

Fiction Writing

En 86

Winter 2021

Division of the Humanities and Social Sciences, California Institute of

Edan Lepucki (she/her)

edan.lepucki@caltech.edu

Meeting time: Thursdays, 7:00 pm to 9:55 pm (with some variation for asynchronous tasks)

Course Description

In this course, we will investigate, interrogate, and celebrate the essential elements of fiction writing, including character, voice, setting, world building, scene, summary, plot, and dialogue. We will read short stories and novel excerpts from a craft perspective, seeking to understand the choices a writer makes, and why, and how these choices affect a text and its deeper subjects. We will also discuss questions of authenticity, responsibility, and empathy as they pertain to writing.

Every week, students will complete brief writing exercises designed to practice specific techniques covered in class. Students will also write a short story or portion of a novel and have it critiqued by their peers. Additionally, students will be required to write a critical analysis of a recently published short story collection or novel.

Each week, we will discuss particular craft elements, analyze published fiction, and provide feedback on student writing. Near the end of the course, students will thoroughly critique the work of their peers in small-group workshops. As a class we will delight in reading and writing fiction, push ourselves to understand how it's made, and work hard to become adventurous and intentional creative writers. How can we write fiction that moves us, or makes us want to keep reading? How can we write fiction that feels not only accurate, but true? We will tackle these questions and many others by reading, analyzing, writing, and workshopping fiction. Over these ten weeks, students will gain a deeper appreciation of this tricky and important artform.

Goals for the Course

- To learn the main craft elements of fiction writing
- To close-read published fiction writing and learn to articulate how—and even, why—an author utilizes a particular craft technique
- To improve your fiction writing with short assignments and to develop those skills further in a longer piece of fiction, be it a short story or novel beginning.

- To practice revising your fiction
- To read and assess the writing of your peers, and to be able to workshop astutely and compassionately, providing specific, useful, and perspicacious feedback for revision.
- To synthesize what you've learned about craft and technique in a critical response to a published novel or short story collection
- To marvel at the mysteries, beauty, and joy of fiction

Required Texts

To be purchased:

- The Art of Time* by Joan Silber
- Thrill Me: Essays on Fiction* by Benjamin Percy
- Best American Short Stories 2019* (AKA BASS) edited by Anthony Doerr, series editor Heidi Pitlor

-Various short story, novel, and essay excerpts—digital links and scanned copies provided in the "Assignments" section of Canvas

-For critical paper, students must choose and purchase a book from reading list

Note: The weekly writing assignments will be posted on Canvas. Please submit those as Microsoft Word attachments.

Course Website or Learning Management System

All course material can be found on the course page here on Canvas.

Assignments and Grading Breakdown

-One completed short story or the beginning of a novel (minimum 3,000 words). 25% of grade (10% for first draft; 15% for revision)

-One critical analysis of a published contemporary short story collection or novel (1,500 words). 20% of grade

-Weekly writing assignments (usually no longer than 250-500 words each). 20% of grade

-Workshop feedback 10% of grade

At the end of the semester, students will turn in a portfolio, which will include:

- Revision of Short story or novel excerpt (minimum 3,000 words)
- Critical paper (minimum 1,500 words)

- All weekly writing exercises, including sense/image diary
- Critiques for your workshop partners

The rest of your grade (25%) will be determined by in-class and online participation: comments on class reading and conversations about craft, peer feedback, and so on.

Late Work

Unless you have been granted an extension ahead of time, assignments turned in late will not be accepted.

Course Format

In this remote format, this course is structured with one synchronous group meeting per week that will likely be half as long as the three hours scheduled. There will also be several asynchronous tasks that need to be completed throughout the week. Most of our time together will be devoted to discussing craft topics, doing informal writing exercises, and reviewing classmates' work. You will need to prepare something for each session: a writing exercise, some reading, and so on. The assignments for our time apart will primarily be discussion board postings about the readings, but things may change, depending on how productive our synchronous meetings are. Refer to Canvas and the schedule below for more details.

Prioritizing Self-Care to Make Learning Possible

(Please note, colleagues at Hixon Writing Center inspired me to add the following to my syllabus! This is mostly their words...)

We are living through very challenging times, and these challenges are not distributed equally. I want to clearly state that taking care of your health and well-being should be your first priority—this is especially true now, but it is always true. You cannot learn if you are unwell or under extreme duress. This course requires a high level of engagement from students; however, I do not want you to be overwhelmed by your work.

If you are dealing with personal challenges, I am here to support you. If you find yourself overwhelmed or encountering other personal challenges during the term, please reach out to me by email so we can develop a plan for you to pursue success in this course in a healthy way. I encourage you to utilize [Caltech's resources that are here to support you](#).

Attendance

That said, attendance is required. If you're absent more than two times, it will affect your grade. Much of what's covered in this course—from lectures, to our group discussions, to our class workshops of student writing—happens during class time and can't be made up all by your lonesome. Your participation is essential, and any unexcused absences will compromise your grade. If you must miss a class, contact me as soon as possible. If you know you're going to be absent, please let me know in advance, so that we can make sure you get the material you will miss.

Academic Integrity

Please uphold Caltech's Honor Code: "No member of the Caltech community shall take unfair advantage of any other member of the Caltech community." Also, make sure you understand Plagiarism: Plagiarism is the appropriation of another person's ideas, processes, results, or words without giving appropriate credit, and it violates the honor code in a fundamental way. You can find more information at: <http://writing.caltech.edu/resources/plagiarism> (Links to an external site.).

Collaboration Policy

For this class, collaboration is limited to readers reviewing your work. This can be fellow students in our workshop sessions, but you can also seek feedback from peers who aren't enrolled in this class. Listen to their thoughts on your work and then decide which criticisms resonate for you, and which don't. You cannot ask someone to edit or co-author your work.

You are not allowed to collaborate with professional co-authors, reviewers, or editors outside of Caltech who are remunerated for their work on your writing.

If you're not sure what is appropriate regarding collaboration, please bring your concerns to me **before** submitting work. If over-collaboration is discovered after writing is submitted, it will be referred to the Board of Control.

Course Schedule

Week 1, January 6, 2021

In class:

- Introductions and ice breakers
- Syllabus review and course expectations
- In-class writing exercises
- Introduce image/sense diary assignment and discuss examples

Homework:

- Read: "Protozoa" by Ella Martinsen Gorham (in *BASS*) and "Thrill Me" (this one you don't need to comment on) and "Set Pieces: Staging the Iconic Scene" (in *Thrill Me: Essays on Fiction* by Benjamin Percy)
- Comment on Discussion Board
- Choose text from list for critical paper (email me top 3 preferences by January 13 at 10 pm)
- Write: character questionnaire AND character description
- Write: Start image/sense diary (*due in 2 weeks)

Week 2, January 13, 2021

In class:

- Lecture on characterization and in-class exercises
- Discuss character questionnaires and character description
- Assign workshop critique groups and discuss feedback process

Homework:

- Read Jamel Brinkley's "No More Than a Bubble" (in *BASS*) and "In The Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried" by Amy Hempel (in Assignments)
- Comment on Discussion Board
- Write: Finish image/sense diary
- Write: One character, two ways (see Assignments)

Week 3, January 20, 2021

In class:

- Discuss image/sense diary assignment
- Lecture and discussion of Scene v. Summary
- Writing exercises
- Group 1 share writing assignments

Homework:

- Read Introduction, "Classic Time" and "Long Time" (in *The Art of Time* by Joan Silber); and "Story of your Life" by Ted Chiang (in Assignments)
- Comment on Discussion Board
- Write: Scene and Summary

Week 4, January 27, 2021

In class:

- Writing exercises
- Lecture and discussion of pacing and plot
- Share Group 2 writing assignments

Homework:

- Read "Urgency" and "Designing Suspense" (in *Thrill Me*); "Switchback Time" (in *The Art of Time*); and excerpt from *Await Your Reply* by Dan Chaon (in Assignments)
- Comment on Discussion Board
- Write: 3 conflicts and pacing outline

Week 5, February 3, 2021

In class:

- Lecture on and discussion of dialogue
- Writing exercises
- Share Group 3 writing assignments

Homework:

- Read "Escape from New York" by Zadie Smith; "Cathedral" by Raymond Carver (both in Assignments) and "Omakase" by Weike Wang (in *BASS*)
- Comment on Discussion Board
- Review handout outlining correct dialogue punctuation
- Write: scene of dialogue between characters

Week 6, February 10, 2021

In class:

- Lecture and discussion of worldbuilding and setting
- Writing exercises
- Share Group 4 writing assignments

Homework:

- Read "Sea Oak" by George Saunders (in Assignments) and "Move Mountains: Activating Setting" (in *Thrill Me*)
- Comment on Discussion Board
- Write: the unfamiliar space
- Write: Draft 1 of story/novel excerpt (due in two weeks)

Week 7, February 17, 2021

In class:

- Lecture on and discussion of voice, tone, and prose rhythm
- Writing exercises
- Share Group 5 writing assignments

Homework:

- Read “The Reader v. POC: Time to Rethink the Creative Writing Workshop” by Matthew Salesses; “How to Unlearn Everything” by Alexander Chee; and “How to Be An Other Woman” by Lorrie Moore (all in assignments)
- Comment on Discussion Boards
- Prepare story or novel excerpt (draft 1 due to workshop partners by 10 pm on 2/24)

Week 8, February 24, 2021

In class:

- Writing exercises
- Discussion of identity, empathy, and responsibility in fiction writing
- Discussion of workshop protocol and goals

Homework:

- Workshop preparation
- Work on critical paper

Week 9, March 3, 2021

In class:

Small group workshops

Homework:

- Read “Home Improvement: Revision as Renovation” (in *Thrill Me*) and excerpts from *The Writing Life* by Annie Dillard (in Assignments)
- Comment on Discussion Board
- Work on critical paper (due in final portfolio)
- Work on manuscript revision (due in final portfolio)

Week 10, March 10, 2021

In class:

- Writing exercise extravaganza
- Review portfolio expectations and discuss revision strategies
- PARTAY

Portfolios are due March 15, 2021 by 10:00 pm.