

# San José State University

Department of English and Comparative Literature  
ENGLISH 241: MFA Fiction Workshop, Fall 2021  
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: Virtual

Days: Tuesdays

Time: 4-6:45PM

Instructor: Prof. Keenan Norris

Office and Office Hours: FO 128 TH Noon-2PM

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**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 *Best American Short Stories 2019*, *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine and *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running: A Memoir* by Haruki Murakami.

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, we will make a sign-up sheet for workshops. Each of you will choose at least two dates when you want to hand in original

work. Your classmates will read your work, provide feedback via Google docs or in a Word doc 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 give the author their commentaries and marked-up manuscripts.

Your 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. A portion of your final grade will be determined by the quality of your peer commentaries.

**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 leading a discussion of either one of the required texts for this class or a piece of fiction of their choosing. The discussion should run for roughly 15 minutes in length and should have as its focus aspects of craft within the chosen text. If the student has chosen a non-required text, they will need to bring a photocopy of the piece that 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:**

*Best American Short Stories 2019*

*Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine

*What I Talk About When I Talk About Running: A Memoir* by Haruki Murakami

*Reed Magazine #154*

<https://www.reedmag.org/bookshop>

Class Schedule (subject to change):

Week 1: Introductions

Reading: Zadie Smith "Fail Better"

Exercise: All Complaints Must Be Made in Writing

Take-home Exercise: Triptych (due Week 2)

Week 2: The Voice

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

Reading: Triptych.pdf by Danzy Senna

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

Exercise: Triptych discussion

Reading: "The Suitcase" by Meron Hadero (starts at about 4:20)

Week 3: The Voice, Episode II

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

Reading: *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine

Exercise: Discussion- How can poetry inform our prose?

Week 4: new work (2,000-5,000 words)

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

Reading: *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine

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

Week 5: new work (2,000-5,000 words)

Reading: *Best American Short Stories 2019*

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

Week 6: The Autobiography of My Other

Claudia Rankine SJSU visit: Mon. Sept. 27

Exercise: The Autobiography of My Other: 2-1.png

Reading: *Best American Short Stories 2019*

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

Week 7: H.C.E.

Exercise: 3-page epic

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

Week 8: The Apprenticeship, I

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

Exercise: Discussion: *Best American Short Stories 2019*

Week 9: Reed Gala/CLA

Reading: *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*

Week 10: "Art is nothing without form"

Exercise: Cause-&-Effect outlines

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

Reading: *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*

Week 11: Subject, Object, Objective; Context, sub-text, text

Exercise: Object, Sub-text Scene

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

Student-led discussions: On craft (any author, any text; 15 minutes)

Reading: *Reed Magazine #154*

Week 12: The Apprenticeship, II

Reed Gala: Thur. Oct. 28

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

Reading: *Reed Magazine #154*

Week 13: Publishing Industry

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

Student-led discussions: On craft (any author, any text; 15 minutes)

Reading: TBD

Week 14: Seeing again

Exercise: Workshop on revision and editing

Student-led discussions: Meaning, context, sub-text (any author, any text; 15 minutes)

Student-led discussions: On craft (any author, any text; 15 minutes)

Week 15: Reflections on...

Workshop: Revisions

Exercise: Reflection writing, progressing toward literary goals

Week 16: Revisions, conti.

Workshop: Revisions

Student-led discussions: On craft (any author, any text; 15 minutes)

Revision piece due

Workshop Etiquette

Workshop is a place for respectful and constructive criticism. It is also a place where students practice articulating what makes creative writing distinctive, interesting, and fun to read. The author should take notes and remain silent as their work is being discussed. Spoken and written commentary from peers must always be directed at the work, not the writer. Personal attacks and offensive or inappropriate language will not

be tolerated. Students who cannot follow these guidelines will be dismissed from the course. If you receive any offensive comments on your work, please let me know as soon as possible so I can address the problem.

- Be courteous, respectful, and tactful.

- Adopt the attitude of an editor for a publishing house whose acquisitions editor has already bought the manuscript that is being discussed: You will be working with this writer for some time. It is up to you not only to critique the writer's work, but to form a constructive professional relationship with the writer.

- Comments should contribute to a meaningful discussion. Brief and constructive comments are helpful. Purely negative, mean-spirited and redundant comments are not. Once you've made your point, you do not need to revisit the issue.

- Comments should come from a place of discovery—not judgement. You should read the work on its own terms.

- Comments should be well thought out. Be careful with the words you choose. Consider how what you say and how you say it may be received by others. Do not derail the discussion with a poor word choice.

- If you have something particularly insightful to say, by all means, speak up. Speak up first.

- When the instructor is talking, you should be listening.

- When another student is talking in discussion, you should be listening.

- Students whose work is being workshopped should not assume a defensive or combative stance. You should be listening for patterns and/or a consensus in your classmates' interpretation of your work and for ways to improve your work.

- Students whose work is being workshopped need not heed the advice of every comment made in the class.

- If your peers are using untoward language, tenor, or tone, you should feel empowered to speak up. If you feel safe doing so, let the person who uses such language know that what they are saying is problematic and/or discourages meaningful discussion. If you do not feel safe and empowered to do so, talk to the instructor about the issue.

- The instructor's policy is to address directly (i.e., in private with the individual) any issue pertaining to a student before airing the matter to the class.

- The workshop will not be effective if you are careless/insulting in your comments (written and spoken), and/or otherwise defy workshop protocol.

Student code of conduct (SJSU and classroom policies)

Students are responsible for maintaining a respectful environment in the classroom.

San Jose State is committed to maintaining a safe education and working environment free of discrimination, harassment and sexual violence. Policies are available online

at: <http://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct/policies/> and

[http://notalone.sjsu.edu/policy\\_information/index.html](http://notalone.sjsu.edu/policy_information/index.html)

Per Title 5, the university prohibits “[activities] that substantially and materially disrupts the normal operations of the University” and “conduct that threatens or endangers the health or safety of any person within or related to the University community, including physical abuse, threats, intimidation, harassment, or sexual misconduct.” Please keep this in mind as you submit work for this course. The work you create in this class should

aspire to resemble in quality the work we read. The work should be literary and character driven (this class is not the place for cat poems, romances, fan-fiction, fantasy, horror, crime, and the like.) I will not tolerate any work that is gratuitously violent, pornographic. If you aren't sure about your work, see me before distributing it to your classmates.

#### Academic Integrity

Your commitment, as a student, to learning is evidenced by your enrollment at San Jose State University. The University Academic Integrity Policy S07-2 at <http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S07-2.pdf> requires you to be honest in all your academic course work. Faculty members are required to report all infractions to the office of Student Conduct and Ethical Development. The Student Conduct and Ethical Development website is available at <http://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct/>.

#### 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. 27: Campus Reading Program event— Claudia Rankine

Oct. 28: Reed Gala and Center for Literary Arts event

#### 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%

Student-led discussion and participation in workshop exercises 10%

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
A+	96 to 100%
A	93 to 95%
A-	90 to 92%
B+	86 to 89 %
B	83 to 85%

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>B-</i>	<i>80 to 82%</i>
<i>C+</i>	<i>76 to 79%</i>
<i>C</i>	<i>73 to 75%</i>
<i>C-</i>	<i>70 to 72%</i>
<i>D+</i>	<i>66 to 69%</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>63 to 65%</i>
<i>D-</i>	<i>60 to 62%</i>