Writers in New York: Fiction (Craft Seminar)

Elissa Schappell

Class Day/Time: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 2:30-5:00pm
Class Location: Writers House, Front Parlor
Office Hours: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 1:00-2:15pm or by appointment
Office Location: Room 003

This class is designed to teach you how to read as a writer. You cannot become a top-notch fiction writer if you don’t first become a top-notch reader. So, with an eye to helping you master the craft of writing fiction, we will be breaking down stories in order to examine the individual elements that must come together to create artful fiction. For example: How to Create Characters that Live and Breathe, Beginnings and Endings, Setting: Where the Magic Happens, Points of View, the Fantastic, Dialogue that Speaks to the Reader and more…

The best way to learn is to study and then copy. If you wanted to learn how to paint the play of sun on a young girl’s cheek, you would sit in front of a Vermeer and copy the way he uses light and shadow. If you wanted to be a DJ and make EDM you’d break down how Skrillex builds a set. If you wanted to learn how to make a soufflé you’d study Ina Garten’s whisking technique. Because you cannot learn a craft if you do not practice it, you will be writing in and outside of class.

We will also be “critiquing” published fiction, approaching stories the way we would if we would were we workshopping the piece in class. Some of the questions we will ask are: How does the author establish their narrative authority? What work is the dialogue doing to create tension, character, and forward momentum? What is the subtext? By studying the strategies, strengths, and weaknesses of each text, you will gain deeper insight into how to write your own fiction.

We will also discuss the inner workings of the literary world, including a special project on literary journals.

Assignments:
In addition to your in class assignments, you will be expected to bring in a two paragraph (200 words) response to each story. The first paragraph is to be a general critique, the second paragraph focusing on a specific craft element.
READING SCHEDULE

Class 1.) IN CLASS:
Introductions. Go over syllabus, writing prompt: One truth/Two lie about yourself—have each student read aloud and the class discusses which is which, and why one was more believable, etc.

Write About What You Know:
Joe Brainard’s “I Remember Exercise”

DISCUSS THE VOICE

ASSIGNMENT: Read, “Why I Write”
Write 500-1,000 words on why you write.

Class 2.) VOICE

How is the voice of each of these characters affected by the emotional situation they find themselves in?

Class 3.) POINT OF VIEW
First person read:
Second person read: How to Be the Other Woman
Third Person Close:
Third Person Distant:

IN CLASS: Write a story from your point of view, something that happened.
Now write it from the other person’s pov.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT:
Now write it from the 3rd person point of view.
Now write it from the 2nd person point of view
Now write it from the 3rd distant

Class 3.) CHARACTER/ SECONDARY CHARACTERS
“What It Was Like, Seeing Chris” by Deborah Eisenberg, “The Water-Faucet Vision” by Gish Jen,
“Harvest” by Danielle Evans

ASSIGNMENT:
Write a character sketch of the protagonist of one of these three stories AND a character sketch of an original character.

IN CLASS: Write a scene in which the character from the story interacts with your original character

Class 4) DIALOGUE
Direct, Indirect, Interior, Spoken and Non-Verbal dialogue

Dorothy Parker, “You Were Perfectly Fine”, Ernest Hemingway, “Hills Like White Elephants”,

Class 5) CHARACTER/SECONDARY CHARACTERS
“What It Was Like, Seeing Chris” by Deborah Eisenberg, “The Water-Faucet Vision” by Gish Jen, “Harvest” by Danielle Evans

ASSIGNMENT:
Write a character sketch of the protagonist of one of these three stories AND a character sketch of an original character.

IN CLASS: Write a scene in which the character from the story interacts with your original character

Class 6) “The Semplica Girl Diaries” by George Saunders, “Americca” by Aimee Bender, “Miracle Polish” by Steven Millhauser

ASSIGNMENT:
Read the three stories and:

1) Write a one-paragraph response to each story that discusses the qualities that make the story fit into the magical realism genre.

2) Be prepared to discuss the stories in class.

3) Write the beginning of an original story (at least 500 words) which uses magical realism.

Class 4) “Reverting to a Wild State” by Justin Torres, “Lechery” by Jayne Anne Phillips, “Coitus” by David Means

ASSIGNMENT:
Read the three stories and:

1. For two of the stories, write a 200-word response that specifically critiques the author’s use of language in the story.
2. For the third story, write a 400-word response, which mimics the voice/tone/language of the story. This piece should be a general critique of the story.

3. It’s up to you which stories you chose for #1 and #2.

Class 6) “Executors of Important Energies” by Wells Tower (2 versions); Literary journal project

ASSIGNMENT: Write a response comparing the two versions of the Tower story.

Find a literary journal that interests you and come prepared to do a 2-minute presentation for the class, discussing the journal in general and one of the stories you read.

“Executors of Important Energies” by Wells Tower (2 versions); Literary journal project

Class 7)

Class 8)

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS:

1) For the works that aren’t read in class, each student will be required to submit a one-page response: Specific guidelines for each response will be given; this will be announced in class.

2) Students will be designated “discussion leaders” for the fiction on the reading schedule.

3) A final paper, examining—on a craft level—two or more of the works discussed in class. This will differ from a standard lit class final paper in that you will address a nuts-and-bolts storytelling technique (“How Tobias Wolff and Mary Gaitskill differ in their approach to building character,” for example.) If you have an original idea for another approach to your paper, please discuss it with me.

OTHER INFORMATION

Attendance:
Grades are in large part based on class participation and attendance. College policy is that students are expected to attend all class sessions for courses in which they are enrolled. Since this course meets twice a week for only 4 weeks, more than one absence will threaten your grade. After your first absence, each additional one may lower your grade by a half point. Absences in excess of two weeks require withdrawal from the course. Late students will be warned once; thereafter, each late appearance will be counted as an absence.

Integrity of Scholarship (from the College catalog):
“Honesty in all academic work is expected of every student. This means giving one’s own response to the readings without help from outside sources. Written material is to be the student’s original composition. Appropriate credit must be given for outside sources from which ideas, language, or quotations are derived.”
Due date policy:
All written responses must be completed before class discussion. Final papers are due at the final session. Late work will be penalized at the discretion of the instructor.

Grading (Standard Scale):
A=93+, A-=90-92, B+=87-89, B=84-86, B-=80-83, C+=77-79, C=74-76, C-=70-73; Letter grades are converted to the average of the range, i.e. A- =91. Your final grade for this course will be incorporated into your workshop grade. Workshop instructors will be responsible for assigning final grades with input from craft instructors.

Changes in Syllabus:
The syllabus may be modified as deemed appropriate. Any changes will be announced in class.