



San José State University

Department of English and Comparative Literature
ENGLISH 241: MFA Graduate Fiction Workshop, Fall 2025

THE COSMOGRAM AND THE BODY

“Writing is an often-painful task that can feel like the death of one’s past. Equally discomfiting is seeing one’s present commitments to truths crumble once one begins to tap away at the keyboard or scar the page with ink. Writing demands a different sort of apprenticeship to ideas than does speaking. It beckons one to revisit over an extended, or at least delayed, period the same material and to revise what one thinks. Revision is reading again and again what one writes so that one can think again and again about what one wants to say and in turn determine if better and deeper things can be said.”— Michael Eric Dyson, “The Ghost of Cornel West”

Classroom: FO 104

Day/Time: Thursdays 4-6:45PM

Instructor: Prof. Keenan Norris

Office: FO 128

Office Hours: TU 11:30AM-1:30PM

E-mail: keenan.norris@sjsu.edu

Course Description: In the lobby of the Schomburg Center for Research into Black Culture located in Harlem, NYC lies a cosmogram dedicated to Langston Hughes’s poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” The poem and art piece span continents, and, remarkably, it is beneath the cosmogram that Hughes’s remains are interred.

This class’s core thematics are the cosmogram, the vivid portrayal of a world that the writer strives for, and the body, the individual characters who in their personalities and circumstances people the world. (Another way of considering the “body” in this construct is as the central thematic, the notional/emotional force that forms the basis of the story.) This class will attempt to

provide imaginative frameworks to access as acutely as possible the worlds, the themes and the persons of our stories.

We'll look at the worlds constructed and the characters explored by writers past and present, and, hopefully our reading will be the dream and nightmare fuel for our own work.

Additionally, we will discuss aspects of the writing profession, with visits from literary professionals to-be-announced. Topics of these discussions will include finding time managing writing time, finding and building literary community, finding an agent or publisher, and networking.

Students will workshop their work as many as three times 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. 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 learn how to creatively corral history and the unknown.

Workshop Ethos: Students will workshop their own original work no fewer than twice and as many as three times 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 almost every week and we will examine what we've read through in-class discussion and student-led class discussions to "open up" the work from an artist's vantage point.

The objectives of this course are to study and to work toward dynamically weaving our histories, our banks of knowledge and our imaginations into the fictions that we create.

Workshop Procedure: After 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 (from different students) per class.

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], (b) the extent of their success at doing so, and (c) suggestions for improvement. A portion of your final grade will be determined by the quantity and 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 group 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 provide either a link to or a digitized copy of at least a significant excerpt the piece that they discuss.

Revision/Final Examination:

In lieu of a final exam, you will turn in a substantial revision of one of your workshop submissions no later than the last day of class. 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.

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 2024, edited by Lauren Groff and Heidi Pitlor

Class Schedule (subject to change):

Week 1: Introductions and Worlds

Reading: Zadie Smith "Fail Better", "Exhalation"

Exercise: Introductions

Week 2: More Worlds, Some Characters

Exercise: "Who Am I?"

Reading: Triptych.pdf by Danzy Senna

Take-home Exercise: Triptych (due Week 3)

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

Week 3: Characters

Exercise: Triptych discussion

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

Week 4: Characters, Part II

Exercise: All Complaints Must Be Made in Writing

Reading: TBD

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

Week 5: Cosmogram, conti. (*Class will be held online*)

Exercise: Reports from somewhere

Reading: TBD

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

Week 6: The Autobiography of My Other

Exercise: The Autobiography of My Other: [2-1.png](#)

Reading: *Best American Short Stories 2024*

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

Week 7: Dream fuel

Reading: TBD

Exercise: Student-led discussions

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

Week 8: Nightmare fuel

Reading: TBD

Exercise: Student-led discussions

Author visit: TBD

Discussion:

Week 9: H.C.E.

Exercise: 3-page epic

Exercise: Student-led discussions

Reading: *Best American Short Stories 2024*

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

Week 10: On craft

Exercise: Student-led discussions

Reading: on craft (Electric Literature essays)

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

Week 11: Craft, conti.

Exercise: Student-led discussions

Reading: on craft (Electric Literature essays)

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

Week 12: Questioning our characters...

Exercise: Student-led discussions

Reading: *Best American Short Stories 2024*

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

Week 13: The World of Publishing

Exercise: Student-led discussions

Reading: Submittable.com; other publishing resources

Student-led discussions: On craft (any author, any text; 15 minutes)
Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words)

Week 14: Submission Party!

Exercise: Submissions; student-led discussions

Reading: *Best American Short Stories 2024*

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

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

Week 15: Seeing again

Exercise: Workshop on revision and editing

Reading: *TBD*

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

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

Week 16: New work or revisions

Discussion: MFA thesis and literary goals; on literary agents, editors and trying to publish

Exercise: Reflection writing, progress and new literary goals

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

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

Story Revision due

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.

Workshop Étiquette

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

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 online, 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 on [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.

Final Examination/Evaluation:

In lieu of a final exam, you will turn in a substantial revision of one of your workshop submissions no later than the last day of class. 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>
<i>A+</i>	<i>96 to 100%</i>
<i>A</i>	<i>93 to 95%</i>
<i>A-</i>	<i>90 to 92%</i>
<i>B+</i>	<i>86 to 89 %</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>83 to 85%</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>