Genre: Writing Short Fiction
MENG 6750 (CRN--)
5:30-8:10 PM Mondays and Wednesdays, EH 217

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Course Description
Fiction writing is both an art and a study in humanity. Benjamin Franklin once said that “Men and melons are hard to know,” and indeed they are. As fiction writers, our job is to penetrate the outer rind with which most people protect themselves so that we may understand our characters from within, including primary or secondary characters, heroes or villains. C.S. Lewis said, “I read to know I am not alone.” This is what we as writers can offer our readers: shared experience and understanding. Plumbing each character’s humanity and finding the language to express that experience artfully are our twin goals this semester.

To help us towards this end, we will read and write extensively. Prepare yourself to work. All styles of fiction are welcome here, from literary to experimental to science fiction to genres yet unnamed, provided that the craftsmanship of your pieces be exceptional. Few writers are successful unless writing becomes a daily habit, and like any other topic of study, the more work you put into this class, the more you will get out of it.

Everything you write this semester will be new. Our goal is not to polish old work to prepare for publication but rather to learn to write more effective short fiction. Writers learn best when they’re working on fresh material and trying bold new experiments. We are creative writers and will spend this semester thoroughly engaged in the act of creation. With that in mind, everything you turn in for class will be something you drafted and revised over the course of the semester. Everything.

The critical reading of others’ writing is as important to your growth as a craftsman as having your own work critiqued. Aim to offer thoughtful, considered, helpful commentary when reading the work of your peers. The readings we do each week should help you learn the fundamentals of craft, but your commentary puts knowledge into practice. Give the type of feedback you want to receive, and your writer’s eye will become more acute in the process.

Learning Outcomes
The MENG Program is dedicated to helping students master the following learning outcomes.
LO 1: Gather, analyze, and communication information and insights creatively and critically.
LO 2: Cultivate skills in close reading, critical thinking, creative expression, and persuasive writing.
LO 3: Understand and apply various theoretical perspectives and discipline-specific terminology to interpretations of texts and/or analysis of data.
LO 4: Acknowledge and articulate the significance of key text(s) in specific genres, periods, cultures, styles, or theoretical perspectives.
LO 5: Demonstrate knowledge of current scholarship and practices.
LO 6: Employ discipline-specific conventions and protocols for written or multimodal presentations.

This class focuses specifically on LO 1, 2, 3, and LO 6.
By the end of this semester, successful students will have
- made writing a daily habit (assessed in journal)
- demonstrated deep understanding of writing craft theory by implementing the elements of fiction and incorporating good craftsmanship into the creation of original stories and novel chapters (assessed in workshop pieces and final portfolio)
- improved their critical eye and application of craft theory through the careful reading and critique of peers’ work (assessed in class participation and workshop response letters)
- familiarized themselves with contemporary short stories and analyzed those stories’ use of craft techniques (assessed in reading responses and participation)

**Required Primary Texts**
The short fiction produced by members of this class

**Required Theoretical Texts**

**Course Grade**
Your grade this semester will be determined according to the following criteria:
- Participation (LO 2, 3) 15%
- Journal (LO 2) 20%
- Workshop Pieces (LO 2, 6) 25%
- Revised Story and Craft Essay (LO1, 2, 3, 6) 25%
- Short Story Reading Responses (LO1, 2, 3) 15%
- TOTAL 100%

All written work should be typed in double-spaced 12-point Times New Roman font and turned in electronically to our class Dropbox.

**Participation:** Your participation grade in this class will be determined by **attendance** and **class discussion** according to the following criteria:

**Attendance:** If you aren’t here, you can’t participate. It is as simple as that. We only meet once a week, so it is important to attend every session if at all possible. Thus, the base of your participation grade will be determined by how often you attend.
- 0 absences: 100%
- 1 absence: 90%
- 2 absences: 75%

**3 absences:** **course failure**
If you need to miss class, please e-mail or talk to me in advance so that we can make arrangements to turn in any assignments that are due. Talk to your peers to get copies of notes and catch up on some of what you missed.

**IMPORTANT NOTES:**
**All absences are treated the same.** Whether you miss class because of a wedding, a funeral, an illness, or a mental health day, it counts as an absence. There are no “excused” or
“unexcused” absences. I expect you to attend class every day on which you are able. Absences should only be the result of an unavoidable emergency.

If you are more than fifteen minutes late to class, you will be counted absent. Contact me immediately if you have an emergency that causes you to miss a class.

Tardies are noted in the course role and affect your course participation. Please be punctual.

Class Discussion: Once you have established the numerical base of your participation grade through attendance, it will be adjusted to reflect your active participation or lack thereof. I will keep a tally sheet to track your contributions to class discussion and use them to adjust your score as follows:

+10 Student frequently offers comments that really develop the conversation, often producing “a-ha” moments. The student’s comments reflect in-depth knowledge of the class material (including workshop stories and readings from required texts), bringing in supplementary research not assigned by the professor, and showing the student’s exceptional intellectual ability and effort.

+5 Student frequently offers comments that are intelligent and useful and demonstrate thorough knowledge of course material, sometimes including supplementary information.

+0 Student routinely offers comments that show his/her knowledge of and thoughtful reflection on the course material. This student meets the class expectations but has not exceeded them.

-5 Student either comments less often than his/her peers or offers comments that do not reflect understanding of course materials. The student falls just short of class expectations.

-10 Student either comments rarely or offers comments that are factually inaccurate and distracting, suggesting they are not reading carefully. Student is not meeting class expectations.

-15+ Student never comments or offers comments that are off-topic and disruptive. Not only is this student failing to meet class expectations, but s/he is preventing others from learning.

Journal: The single most important skill any writer needs to gain is discipline. A talented writer who only sits down to write when the muse strikes or a project is due is unlikely ever to finish a novel or revise short stories to completion. Good writers become great writers through practice as well as through study. Your journal is your place for daily practice. Think of it as an artist think of his/her sketch book: it is a place to play and experiment.

Your journal grade will be determined by the average number of pages you produce each week. An average of five pages or more a week will earn 100%. The math to determine the percentage grade will look like this: (number of pages you write)/(5*6 weeks)

Remember, I am not looking for quality here—only quantity. Be BOLD! Take risks! The idea is to get you writing as much as possible, keeping the door to your creative self open. You may include notes on your ideas, sentences you want to try out, first drafts, research notes, sketches, and more, but remember, this is not a diary. You want to fill this book with fiction.

All journals will be hand-written. Hand writing a journal accesses a different part of your brain than computer composition, as well as causing you to revise before turning a
Writing in a notebook diminishes the notion that what you draft initially is a long way from its finished form, and in this, a hand written journal can be enormously liberating. Also, it is extremely portable, requiring neither a power source nor decent lighting. Get in the habit of carrying this journal with you everywhere and writing in it whenever possible.

**Workshop Pieces:** Early in the semester, we will create a workshop schedule. Three days before your workshop date, you will need to upload your story to the class Dropbox. **Please double-space.** Make sure your name is on your submission. Number the pages and staple the whole. Use 12 point, Times New Roman font for readability. (This is the industry standard, and the font you’ll want to use if you are submitting your work to publishers.) **Workshop submissions should be no longer than fifteen pages. There is no minimum length.** A well-constructed piece of flash fiction takes just as much time and thought to write as a longer story. Your goal here should be quality, not quantity.

For each workshop day, you will read and comment on your peers’ work as you wish your work to be reviewed, that is, thoughtfully and constructively. Your workshop grade will be based on both the effort and quality reflected in the pieces you turned in and on the effort you put into offering intelligent, helpful criticisms to your peers.

Because I want you more focused on improving your craft rather than earning a letter grade, these one-page writings will be marked ✔, ✔+, or ✔−. A ✔ will be the most common of these marks, showing that the student has completed the assignment to the best of his/her ability and on time. The ✔+ will be reserved for students who have shown extraordinary effort or talent in a particular writing and will be far more difficult to earn. On the other hand, students whose work is late or sloppy will earn a ✔−. Strive to complete every assignment to the very best of your ability. Regular journal writing should help you to write your best.

**Revised Story and Craft Essay:**

At some point during the semester, I would like you to choose one of the stories you’ve shared in workshop to revise. Go beyond merely fixing typos and odd syntax—you should actually re-envision your story. Try to see it anew and re-write accordingly. Go back and think about your original idea, think about how that idea changed during the writing, think about what most interests you about the piece as it stands now. Work conscientiously towards building a better whole.

To accompany your revised story, you will write a 2-4 page “craft essay.” Approach it like a researched personal essay. You are free to be conversational and creative, but your essay should also be thought-provoking and researched. Make an argument: what is the single most important thing you’ve learned about writing, and how is this demonstrated in the portfolio? Support your thesis with at least three quotations from the Tin House Writer’s Notebooks and with specific references to your revised story. You may also want to include quotations and paraphrases of remarks made by your peers.

Each of these pieces will be worth ten percent of your course grade (twenty percent for the pair) and will be assigned a letter grade based on its overall quality.

**Reading Responses:** Students will respond to course readings from the Tin House and Best American Short Stories (BASS) texts in brief in-class writings. These writings should reflect the students’ careful reading of the assigned material and should reference specific
ideas and examples from the reading to receive full credit. These will be graded ✔+, ✔, or ✔- accordingly. The plus will be rare, reserved only for the most outstanding and thought-provoking responses, while responses that fail to be specific about the course reading will receive a minus. Remember as you write these that you want to show that you read the assignment carefully and thoughtfully. You must be in class to complete these responses, so please be punctual and present to avoid missing the response time.

OTHER POLICIES

Late Work: All assigned work should be turned in by the assigned deadline. Late work will be penalized five points for each day it is late, including Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays. If for some reason your work is late, be sure to e-mail a copy to me as soon as possible to prevent excessive loss of points.

Missed Classes: If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to talk to a peer and find out what you missed. If you know you are going to miss a class and talk to me in advance, so we can devise a plan.

Texting/Social Networking/Surfing/Other: While in this class, your computer and/or phone should be turned off and put away unless it is needed for a class assignment. Do not send text messages, surf the net, or check social networking sites while in class. Doing so displays a contempt for the class and for the thoughts of your peers that I absolutely will not tolerate. Students caught “texting” will lose five percentage points from of their final grade for the first offense and will be asked to drop the class if the incidence recurs. They may re-enroll in the course when they are serious about learning.

Academic Dishonesty: As specified in PPM 6-22 IV D, cheating and plagiarism violate the Student Code. Plagiarism is “the unacknowledged (uncited) use of any other person’s or group’s ideas or work.” Students found guilty of cheating or plagiarism are subject to failure of a specific assignment, or, in more serious cases, failure of the entire course.

Core Beliefs: According to PPM 6-22 IV, students are to “[d]etermine, before the last day to drop courses without penalty, when course requirements conflict with a student's core beliefs. If there is such a conflict, the student should consider dropping the class. A student who finds this solution impracticable may request a resolution from the instructor. This policy does not oblige the instructor to grant the request, except in those cases when a denial would be arbitrary and capricious or illegal. This request must be made to the instructor in writing and the student must deliver a copy of the request to the office of the department head. The student's request must articulate the burden the requirement would place on the student's beliefs.” As a note, we are not willing to censor your fellow students and their writing. Each student has an individual voice and it is very likely topics and language will come up that may be offensive to some.

***Please note that, due to the nature of this course, readings often include material that may be offensive. Creative writers must write about what they feel most passionately about, and it is not unusual for writing to include profanity, graphic depictions of sexual encounters, violence, and political or religious content. I welcome all forms of writing here, provided that
they aspire towards excellent craftsmanship. If you feel that the course requirements will violate your values, we need to talk immediately to determine whether we can create a plan that will allow you to complete the course work. If we can find no solution, you may wish to take this course from another instructor. I will completely understand your decision to do so and will not hold it against you in any way.

**Disability Accommodation:** PPM 3-34 notes: “When students seek accommodation in a regularly scheduled course, they have the responsibility to make such requests at the Center for Students with Disabilities before the beginning of the semester in which the accommodation is being requested. When a student fails to make such arrangements, interim accommodations can be made by the instructor, pending the determination of the request for a permanent accommodation.”

**Emergency Closure:** If for any reason the university is forced to close for an extended period of time, we will conduct our class via Canvas. Look for announcements through Weber email.
SCHEDULE:

Please complete all readings and assignments prior to the date on which they are listed.

Week 1
May 9 Getting Rolling
Welcome to class. Meet your peers. Create workshop rotation. Using the image, or “show, don’t tell.”

May 11 Showing and Telling, Write What You Know?
Benjamin Percy’s “The Slowest Reader” found here: http://therumpus.net/2012/08/the-slowest-reader/.
WNI, Peter Rock’s “The Telling That Shows”
WNII, Bret Anthony Johnson’s “Don’t Write What You Know”
BASS, Julia Elliott’s “Bride”
Sample workshop story in dropbox.
Bring stories to distribute: [3 students]

Week 2
May 16 Dialogue
Dorothy Allison’s Tin House podcast on Dialogue, found here: http://www.tinhouse.com/blog/podcasts.
WNII, Christopher Beha’s “Do Something”
BASS, Laura Lee Smith’s “Unsafe at Any Speed”
Workshop: [3 students]

May 18 Characterization
WNII, Jim Krusoe’s “Story and Dream.”
WNII, Benjamin Percy’s “Get a Job: The Importance of Work In Fiction.”
BASS, Victor Lodato’s “Jack, July”
Workshop: [3 students]
Bring stories to distribute: [3 students]

Week 3
May 23 Time and Place
WNI Dorothy Allison’s “Place”
BASS, Colum McCann’s “Sh’khol”
Workshop: [3 students]
Bring stories to distribute: [3 students]

May 25 Beginnings
WNII Aimee Bender’s “On the Making of Orchards”
WN II, Ann Hood’s “Beginnings”
Bring BASS to class to examine beginnings.
Workshop: [3 students]
Bring stories to distribute: [3 students]
Week 4
May 30 Memorial Day [no class]

June 1 The Fabulous
WNII Karen Russell’s “Engineering Impossible Architectures.”
Dropbox, Kelly Link’s “The Summer People”
Dropbox, Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”
Workshop: [3 students]
Bring stories to distribute: [3 students]

Week 5
June 6 Plot Structure
WNII, Anna Keesey, “Making a Scene: Fiction’s Fundamental Unit”
BASS, Justin Bigos “Fingerprints”
Journal check—bring all journals to class.
Workshop: [3 students]
Bring stories to distribute: [3 students]

June 8 Point of View & Narrative Distance
WNII, Tom Grimes, “There Will Be No Stories in Heaven”
Q Lindsey Barrett’s “Writing Beyond Good” at http://www.missourireview.com/tmr-blog/2013/08/writing-beyond-good/
Workshop: [3 students]
Bring stories to distribute: [3 students]

Week 6
June 13 Character Motivation
WNII, Aimee Bender’s “Character Motivation”
BASS, Ben Fowlkes’s “You’ll Apologize If You Have To”
Workshop: [3 students]
Bring stories to distribute: [3 students]

June 15 Revision
WNII, Chris Offut’s “Performing Surgery Without Anesthesia”
WNII Antonya Nelson’s “Short Story: A Process of Revision”
Revision exercise
Workshop: [3 students]
Bring stories to distribute: [3 students]

Week 7
June 20 Endings
WNII Elissa Schappell’s “Endings: Parting Is Such Sweet Sorrow”
Dropbox, ZZ Packer’s “Brownies”
Workshop: [3 students]

June 22 Place of Fiction
In class: Chimimanda Adichie’s “The Danger of a Single Story” Discussion: what work should fiction do?
Because this is a projects-based class, we will not meet during the final exam time. Please use the time instead to finish other projects and prepare for your other finals. If you’ve made it this far, you’ve more than put in your time. Good work!