

**English 205: Writing Fiction**  
**Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:30am to 10:45am**  
**Oddfellows #206**

Professor: Matthew Ferrence  
Office: Oddfellows 218  
Office Hours: M 1:30-2:30; Tu 11-12; W 10-11, 1:30-3:30; Tr 3-4  
Office Phone: x4339  
email: mferrence@allegheny.edu

Required Texts

Williford and Martone. *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction*.

Lamott. *Bird by Bird*.

Houston. *Cowboys Are My Weakness*.

Philosophy

On one hand, we know what fiction is: made-up stories, sometimes that make a point, often including a plot. Certainly, we've read countless fictions by the time we reach college, and particularly by the time we enroll in courses like English 205. Yet, in practicing the crafting of fiction, we realize that we know much less than we thought, perhaps even know very little at all. This is true of all writers – seasoned professionals spend lifetimes learning, discovering, and shaping fiction. But as an operating principle of this course, we must accept that we enter into this course as apprentice writers ready to embrace a difficult truth: we know less about fiction than we think we do.

Partly, this limitation of knowledge is a function of prior reading and training. Our exposure is always limited, is typically more-so prior to college-level writing work. Many voices enter our writing, and often those voices are not yet our own. This course is designed to help you find your voice, and to develop a tool-box of technique that allows you to make fiction work.

It is this latter point, perhaps, that might seem the oddest or most frustrating aspect of the course. We will not seek to make our own fully unique fictions until near mid-term. Prior to that, we will practice our craft in controlled, limiting settings. I have structured the course this way to emphasize the necessity of development. Very much because we have so much prior exposure to fiction, we need to pause, examine, and hone before we seek to make our own. We must work as craftspeople on our technique, lest we inadvertently repeat the technical flaws of the fiction that dominates our reading past. It is easy to be overly-influenced by all manners of authorial voice, from Nicholas Sparks to Italo Calvino to Stephanie Myer to Annie Proulx. By honing our tools, we become better prepared to shape our own voices and, ultimately, write stories that are *ours*.

Assignments and Grading

Original Creative Writing — 50%

1. Two Exercise Stories, 3-5 pages (*Note: The characters and the situations for these exercise stories will be determined by a random selection from class-generated stock.*)
  - a. Point of View Variation: three characters describing the same thing
  - b. Characters in Situation: Two or more characters interacting in a specific situation
2. Two Open Stories, 7-10 pages (*stories of your complete invention*)
3. One revision of each Exercise Story.
4. Two revisions of each Open Story.
5. Various in-class and take-home writing exercises (*to be collected in your portfolio*).

This is a writing workshop, intended to offer you the opportunity to write and revise original work. You will be required, therefore, to revise each of the pieces you write this semester, making use of the comments you receive in class workshop discussion and privately from me. Your

intention, always, will be for improvement. For your two Open Stories, you should shoot for completion, polish, and potential publication. Your grade for this portion of the class will not be determined until the end of the semester, based on the contents of the portfolio you will hand in at the final exam.

#### Workshop and Participation — 25%

A significant and important portion of this class will be spent in peer workshop. Your response to your peers' papers will earn a quarter of your own course grade, reflecting the value I place on these sessions. Each of you will workshop twice over the course of the semester, once in each half of the term.

All work to be workshopped must be distributed on paper to the entire class one meeting before the workshop date. This is crucial, as we must all be afforded ample time to read and respond thoughtfully to your writing. Workshop respondents should come to class prepared to offer incisive and generous criticism for their peers. To prepare for response, each student should make margin comments directly on the distributed texts and must write a separate full-page analysis of the work. Two copies of this response will be brought to class: one will be submitted to me, the other to the author of the work under review.

As a part of your participation grade, you are also required to attend the Single Voice Reading events for this term. For the class meeting following each reading, you will bring a one page informal response to the reading. In that, address both the delivery and content of the reading – watch these writers to see how they *perform* their work in front of an audience.

#### Reading Responses and Critical Introduction — 15%

We will spend considerable time reading professional work this semester, part of our effort to develop nonfiction ears. Prior to the class discussion of each assigned reading, you must post an informal reading response to Sakai. These responses are intended to help you prepare for the class, to form and shape thoughts that will help deepen our conversation. As such, write these responses as a *writer* and not just a reader: focus on how the essay works, on what craft decisions lead to the successful execution of the piece. Preparing these individual responses will also prepare you for your final portfolio, which must include a five-page self-reflective introduction. Part of that introduction should include discussion of your nonfiction influences and how they helped encourage your individual aesthetic. Well-crafted reading responses over the course of the term will provide you with useful foundation material for the final portfolio.

#### Literary Journal Analysis and Presentation — 5%

None of us is likely to become fabulously wealthy as a result of our writing. But that's not to say that our work won't be read, or that the current state of literary America offers no venue for the sharing of serious creative writing. Quite the contrary, we have a splendid proliferation of literary journals in this country, offering literally hundreds of locales to (with a little luck!) share our work. Each of you will select a literary journal currently active, order a copy (which usually costs around \$5), and present to the class a thorough description: writer's guidelines, genres included, kinds of material between the covers, and a discussion of your favorite work within. The idea is to participate in the wider world of writers, to see what's being published and where, and also to begin to form our own catalogs of potential publication venues.

#### Author Analysis — 5%

Each of you will select a contemporary author of creative nonfiction and a book-length work written by that author; class sign-ups will prevent overlap and allow for a wide distribution of authors. In a carefully-constructed five page critical essay, you will provide an overview of the book, author, and craft. Your essay should be attentive to the choices made by the author in style, form, content. You should read and write from the point of view of craft mechanic, taking

apart the book to better understand how it was put together. You will turn in a hard copy of this essay **and** post a copy to Sakai, so that everyone in the course will have access to the aggregation of analyses.

### **Administrative Details**

*Attendance:* Ideally, you should be here. The nature of this class's design makes your presence important and valuable, and your absence will hinder your learning and the learning of your classmates. However, legitimate reasons for absences do arise, and in the case of sickness missing class may be necessary for your health and for the health of the rest of the class. You are the primary evaluator of your ability to attend class, and I trust you to keep your classmates' best interests in mind, both by missing class when ill and by not taking advantage of our compassion. Please email me as soon as you can if you think you will be absent, then visit me during office hours upon your return, so that we can make arrangements to have you make up the work you miss. You may miss two courses in the term without penalty to your grade (though, of course, the spirit of the missed day can never be recovered). Subsequent absences will result in the loss of 10% of your participation (i.e. each further absence reduces your *course* grade by one letter). Any student missing more than four classes will fail the course.

*Late Work:* We're creative, but we're not lazy. All work turned in after due dates have passed will be assessed a one letter-grade per day penalty. On-time work will be defined as turned in during class. Work turned in, for example, later in the day will be considered late.

*Class Conduct:* We will treat each other with respect in our written and verbal communication, regardless of ethnicity, gender, orientation, or religious belief. Even when offering critique of writing, we will be civil, gentle, courteous, and fair. Electronic devices will be neither turned on nor used while class is in session.

*Academic Honesty:* Plagiarism is a serious offense and will not be tolerated in this class. All work handed in should be your own, and any source materials should be properly cited. Plagiarized work may result in a zero score for the assignment with no chance of revision and, if serious, could result in immediate failure of the course. If you are unsure of what constitutes plagiarism, please refer to Allegheny College's Honor Code.

## Daily Schedule

- 1.19 Course Introduction; Discuss Philosophy of Fiction; Writing Exercise “The Brick”
- 1.24 “Sarah Cole...” (1); BBB 1-15; in-class Character Creation
- 1.26 “Brownies” (503); BBB 16-20; Point of View Discussion
- 1.31 **P.O.V. Variation Draft Due**; “The Fireman’s Wife” (33); BBB 21-27
- 2.2 “The Disappeared” (52); BBB 28-32; Workshops \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_
- 2.7 Ferrence at Clarion; Situation Creation
- 2.9 “Silver Water” (72); BBB 33-38; Workshops \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_
- 2.14 “The Cavemen in the Hedges” (533); BBB 39-43; Workshops \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_
- 2.16 “Jealous Husband...” (103); BBB 44-53; Workshops \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_
- 2.21 **Characters in Situation Draft Due**; “Relief” (120)
- 2.23 “After Rosa Parks” (129); BBB 54-63; Workshops \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_
- 2.28 “We Didn’t” (181); BBB 64-73; Language Exercise Part I
- 3.1 Ferrence at AWP; Language Exercise Part II
- 3.6 “Twilight of the Superheroes” (190); BBB 74-79; Workshop \_\_\_\_\_
- 3.8 “Communist” (214); BBB 80-84; Workshops \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_  
*Single Voice Reading 8pm: Nick Lantz and Andrew Mulvania*
- 3.13 “Tiny, Smiling Daddy” (228); BBB 85-92; Workshops \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_
- 3.15 **Open Story I Draft Due**; BBB 93-94; “Winners on the Pass Line” (239)
- SPRING BREAK
- 3.27 “A Real Doll” (266); BBB 95-102; **Literary Journal Analysis Due**
- 3.29 “The Half-Skinned Steer” (520); BBB 103-109; Workshops \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_
- 4.3 “Car Crash While Hitchhiking” (288); BBB 110-115; Workshops \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_
- 4.5 **Open Story II Draft Due**; “The Pugilist at Rest” (304); BBB 116-121
- 4.10 *Cowboys Are My Weakness*; Workshops \_\_\_\_\_
- 4.12 *Cowboys Are My Weakness*; Workshops \_\_\_\_\_  
*Single Voice Reading 8pm: Pam Houston*
- 4.17 “A Temporary Matter” (321); BBB 122-130; Workshops \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_
- 4.19 “Stone Animals” (351); BBB 131-144; Workshops \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_
- 4.24 “Lust” (405); BBB 145-150; Workshops \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_
- 4.26 “The Management of Grief” (417); BBB 195-201; Workshops \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_
- 5.1 “Female Trouble” (431); Workshop \_\_\_\_\_ ; **Author Analysis Due**

FINAL EXAM: Friday May 4<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 p.m.