love" Maile Meloy
  6. Course Description
  7. Detailed Syllabus
  8. Freytag's Triangle

September 17 Point-of-View

I Discussion Topic: Point-of-View

II Readings for This Date

1. 1st Person Single Narration "Sonny's Blues" by James Baldwin
2. 1st Person Plural Narration "A Rose for Emily" by William Faulkner
3. 2nd Person Narration "Ranch Girl" by Maile Meloy (print out PDF from Course Documents
   from Half In Love
4. 3rd Person Omniscient Narration "Hands" by Sherwood Anderson
5. 3rd Person Limited Narration "To Build A Fire" by Jack London
6. Alternating Narration "Patriotism" by Yuko Mishima
7. Glossary of Literary Terms (pages 907-920)

III In-Class Writing Exercise

1. Write a list of your nicknames. Pick one — one that you hate? love? - and explain how you got it.
2. Storymatic Prompts
3. Scientific Belief: True or False

IV Writing Due on This Date

1. Using Alloway's Chronology, create a chronology of events for a fictional character.
2. Answer the questions posed by Paul Thek in "Teaching Notes: 4-Dimensional Design."

https://classes.nyu.edu/webapps/blackboard/content/listContentEditable.jsp?course_id=_237809_1&content_id=_3496196_1
a. In your first version, provide personal, autobiographic answers.
b. In a second version, allow the person that you created for
   Alloway's Chronology to answer the questions.
3. Thought piece on assigned stories. Write a paragraph on each story,
   describing what is achieved by the perspective/point-of-view from which
   the story is being told.

3 : September 24 – NO CLASS
   No class today. Rosh Hashanah.

4 : October 1: More on the Third Person
   I. Discussion Topic – More On The Third Person

II Readings For This Date
1. Third person subjective "The Metamorphosis" by Franz Kafka
2. Third person objective "Shilo" by Bobbie Ann Mason
3. Third person omniscient "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson

III In-Class Writing Exercises
1. The Gammas (inspired by Robby McCauley)
2. Storymatic Prompts

IV Writing Due on This Date

Thought piece on third person narration. Citing examples from the
   texts, write a long paragraph on each story explaining why they are
categorized as subjective, objective, or omniscient. If you disagree with
these categorizations, explain why.

5 : October 8 – Plot & Conflict

Freytag's Triangle doc (23.5 Kb)
I Discussion Topic: Freytag's Triangle

II Readings For This Date

Unified Plot -- "Cathedral" by Raymond Carver
Episodic Plot -- "Paul's Case" by Willa Cather
Discontinuous -- "A Rose for Emily" by William Faulkner

II In-Class Writing Exercises
1. Freytag's Triangle Worksheets for master stories
2. Plots from the Paper -- break into groups and plot out a major news
   story
3. "I never told this to anyone, but ________." Fill in the blank. Write
   this sentence three times. Create two of the secrets, but for a third
   sentence one tell something true from your own life that you never told
   anyone. Read these aloud in class. See if the other writers can guess
   which one is autobiographical.

III Writing Due Today

https://classes.nyu.edu/webapps/blackboard/content/listContentEditable.jsp?course_id=_237809_1&content_id=_3496196_1
In a short paper (two pages), you will be writing about all of the master stories that you have read to date. Explain which ones have unified plots, which ones are episodic, and which ones are discontinuous. If any of them fall into a fourth category, explain why.

6 Oct. 15 – NO CLASS
NYU Fall Break – No classes.

7 October 22 – Past/Present/Future
How to Become a Writer Or, Have You Earned This Cliche? webarchive (27.395 Kb)
Using Verb Tenses webarchive (239.405 Kb)

I Discussion Topic : Verb Tenses

II Readings For This Date

"Using Verb Tenses" by Heather MacFayden (link above from University of Ottawa website)
Past tense: "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" by Flannery O’Connor
Present tense: "Misery" by Anton Chekhov
Future tense: "How To Become A Writer ... Or Have You Earned This Cliche" by Lorrie Moore (see attached PDF)

III In-Class Writing Exercise

Write a detailed instruction on how to do something (change a tire, rewire a lamp, cook an omelette. Start out by writing a simple, by the numbers, to-the-point description. Then go back and add in a brief sentence that reveals what the narrator is thinking/feeling/believing/anticipating/predicting.

IV Writing Assignment Due Today

Re-write the first ten lines of each of the assigned stories.
• On page 1, re-write "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" in the present and future tenses.
• On page 2, re-write "Misery" in the past and future tenses.
• On page 3, re-write "How To Become A Writer" in the past and present tenses.

V Writing Assignment Due Today

Manuscript critiques. Comment on each of the three workshop manuscripts. Email your narrative comments on each to me by Sunday midnight. Paste your comments into the body of your email. No attachments.

8 October 29 – Exposition, Description, Setting.
Characterization
I. Discussion Topic: Information Without Action

II Reading Assignments For This Date
I Discussion Topic: Literary Fiction and Meaning

II Reading Assignment For This Date

"Ars Poetica" by Horace
(see web link)

III Writing Assignment Due Today

Selecting any two or three stories that you've read from the class anthology as reference points, write a short (two pages) paper on the matter of literary fiction having meaning. This is an opportunity for you to make a statement, albeit brief, of your *ars poetica*.

IV Writing Assignment Due Today

Manuscript critiques. Comment on each of the three workshop manuscripts. Email your narrative comments on each to me by Sunday midnight. Paste your comments into the body of your email. No attachments.

I Class Topic: Titles

II In-Class Writing Exercise

1. Create a set of title options for the story that you are currently working on.
   a. Character Name
   b. Location
   c. Action
   d. Idea
   e. Other

2. Do the same thing for the first story that you wrote this semester.

Writing Assignment Due Today

Manuscript critiques. Comment on each of the three workshop manuscripts. Email your narrative comments on each to me by Sunday midnight. Paste your comments into the body of your email. No attachments.

Discussion Topic: Story Check List

(from MacCauley)

Writing Assignment Due Today
Manuscript critiques. Comment on each of the three workshop manuscripts. Email your narrative comments on each to me by Sunday midnight. Paste your comments into the body of your email. No attachments.