

Fiction Workshop

ENGL 206/306/406

Fall 2015

2:30-3:45 p.m., T,R (PA 207)

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"I think it's a beginning for authors to acknowledge that they are myth-makers and that, if they are widely read, will have an influence that will last for many years. I don't think there's a strong awareness of that now. And we have such a young culture that there is an opportunity to contribute wonderful new myths to it -- which will be accepted."

—Kurt Vonnegut, *interview with Walter James Miller, WNYC's Reader's Almanac (1974)*

Course Description:

What makes great fiction... *great*? And, in a world increasingly focused on the collection and analysis of pure data for political and economic purposes, where does storytelling even fit in? Does fiction still have the power to change the world?

In the Fiction Workshop, we will read and dissect the Pulitzer Prize-winning comic masterpiece, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, as a foundational text from which all elements of original, intelligent, meaningful, entertaining, and lasting fiction will be thoroughly explored. Students will learn, and practice, all the tools of professional storytellers and will end the semester as much-improved readers, and writers, of fiction.

Required text: *A Confederacy of Dunces*, a novel by John Kennedy Toole.

Student Outcomes:

Through close study of this classic novel, as well as other fiction throughout the semester, students will deepen their knowledge of the purpose and craft of fiction while acquiring the lifelong skills to become better writers and storytellers. For each student, the Fiction Workshop will result in a Final Portfolio that will include, among other work, the opening

chapter of an original novel. Students will learn professional, practical writing tools to create their own interesting, original characters, memorable moments, and kickass endings through structure and plotting, dialogue, defining a character's central desire, elevating tension, technique (unique voice), addressing common mistakes, dealing constructively with feedback, revision (where the writing really happens), arriving at theme, and understanding fiction writing as a means to form a personal life philosophy that serves a higher purpose.

Attendance and Participation:

Attendance and participation are *essential*. You get one free absence (if it's absolutely unavoidable), but still must do the assigned work. Please exchange phone numbers and/or emails with a classmate now.

Grading and Evaluation:

Attendance and Participation (15%).

Writing Assignments:

1. Personal Mission Statement (15%):

A statement of your purpose, and practical objectives, for learning the craft of fiction (3-5 pages, 750 - 1,000 words).

2. First Annotation (15%):

Craft exercise to be assigned (3-5 pages, 750- 1,000 words).

3. Second Annotation (15%):

Craft exercise to be assigned (3-5 pages, 750- 1,000 words).

Original Fiction (20%):

This 10-15 page (2,500 – 3,750 word) work of fiction will be composed as the first chapter of an original novel, invoking all the craft elements and tools we study. The piece will be revised multiple times for the Final Portfolio.

Final Portfolio (20%):

Contains Final Revisions of all Writing Assignments (including original, marked-up drafts), and a summary Process Letter detailing the craft journey of the writer upon reflection of the goals set in his or her Personal Mission Statement. I will evaluate your grade for your Final Portfolio by assessing the effort you put forth into revising your work while incorporating the principles and craft tools learned, and notes received, throughout the semester.

Schedule (subject to change):

Week 1:

- Introductions. Course goals and format. Reviewing the syllabus. Syllabus class feedback exercise and Q&A.
- Why *A Confederacy of Dunces*? The story of John Kennedy Toole, Thelma Toole, Walker Percy, publication and reception of the novel, the Pulitzer Prize, and the book's enduring legacy.
- Why write? Purpose and personal vision. The equipment of a writer.
- *A Confederacy of Dunces* assigned reading. Lessons and group discussions.
- Writing Workshops: Prompt, write, discuss.
- Writing Assignment #1: Write your Personal Mission Statement as a fiction writer.

Week 2:

- How Well Do You Write? Grammar, spelling, punctuation and other rudiments of being taken seriously as a communicator of ideas.
- Kinds of Stories – and How Best to Tell Yours: concept, literary format, and genre.
- A Writer's Material: personal experience, reading, keeping notebooks and journals.
- *A Confederacy of Dunces* assigned reading. Lessons and group discussions.
- Writing Workshops: Prompt, write, discuss.
- Turn in Personal Mission Statement.

Week 3:

- The Basics. What is a sentence, beat, paragraph, scene, sequence, chapter, act, section, etc.?

- Structure and Plot. Classic three-act structure. Twists and turns. Memorable moments.
- *A Confederacy of Dunces* assigned reading. Lessons and group discussions.
- Writing Workshops: Prompt, write, discuss.
- Receive back Personal Mission Statement.
- Writing Assignment #2: First Annotation (TBD).

Week 4:

- Telling the Story: narrative technique, point of view, and making decisions as the writer.
- Creating interesting, original characters.
- Dialogue: how people really speak (but not really).
- *A Confederacy of Dunces* assigned reading. Lessons and group discussions.
- Writing Workshops: Prompt, write, discuss.
- Turn in Writing Assignment #2: First Annotation.

Week 5:

- Where's the Heat? Drama and Dilemma: conflict, rising tension, narrative velocity, pacing, and the hero "failing her way to success."
- *A Confederacy of Dunces* assigned reading. Lessons and group discussions.
- Writing Workshops: Prompt, write, discuss.
- Receive back Writing Assignment #2: First Annotation.

Week 6:

- Technique: discovering, and embracing, your singular style and voice.

- *A Confederacy of Dunces* assigned reading. Lessons and group discussions.
- Writing Workshops: Prompt, write, discuss.
- Writing Assignment #3: Second Annotation (TBD).

Week 7:

- Painting with Words: image and detail. Making your story *feel* real.
- *A Confederacy of Dunces* assigned reading. Lessons and group discussions.
- Writing Workshops: Prompt, write, discuss.
- Turn in Writing Assignment #3: Second Annotation.

Week 8:

- Symbolism and Metaphor: What is happening in the story? vs. What is *really* happening in the story?
- *A Confederacy of Dunces* assigned reading. Lesson and group discussion.
- Writing Workshops: Prompt, write, discuss.
- Receive back Writing Assignment #3: Second Annotation.
- Prepare to pitch and discuss your Original Novel concepts.

Week 9:

- On Comic Tone: slapstick humor, satire, black comedy, irony, deadpan, and cult fiction. From Swift to Twain to Charles Portis, Lorrie Moore, and beyond.
- *A Confederacy of Dunces* assigned reading. Lessons and group discussions.
- Writing Workshops: pitch and discuss your Original Novel concepts. Fundamentals of a solid opening chapter.

- Writing Assignment #4: Original Fiction. Start drafting Chapter One of your original novel (final length: 10-15 pages, 2,500 – 3,750 words).

Week 10:

- Story Resolution (or the lack of it): finale, climax, coda, and epilogue.
- *A Confederacy of Dunces* assigned reading. Lessons and group discussions.
- Writing Workshops: lessons and discussions on progress of your Original Novel Chapter.

Week 11:

- Theme: philosophy, purpose, and truth.
- *A Confederacy of Dunces* assigned reading. Lessons and group discussions.
- Writing Workshops: progress on Original Novel Chapter (applying craft lessons; discussion).

Week 12:

- Revision: feedback, notes, reflection, problem solving, and the path to becoming a writer.
- *A Confederacy of Dunces* assigned reading. Lessons and group discussions.
- Writing Workshops: progress on Original Novel Chapter (craft lessons and discussion).
- Turn in First Draft of Original Novel Chapter. Hard copy, double-spaced, 10-15 pages (2,500 – 3,750 words).

Week 13:

- Publishing: the business of fiction, agents, editors, professionalism, entrepreneurship, routine, and the responsibilities of being a paid writer.
- *A Confederacy of Dunces* assigned reading. Lessons and group discussions.

- Writing Workshops: pulling it all together (polishing your chapter).
- One-on-one meetings: pre-scheduled, in my office to discuss your work thus far and/or any lingering craft issues with your Novel Chapter. Receive back First Draft pages w/notes.

Week 14:

- If you haven't, complete reading *A Confederacy of Dunces*.
- Adaptation. Fiction as source material for film, television, and the Internet. A primer on the business of writing for entertainment. The uniquely different skills of the novelist and the scriptwriter.
- Approaching *A Confederacy of Dunces* as a screenplay. The odd, infamous Hollywood history of the novel.
- Writing Workshops: final lessons and group discussions on revision, values, and theme.

Week 15:

- Final thoughts on *A Confederacy of Dunces*, the novel, and the future of fiction writing.
- Final Portfolios Due (in hard copy).
- Discuss similarities and differences between John Kennedy Toole and Dow Mossman's *The Stones of Summer*. Watch documentary "The Stone Reader".

Student Conduct

This is a workshop-style class so regular, thoughtful, and courteous engagement in our lively discussions is not just encouraged, but *required*, to get the most benefit from the learning experience. Your grade is based 15 percent on attendance and participation, so I pledge to always do my best to present challenging material, spark interesting discussion, moderate difficult topics, and steer our discourse to stay focused on the aspects most relevant to our purposes.

Please don't chew gum, or mess around with your cell phone, laptop, tablet, Google Glass, iWatch, Rubick's Cube -- or engage in any other rude, distracting behaviors.

This class is *old school*. I will prepare handouts to accompany important lessons. Therefore, any class notes will be taken by hand, not typed into a device. Video or audio recording of class is not allowed.

It is a student's responsibility to be aware of assignment deadlines.

Computer problems, power failures, and Internet difficulties are not excuses for missed assignments. Have back-up plans for possible technical glitches.

Academic Accommodations:

In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, students with a documented disability are eligible for support services and accommodations. If a student wishes to request an accommodation, please contact the Director of Academic Support Services, Henry Conover, at (775) 831-1314 x7534, hconover@sierranevada.edu or go to the OASIS offices on the third floor of Prim Library within the first week of the semester.

The SNC E-mail System:

The SNC e-mail system is the official communication vehicle among students, faculty members and administrative staff and is designed to protect the confidentiality of student information as required by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 Act (FERPA). Students should check their college e-mail accounts daily during the school year. Students have a right to forward their SNC e-mail to another e-mail account (for example, @hotmail or @gmail). However, confidentiality of student information protected by FERPA cannot be guaranteed for SNC e-mail forwarded to an outside vendor. Having e-mail redirected does not absolve a student from the responsibilities associated with official communication sent to his or her SNC e-mail account.

Faculty/Student Honor Code:

The faculty of SNC believes students must be held to high standards of integrity in all aspects of college life in order to promote the educational mission of the College and to encourage respect for the rights of others. Each student brings to the SNC community unique skills, talents, values and experiences which, when expressed within the community,

contribute to the quality of the educational environment and the growth and development of the individual. Students share with members of the faculty, administration and staff the responsibility for creating and maintaining an environment conducive to learning and personal development, where actions are guided by mutual respect, integrity, responsibility and trust. The faculty and students alike must make diligent efforts to ensure high standards are upheld by their colleagues and peers as well as themselves. Therefore faculty and students accept responsibility for maintaining these standards at Sierra Nevada College and are obligated to comply with its regulations and procedures, which they are expected to read and understand.

Consequences for Violating the Honor Code:

SNC students and faculty share the responsibility for maintaining an environment of academic honesty. Thus, all are responsible for knowing and abiding by the SNC Faculty/Student Honor Code published in the current SNC Catalog. Faculty are responsible for presenting the honor code and consequences for violating it to students at the start of their classes AND for reporting all incidences of academic dishonesty to the Provost. Students are responsible for knowing what constitutes cheating, plagiarism and fabrication, and refraining from these and other forms of academic dishonesty. Violations of the honor code become part of a student's academic record.

SNC's Disciplinary Sanctions for Honor Code Violations:

1st Offense: Student receives a zero for assignment/exam and counseling with faculty on the honor code, consequences for violating the honor code, and the value of academic honesty in learning.

2nd Offense: Student fails course and receives counseling with faculty on the honor code, consequences for violating the honor code, and the value of academic honesty in learning.

3rd Offense: Student is expelled.

The SNC Mission Statement:

Sierra Nevada College graduates will be educated to be scholars of and contributors to a sustainable world. Sierra Nevada College combines the liberal arts and professional preparedness through an interdisciplinary curriculum that emphasizes entrepreneurial thinking and environmental, social, economic and educational sustainability. Core themes are Liberal Arts, Entrepreneurial Thinking, Professional Preparedness and Sustainability.