ENGLISH 4565
GRADUATE FICTION WORKSHOP
SPRING, 2013

INSTRUCTOR: Lee Martin

OFFICE: Denney Hall 168

HOURS: T & W: 4-5
or by appointment

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TEXT:

Course readings are posted on Carmen: https://carmen.osu.edu/

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This is an advanced writing workshop that asks you to think about how literary fiction is made. Therefore, we won’t be considering genre fiction (romance, sci-fi, fantasy, etc.). By literary fiction, I mean stories that are more character-driven than plot-driven. These stories show us something about the complexity of human existence by concentrating on characters and their conflicting wants, needs, fears, hopes, etc. I don’t mean to suggest that these types of stories are without plots. Plenty happens, but what happens externally is less important than what happens internally to the characters involved and what it means for the rest of their lives. In other words, events occur because of the types of people characters are, and the plots that unfold always reveal something new about the inner lives of those characters. We might put it this way: characters create plots, and plots reveal characters.

The stories that we’ll read will invite us to think more deeply about the technical choices writers make and the effects these choices have on the process of storytelling. Reading and analyzing from a writer’s perspective gives us a chance to think about how stories are made and also an opportunity to build our own technical repertoire when it comes to constructing narratives.

For the sake of our conversations, we’ll break the craft of fiction into the following elements: characterization, structure, point-of-view, detail, and language. We’ll look at techniques associated with these elements in selected readings. We’ll continue this conversation as we talk about our own stories during workshop discussions. Each member of the workshop will have the chance to present two stories for our consideration. It will be your responsibility to distribute
copies of your pieces to everyone at least one week prior to the date of your workshop discussion.

WORKSHOP METHOD

To offer us a chance to gather some preliminary thoughts on how writers talk about narratives with the objective of helping the writers more fully realize what they’ve put on the page, I’d like to consider some ideas from Alan Ziegler and his article, “Midwifing the Craft”—Teaching Revision and Editing,” which appears in an anthology edited by Joseph Moxley, Creative Writing in America. Ziegler classifies literary feedback into four types: reactive, descriptive, prescriptive, and collaborative. Reactive feedback would be something like, “I love the opening,” or “This doesn’t work.” This type of feedback really just gives the record of how a given piece of fiction, or part of it, affects a single reader. Descriptive feedback goes a bit further by pointing out some success or problem. “The voice captivates me,” a reader might say. Another might point out that the protagonist seems shallow. In either case, it’s up to the writer to figure out how he or she accomplished the former or how to correct the latter. Prescriptive feedback offers specific suggestions for changes such as, “Combine these two characters into one.” Sometimes prescriptive feedback becomes collaborative when readers actually contribute words to a text. Notice that while prescriptive feedback does present specific changes for the writer to consider making, it often fails to offer a rationale. In other words, readers are often quick to say this needs to be done or that needs to be done without articulating how the change will alter the text. This analytical type of feedback, which Ziegler fails to acknowledge, is usually the most helpful for the writers and the readers. As members of a workshop, we must understand that stories are the result of specific artistic choices writers have made either consciously or instinctively (e.g. characterization, structure, point of view, detail, language). Specific choices produce specific results, and some of them may be detrimental to the effect that a story is trying to achieve. It doesn’t mean that the writer failed, only that he or she may want to consider alternative choices. If we are tactful and thoughtful with our analyses, the writers in the workshop may find specific strategies helpful in revision. We won’t waste our time, then, trying to determine if a story is “good” or “bad.” Instead we will focus on the artistic choices and their effects. Our obligations will be to the stories themselves as they progress to what they want to be. To prepare for discussions of stories from the workshop members, you should use any of Ziegler’s feedback types to write comments in the margins of the manuscripts. Then you should write a letter to the writer in which you become very specific with your analysis of choices and effects. Please sign your letters in the event that the writer wants to talk further with you about a suggestion he or she finds intriguing.

REQUIREMENTS

(1) You will write two stories and share them with the workshop.
(3) You will offer verbal and written responses to the stories written by members of the workshop.
(4) You will participate in the discussion of assigned readings.
(5) You will present a significant revision of one of your stories at the end of our time together. **Revisions will be due on April 17.**

(6) Because so much of everyone’s success will depend on the effort we give to our workshop discussions, your regular and punctual attendance will be essential. **If you fall short with this effort, either through absences or problematic tardies, your final grade will be compromised.** If you have more than two unexcused absences, you can count on receiving less than a premium grade for the course.

**GRADES**

When I evaluate your fiction, I will be looking for a command of the techniques of the craft as well as an ability to penetrate the inner lives of your characters and their situations with some sophistication of vision. It is possible to receive a “B” by writing technically perfect stories. The “A” stories, however, will be technically sound and will capture, through good work with characterization, the complexities of human existence. I will calculate your final grade holistically by evaluating how good a citizen you’ve been in the workshop and the quality of your final revision. I will give no grades until the end of our time together; if you have concerns at any time about your performance, please feel free to talk to me.

**PLAGIARISM STATEMENT:**

Plagiarism is the representation of another's works or ideas as one's own: it includes the unacknowledged word for word use and/or paraphrasing of another person's work, and/or the inappropriate unacknowledged use of another person's ideas. All cases of suspected plagiarism, in accordance with university rules, will be reported to the Committee on Academic Misconduct.

**DISABILITY STATEMENT:**

The Office for Disability Services, located in 150 Pomerene Hall, offers services for students with documented disabilities. Contact the ODS at 2-3307.
DAILY SYLLABUS:

1/9  
Course Introduction  
“An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke” by Tobias Wolff  
plus a writing activity

1/16  
“The Fireman’s Wife” by Richard Bausch  
“Adventure” by Sherwood Anderson  
2 workshops

1/23  
“Fun With a Stranger” by Richard Yates  
2 workshops

1/30  
“Miles City, Montana” by Alice Munro  
2 workshops

2/6  
“In the White Night” by Ann Beattie  
2 workshops

2/13  
3 workshops

2/20  
3 workshops

2/27  
3 workshops

3/6  
No Class

3/13  
Spring Break

3/20  
3 workshops

3/27  
3 workshops

4/3  
3 workshops

4/10  
“Sunday at the Zoo” by Stuart Dybek  
“The Custodian” by Brian Hinshaw  
2 workshops

4/17  
Course evaluation and wrap-up  
2 workshops  
portfolios due