

San José State University

Department of English and Comparative Literature

ENGLISH 241: MFA Fiction Workshop, Fall 2018

Establishing Voice, Building Characters and Structuring the Story

"True artists, whatever smiling faces they may show you, are obsessive, driven people... No critical study, however brilliant, is the fierce psychological battle a novel is." - John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*

Classroom: FO 104

Days: Tuesdays

Time: 1900-2145

Instructor: Prof. Keenan Norris

Office: FO 128

E-mail: keenan.norris@sjsu.edu

Office hours: Tuesdays 12:45 - 2:45PM and by appointment

Course Description: This is the most advanced fiction workshop offered at SJSU. It is designed for students pursuing writing as a vocation. Students enrolled in the MFA Program in Creative Writing have registration priority. If there is extra space, graduate students in other disciplines and Open University students may enroll with instructor permission. The majority of our class time will be spent discussing student work. We will also read from *The Immigrant's Refrigerator* by Elena Georgiou, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* by Le Thi Diem Thuy, *teaching my mother how to give birth* by Warsan Shire and either *Hunger* by Knut Hamsun or Reed Magazine's 151st issue.

The class is divided into four loosely thematized parts, based around the concepts of voice, character-building, story structure and reflection/revision. We will take a tour of different styles of creative writing, learning what's been invented, and we'll do a lot of our own new writing as well. Additionally, we will discuss aspects of the

writing profession. Topics include finding time to write, managing time, revision, genre, using material, finding an agent or publisher, and networking.

Workshop Ethos: Students will workshop their own work on at least three instances during the term (2,000-5,000 words) and will also be required to provide written feedback to their classmates when their classmates are the focus of the workshop. We'll also read the work of acclaimed writers every week and we will examine what we've read through in-class discussion and group book reports (each group will be responsible for one report to the class) to "open up" the work from an artist's vantage point.

The objectives of this course are to study and work toward establishing our voice(s) as writers, to learn in nuanced fashion the deep lives of our characters, and to competently structure our stories.

Workshop Procedure: At the first class meeting, I will pass around a sign-up sheet for workshops. Each of you will choose at least two dates when you want to hand in original work. On those dates, you will pass out photocopies of your piece to everyone in the class. Your piece must be double-spaced and it must include page numbers. Your classmates will read your work, make comments in the margins, and type a commentary of at least three-quarters of a page in length. At the next class meeting, we will discuss your story. We will discuss up to four stories per class. At the end of the discussion, everyone will hand the author their marked-up manuscripts and commentaries.

Your typed commentary on each student story will address (a) your interpretation of the story (what the story is about, what the author is trying to accomplish) and (b) suggestions for improvement. Please print two copies of your commentary - one for the author and one for me, the instructor. A portion of your final grade will be determined by the quality of your peer commentaries.

Group book report and student-led discussions: One of the most useful skills you can learn in graduate school is how to lead a discussion. Students will get their feet wet with this by participating in a group

book report (4 students per group) on one of the required texts. The group book report should be roughly 15 minutes in length and will focus on aspects of craft within the text under discussion. In the final weeks of the term, each student will individually lead a 10 minute class discussion on a published story of their choice. Students will need to bring a photocopy of the story they intend to discuss the week before they are to present.

Classroom Decorum: In a workshop, writers must feel safe sharing their work with the group. Please keep your critiques confined to the work, not the author. Hostile, threatening, or ad hominem criticism will not be tolerated. If you feel threatened by a classmate, please bring the issue to my attention so I can address it promptly.

Course Learning Outcomes (CLO):

This course addresses the following Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) approved for the MFA in Creative Writing:

- SLO 3: Students will demonstrate an appropriate level of knowledge of literary history, literary theory, and craft and theory of creative writing.
- SLO 4: Students will demonstrate critical and analytical skills in the evaluation and interpretation of literary texts.
- SLO 5: Students will demonstrate a command of written academic English, including the abilities to: a) organize and present material in a cogent fashion; b) formulate and defend original arguments; c) employ effectively the language of their discipline; d) write under time constraints.

Required Texts:

The Immigrant's Refrigerator by Elena Georgiou

The Gangster We Are All Looking For by Le Thi Diem Thuy

teaching my mother how to give birth by Warsan Shire

Hunger by Knut Hamsun or *Reed* #151

Class Schedule:

August 21: Introductions

Reading: "In Praise of Doubt and Uselessness"

Exercise: "Call me Ishmael"/All Complaints Must Be Made in Writing

Take-home Exercise: Triptych (due Week 2)

August 28: The Voice

Exercise: "Call me Ishmael"/All Complaints Must Be Made in Writing

Reading: *teaching my mother how to give birth*

Workshop: new work, 2,000-5,000 words, 3-4 student pieces per session

Exercise: Triptych discussion

September 4: The Voice, Episode II

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words)

Exercise: Discussion- How does poetry inform prose?

September 11: The Apprenticeship

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words)

Group book report: *teaching my mother how to give birth*

September 18: The Autobiography of My Other

Exercise: The Cheerleader, the Police Officer and the kid who never comes to class

Reading: *The Immigrant's Refrigerator*

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words) _____

September 25: The Autobiography of My Other, conti.

Exercise: The Autobiography of My Other

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words) _____

October 2: H.C.E.

Exercise: 3-page epic

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words) _____

October 9: The Apprenticeship, II

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words)

Group book report: *Immigrant's Refrigerator* _____

October 16: "Art is nothing without form"

Exercise: Discussion on story outlining

Reading: *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words) _____

October 23: "Art is nothing without form", conti.

Exercise: Cause-&-Effect outlines

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words) _____

October 30: Subject, Object, Objective; Context, sub-text, text

Exercise: Object, Sub-text Scene

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words)

November 6: The Apprenticeship, III

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words)

Group book report: *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*

November 13: Publishing Industry

Exercise: Discussion on agents, presses, publishing, etc.

Student-led discussions: On craft (any author, any text; 10 minutes)

Reading: *Hunger* or *Reed 151*

November 20: Seeing again

Exercise: Workshop on revision and editing

Reading: "The Angel in the Marble: Modern Life Lessons from History's Greatest Sculptor"

Student-led discussions: Meaning, context, sub-text (any author, any text; 10 minutes)

November 27: Reflections on...

Workshop: Revisions

Exercise: Reflection writing, progressing toward literary goals

December 4: Hunger

Workshop: Revisions

Potluck

Group book report (open text)

Revision piece due

Attendance at Literary Readings:

You are required to attend two readings by poets or prose writers presented on the SJSU campus or elsewhere. The Bay Area is one of the world's great literary regions, where seven days a week one can attend a reading by a renowned writer at a bookstore, college, community center, or library. Readings are listed in the Sunday editions of the *San Jose Mercury News*, *San Francisco Chronicle* and [LitSeen](#). After attending each reading, you will write a brief response paper (2 or more pages). The writing may be free form as long as you respond in some detail to any aspect of the reading, for example the speaker, the venue, the material performed, or the Q&A with the audience. Here are a few literary events to be aware of:

Sept. 7: Left Margin Lit reading, 7PM 1543 Shattuck Ave in Berkeley

Sept. 21: Reed 151 Launch Party featuring T.C. Boyle, 7PM at the Hammer

Sept. 22: Nomadic Press chapbook launch, 7PM at 2301 Telegraph Ave in Oakland

Oct. 9: Former Steinbeck Fellows Dallas Woodburn (*Woman, Running Late, In A Dress*) and Peter Nathaniel Malae (*Son of Amity*) will read from new works of fiction. Reception to follow. 7PM, Steinbeck Center (MLK Library 590)

Oct. 17: Gary Kamiya reading & conversation with Michael Johns; 7PM, Hammer

Nov. 7: Mighty Mike McGee reading & conversation with Tshaka Campbell; 7PM, Café Stritch

Nov. 28: Three of the six 2018-2019 Steinbeck Fellows will read from new work and answer questions from the audience. Reception to follow. 7PM. Steinbeck Center (MLK Library 590)

Final Examination/Evaluation:

In lieu of a final exam, you will turn in a substantial revision of one of your workshop submissions. Examples of changes that might be

included in a substantial revision include adding or deleting a character, changing the point of view, inserting a new scene, and altering the ending of the story. It is not enough simply to correct the spelling and grammatical errors of the first draft. To earn a high grade on the revision, you must alter the story in some significant way. The revision is due the last day of class, but can be submitted earlier if the student wishes to workshop the piece and can find space in the class schedule for that.

Late Assignment Policy:

It is important that you turn in your stories when you say you're going to. This is your most important responsibility. Late or emailed stories will not be accepted. If you need to change your workshop date, it is your responsibility to find someone willing to trade dates with you, and to tell me that you've switched prior to the date when your work was scheduled to be workshopped.

University Policies:

Per University Policy S16-9, university-wide policy information relevant to all courses, such as academic integrity, accommodations, etc. will be available on Office of Graduate and Undergraduate Programs' Syllabus Information [web page](#).

Determination of Grades:

The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined by the SJSU Catalog (Grades-Letter Grading). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A+/A/A-= excellent; B+/B/B-= above average; C+/C/C-= average; D+/D/D-= below average; F= failure. Within any of the letter grade ranges (e.g.

B+/B/B-), the assignment of a + or - grade will reflect stronger (+) or weaker (-) completion of the goals of the assignment.

A+/A/A-: Satisfactory participation in 3 or more workshops as the writer; provided feedback to all writers being workshopped; one book report completed; triptych and reflection paper completed

B+/B/B-: Satisfactory participation in 3 or more workshops as the writer; provided feedback to most writers being workshopped; one book report completed; triptych or reflection paper completed

C+/C/C-: Satisfactory participation in 2 workshops as the writer; provided sporadic feedback to writers being workshopped; triptych or reflection paper completed

D+/D/D-: Incomplete: Satisfactory participation in 1 workshop as the writer; some class exercises completed

F: Almost no work completed

Final grades will be the product of the following factors:

- Your fiction (2-3 new pieces and a revision) 60%
- Peer commentaries 20%
- Response papers on two literary readings 10%
- Group book report 5%
- Student-led discussion and participation in workshop exercises 5%