Course: Fiction Inside out (Elec-GG 2544- 001) Fall 2014, Sept 2-Dec 12, 2014

Thursdays, 6.20-9.00 p.m. Bobst LL148
Professor: Meera Nair mn379@nyu.edu
Office Hours: 429 1 Wash Pl, 5.30- 6.15, By appointment.
Contact: mn379@nyu.edu

Course description:

In this craft-oriented workshop, we will identify and practice the essential technical elements of fiction writing. We will look under the hood, take the back off the clock, peer into the innards, in order to study the formal decisions necessary for effective story-telling. Our inquiry will include point of entry; character and plot; creating meaningful scenes; ineriority v/s external action; exposition; the management of time; the position of the narrator; linear v/s modular design; dialogue and its uses; conflict and resolution; image systems and so on. Fun exercises that encourage play, class readings, technique essays and student work will be points of departure for our enquiries into the internal workings of fiction.

Course Learning Goals:

By the end of the course students will be able to:
− demonstrate deeper and higher order understanding of critical craft concepts deployed in fiction;
− explain how these concepts contribute to a text's literary, aesthetic and emotional effects;
− develop close reading and annotation skills
− demonstrate increasing skill with the workshop process of analyses and critical response to their own work and that of their peers;
produce at least 3 extended pieces of original fiction;
- develop solid skills around revision and editing techniques and produce reasoned, perceptive responses to assigned texts.

Grades:

In calculating your final grade I will consider:

1. The quality and frequency of your engagement with and commentary on the material presented in class
2. The progress made on your own writing and understanding and application of various narrative elements
3. The seriousness and depth of your revisions on your own stories
4. The enthusiasm with which you engage with the work of your peers.

Creative Portfolio:

You are to submit TWO substantially revised, cleanly edited works of fiction of at least 2000-3000 words each at the end of the semester. You may work on them throughout the semester.

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 three times per class. 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.

Absences: 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](http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html))

**Workshop Schedule:** The schedule is flexible and can be adapted according to the size of the class. At the very least I hope to give you opportunities to workshop your class at least TWICE.

Each student will have opportunities to present work (and revisions of that work), according to the deadlines set below: Plan now to make your deadlines and have substantial, work to put up for class. Work will be distributed IN CLASS for the next week; please plan ahead; if you are submitting work, attend class with the required number of copies for yourself, your classmates, and the instructor).

Each workshop, please bring edited copies of the stories being discussed that week to class with 2 copies of a one page, single-spaced, typed critique. One copy of the critique will be given to the author to aid in his/her revision; the other will be turned in to the instructor. Your critiques should address what works well for you in the story and what doesn’t, where you engage as a reader, where you are lost or lose interest. Please see the Workshop Guide attached.

Include your praise, questions, and specific suggestions. Your critiques should form the basis of your classroom discussion of the work. Write well in your critiques, in paragraph form, as would a critic or reviewer, but state your points in congenial fashion to your colleagues. Our class aspires to provide a supportive and incisive editorial board for our workshop. Please LINE EDIT your copies of the stories up for discussion, commenting in the margins AND ON ACTUAL LINES. Strive to be a good line editor (you can’t edit yourself effectively until you learn to edit others). Stories marked/line edited by classmates and instructor will be returned to the author to aid in revision. Editing, along with writing and reading our supplemental texts,
is important, and you should strive to progress as an editor just as you strive to progress as a writer.

Each writer knows her/his deadlines far in advance. Please plan to make your deadlines. The aim of the workshop is to help the work reach final form and to workshop a revision of at least three stories. Please try to move beyond first draft in your submissions of new work; the work you turn in to class should be work you have revised and edited yourself at least once. Please do not submit work previously submitted to other workshops.

Workshop feedback is most effective for short stories, or for book/novel/memoir excerpts that can be read as complete in themselves (though enlarged in meaning and effect within a larger context). Stories or excerpts should be no more than 10-15 pg; typed and double-spaced; fine to submit a shorter work (the classic length for the short story is 15 pages – longer is not necessarily better), or two (short short) fictions if you like.

**Texts:**
Short stories and articles from the course packet on Google Drive. Please become familiar with Google Drive.

*Disgrace*, by J.M Coetzee

---

**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 – September 4**
**Introductions**
Course structure
Writing exercise – (write in class/revise at home)

**Week 2 - September 11: Character**

**Readings: Articles:**
*Yearning*, Robert Olen Butler (pgs. 41-61)

*Icebergs, Glaciers and Artic Dreams: Creating characters* (44-55)

**Stories:**
Assignment 1:
a. Please choose THREE favorite paragraphs of **character description**/voice or observation from different sections of the story and type them out; follow each with a short statement on why you chose them/ their context within the story. Email me your statements via Drive by 5.00 p.m. on Wednesday, Sept 10.

b. Ford Maddox Ford in talking about minor characters says that “If you’re going to have a character appear in a story long enough to sell a newspaper, he’d better be real enough that you can smell his breath.” In the stories we are reading this week, minor characters like Rufus (Natasha) or The Birthday Boy (Tandolfo) exist fully on the page and even go so far to advance the action of the story in surprising ways. Write a scene where there is a central protagonist (use the character you created in class) and a minor character engaged in some enterprise/action together. Using the pov of the protagonist, his dialogue/thought/action reveal (through description or otherwise) the minor character to us. You can stop there or complicate the scene farther by giving your minor character agency in that his actions/dialogue in some way contradict or differ with what the pov character in your scene wants us to believe. (500 words) (5 points)

OR

Look closely at “Tandolfo” and the Marcus stories. Identify a moment/scene when the protagonist makes his yearning/desire clear. For instance, in the Marcus story, there’s a moment when Paul’s mother hugs him, shortly after he arrives at home. There are also several moments where the great Tandolfo (rather poignantly) betrays his desire. Think about what it is these two characters really yearn for…not in the moment but what their deep down desire is. How do the images/language in the scene coalesce to signal their desire? Write a scene where a character you invent(use the character from class) makes his/her desire clear. (500 words) (5 points)

*Bring copies for distribution to your classmates and for me in the next class.*

**Week 3: September 18: Beginnings and Endings:**

Novel beginnings:

*Book I – Harry Potter* (opening)

*Tamima Ahnam*, The Courthouse (opening)
Short stories:
Some openings to look at (sheet)
*Jewish Hunter*, Lorrie Moore (pg 48)
*Say yes*, Tobias Woolf (1-5) – Complete story
Sheet: Ways to begin a story.

Stories without endings:

*In the Land of Men*, Antonia Nelson (14-24) (no ending)
*In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* (1-15) Daniyal Mueenuddin (no ending)

Assignment 2: is in three parts.
a. Please choose TWO openings and type them out (5 sentences each). Follow each with a short statement on why you chose them/and what you thought they were doing for the story/the reader. Email me your statements by 5.00 p.m. on Wednesday.

b. Write your own ending for the Bausch and Mueenuddin stories. You are paying a homage to these writers (even if you hate the story) in that you are imitating their style, their language, their voice, dialogue, their sensibility, their intentions. So write an ending that you think they could have written. **Bring copies to class on September 25. One for me. (5 points)**

c: Write an opening scene of a story growing out of a this question: “Where were you last night?” This is only an opening scene (it needs to be a scene) so do not exceed 1-3 double spaced pages. **Bring me a copy and bring distribution copies to class on September 25. (5 points)**

**Week 4 : September 25, 2014  Narrative Design**
Stories: *People like that are the only people here*, Moore (pages 215-250)
*Lizzie Anne...*, Carolyn Chute (232-251)
*The sky is gray*, Earnest G. Gaines
In class: You will be required to lead a discussion on narrative design. Leaders TBA

Assignment 3. Here are two exercises. I would like you to treat this as an invitation to think outside your usual style and material and have fun. **Please bring copies to share with me and the class.**

1. Bare Bones Design (10 points for 2 pieces)

500-1500 words (pl stay within the limit)

Write a linear story in which a strong main character is on a quest for something important and specific (e.g. a shelter for a baby, medicine for a sick mother, or the key to a storehouse
where a tyrant has locked away all the grain from the starving children. Or you can take any famous fairy tale which has a strong plot line and subvert it to your own purposes like Angela Carter’s version of Red Riding Hood. The object is a given---don’t explain it’s importance. The main character starts acting immediately. She/he then meets a specific obstacle (e.g. a thunderstorm, a lost purse, a boulder, a drunken revel, an angry father, a handsome rogue); finally she/he triumphs over the obstacle by means of a magic or supernatural element that comes from the outside (like a fairy godmother or Dorothy’s red shoes in the Wizard of Oz.) You may introduce minor characters, but the narrative should never abandon the main character. Write scenes with action and dialogue. If you do use summary, try and make it as vivid and specific as possible.

OBJECTIVE
Like a medical student who must learn the names and locations of human bones before going on to more complex systems, you must be able to control and handle basic plot before moving on to more subtle elements.

2. Modular:
Now take the same story elements (perhaps the same territory, character, even events but perhaps put together differently) and see if you can use them in a modular design. What will you discard? What will you need to add?

Week 5: October 2, 2014  Plot
Essays: Plot and narrative
Incremental Perturbations: How to know if you have a plot or not John Barth

Stories:
Helping, Robert Stone (467-495)
Men Under Water, Ralph Lombreglia
Tall Tales from the Mekong Delta, Kate Braverman (1-21)
River of Names, Dorothy Allison (1-6)

Assignment: Write comments on any two stories based on turning points in the story and arc. How is River of Names different-or similar? Email by 5.00 p.m. Wed. 8th October

Assignment: Start a story/ complete a story you've begun/ revise.

Week 6: October 9, 2014 Dialogue
Dialogue packet (pgs 1-69)
1. Who’s Irish, Gish Jen (dramatic monologue)

2. Edgemont Drive, E.L. Doctorow (Story stripped down to only dialogue with out any attributions).
2. *Aren’t you happy for me?*, Richard Bausch

3. *The year of getting to know us*, Ethan Canin

**Workshop: Group 1**

**Week 7: October 16, 2014** Emotion Stories: Emotion pack

"He's at the Office" Gurganus
"A Time for kissing" Robinson
"Axolotol" Cortazar
"So Much Water..." Carver

**Workshop: Group 2**

**Assignment: Presentations with discussants. TBA**

**Week 8: October 23, 2014**
 Chapters 1-4 *Disgrace*

**Workshop Group 3**

**Week 9: October 30, 2014**
 Chapters 5-9 *Disgrace*

**Week 10: November 6, 2014**
 Chapters 10-14 *Disgrace*

**Week 11: November 13, 2014**
 Chapters 15-19 *Disgrace*

**Week 12: November 20, 2014**
 Chapters 20-24 *Disgrace*

**Week 13: Nov 27, 2014** (No class for Thanksgiving)

**Week 14: December 4, 2014** Presentations/catching up
 Protocol TBA/Flash fiction/ Author visit (perhaps)

**Week 15: December 11, 2014** (last day)
Publishing etc./