

ENG 333: Advanced Fiction Writing

Spring 2009

Section 70, T 7-9:30PM

BHA/Administration Building Room 8

Master of Ceremonies: Henry Marchand

Office: 110 Hartzel Hall

Office Hours: MWTh 10-11AM & by appointment

Office Phone: 3325; off campus, dial 610/606-4666, ext. 3325

E-mail: hmarchan@cedarcrest.edu

(All e-mail correspondence must utilize Cedar Crest College e-mail accounts.)

Books:

Best American Short Stories 2008

Other Texts:

Your own writing and that of your classmates

Course Website

Narrative magazine "Story of the Week" (online)

Other materials as assigned

Course Description: Writing fiction can be many things: a passion, a joy, a chore, a torment, a shout, a whisper, a cry, a laugh, a revelation – sometimes in rapid and repeating succession. But everyone who takes it seriously knows one thing for certain: it's *work*. That work is what this course is about, and before we get up and running I need you to accept and embrace it; realize that it's one thing to put words on paper and quite another to write. If you're *writing*, the job isn't done until you can look in the mirror and tell the face there that it has been given the attention and respect it's due, and the result is something that other people should invest time in reading. This is not a class, in short, for last-minute writers, or sloppy writers, or writers who don't *read*.

Which is to say that it's exactly the class you should be taking.

Having made it to this point in your college education, and being the kind of person who signs on for a class in fiction writing, you have almost certainly already read more than most human beings who have ever lived. (This is no great distinction, actually, but it's a good place to start.) Your experience in reading is a great asset, because writers read everything: novels, short stories, nonfiction, poetry -- words are a writer's nourishment, feeding soul and mind and leading to more words, the words you choose and combine and arrange and fuss over again and again, in the absorbing and rewarding effort to create something *good*.

When you're a writer, you see, you want to write great things; you want to broaden and deepen and change the world for those who read what you write, through a process of exploration and discovery that always and forever changes you, first of all, in ways subtle or grand.

Accept this as the challenge of our semester together. You may come to this class knowing that you're already a good writer, maybe very good. You may be, if you admit it to yourself, a bit arrogant about this. Or you may harbor some doubt. Either can be a strength. But accept that you *are* a writer, and accept the work and dedication this requires, and you'll have the opportunity to create fictions that surprise and please you, stories that need to be read.

Please know this from the start: I *expect* you to write well, that's the minimum requirement. What you contribute for workshop discussion will be vividly imagined, technically sound, well-written works of fiction. The focus of our class meetings will be on critical assessment of this already-polished work, on making good writing better. And in the process, everyone in the class is going to become a better, more deliberate writer.

So this is no place for first drafts, obviously. It would be a waste of your own time and of your classmates' time if you were to submit for discussion a story written an hour or a day or two days before it's due. At this level, we must all take the work more seriously than that, and we respect the work that the class stands ready to do. The work you bring to the workshop must be, as stated above, polished: that means you've worked hard at writing it *and* at revising it before offering it for discussion. First drafts are not writing.

My role in all this is pretty straightforward. I've got some ideas about what being a fiction writer means and some experience of being one. I'm a very good writer, at my best (still aspiring to greatness), but no one is always the writer he or she should be; I know, as a consequence, the signs of rushed work and faltering commitment. I have been writing fiction for a long time; I've had the satisfaction of seeing my work published, and I have also participated as student and teacher in more hundreds of writing workshops. You can and should, therefore, expect me to keep each writer in class (yourself included) committed to producing her best work, and to freely share my own knowledge, experience, and constructive criticism. I'll do some lecturing when it seems likely to be helpful; I'll require you to read stories in the Best American Short Stories anthology and elsewhere for analysis and discussion; I'll read your writing attentively and respond thoughtfully in class discussion and in my written comments; and I'll hold you to a high standard in reading and responding to the work of your classmates, because you can't become a better writer without constantly honing your reading skills -- and because they're working to help you and you owe them the same.

Policies & Procedures

Grading: Individual written works will be letter graded according to the scale below:

A: Strikingly original creative work, distinguished by both its compelling story and its stylistic power. Sensory detail, sonic effects, figurative language, allusion, etc. can be seen to work together toward achieving the writing's intention. The reader is impressed by originality in imagery, analogy, phrasing, etc. The work conveys a freshness of perception and insight. There

are no clichés. Errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation and other basic elements are absent or very nearly so.

B: There is clear evidence that the writer set out to write a compelling story and has attended to elements of style. Errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation and other basic elements are absent or very nearly so. The writing is free of cliché and demonstrates the writer's interest in pursuing fresh insights and perceptions.

C: Average work; the reader is not significantly distracted by errors in grammar, etc. Some evidence that the writer has attended to elements of style is present. A clichéd image, phrase, analogy, etc. may appear. The story itself engages the reader, but more needs to be done with the language and perhaps with some narrative elements. The writer should, perhaps, look deeper into the material and seek fresh insights and perceptions.

D: The work demonstrates inadequate attention to the requirements of English grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. It is not clear that the writer has attended to elements of style (sentence variety, figurative language, allusion, alliteration, assonance, etc.). The work may contain multiple clichés in imagery, analogy, phrasing, etc. The story is overly familiar, and/or lacking in insight and perception. A "first draft" aura looms.

Workshop Requirements:

You are required to submit **at least two original works and at least three works overall** for workshop discussion. Self-contained segments of a book-length work in progress are acceptable, as are (of course) complete short stories. **Work submitted must not include anything written for a previous class at Cedar Crest College or elsewhere. After two original works have been submitted and discussed, additional original works or revisions of work previously discussed by the class may be submitted. Every workshop member must have submitted at least one original work before mid-term.**

Stories submitted for reading and discussion must be between six and twenty pages in length (the range is ever-so-slightly flexible; talk to me about any expected over or under); **the cumulative total of all work submitted to the workshop must be at least twenty-five pages.** The final course grade will be reduced by one letter grade if the page count is light. (The final course grade will be "F" if three works are not submitted to the workshop.)

Your **contribution to workshop discussion** will be noted and used in determining your course grade, as below. Your workshop contribution also includes the **written notes and suggestions** you make on your classmates' work; you are required to regularly provide detailed and constructive notes, including a summary end note. Failure to do so will affect your final grade.

Final course grades will be calculated according to the following weights:

Original written work: 75%

Workshop contribution: 25%

Attendance: One absence from the class is permitted without penalty. Each subsequent absence lowers the final course grade by one increment (A to A-, for example). **If you know in advance that you will miss a class, you are still responsible for reading and commenting upon the work that will be discussed that day. Your comments must be emailed to the writers of the week's work, and cc'd to me.** You are also responsible for completing any reading or other work assigned on the day that you miss.

Workshop Manuscript Format: All written work is to be submitted in standard manuscript format as a **Word '97-'03 Compatible** (.doc) document to the appropriate "Document Sharing" category on the course website ("1st Story," "2nd Story," etc.). Please do not post your stories as Word 2007 (.docx) files; some of your classmates will be unable to open them, I'll have to convert them to the required file type, and I will become unhappy. You are a caring person; you don't want me to be unhappy.

Workshop Procedure: Each class member will open the work to be read for the next class meeting in the appropriate Document Sharing category on the course web site (we will know in advance in which category to find a given writer's work) and make the written comments/edits/suggestions throughout the work that she feels are appropriate. Each class member must print a copy of the work as she has altered it, typing or writing her own name on it at the end, following summary comments, and bring that copy to class. These printed copies will help to guide our discussion of each work in class, and will be given to the writer of the work at the close of this discussion. Please notify me privately if you do not receive written comments from any member of the workshop; it's vital to the course that everyone does her part in this regard, and also important to each individual's grade for the course. Letting me know of the problem will enable me to notify a class member that her participation grade is in peril.

Honor Philosophy: The Honor Philosophy of Cedar Crest College obliges all students to uphold community standards for academic and social behavior to preserve a learning environment dedicated to personal and academic excellence.

In terms of the workshop environment, this philosophy requires honest, constructive comments about each other's work, with due attention paid to the tone and language used. Writers and readers alike must remember that the subject under discussion is the written work, and that our goal as a community is to assist each member in refining and polishing that work. Writers must guard against taking critical comments personally (whether positive or negative), and readers must be respectful in their written and spoken comments.

Academic Honesty: Original work and respect for the work of other writers is the essence of this class. Any material that appears within your work but originates elsewhere must be appropriately attributed to its source. My response to plagiarism is to assign a failing grade for the course.

Classroom Environment: Enthusiastic, attentive, respectful, and supportive: that's the atmosphere that will enable us to do our best work. To help maintain our energy and focus and avoid unnecessary distractions, please turn off your cell phone's ringer or any other potentially disruptive devices before class; also, please don't bring food. Drinking in class (that is, drinking

coffee, tea, soda, milk, or juice) is fine. Don't arrive late, or leave early. Don't bring guests. And *always* have things to say about the work we'll be discussing.

E-mail Policy: All e-mail correspondence between students and the instructor must utilize Cedar Crest College e-mail accounts. I will not reply to messages that do not come from your cedarcrest.edu address.

Special Accommodations: Students with documented disabilities who may need academic accommodations should discuss these needs with their professors during the first two weeks of class. Students with disabilities who wish to request accommodations should contact the Advising Center.

Course Outcomes, Objectives, and Assessment:

English 333, Advanced Fiction Writing is designed to facilitate the following educational outcomes:

- Students will demonstrate strong fiction writing ability
- Students will demonstrate attentive reading and analytical/critical thinking skills
- Students will demonstrate the ability to revise and edit written work
- Students will demonstrate knowledge of basic writing and literary terms

To attain these outcomes, English 333 pursues the following course objectives:

- At the completion of this course, students will be able to write complete works of short fiction
- Students will be able to analyze, critically evaluate and edit completed works of fiction writing and to clearly articulate suggestions for improving them
- Students will be able to revise their own original works of fiction

Forms of assessment:

- Students will demonstrate their fiction writing abilities through the writing of complete short stories
- Students will demonstrate attentive reading and analytical/critical thinking skills through written and oral assessment of works written by established writers and by their workshop peers
- Students will demonstrate the ability to revise/edit written work through written and oral assessment of works written by established writers and by their workshop peers, and through revision of their own written work
- Students will demonstrate knowledge of basic writing and literary terms through written and oral assessment of works written by established writers and by their workshop peers

Workshop Participation Grading

Grade

Criteria

- A** Regularly demonstrates excellent preparation: has clearly read assigned material and has thoughtfully responded. Brings original thought and perspective to discussion, making contributions that expand / extend our collective understanding and appreciation of the written work. Listens attentively to class members and instructor and responds constructively. Written notes on class members' work are plentiful, specific, and constructive. Maintains active involvement throughout the term.
- B** Regularly contributes to class discussion and has clearly read assigned material. Brings original thought and perspective to discussion. Listens attentively to class members and instructor. Written notes on class members' work are specific and constructive. Maintains consistent involvement throughout the term.
- C** Contributions to discussion show that assigned materials have been read. Listens attentively to class members and instructor. Written comments on class members' work are most often specific and constructive. Level of involvement varies, but contributes when called upon.
- D** Doesn't often contribute without being called upon. Completion of assigned reading sometimes in doubt. Written comments are, overall, inadequate in number and/or content. Level of involvement consistently unsatisfactory.
- F** Does not contribute to discussion unless called upon. Contributions when called upon indicate that assigned materials have not been read. Written comments are most often minimal and/or not constructive. Level of involvement consistently unsatisfactory.

Schedule:

The instructor will assign readings from the required texts and other sources when they have value in demonstrating concepts or techniques appropriate to this advanced level writing workshop. Such readings will certainly figure in the early weeks of the semester, but the texts will remain a resource throughout; the precise days on which readings will be assigned or discussed will be determined as the semester progresses. The majority of class time will be devoted to discussion of writings produced by the workshop's members. The frequency and pace of each member's submitting work for workshop consideration will be individually determined (see "Policies and Procedures," above, for details regarding the minimum writing requirements). The required revision of one work previously discussed in class must be turned in to the instructor no later than the day scheduled for the Final Exam (there is no such exam for this class).

Answers to anticipated questions:

Always feel free to ask any questions you've got, but read these first to make sure you're not being redundant:

Q: Can I submit more than three works for the class to read and discuss?

A: Yes; as long as at least two are original, complete stories. The rest can be originals or revisions, as long as they're revisions of stories written for this class.

Q: Can I submit "Short Short Stories" or "Flash Fictions" that are a paragraph or a page or two pages long?

A: No. Works submitted to the workshop must be in the six to twenty page range, give or take a partial page.

Q: Is there a particular kind or genre of fiction that I must write for this class?

A: Realistic, character-based fiction is preferred. Genre stories (horror, science fiction, fantasy) lend themselves very easily to cliché and too-familiar characterizations, plots, etc. If you feel that you have done something fresh and satisfying within a genre, avoiding cliché and staleness, by all means submit it for reading and discussion.

Q: Can I submit chapters from a novel that I'm writing?

A: Yes, as long as the chapter or chapters can be read as a self-contained narrative.

Q: What's your stance on talking animals?

A: I hope you mean talking animals in fiction. I'm not licensed to discuss the other kind with you. As far as talking animals in fiction go, they obviously have no place in realistic fiction unless they're hallucinations, the imaginary friends of fictional children, or characters that your characters encounter on TV, in movies, or in books. They do appear in some genres, but even in these cases you should always ask yourself if a human character might serve the story just as well.

Q: Can I write a story based on something that really happened?

A: Yes, *but*: this is a **fiction** workshop. "Based on" must mean "I spun an entirely fictional story out of an experience or some part of an experience that I had, or that someone else had." It cannot mean that you write memoir; that's a different kind of writing and a different class.

Q: What's life all about, anyway?

A: You tell me. Write a story.