CRW 3150b: INTRODUCTION TO WRITING FICTION
M 4:30-7

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About this Course:
In this introductory fiction workshop, we'll be sharing new fiction work, offering productive feedback on each other's stories, and delving into the fundamentals of what sets storytelling apart from other kinds of writing. We'll also be reading and reflecting on published examples to help us to determine what elements are necessary for writing an engaging story.

Creative Exercises:
For the first part of the semester, you will complete six creative exercises that will allow you to put into practice the concepts and formal elements of narrative design that you will learn from our discussions and from your readings. Your grades for these assignments will be based on your attention to each exercise's instructions, and on the creative ways you answer each exercise's challenge. Exercises are due at the start of the class period.

Some Rules Regarding What You Can and Cannot Do in Creative Exercises and Stories

- No pornography—sexual, violent, etc. This doesn't mean you cannot include in your fiction sex and/or violence. What it does mean is that you should avoid gratuitous sex and/or violence.
- No literature written for children, though stories ABOUT children are more than welcome (we'll be reading a few).
- Genre stories must display evidence of literary technique beyond the basic constraints of a given genre. For instance, you can write a mystery or a fantasy story, as long as it has strong characterization, description, a compelling voice, etc.
- No fan fiction. Make up your own characters and plots (unless you are fictionalizing the life of a historical figure. If so, do something unpredictable with them).
- No stories with protagonists who are not humans.
- No characters with the names of students in the workshop or the workshop's leader.
- No stories about having to write stories for a class.
- No stories with narrators who are cognitively compromised.
- No stories with excessive amounts of gratuitous profanity.
- No stories with a lot of dialect or patois in the narrative or dialogue.
- No stories about or narrated by central characters on death row or in an execution chamber.
- No stories with alarm clocks at any point of the narrative that wake up the central character.
- No workplace revenge stories.
- No stories about trips to heaven or hell or narrated by characters in heaven or hell.
- No stories with central characters who die during the course of the narrative.
- No stories ending in a character's being sent to a psychiatric institute, or where it is revealed that the story has been told from a psychiatric institute all along.

- No stories ending in suicide, homicide, mass murder, apocalypse, or natural disaster (that is called a deus ex machina, and the Greeks wore them all out for us).
- No stories ending with the disclosure that the story was all a dream.
- No stories ending in any type of negating "Big Reveal," e.g., "It turns out . . . she was a man!" or, "Alas, I am but a dachshund" or, "It turns out Ed Norton and Brad Pitt are one dude in *Fight Club*!"

From Josh Russell:
These rules are intended to help you focus on the most important element of narrative fiction: the complex, unique inner lives of human beings. The rule to which students most often object is the prohibition of writing based on the rules of generic genre. Note that I am not prohibiting genre. What I am prohibiting is fiction that relies on the generic clichés and agreed-upon rules that constrain bad genre writing. The challenge of art is to make new that which has become shopworn and dull. The problem with writing fiction about zombies or vampires or the melodramatic death of a child is that it's hard to make new something with a set of rules everyone feels they must follow: zombies are mindless and violent, vampires cannot go out in the sun, the death of a child is always heartbreaking.

What fiction allows us to do is enter into the mind of another human—that's what makes it different from film and other visual arts. The most interesting fiction allows us to see the world anew because we get into another human's mind: there must be someone sane who, for reasons we could learn if we were allowed access to her thoughts, is relieved by the death of a child. Avoid at all costs repeating the old stuff. Make it new.

Reading Responses/Prompts:
For each published story you read for class, write a response that includes the following:

1) 1-3 sentence summary of what the story is about, naming the protagonist and the central conflict, and proving that you've read all the way to the ending.
2) A prompt that you made from reading the story like a writer.

Here's an example:
Summary:
"Good Country People" by Flannery O'Connor is a story about an atheist woman named Hulga who has a wooden leg and lives with her mother. She's pretty unhappy with her life and judgy about other people until a Bible salesman comes along, kisses, her, and steals her leg.

Prompt:
Write a story where the protagonist has a kind of impairment—a missing limb, blindness, deafness—but it is not part of the central conflict.

Note: Each reading response assignment will include two of these, one for each story we'll be discussing on that day.

You'll submit all seven reading responses to the iCollege dropbox by 2pm on the day they are due, but make sure you're able to discuss the story with the rest of the class during class time.

Workshop:

The short stories you'll write for workshop:
This semester, you will write two stories to be shared with your classmates:

1) A first person story between 1000 and 7000 words.
2) A third-person story between 1000 and 7000 words.

(At least one of your stories must have a minimum of 3000 words.)

PLEASE NOTE: These must be complete stories, with endings. No first chapters of novels.

Giving Feedback:
A primary function of the workshop is a chance for us to make life-long friends and readers of our work. Try to be honest but not petty, kind but not hollow or flattering, and overall, helpful with critiques. These are not the place to show off or draw attention to yourself, but to learn from each other. Try to treat workshop members as teammates instead of rivals.

Turning in Your Stories:
Email your stories through iCollege no later than five days prior to your workshop (so, on the Wednesday before).

Both stories must be proofread and tightened to the best of your ability before you submit them. After you've received feedback, you will revise one of these stories and include it in a hardcopy portfolio due the Monday, December 11th by 5pm. Revised drafts must demonstrate evidence of revision.

Workshop Responses:
Read each story twice. Keep a pen out of your hand the first time. During the second read, mark:

- Sentences you had to read twice because you couldn't understand them.
- Sentences that made you pause and appreciate them.
- Questions you have about what's going on.
- Any other reactions that it might be helpful for your classmate to read.

When you're finished, write a brief note to <u>each</u> student author (roughly 150 words) that should include:

a. a short summary of the piece (2-3 sentences);
b. praise (2-3 sentences);
c. and critique (2-3 sentences) If you felt the urge to stop reading at any point, let the writer know where and why.

Submit these notes to the iCollege dropbox by 2pm on the day of the workshop, and bring a hardcopy for your classmate, along with a manuscript that you've marked up.

<u>Revision Plan/Conferences (150-300 words)</u>
Once you know which story you want to revise for the portfolio, schedule a conference with me. Bring your revision plan to the conference.

The plan should be a reflection on your workshop, what was helpful, what wasn't, and how you want to move forward. Remember that a revision only needs to tackle one problem at a time, maybe two, but certainly not all at once. For instance, if someone pointed out that you need more scenes with the mother in your story, focus on writing those. If you need to be more descriptive, look for places where you can extend and elaborate on the details.

Revision:
A revision requires re-writing, so tweaking/fixing grammar isn't enough. For that reason, if one of your stories feels like it needs more work, you might be better off choosing that one for your revision.

Revision Reflection Essay (300-500 words):
After you revise your story, write a reflection that states what you actually were able to accomplish in your revision. Also, take a moment to reflect on the class as a whole. What did you hope to accomplish with story writing? Did you meet your goals? What areas of your writing do you want to work on next? What were some important things you picked up from this class about fiction writing, or writing in general?

Five Elements Assignment
Twice during the semester—at the first meeting and after we have finished the workshops—you will make a list of the five elements you feel make a short story successful and then offer a brief explanation of why each element is important.

Chances are that your list will evolve, and so part of your final explanations will be why you have added new elements and removed others, and/or what has convinced you to stick with your some (or all) of your original five, and/or how your feelings have changed even if some or all of your elements have remained the same.

The first, in-class version of this assignment will be little more than a list, but your portfolio version should be at least 500-words (two typed pages). Each element should have its own brief paragraph in which you note at least one example from the published stories you feel proves your claims.

You are welcome to discuss both stories with me during my office hours, but one should is all I require.

Portfolio:
This will include a hard copy of both first drafts that you workshopped in class, the revision reflection essay, a revision of one of your stories, and the five elements essay.

Bring this to class on the last day, April 23rd.

Class Policies

You must be at workshop to receive an A.
Since this class is mostly based on our ability to give each other collective feedback, students cannot miss more than **one** class period before their grade starts to drop (50 points, or half a letter grade for each additional absence).

If you come in late, don't interrupt. Same if you leave early. Three "lates" or "early departures" make an absence.

Turn Your Work in On Time
Late work inconveniences everybody. Late assignments, whether they are stories you're submitting for workshop, reading responses, exercises, whatever will lose half their points. (For instance, if you turn in your draft workshop after the deadline, you'll get 75 points for it, not 150).

Do not respond to comments while your story is being workshopped.
We'll invite you to ask questions at the end, and we might ask you questions for clarification, but try to focus on taking notes.

Do not defend your story while you're asking the workshop questions.
Give yourself time to process your critiques—it often takes a week (or more) to figure out what is helpful and what is not. Sometimes it takes trial and error in re-writing to figure that out. Learn to toss out the bad and keep the good so you can move forward. Make an appointment with the instructor if you want to address any gray areas or confusion about something someone has said about your story.

Be Civil
Jabs at the writer and discriminatory language will not be tolerated.

Pay attention during another person's workshop.
Turn off your cell phones and put them away. Do not use your laptop for anything but to look at a digital copy of another person's story.

Students may be asked to leave if they are repeatedly disruptive during another person's feedback time. Do not carry on private conversations. Save them for another time.

Stay on point.
If someone brings up a movie/book/television reference during a workshop, do not continue the conversation to be about the reference rather than the story. Also, don't spend too much time on a "quick fix" problem with the story. Example: If the writer used the wrong word/name in a sentence and caused confusion, name the error and move on (or just mark it on the manuscript). Don't spend too much time justifying your interpretation. Just give the writer enough make a note and think about it.

Assume the class will interpret everything you write is autobiography.
This is how the real world of readers works.

Don't assume everything your classmates write is autobiography.
That is just generous reading. Pay attention to the story's construction. Stay helpful.