

Fiction Workshop
ENGL 206/306/406
Prim 214
Spring, 2020

Instructor: Gayle Brandeis
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Course description: E.L. Doctorow has said that writing fiction "is like driving a car at night. You never see farther than your own headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way." Writing fiction is such a personal, solitary journey, but I hope to shine extra light as you make your way down the road. In addition to workshopping your fiction and talking about craft, we will also (hopefully) do some in class writing during every session to keep our creative juices flowing, our writing muscles flexed. By the end of our time together, I hope you'll have a deeper understanding of the craft of fiction and a more intimate relationship with your own voice as a fiction writer.

Text: *PEN America Best Debut Short Stories 2019*, edited by Yuka Igarashi and *Wired for Story* by Lisa Cron. During the residency, I may also suggest additional online readings beyond those in the syllabus.

Some general guidelines:

--Come to class on time and prepared (which means having all required reading, including workshop stories, read thoroughly and annotated), and be sure to turn off all cell phones, iPods, etc. Laptops are okay for notes and in class writing, but you may not go online.

—Be honest but kind in your feedback (Please see “Workshop Guidelines” handout for more detailed guidelines.)

--Be willing to explore, to push your own boundaries, to dig deep and take creative risks. And have fun!

Grading:

—Two absences are acceptable (though not desirable); anything beyond that will affect your grade.

Your grading will be based upon these things:

—Your original creative work

206 students will workshop and revise one piece of fiction (up to 10 double spaced pages, 12 pt font)

306 students will workshop and revise two stories

406 students will workshop and revise two stories and give a presentation on a writer or aspect of craft of their choice

—Your written responses to all assigned readings from the text. These are due **in paper** the day of the discussion.

--Your participation in class (including discussions, workshop critiques and in-class writing exercises. Each student will also lead a discussion about one chapter of *Wired for Story*, synthesizing the chapter and offering two questions related to the chapter to spark conversation.)

All students will turn in a portfolio of workshopped work and revision(s), along with a short essay explaining the revision process and also what they learned over the semester, in addition to their favorite three in class writings.

Class Schedule

T Jan 21

—Introduction to class and each other

Th Jan 23

—Discuss “Eight Rules for Writing Fiction” <https://www.newyorker.com/humor/daily-shouts/eight-rules-for-writing-fiction?verso=true> and “The Husband Stitch” by Carmen Maria Machado <https://granta.com/the-husband-stitch/>

—Craft discussions/in class writing

T Jan 28

—Workshop

—Discuss “Today, You’re a Black Revolutionary” by Jade Jones (PABDSS, p. 3)

—Craft discussions/in class writing

Th Jan 30

—Workshop

—Discuss Chapter 1 of *Wired for Story*

—Craft discussions/in class writing

T Feb 4

—Workshop

—Discuss “The Rickies” by Sarah Curry (PABDSS, p. 17) “Bad Northern Women” by Erin Singer (p. 195)

—Craft discussions/in class writing

Th Feb 6

—Workshop

—Discuss Chapter 2 of Wired for Story

—Craft discussions/in class writing

F Feb 7/Sat Feb 8 June Saraceno and I will be reading Friday at 7pm and giving a workshop Saturday at 10am as part of the Writers in the Woods reading series. Come for extra credit and fun! :)

T Feb 11

—Workshop

—Discuss “The Unsent Letters of Blaise and Jacqueline Pascal” by Kelsey Peterson (PABDSS, p. 33)

—Craft discussions/in class writing

Th Feb 13

—Workshop

—Discuss Chapter 3 of Wired for Story

—Craft discussions/in class writing

T Feb 18

—Workshop

—Discuss “The Manga Artist” by Doug Henderson (PABDSS, p. 47)

—Craft discussions/in class writing

Th Feb 20

—Workshop

—Discuss Chapter 4 of Wired for Story

—Craft discussions/in class writing

T Feb 25

—Workshop

—Discuss “Mother and Child” by Laur Freudig (PABDSS, p. 69)

—Craft discussions/in class writing

Th Feb 27

—Workshop

—Discuss Chapter 5 of Wired for Story

—Craft discussions/in class writing

T Mar 3

—Workshop

—Discuss “Without a Big One” by JP Infante (PABDSS, p. 87)

—Craft discussions/in class writing

Th Mar 5

—Workshop

—Discuss Chapter 6 of Wired for Story

—Craft discussions/in class writing

T Mar 10

—Workshop

—Discuss “Last Days I” by Tamiko Beyer (PABDSS, p. 109)

—Craft discussions/in class writing

Th Mar 12

- Workshop
- Discuss Chapter 7 of Wired for Story
- Craft discussions/in class writing

T Mar 17

- Workshop
- Discuss “Good Hope” by Enyeribe Ibegwam (PABDSS, p 121)
- Craft discussions/in class writing

Th Mar 19

- Workshop
- Discuss Chapter 8 of Wired for Story
- Craft discussions/in class writing

T Mar 24

- Workshop
- Discuss “Tornado Season” by Marilyn Manolakas (PABDSS, p. 129)
- Craft discussions/in class writing

Th Mar 26

- Workshop
- Discuss Chapter 9 of Wired for Story
- Craft discussions/in class writing

T Mar 31

- Workshop
- Discuss “Cicadas and the Dead Chairman” by Pingmei Lan (PABDSS, p. 183)
- Craft discussions/in class writing

Th Apr 2

- Workshop
- Discuss Chapter 10 of Wired for Story
- Craft discussions/in class writing

T Apr 7

- Workshop
- Discuss “Vain Beasts” by AB Young (PABDSS, p. 181)
- Craft discussions/in class writing

Th Apr 9

- Workshop
- Discuss Chapter 11 of Wired for Story and “Reza’s Restaurant, Chicago, 1997” by Kaveh Akbar <https://www.vqronline.org/poetry/2018/06/rezas-restaurant-chicago-1997>
- Craft discussions/in class writing

F April 10 and Sat April 11 Kaveh Akbar will be giving a reading Friday at 7pm and teaching a workshop Saturday at 10am. He is amazing. Come for extra credit and enrichment.

T Apr 14

- Workshop
- Discuss “Bad Northern Women” by Erin Singer (PABDSS, p. 195)
- Craft discussions/in class writing

Th Apr 16

- Workshop
- Discuss Chapter 12 of Wired for Story
- Craft discussions/in class writing

T Apr 21

- Workshop
- Discuss
- Craft discussions/in class writing

Th Apr 23

- Workshop
- Discuss
- Craft discussions/in class writing

SCHOOL POLICIES

Sierra Nevada College 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: Liberal Arts, Professional Preparedness, Entrepreneurial Thinking, Sustainability

Learning Differences: 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.

The 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 of Violating the Student 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 the consequences of 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 for refraining from these and other forms of academic dishonesty. Violations of the Honor Code become part of a student's academic record.

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 Email System: The SNC email 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 email 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 email redirected does not absolve a student from the responsibilities associated with official communication sent to his or her SNC email account.

Critique Guidelines

My goal as a workshop facilitator is for all of us to leave the workshop feeling inspired and ready to return to the page. To make that possible, let's all commit to a workshop culture that's honest but kind, that's above all HELPFUL. Here are a few guidelines I've put together toward that end.

How to be a workshopper

1. Come to class prepared (meaning have each workshop piece read thoroughly and annotated, with both line notes and global notes to give to the writer at the end of workshop).
2. Be respectful of each other and of the writer, who is sitting silently, wishing they could speak (note: more about silence later).
3. After the writer reads a page or so of their work out loud (and gives other introductory information, if desired), we will begin by summarizing the story and its themes.
4. We will continue by talking about what works.
5. We will conclude by discussing what the writer might do to achieve their goal.
6. Then the writer will have an opportunity to respond.
7. Please be HELPFUL. Talk about the story in a way that will most help the writer continue writing.
8. This doesn't mean you have to praise, praise, praise.
9. It does mean you should look for ways to help the writer achieve their goals, to help the work become most fully itself.
10. Describe the work, not the writer.
11. You don't have to raise your hand to talk. You may wait for your chance. However, if you're having a hard time getting a word in, go ahead and raise your hand.

Some questions to consider when workshopping (these are adapted from a list from the Iowa Writers Workshop):

1. What is the story's focus; what is it about? What is the central conflict of the story? (If you are examining a scene, you should see a conflict and focus in the scene, even though it is not a complete story.)
2. What is the point of view? Is it appropriate to the story? What does the narrator's voice tell you about their character? Are there any lapses in diction or syntax? Would another point of view work better?
3. Does each character have depth, complexity? Does anyone act out of character; if so, is this action simply surprising or is it unbelievable? Is there anything the author could do to bring the characters more alive?
4. Do the images and actions of the characters reveal personality and establish motivation for later events?
5. Is the dialogue natural, efficient, and used to further plot and character development?
6. Can you tell what the relationship is between the characters? What might the author do to give more insight into the relationship between the characters?
7. How does the author make use of place? Do you have a good sense of place, of where we are, at all times in the piece under discussion? Is place used primarily to set the scene or establish mood, and if so, does it work well? Is the setting used effectively to set a scene or establish mood? How might the author use place to further narrative or character development?
8. Is the language compressed, tension-filled, energized?
9. Are there enough details to sustain the fictional dream? Are the metaphors, similes, and symbols fresh, accurate, unobtrusive?
10. Is the emphasis correctly placed on action rather than narration? Is there a good balance between scene and summary or is there too much "telling"?
11. Is the ending satisfactory, appropriate? If not, how might the author change the ending?

Note: These are also good questions to ask yourself when revising your work.

How to be workshopped

1. Have sympathy for yourself. No matter how respectful this conversation is, and no matter how thick your skin, there will probably be times when being workshopped is difficult. This is a good sign that you care about your work.
2. Do not at any point apologize for your writing. You are doing a courageous thing. Your writing is valuable, no matter how unfinished it may be.
3. Choose a page or so of your work to read at the start of your workshop. If you have any pressing questions you'd like the workshop conversation to address— you are especially eager to know how your dialogue is working, etc.—feel free to ask them before the workshop begins, as well. You're also welcome to give a brief introduction about your process or what you hope to accomplish with the piece.

3. Remain silent during discussion. You might have a powerful impulse to speak. You might want to explain yourself, or your work. Be a fly on the wall (a very intelligent fly).
4. Take notes. If you have questions, comments, or simply have a (brief!) moment of hating someone's guts, write that all down.
5. Write down everything everyone says that you find useful, and everything with which you vehemently disagree.
6. Taking notes engages you in the conversation while you remain silent. It also helps you later, when you have some distance and want to recall the most useful parts of the workshop. (An alternative: If you decide you don't want to be present be in the workshop room when your work is being discussed, you are welcome to leave the room and deputize someone in the class to take notes for you.)
7. You will have an opportunity to speak at the end of the discussion (An important note: While I believe there is great value in being silent during workshop, I don't want you to feel *silenced*—if you need to say something to clarify a point or have a question relevant to the moment at hand, you are welcome to chime in, but please try to keep this to a minimum; it's very helpful to practice hearing what other people have to say about your work without your input—it's what it's like being a writer in the world dealing with reviews, etc.)
8. Thank your classmates for their work and input.
9. Please do not respond defensively and aggressively (“You’re all missing the point! Can’t you see that the mother hates her daughter?”) no matter how much you want to.
10. If you have unanswered questions, please ask them. (“I wanted to suggest that the mother hates her daughter. Does anyone have ideas about how I could achieve that?”)

An additional note: I was recently introduced to the concept of “brave space” and feel it translates well to creative writing workshops, allowing us to consciously co-create a space where all participants feel they can be heard, a space where we can build the workshop culture we want together.

The hallmarks of a “brave space”, according to Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens in their 2013 book, *The Art of Effective Facilitation*, are these five elements:

- Controversy with civility*, a space where varying opinions are allowed
- Owning intentions and impacts*, a space where participants acknowledge and discuss instances where a dialogue has affected the emotional well-being of another person
- *Challenge by choice*, a space where participants have an option to step in and out of challenging conversations

- Respect*, a space where participants show respect for one another's basic personhood
- No attacks*, a space where participants agree not to intentionally inflict harm on one another

I think this resonates so beautifully with what we're trying to accomplish here at SNC. As writers, we have to be brave on the page; let's commit to being brave together in our workshop space, as well.

Here's to a fabulous, productive, inspiring, fun, workshop! :)