English 361.090  
Intermediate Fiction Workshop  
MWF 11:00 – 11:50  
Ferguson 177

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Office: LAN 258  
Office Hours: MWF 12-1 pm, TTh 11-12:00 pm, & by appt.

“I guess a big part of serious fiction’s purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves…. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside.” – David Foster Wallace

Required texts:
- Readings are posted on the class D2L site. You will be responsible for retrieving, printing, reading, annotating, and bringing these materials to class.
- A good style guide and a dictionary are recommended.

Class description (from General Bulletin):
Intermediate Fiction Workshop - Readings and discussions demonstrating the basic structural and technical elements of fiction with opportunities for practice and peer workshop. Prerequisite: ENG 261 or consent of instructor.

Program Learning Outcomes:
1. The student will demonstrate close reading skills and recognize strategies used by professional creative writers.
2. The student will employ techniques and strategies for crafting carefully composed, competent creative works of fiction.
3. The student will articulate useful, critical editorial advice for peer writers.
4. The student will demonstrate strategic revision on completed creative work.
5. The student will compose and sustain a complete, polished manuscript of substance in the focus-genre.

Class format:
The work of this class will include short exercises in the form as well as longer, complete works. The overall objective of the course is to give you a broad introduction to the short story form as well as a close look at the craft of fiction. Works that strictly adhere to a genre (sci-fi, horror, fantasy, etc.) are not expected and will not be accepted.

The emphasis in this class will be on the process rather than the finished product. This does not mean your work will not be important: you should expect to turn in completed works of fiction representing the best you can do and we will read and discuss them with an aim to improving them. However, we will be approaching the work of the class as teaching, instilling, and/or improving your writing process—from reading like a writer to crafting, critiquing, and revising.

You will all get a chance to receive feedback on your work from me and from your peers. You are welcome to come to my office anytime to talk about your writing or the stories we’re reading or anything related to writing or this class. In fact, you’re more than welcome; I encourage you to come talk to me. This includes asking specific questions about your work-in-progress. However, I will not read and give feedback on your work before it is turned in.
Grading:
Your final grade will be composed of the following percentages:

- Exercises – 25%
- Story – 25%
- Revision – 10%
- Critiques – 15%
- Final Portfolio – 5%
- Participation – 20%

Assignments:

Exercises
For the first several weeks of class, you will be completing brief, generative exercises in response to a particular craft-focused prompt. These are included in detail below. You will write these and submit them to me fairly soon thereafter (due dates are on the course calendar). However, you will also be editing them and collecting them into your portfolio (see below).

Story
Along with your body of shorter exercises, you will each write and submit one story (the approximate length range is 8-15 pages) to be workshopped. You’re going to upload your stories (as replies to a thread I’ve started) on D2L. They are all due on the same date (see below). Since you are submitting your work for your peers to read, your work must be turned in on time. I will fail work that is not turned in for the workshop at all. (Note: the thread on D2L will close by noon on the class day following the submission date. You will have to make arrangements with me to submit a late story.) We’ll cover details of the workshop itself in class.

I’m going to use a (very) simple rubric to grade your stories. If you’d like, I can flesh out each of the criteria listed below, but basically your grade will be determined by the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content (Ideas)</th>
<th>Form (Voice, Organization, Development)</th>
<th>Craft (Mechanics)</th>
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<tr>
<td>3 – Excellent (original, interesting, relevant, resonant)</td>
<td>3 – Excellent (original, individual voice; smart and innovative organization; form serves and is served by content)</td>
<td>3 – Excellent (artful, error-free sentences; effective sentence variation; purposeful paragraphing; beautiful, appropriate, smart word choices)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 – Average (somewhat generic)</td>
<td>2 – Average (appropriate voice; well-organized paragraphs; thoughtfully developed)</td>
<td>2 – Average (error-free or very few grammatical errors; appropriate paragraphing; collegiate word choices)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 – Poor (unoriginal, inappropriate)</td>
<td>1 – Poor (voiceless; sloppy, thoughtless, or incoherent organization)</td>
<td>1 – Poor (many errors in grammar, syntax, or paragraphing; poor or mistaken word choices)</td>
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Thus, for example,
A = three 3s (9)
B = two 3s and a 2 (8)
C = two 2s and a 3 (7)
D = three 2s (6)
F = two twos and a 1 (5 or below)

Note that two 3s and a 1 (excellent content, excellent form, but poor grammar and mechanics) is a C; one 3, one 2, and a 1 (excellent content, average form, poor grammar and mechanics) is a D. Be sure to carefully proof and line edit your work.
Revision
You will radically revise your (longer) short story in response to feedback from your peers and from me. The difference between cosmetic revision and radical revision is that the former means cleaning your work up, correcting grammatical mistakes, etc., whereas the latter means significantly re-approaching and reworking the story: e.g., changing the structure, changing the narrative perspective, changing the main character, changing the climactic event, etc. We will discuss this further in class.

Critiques
You will be responsible for printing, reading, and annotating the works of your peers. You must have your (printed, annotated) copy in front of you when we begin discussing that story. You are expected to write line edits/marginalia on each story as well as a summative (approximately one-page) critical letter to the writer. I will be collecting these at random. Thus, if I collect critiques on a given day and you don’t have them, I will reduce your grade on the assumption you have missed all previous, uncollected critiques. Be sure to do all your critiques and have them handy.

Grading criteria:
- 0 – No critique
- 1 – Critique turned in
- 2 – Marginalia on the story; appropriate summative critique
- 3 – Insightful and substantial craft-focused critique

Final Portfolio
The portfolio will include all of your exercises, your longer story, your revision, and a brief introduction reflecting on the particular craft elements you focused on for your revision. The order of this will be: introduction, revised story, story, short exercises. You will edit/proof all of your writing for the portfolio. The portfolio will not include earlier drafts of the exercises, but only clean copies. Portfolios can be submitted in any form—three ring binders are nice, and you can get them back later; however, submitting with simply a binder clip is also acceptable.

Participation
Really, this is the most important part of the class (along with your writing, of course): the workshop is centered on thoughtful, rigorous, critical discussion of each other’s work. It’s a small class, so you must be ready to share your ideas and insights on all the assigned readings. And because you’ll be getting feedback and comments from your classmates on your stories, this also means you need to come to class prepared to make respectful yet rigorous criticisms of the work presented in workshop.

To help facilitate everyone’s involvement, I am assigning each story we workshop a leader and breaking you into groups (explained below). The leader will kick the conversation off by answering the opening question, “What is/are the ambition(s) of this piece?” S/he may also wish to notice elements of the writer’s approach, including the form, the subject, and the craft, and to relate workshop members’ comments with one another as the discussion moves along. The leader will have carefully read the story, anticipating different possible readings, interpretations, and ambiguities; s/he will be ready to contribute more comments to the discussion including suggestions for revision (in answer to the question “What does the best version of this story look like?”) and at least one “love circle” comment.
Primary and Secondary Reading Responsibilities

Every workshop story will be assigned a letter, as will each of you. You have primary responsibility for reading those stories that match your letter; you have secondary responsibility for reading stories labeled with the other letter. You will write a critique for your primary stories. Note, though you do not have to write a critique for secondary stories, you are still expected to read them and be ready to actively discuss them.

Class policies

Attendance / Tardiness

Because most of what you’ll be learning you’ll be learning from your classmates’ input and comments, it’s very important that everyone comes to class (in both body AND mind). If you are unable to make it to class for a legitimate reason, you must tell me at least 24 hours in advance. It is up to you to be responsible for all work and assignments you miss.

- 3 absences = no higher than a B
- 5 absences = no higher than a C
- 7 absences = no higher than a D

If you are absent more than nine times (the equivalent of three weeks of class) I will fail you.

If you are more than ten minutes late twice, that counts as an absence. If you show up to class without the text, without your work, or without being prepared for class discussion, that counts as an absence. This includes in-class naps, texting, disruption, etc.

The Necessary Stuff

Acceptable Student Behavior

A recent policy from the Provost’s Office states, “Classroom behavior should not interfere with the instructor’s ability to conduct the class or the ability of other students to learn from the instructional program (see the Student Conduct Code, policy D-34.1). Unacceptable or disruptive behavior will not be tolerated. Students who disrupt the learning environment may be asked to leave class and may be subject to judicial, academic or other penalties. This prohibition applies to all instructional forums, including electronic, classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc. The instructor shall have full discretion over what behavior is appropriate/inappropriate in the classroom. Students who do not attend class regularly or who perform poorly on class projects/exams may be referred to the Early Alert Program. This program provides students with recommendations for resources or other assistance that is available to help SFA students succeed.”

Academic Integrity (A-9.1)

Academic integrity is a responsibility of all university faculty and students. Faculty members promote academic integrity in multiple ways including instruction on the components of academic honesty, as well as abiding by university policy on penalties for cheating and plagiarism.

Definition of Academic Dishonesty

Academic dishonesty includes both cheating and plagiarism. Cheating includes but is not limited to (1) using or attempting to use unauthorized materials to aid in achieving a better grade on a component of a class; (2) the falsification or invention of any information, including citations, on an assigned exercise; and/or (3) helping or attempting to help another in an act of cheating or plagiarism. Plagiarism is presenting the words or ideas of another person as if they were your own. Examples of plagiarism are (1) submitting an assignment as if it were one’s own work when, in fact,
it is at least partly the work of another; (2) submitting a work that has been purchased or otherwise obtained from an Internet source or another source; and (3) incorporating the words or ideas of an author into one's paper without giving the author due credit.

If you are caught plagiarizing in this class you will fail not just the assignment but the course. Please read the complete policy at http://www.sfasu.edu/policies/academic_integrity.asp

Withheld Grades Semester Grades Policy (A-54)
Ordinarily, at the discretion of the instructor of record and with the approval of the academic chair/director, a grade of WH will be assigned only if the student cannot complete the course work because of unavoidable circumstances. Students must complete the work within one calendar year from the end of the semester in which they receive a WH, or the grade automatically becomes an F. If students register for the same course in future terms the WH will automatically become an F and will be counted as a repeated course for the purpose of computing the grade point average.

Students with Disabilities
To obtain disability related accommodations, alternate formats and/or auxiliary aids, students with disabilities must contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS), Human Services Building, and Room 325, 468-3004 / 468-1004 (TDD) as early as possible in the semester. Once verified, ODS will notify the course instructor and outline the accommodation and/or auxiliary aids to be provided. Failure to request services in a timely manner may delay your accommodations. For additional information, go to http://www.sfasu.edu/disabilityservices/.

Course Calendar (subject to possible change)

Week 1 – Introductions/Process
Jan. 20 – Introductions, syllabus
22 – Gary Lutz, “The Sentence is a Lonely Place,” David Foster Wallace, “Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (XXIV)”

Week 2 – Showing and Telling
25 – Alice Munro, “Runaway”
27 – James Salter, “Bangkok”
29 – Ben Lerner, “The Golden Vanity”

Week 3 - Character
Feb. 1 – Lorrie Moore, “Dance in America”
3 – Phil Klay, “After Action Report”
5 – Miranda July, “Roy Spivey”

Week 4 - Place
8 – John Cheever, “The Swimmer”
10 – Laura van den Berg, “Acrobat”
12 – Kevin Brockmeier, “The Ceiling”

Week 5 - Time
17 – Denis Johnson, “Emergency”
19 – Claire Vaye Watkins, “Rondine al Nido”
Week 6 – Form/Plot
22 – Tobias Wolff, “Bullet in the Brain”
**Time exercise due**
26 – David Foster Wallace, “The Soul is Not a Smithy”

Week 7 - POV
**Form/plot exercise due**

4 – Barrett Swanson, “Annie Radcliffe You are Loved”

Week 8 - Workshop
7 – Midterm conferences
**POV exercise due (at time of conference)**
9 – Midterm conferences
11 – Midterm conferences
**Stories due**

Spring Break – NO CLASS – March 14-18

Week 9
21 – Workshop 1 & 2
23 – Workshop 3 & 4

Easter Break – NO CLASS – March 25-28

Week 10
30 – Workshop 5 & 6
Apr. 1 – Workshop 7 & 8

Week 11
4 – Workshop 9 & 10
6 – Workshop 11 & 12
8 – Workshop 13 & 14

Week 12
11 – Workshop 15 & 16
13 – Workshop 17 & 18
15 – Workshop 19 & 20

Week 13 – Revision
18 – Tower, “Retreat” version 1
20 – Tower, “Retreat” version 2
22 – Poissant, “Venn Diagram”

Week 14
25 – Revision peer review
27 – Revision peer review
29 – Revision peer review

Week 15 – Revision
May 2 – Portfolio conferences
4 – Portfolio conferences
6 – Portfolio conferences

Week 16
TBA – **Portfolios due**
Exercises

1. **Writing Process Exercises (3 pages)**
   a. **Choose one of the following:**
      i. An early memory
      ii. The loss of a small object
      iii. An experience you still do not fully understand
      iv. A sudden change in a relationship

      Freewrite notes/details about whichever you chose. Now write the first page(s) of a story about it.

   b. **From life**
   Take a notebook and go to a place (on campus or—better—off) where you can observe people. Choose a few people and describe them in detail: what are they wearing? What are they doing and why do you think they’re doing it? Can you overhear or guess what they’re saying? What are they thinking?

      Choose one character and invent a life for him/her. Write at least two pages of a character sketch: Where does s/he live? Work? What relationship(s) does s/he have? What worries? Fears? Desires? Pleasures? Does the character have a secret? Begin a story.

      (Note: approach this as an exercise in empathy, for one, and two: don’t feel bound by realism. Consider the person/character, consider the questions above, and feel free to invent/imagine.)

   c. **From experience**
   List all the jobs you’ve ever had or of which you have secondhand knowledge—no matter how mundane. List some incidents that happened at one or another of these jobs. Pick one incident and begin describing it.

      (Note: still not bound by realism. Feel free to invent/imagine and feel free to inject humor/absurdity.)

2. **Showing & Telling Exercises (3 pages)**
   a. **Impossible possible**
   Create a reality that is really convincing and yet literally impossible (or just really highly unlikely). Draft a (roughly) three page story in which a single impossible event happens in the everyday world. For example, a dog tells fortunes, a secret message appears on a pizza, the radio announcer speaks in an ex-husband’s voice—supermarket tabloids can be a good source of ideas for this. First, focus on using detail to create the reality of both the normal world and the impossible event—the more believable the reality is, the more seamlessly readers will accept the magic.

   b. **Defamiliarize**
   Write about something familiar—a person, place, thing, experience—from the point of view of a stranger—someone from another country or another time; someone with a particular mental condition or a prisoner just released, etc. Pick a situation that might seem commonplace to your readers and imagine how the stranger would perceive it though all her available senses. Send the urbanite to a small Midwestern town; introduce the time traveler to his own future; have the ex-prisoner spend the evening in a karaoke bar. The goal is to make the everyday seem strange and new again. Avoid using familiar words. You might try not to name the situation but let your reader figure out where the character is through your use of sensory details.
3. **Character Exercise (3 pages)**
Hemingway advised creating characters (at least partly) from life, saying,

> Some characters come from real life. Mostly you invent people from a knowledge and understanding and experience of people. [...] If you describe someone, it is flat, as a photograph is, and from my standpoint a failure. If you make him up from what you know, there should be all the dimensions.

But it’s important not to stick too closely to the real-life person or identify with the character so closely you are unwilling to let him/her get into any serious trouble.

Get your character in trouble.

How might you have her mess up? Perhaps she makes a fool of herself by saying or doing the wrong thing, or is stubborn even though she is dead wrong about something. An indiscretion? An experiment? An immoral act?

(Note: you should try to make the character act true to herself, while doing something (or things) that the reader disagrees with, and maybe doesn’t like. Consider that. How can you make the character flawed—based on a real-life model but making mistakes we, readers, wish she wouldn’t make?)

4. **Place Exercises (3 pages)**
   a. **Character in conflict with place**
   Imagine a character who misunderstands the nature of the place, or overlooks something important, or is oblivious to what is suggested by certain details. Or imagine a character whose reaction to a place is the opposite of what we would expect.
   b. **Entrapment**
   Describe a place where a character feels trapped. It could be obvious (an elevator stuck between floors) or less so (a wedding rehearsal). Use sensory details to suggest your character’s claustrophobia.
   c. **Depth of field**
   Write a scene in which you move back and forth between two “fields of action”—one in the foreground with your characters, one in the background. One of my favorite examples of this is a David Foster Wallace story in which a focus group is taste-testing chocolate cake-snacks in a bland corporate conference room while, outside, a man in a mask with a gun is climbing the building’s exterior as a crowd gathers to watch. Of course, “The Ceiling” is another great example of this.

5. **Time Exercises (3 pages)**
   a. **Summary vs. scene**
   Write a story that takes place over a long period of time. Make a list of possible events in the story; maybe even draw a timeline. What will you show in scenes? What will be summarized? (Consider “Rondine al Nido.”)
   b. **“Time is a flat circle”**
   Consider how you can play with a story’s time (consider Robert Coover’s “Going for a Beer” and Denis Johnson’s “Emergency”) for effect. How can the time—and its passage—relate to the character’s internal experience? How can a nonlinear time or a confused motion of time be written so as to feel more true to experience?

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1 Rust, from *True Detective* season 1, alluding to Nietzsche (maybe) and the idea of the eternal return.
c. **Shifting tempo**
Write a very short story in which you use (in miniature) scene, summary, flashback, and slow motion. (Consider “The Treeline, Kansas, 1934” as an example.)

6. **Form/plot**
   a. **Dynamic denouement**
   Write a story that builds chronologically up to the climax, then changes shape, direction, pace, tone (consider a slide or a diving board: it’s a slow, steady climb, but once you’re at the top, it’s a rapid, exhilarating descent). You want to bring the plot to the biggest moment and then pivot out to the smallest (or a small) moment, but one of emotional resonance, real significance. Consider “Bullet in the Brain.” Try to move the story from the expected (even cliché) to the unexpected—how many stories of a bank heist and a death end on a quiet meditation on the power and beauty of (even ungrammatical) language?

   b. **Reveal**
   Write a story in which subtle details build to reveal a surprise ending (consider “The Lottery”). How can you make the story feel at once withheld and tense, static and progressive, signaling to the reader that something is occurring without giving it all away too soon? Focus on the tension in the story, the reader’s desire to figure thing out, rather than the details themselves (we never see the most dramatic images in Jackson’s story).

   c. **Cantilevered arc**
   Write a story in which the conflict is immediately present, or introduced early but not clearly resolved. Consider how Wallace braids together the dramatic events that are supposed to be what the story is about with the distracted memories and imaginings of the narrator. The story’s form also involves narrative squares (like the mesh in the window’s comic book panels); how might your story’s form relate to its content?

7. **POV**
   a. **1st person (& second)**
   Write a first person narrative in which the speaker (accidentally) reveals things about him/herself beyond what is said or explicitly intended. Consider “i can speak™.” The character in this story lets details slip showing his desperation, admitting to the products failures, and evincing a stressful and awful corporate environment. Likewise, in “Orientation,” the voice guiding the reader around the office comically lets us see the reality of life within these cubicles. In “Girl,” we learn about the speaker and also the larger system within which these particular guidelines/rules are situated. How can your narrator subtly reveal more than what s/he’s explicitly stating? How can you let admissions, corrections, omissions, etc., rise up to paint a clearer picture to the reader than the narrator intends?

   b. **2nd person**
   James Wood has written there are few successful second person stories. Junot Diaz has written at least two. Consider “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” in particular the way the second person is employed to manipulate sympathy (and deflect responsibility). Write a second person story in a similar form. What does the character (narrator) want? To whom is the story addressed? Why might the character (narrator) not want to own the first person? How can you use the direct address of second person to lure the reader in (perhaps while making the reader aware of that lure)?

   c. **3rd person**
   Write a (short) short story in a shifting, multi-character close third. Consider “Annie Radcliffe You Are Loved.” You want to have more than one character and follow more than one narrative line. How might the distinct POV sections bear the imprint/voice of the character narrated?