Writers as Shapers: Sculpting the Story

NYU Fall 2013: Wrtng-UG 1549-001

Wrtng-UG 1549-001meets@

11:00 a.m. – 1:45
p.m. Wed.

Bldg: 25 W4th, Rm
#: C-12

Required Course materials

2. *Fiction Writing Step by Step, by Josip Novakovich.* Order online or from a bookstore.
3. Articles on various elements of fiction (handouts)
4. A binder for all written work -VERY IMPORTANT. You will be required to hand in all your commented exercises at the end of the semester so keep everything in one place
5. A pack of 4X6 index cards.
6. A notebook to jot down ideas
7. Photocopies of Workshop stories (see further instructions below)
8. Final Portfolio - two-pocket folder with a manuscript clip

9. Highly recommended: *The Elements of Style (Illustrated)* by Strunk, White, Kalman

Instructor Bio

*M.F.A. (Creative Writing), New York University, 2001*
M.A., (Creative Writing), Temple University, 1999

Meera Nair is the author of Video (Pantheon 2003) and a children’s book Maya Saves the Day (Duckbill: India 2013). Video won the Asian-American Literary Award and was a Washington Post Best Book of the Year and the Editor’s Choice at the San Francisco Chronicle. Her work has been featured on National Public Radio’s Selected Shorts, in the New York Times magazine, the Hindu, Three Penny Review, Calyx, India Abroad, Departures magazine and in the anthologies Charlie Chan is Dead–2, Money Changes Everything and Delhi Noir. Nair has won fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts and from the MacDowell Artists’ Colony. She has taught fiction at the New School, New York University and Brooklyn College’s MFA program and, in addition to her duties as Writer-in-Residence at Fordham, has led the University’s Writing London Study Abroad summer program in the UK for the past two years. She has completed a novel titled, Harvest.

Course description

A piece of fiction can be constructed in an unlimited number of ways and each week we will explore the formal possibilities that are available to us. We will study the choices we can make as writers—of narrative point of view, beginnings, resolutions, dialogue, description, pacing, plot and character development. We will isolate and inspect strategies that published authors have used. Students will produce and workshop their own fiction from exercises.

Goals

In the conversation between student writing and the studied literature there will hopefully be a greater sense of writers as shapers, sculptors of the raw material of story.

By the end of this course students should:

- demonstrate a deeper understanding of craft terms and concepts commonly used in fiction and be able to explain how these elements contribute to a text’s literary, aesthetic, or emotional effects.
- closely read, critique and demonstrate familiarity with a variety of professional writers styles and voices.
- be familiar with the workshop process of analyzing and critiquing their own work and that of their group
- produce at least two extended pieces of original fiction
- use editing and revision techniques
In this class you are required to:

Write fiction. Lots of it. Everyday, if possible.

Revise constantly.

Read like a writer, paying careful attention to craft and context

Respond to, critique and discuss the assigned readings in order to explore the fictional techniques employed.

Respond with respect and seriousness to the work of your peers. A typed letter to the student being workshoped is required.

Complete, type and hand in all writing assignments/exercises

Be an engaged, prepared participant in class discussion

Attend any conferences I set up

Grading/Evaluation

It is not enough to merely turn in excellent, polished stories in your final portfolio. Enthusiastic participation in class discussion and answers to the questions I ask on your texts, and a full, enthusiastic response to your assignments and in workshop will play a large part in your final grade.

In calculating your final grade I will consider:

1. The extent to which you have engaged with and commented upon the material presented in class

2. How much your own writing and discussion of the text demonstrates your understanding of narrative elements like scene, point of view, pacing and so on.

3. The seriousness and depth of your revisions on your own stories

4. The enthusiasm with which you address the stories of your peers

Final Portfolio:
You will be expected to submit TWO substantially revised, cleanly edited short stories one at least 8–pages long and the other 10–12 pages long. You may work on them throughout the semester. (110 points)
Note card responses:
On some of our reading assignments, I will provide you with a question to respond to after you have read the text. Note card responses may be handwritten. Questions for note card responses will be issued at least a day before the reading is to be discussed in class.
Answer each question completely, thoughtfully, and legibly, but write only on the front of a 4” by 6” card. Put your name on the back. Cards are graded on an all-or-none basis: if you complete all of the required cards, you are eligible for full credit. If you complete fewer, you will receive zero credit for this course component. I will collect these at the beginning of the class session for which they have been assigned. Late cards or cards written during class will not be accepted, and cards may be turned in only by the author. No exceptions or extensions. Each card will be marked with a √, √+ or √-. Failure to cite a passage will automatically result in a √- grade. If, at the end of the semester, the majority of your cards received √+, you will get an “A” for this component of the course. If the majority of your cards received a √ you will get a “B” for this component. If the majority received a √-, you will get a “C” for this component. √+ responses will look beyond the plot of the text and the immediate circumstance of the characters and attempt to take a look at the question from the perspective of the entire text and the particular craft technique being employed. So if I ask why a character makes a particular choice, there will be a surface answer that reflects his or her motivations at the moment, but there will be a more complete answer beyond the most obvious. Imagine the character’s circumstances, get into his or her head. Think about what the character or the situation represents in a larger context, and then write an insightful, complex, but concise answer to the question. You might wish to fastwrite on another piece of paper before you commit an answer to the card. (40 points).

Survey of Narrative Techniques:
You will prepare a presentation on a particular set of stories of your choice from our text. For instance, you may seek to enlighten the class on the way in which the depiction of character changes through various stories. Perhaps you notice that characters were described in a more elaborately physical way in certain stories while other stories emphasize their interiority over the physical. Or some only stick to action to delineate traits. Or you may want to explore how setting in certain stories acts as a catalyst toward progressing the story. You will use a maximum of 3 stories to make your points. You will make a brief (10 min maximum), oral presentation (after discussing your thesis with me) with a prepared handout. Please make sure you cite specific examples from the text. (25 points).
Your smart use of relevant technology (Powerpoint, Prezi, video etc) will count toward your grade.
**Attendance and Participation:**

It is your responsibility to create and take advantage of this community of readers, thinkers and writers by coming prepared every day to class having read and thought about the material we are discussing, by having drafts completed on time, contributing to class discussion and being respectful, thoughtful and responsive listeners. I expect you to contribute something relevant and meaningful to class discussion at least twice a week. I will be calling on people randomly to volunteer responses too, but it will be your responsibility to make sure you are contributing weekly, even if you are only asking questions. Failure to participate can significantly lower your grade. (100 points)

**Literary Reading:** You are required to attend at least two literary readings and turn in an assessment. (20 points)

**Evaluation:**

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<th>Component</th>
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<td>Final Portfolio</td>
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<td>Notecard responses</td>
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<td>Survey of narrative techniques</td>
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<td>Assessments of literary readings</td>
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<td>Attendance and participation</td>
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TOTAL: 350 points

**Attendance**

Please count on coming to every single class this semester. If, however, emergencies intervene, know that you will be allowed two absences for any reason (lateness, illness, family emergency, etc.) before I begin marking you down. If you are not in class when I take attendance you are marked absent. Please note that if you leave the classroom for five or more minutes after class has begun, you will be marked late or absent accordingly. In case of personal and medical emergencies, you should contact me, or the appropriate authority in your department.

1 excused absence - No impact  
Every additional absences - 3 points lowered off your final grade  
3 or more absences - You will fail the course.

**Statement on academic integrity:**
As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website (http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html)

**PROVISIONAL SYLLABUS**

Nothing below this line is set in stone. I like to introduce readings, exercises and coursework, in short, change the syllabus around to suit the occasion and class needs.

| Week 1 9/4 | Class starts at 12:15 p.m.  
Introductions: Literary terms, Beginnings, exercises |
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<td>Week 2 9/11</td>
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**Character : How to's.**  
Erdrich (pp. 305), Mason (542) Lahiri (510) Casebook analysis (Lewis, 1034)  
**Yearning and Character** (handout)  
Iceberg theory of Character: (handout)  
Homework from Novakovich, *Writing Fiction* (pg. 29), Exercise 2, also (pg. 41), Exercise 10. Choose any one experiment. **Word limit:** 800 words  
Please stick to your word limit—think of it as good training for your future writing career |
| Week 3 9/25 |  
**Narrative Point of View**  
Marquez (334), Bender (100), Cheever (180), Jen (394).  
Writing Fiction - Chapter Four (72), Russo, Omniscience (handout), Almond, Fiction POV (Handout)  
Youtube film on POV  
DUE: Character Exercise (type and hand over first thing in class). H/W from WF: (80) Exercise 3. (2 pages) |
| Week 4 10/2 |  
**Scene: How to Make one**  
Carver (123), O’Brien (636), Kincaid (507), Banks (87)  
Casebook: (953) and (957)  
Hrijbal, The Scene Beast is Hungry (Handout)  
H/W: WF (pg. 136-137): Write an opening scene using exercise 5, 6 or 7. |
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<tr>
<th>Week 5 10/9</th>
<th>Plot and Conflict: How much is too little? Barth, <em>Incremental Perturbation (Handout)</em>, Oates (623), Mueenuddin (589), Hempel (372) Home, O’Connor (662 –<em>Good Country People</em>). Also Casebook: (1052, 1041, 1046) DUE: Scene Exercise. Workshop Group 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>Week 6 10/16</td>
<td>Workshop Group 2.</td>
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<td>Week 7 10/23</td>
<td>Workshop Group 3</td>
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<td>Week 8 10/30</td>
<td>Workshop Group 4</td>
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<td>Week 9 11/6</td>
<td>Workshop Group 5 (<em>Survey Of Narrative Techniques: Presentations</em>)</td>
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<td>Week 10 11/13</td>
<td>Round 2 Workshop: Group 1(4)</td>
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<td>Week 11 11/20</td>
<td>Group 2(4)</td>
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<td>Week 12 11/27</td>
<td>Workshop: Group 3(4)</td>
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<td>Week 13 12/4</td>
<td>Workshop: Group 4 (4) Presentations</td>
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<td>Week 14 12/11</td>
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**LITERARY EVENTS**

You will be required to attend **two** literary events during the semester and write 2-page informal responses to each of them. In addition to the author’s name and the title of the book read from, be sure to include the venue where the reading occurred.

**Tips:** Take notes during and after the event. Make sure that you have all salient information: the writer’s name, the title(s) of the book or books read from, and the venue. What was the most interesting or exciting aspect of the reading? The strongest (or weakest) passage or aspect of the work? Explain. What, if anything, did you learn from the experience? If you are familiar with
the writer’s work, include your expectations of the reading versus your actual impressions. Why might the writer be worth reading—or avoiding like the proverbial plague? Please do not hesitate to have fun when writing your responses. If you are at a reading where a lot of authors are featured, write about the ones that stood out for you and analyze why.

**Note:** Although I encourage you to attend as many literary readings as your schedule allows, know that you will be **required** to attend only three readings per semester.

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**FINAL PORTFOLIO GUIDELINES**

- Two substantially **revised, cleanly edited** short stories: one at least 8-10 pages long, the other 12-14 pages. You can work on them throughout the semester.

- Assessments of 2 literary readings you attend (see explanation above)

When I say your story should be “substantially revised” and “edited,” I mean that it should be aggressively and repeatedly rewritten, and brought to the most fully realized form that you can manage by the semester’s end. Apply what you have learned of craft in class to make substantial changes—in point of view, voice, characterization for example—to your original draft, proof read closely and obsessively. Writing Center visits are strongly advised.

- Also include an informal **self-evaluation**, in the form of a letter at least 500 words long, in which you tell me what you learned as a reader and writer during the semester.

Please submit your Final Portfolios bound by a manuscript clip (not a paperclip) or tucked in a soft folder (not a ring binder).

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**Fiction Terms**

Like every other discipline Fiction Writing too employs a language that is unique to it. One of my goals is to make sure you leave the class comfortable using the vocabulary used to discuss fiction.

Here are terms that you should become familiar with in verbal/written communication about fiction.

**Note:** additional terms may be given in class.

**Character:** an imagined person in a literary work (Romeo or the Fat Girl, for example).
Flat characters: are one-dimensional figures, figures with simple personalities. They show none of the human depth, complexity, and contrariness of a round character or of most real people.

Round characters are complex figures. A round character is a full, complex, multidimensional character whose personality reveals some of the richness and contradictoriness we are accustomed to observing in actual people, rather than the transparent obviousness of a flat character. We may see a significant change take place in a round character during the story.

Protagonist: The protagonist or hero is the central character in the story who engages our interest or sympathy. Sometimes, the term protagonist is preferable to hero, because the central character can be despicable as well as heroic.

Antagonist: the character or force that opposes the antagonist.

Motivation is the external forces (setting, circumstances) and internal forces (personality, temperament, morality, intelligence) that compel a character to act as he or she does in a story.

Irony: a contrast of some sort; reveals a reality different from what appears to be true.

Verbal irony: the irony is between what is said and what is meant ("You're a great guy," meant bitterly).

Dramatic irony: the contrast is between what the audience knows (a murderer waits in the bedroom) and what a character says (the victim enters the bedroom, innocently saying, "I think I'll have a long sleep").

Situational irony: when an incongruity exists between what is expected to happen and what actually happens (Macbeth usurps the throne, thinking he will then be happy, but the action leads him to misery).

Plot: the artistic arrangement of events in a story. Events can be presented in a variety of orders:

Chronological: the story is told in the order in which things happen. It begins with what happens first, then second, and so on, until the last incident is related.

In medias res: Latin for "in the midst of things." We enter the story on the verge of some important moment.
Flashback: a device that informs us about events that happened before the opening scene of a work; often a scene relived in a character's memory.

Exposition: the opening portion that sets the scene, introduces the main characters, tells us what happened before the story opened, and provides any other background information that we need in order to understand and care about the events to follow.

A conflict is a complication that moves to a climax. Conflict is the opposition presented to the main character of a story by another character, by events or situations, by fate, or by some act of the main character's own personality or nature. More loosely defined for contemporary fiction, it is the problem or tension that must somehow be addressed (if not perfectly resolved) by the end of the story.

Suspense: the pleasurable anxiety we feel that heightens our attention to the story.

Foreshadowing: indication of events to come. The introduction of specific words, images, or events into a story to suggest or anticipate later events that are central to the action and its resolution.

Climax: the moment of greatest tension in the story, at which the outcome is to be decided.

Denouement (French for "untying of the knot"): resolution; conclusion or outcome of story.

Epiphany: a moment of insight, discovery, or revelation by which a character's life or view of life is greatly altered.

Point of View: Point of view refers to who tells the story and how it is told. What we know and how we feel about the events in a story are shaped by the author's choice of a point of view.

Narrator: the teller of a story (not the author, but the invented speaker of the story).

There are two broad categories for points of view that storytellers can use:

1. The third-person narrator: The third-person narrator uses "he," "she," or "they," to tell the story and does not participate in the action.
2. The first-person narrator: The first-person narrator uses "I" and is a major or minor participant in the action.
3. A second-person narrator, you is possible but rarely used because of
the awkwardness in thrusting the reader into the story, as in “You are minding your own business on a park bench when a drunk steps out of the bushes and demands your lunch bag.”

4. Third-person narrator (nonparticipant)
   4.1. Omniscient (the narrator takes us inside every character[s] head
   4.2. Selective omniscient or limited omniscient (the narrator takes us inside one or two characters)
   4.3. Objective (the narrator is outside the characters)

5. First-person narrator (participant)
   5.1. Major character
   5.2. Minor character

6. Third-person narrator: No type of third-person (nonparticipant) may appear as a character in a story.
   6.1. Omniscient narrator: is all-knowing.
   6.2. Editorial omniscience: the narrator not only recounts actions and thoughts, but also judges.
   6.3. Neutral omniscience allows characters’ actions and thoughts to speak for themselves.
   6.4. The selective omniscient narrator is much more confined than the omniscient narrator. With selective omniscience, the author often restricts the narrator to the single perspective of either a major or a minor character. The way that people, places, and events appear to that character is the way that they appear to the reader.

Stream-of-consciousness: when limited omniscience attempts to record mental activity ranging from consciousness to the unconscious, from clear perceptions to confused longings.

   6.5. Objective point of view employs a narrator who does NOT see into the mind of any character. From this detached and impersonal perspective, the narrator reports action and dialogue without telling us directly what characters feel and think. This point of view places a heavy emphasis on dialogue, actions, and details to reveal character.

7. With a first-person narrator, the “I” presents the point of view of only one character’s consciousness. The reader is restricted to the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of that single character.
   7.1. The first-person narrator can be a major character like the narrator in “A & P”; or a minor character (imagine how different the story would be if it had been told by Lengel the manager or by Stoksie, one of the co-workers).
   7.2. An unreliable narrator is a fictional character whose
interpretation of events is different from the author’s. One type of unreliable narrator is the naive narrator (the innocent eye) who lacks the sophistication to interpret accurately what he/she sees. The reader understands more than the narrator does.

**Setting:** the locale, time, and social circumstances of a story (for instance, an Eastern town in winter, about 1950, in an upper-class private girls school).

**Tone:** the prevailing attitude (for instance, ironic, compassionate, objective) as perceived by the reader: the author’s feelings toward the central character or the main events.

**Symbol:** a person, object, action, or situation, that, charged with meaning, suggests another thing (for example, a dark forest may suggest confusion, or perhaps evil), though usually with less specificity and more ambiguity than allegory. A symbol usually differs from a metaphor in that a symbol is expanded or repeated and works by accumulating associations.

**Theme:** the central idea or meaning of a story; what the work is about. When you express the theme in your own words, it should be worded in a complete sentence and universally expressed.

**Literary criticism:** discourse—spoken or written—about literature.

**Literary theory:** criticism that tries to formulate general principles rather than discuss specific texts.