New York University-Gallatin School
Fall 2016
ELEC-GG 2544

Course: Fiction Inside Out-Workshop  Fall 2016  ELEC-GG 2544
Time: Friday: 3:30 – 6:10 pm
Place: Room 527, 1 Washington Place (The Gallatin Building)
Meeting Dates: Fridays, Sept. 9 -Dec 16, 2016
Instructor: Meera Nair
Email: Meerav3@gmail.com
Office and Hours: Room 507, 1 Washington Place, 2:00-3:00 pm

Description:
A graduate-level workshop on the writing, reading and critiquing of fiction
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; ineriorsity 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

Learning goals:
- demonstrate increasing skill with the process of analyses and critical response to their own work
  and that of their peers in a workshop context;
- demonstrate higher order understanding of critical craft concepts deployed in fiction;
- explain how these concepts contribute to a text's literary, aesthetic and emotional effects;
- create 2-3 extended pieces of original fiction that demonstrate complexity through attention to
  the elements of fiction, as well as language and style.
- learn to read, comment and write constructively and critically on the creative writing of peers
  in the workshop context.
- develop solid skills around revision and editing techniques and produce reasoned, perceptive
  responses to assigned texts.
- demonstrate the ability to respond to constructive critique from instructor and peers by
  effectively revising writing assignments.
- Participate in writing related activities such as readings and talks

Texts: In Dropbox. Will send you an invite.

Expectations:
- Final:
- 1. A Creative Portfolio of thoroughly revised 2-3 extended pieces of fiction that amount to 30-40 pages.
2. Produce an experimental piece of fiction (that may or may not be in your final portfolio, but will be workshopped) that takes you out of your comfort zone.

3. An informal letter of at least 500 words assessing your development as a fiction writer and reader
   - writing exercises
   - short written reflections on published writers,
   - cogent, persuasive 1-page workshop responses for peers
   - revised writing samples
   - Contributions to class discussions and workshops
   - Attendance at readings, panels, performances

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.

If we see writing and reading as practices, we must consider creative-writing courses process courses. The following grading breakdown should be read with this idea in mind.

- Final Portfolio—50 percent
- Responses/letters to your peers—30 percent
- Participation—20 percent

Creative Portfolio:

You are to submit around 30-40 pages of substantially revised, cleanly edited works of fiction (stories or chapters) at the end of the semester. This could be 3 Stories of 10 pages each, several shorter stories or chapters, the point is you are aiming to produce substantial work. You may work on them throughout the semester.

When I say that the work should be “substantially revised” and “cleanly edited,” I mean that they should be aggressively and repeatedly rewritten, and brought to the most fully realized form that you can manage by the semester’s end. Do not be afraid to make large changes—in point of view, plot, or voice, for example. All creative pieces should be as free as you can make them of accidental mechanical errors (as opposed to intentional, effective manipulations of grammar and spelling). Use MLA format. (Note: If you hand in chapters, include a brief synopsis of the novel and explain where the chapters fall within the book and make sure they are self-contained, in that they do not make too many references to stuff that’s happening in other parts of the book.)

Experiments/Flash fiction
Workshopping is hard and it is often difficult to sit there and watch your work get picked to shreds. It is only human to be risk averse and want to write and present only the stories that fits into your comfort zone and makes you feel secure about the story and yourself. Which is exactly why I'm asking for experiments. These will be flash fiction or a short experiment that fulfills a challenge that you have set for yourself. So, for example, if you write realistic, linear stories, perhaps you set out to write fractured science fiction. Please mark your story as an Experiment and tell us what the challenge you set yourself and why. The workshop for this story will take into consideration the challenge you set yourself and how well your story met the challenge.

**Attendance and Participation:**
Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It is your responsibility to create and take advantage of this community of readers, thinkers and writers by coming prepared 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. Workshopping is hugely important to advanced writer's like you, so please take it seriously and treat the work of your peers with the same diligence and respect you accord your own. I expect you to contribute something relevant and meaningful to class discussion in every 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 (plus it's disrespectful to your fellow writers).

**Absences:**
Please count on coming to every single class this semester. Missing a class of this length is equivalent to missing a week of classes. However, I am aware that emergencies intervene. 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.

2 excused absences – No impact
Every additional absences – points lowered off your final grade
4 or more absences – You will fail the course.

**Plagiarism**
Plagiarism is defined as “Using a phrase, sentence, passage, image, graph, table, sound recording, art work, or any other type of creative or intellectual material from another work without proper citation; paraphrasing words or ideas from another work without attribution; reporting as your own research or knowledge any data or idea gathered, reported, or developed by another person; submitting as your own work anything produced by another. Plagiarism does not only apply to written or recorded work, but also to intellectual property such as computer programs, oral presentations, and artistic work including choreography, stage blocking, and music.”

**Illicit Collaboration:** submitting work done in collaboration with others without the express permission of the instructor or without acknowledging such collaboration.

**Doubling or Recycling:** submitting the same or substantially similar work in multiple courses, either in the same semester or in a different semester, without the express approval of all instructors.
Syllabus

Nothing below this line is set in stone. Readings/exercises may change in response to class needs.

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 work at least twice.

Each student will have opportunities to present work (and revisions of that work). 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, which will be the basis of your classroom discussion. One copy of the critique will be given to the author to aid in his/her revision; the other will be turned in to me. Please use the Workshop Guide attached as a reference for your critique. In your critique you should aim to be kind, but honest. Think of yourself as being part of an editorial board for your fellow writer, so please line edit, comment in the margins and so on. Your edit should help your fellow writer revise the work. Think of workshop letters as a chance to hone your editing skills.

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 generated for this class, revised and edited yourself at least once. Please do not submit work previously submitted to other workshops.

If you are not present on the day your story is being workshopped, you will forfeit your workshop.

Provisional Syllabus

All readings should have been completed before the class meeting. If the syllabus says the text is Yearning by Butler for Sept. 16, it means you would have already read and thought about the texts BEFORE you come into class that day.

Because each class is different and has different needs, the following outline may change. All stories and craft articles are in the Dropbox link I will invite you to share on the first day aof class.

Provisional Syllabus

Week 1 – September 9
Introductions
Course structure
Read in class: Say Yes.
Exercise: following Micheal Ondaatje's 7 or 8 Things I Know about her.
Week 2 - September 16: Character


Stories:
- *We did not like him*, Akhil Sharma
- *What have you done?* Ben Marcus
- *He’s at the Office*, Allan Gurganus

Assignment 1:
a. Please choose THREE favorite paragraphs of character description/voice or observation from each story and type them out; follow each with a short statement on why you chose them/their context within the story.

b. Look closely at Sharma and the Marcus stories. Identify a moment/scene when the protagonist (the main character in the story) makes his yearning/desire clear. Write about what it is these two characters really yearn for…not only in the moment but what you identify as their deep down desire. How do the images/language in the scene coalesce to signal their desire?

Week 3 – Sept. 23: Openings

Stories:
- *The Courthouse*, Tamima Anam
- *The Fat Girl*, Dubus

Some openings to look at (sheet)

Workshop Group 1
Exercise 1 due.

Week 4 - Sept. 30: Scene

Readings:
- Craft: *The Scene Beast is Hungry*, C.J. Hrijbal
- Stories: *Marie*, Edward P Stone
  - *Hitting Budapest*, Bulawayo

Workshop Group 2

Week 5 - Oct. 1: Dialogue

Stories: *Edgemont Drive*, Doctorow
- *The Gilgul of Park Avenue*, Englander

Workshop Group 3
Week 6- Oct 7 Narrative Design I
Craft: Linear Design, Bell
Stories: People like that are the only people here, Moore
    In Other rooms, Other wonders, Daniyal Muenuddin
Workshop Group 4

Week 7 - Oct 14 Narrative Design II
Modular Narrative Design, Bell
Reading: Lizzie Ann, Chute (Modular story and analysis)
Workshop Group 5

Week 8 - Oct 21: Plot 1
Craft: Incremental Perturbations: How to know if you have a plot or not, John Barth
Stories: Helping, Robert Stone
    Ghosts, Danticat
Workshop Group 1

Week 9 - Oct 28: Plot II
Stories:
Tall Tales from the Mekong Delta, Braverman
The Continuity of Parks, Cortazar
Workshop Group 2

Week 10 – Nov 4 : Emotion
(Presentations)
Patriotism, Mishima
A Time for Kissing, Robinson
So much water under the Bridge, Carver
A Distant Episode, Bowles
Workshop Group 3

Week 11-Nov. 11 Place
Craft: A Writer's Sense of Place, Erderich
    Place, Allison
Stories: http://we--do--not--sow.tumblr.com/post/19698698381/pastoralia-by-george-saunders
A Child's Book of Sickness and Death, Adrian

Workshop Group 4

Week 12: Nov. 18 Revision
On Revision, Offut

Workshop Group 5

Week 13: Thanksgiving Holiday

Week 14: Dec 2
Workshop Group 1 (flash fiction/experiments)

Week 15: Dec 9
Group 2

Week 16: Dec 16 (last day – PORTFOLIO DUE)
Group 3. + Publishing

WORKSHOP GUIDELINES

Submission guidelines
When you submit chapters for workshop, double-space, use 12 pt. font (remember most publications prefer Times Roman), number and staple the pages. All work must be titled. (You may fall back on “Untitled” if you wish.) When you submit an excerpt or chapter of a novel, please provide a brief, single-spaced synopsis of the novel.

Assignment: You will give every workshopee a copy of a typed, double-spaced letter with your critique of the story/chapter under consideration.

Procedure:
Workshops will begin with the writer reading aloud one page. Once she’s done reading, the writer will not speak (except if the story is an Experiment) while the other students in the workshop discuss the story. At the workshop’s end, the writer will be invited to respond to comments and ask questions.

Guidelines for fiction critiques – PLEASE REFER TO THIS WHEN WRITING YOUR CRITIQUES
Read the story or chapter through without pausing first time. Then read it again, making notes in the margins, when you come across something that is especially beautiful, well-written, confusing, cliché, or could be expressed better. You should expand on these notes in a couple of paragraphs written on the back of the piece to the author. Remember to be kind. Begin with praise for the parts of the story that were working/well-written/thought provoking etc. If you loved the characters, say so. But don’t leave it as “I love Norman.” Instead say, “I love how you have Norman put together a log cabin from pop-sickle sticks. It reveals his need to keep himself busy and not think about his life.” Don’t go on about grammatical errors---edit one or two for the author and leave it at that. Back everything that you say with specific examples from the story. Give praise for the gifts in the fiction. Lastly, give concrete, specific suggestions. Remember to focus on your experience as a reader rather than your likes and dislikes.

After making your notes, try and answer these questions for yourself before you write your graphs to your classmate.

1. What are the author’s intentions? Does he/she achieve them? This is where the class will consider what the chapters are about. What ideas are being explored in this piece? Are these ideas cliché? Are they fresh and original? What is the heart of the story? (Joyce’s Araby is a linear, story in the realist tradition narrated in the first-person from a young boy’s point of view who falls in love with his friend’s sister. The young boy journeys to a market to buy a gift for his first love---but is unable to achieve his aims. At the heart of the story is an examination of the connection between sexual awakening and a yearning for idealized romance. It is also a story about growth: how we sometimes have to suffer to understand ourselves.)

2. At what point in the story/chapter were you completely absorbed? What did you care about? Here the class will try and list what gifts were in the piece—and also discuss why these particular aspects succeed. (Therefore, it is not enough to say you love the way Tommy draws the animals. Instead, explain how the words used reflect the yearning to express his artistic self, the one aspect of himself he feels is real and unassailable.)

3. How interesting are the characters in this piece? Do they seem like real people or are they not very interesting? Do they do what is expected of them or do they surprise you? How are the actions of the characters affecting the piece? What details bring the characters to life? What improvements do you suggest?

4. Is the setting adding to your understanding of the characters? Could this story take place anywhere else? What details stand out? How could the setting be made better? (Your description of the main characters room as smaller than a Japanese love motel was confusing. I have never seen one of those places. Perhaps you could describe the place, the narrowness of the room, how one could touch the walls with ones arms stretched out?)

5. Comment on the language used. Is it evocative enough? Can you smell, taste, see, hear, touch? Which sentences were beauties? Point them out. Is there place for more color? Point them out.

6. Is there dramatic action? If there isn’t, does that fit with the intention of the story? Which scenes are working? Why? Are there any that don’t work? Why? Again, don’t say thinks like, “Your scenes are not working.” Can you identify a place in the story where a scene might help? Is there a place in the piece where summary might be better? (for instance, instead of showing the protagonist taking a bus,
car, train, would it be better if he just arrived?)

7. Has the author chosen the best possible **POV**, given the characters, intention and other factors? Could it be told better from a first person **POV** or limited third person **POV**?

8. Is the **dialogue** adequate? Too much? Are there parts of the story that could benefit from dialogue? If there is no dialogue at all, is that part of the writer’s intention for the story?

9. At what point where you out of the piece? Be aware of the points in the story where you lost interest. When you suggest revision talk about why you think these parts need revision: For instance, it is not enough to say “When Jack talks about taking a bath right after his baby died—I just hated that part. Maybe he shouldn’t take a bath right then.” Here, you are proscribing a particular course of action, writing the story for the author. Instead, it would help the writer if you said, “I did not understand why Jack would take a bath right after his baby died—it seemed like a strange action though interesting. Maybe you could describe his bath in such a way that it telegraphs his emotions at the moment or have him think some thoughts.”

10. Is there conflict/tension—are you compelled to read on? What was set in motion in the beginning that kept you reading? What did you want to see completed?

11. Does this story have a story? An arc? Or is it merely a sequence of events? If it doesn’t, what has the author replaced it with? Where is the writer taking you? Do you care to go there?