

San José State University
Department of English & Comparative Literature
ENGL 130, Writing Fiction
Spring 2015

Instructor: Nick Taylor
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Office Hours: Mon/Weds 1:30PM – 3:30PM and by appointment.
Class Days/Time: Mon/Weds 10:30AM-11:45 AM
Classroom: BBC 121

Course Description

For the first month we will be reading and discussing published stories from 2014 edition of *Best American Short Stories* and the latest issue of *Reed* magazine. I will make presentations on elements of the craft – character, conflict, point of view, etc. The goal is to practice reading like writers rather than critics (there is a difference). We'll also do some writing exercises, in class and at home, to get your ideas flowing.

Next we will discuss your stories. Each of you will hand in two stories over the course of the semester. Many of us enjoy reading and writing genre fiction, such as fantasy, sci-fi, romance, horror, and crime. However, in this course we will be reading and writing character-driven literary fiction. Character-driven fiction isn't necessarily realistic, but it does focus on people who feel real to the reader, and whose situations derive from both external and internal conflict. If you have never written character-driven fiction before, don't worry. The assigned readings provide a wide variety of examples for you to study.

In lieu of a final exam, you will turn in a revision of one of your stories. I will explain in class what I mean by a revision and what I expect to see in yours. Your revision is due the last day of class.

Student Learning Goals

This course addresses the following Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) approved for the BA in English:

SLO 1: Read closely in a variety of forms, styles, structures, and modes, and articulate the value of close reading in the study of literature, creative writing, or rhetoric.

SLO 3: Write clearly, effectively, and creatively, and adjust writing style appropriately to the content, the context, and nature of the subject.

The list of all approved SLOs are listed on the English Department's website:
<http://www.sjsu.edu/english/undergraduate/studentlearninggoals.html>

Assignments

- Two new, original pieces of fiction, photocopied for the class (SLO #3).
- Written and verbal comments on your classmates' stories (SLO #1, #3).
- Reading assignments from the textbook. I will quiz on these (SLO #1).

- A substantial revision of one of your stories (serves as the final exam) (SLO #3).
- Brief in-class and take-home writing exercises (SLO #3).
- Attendance at two literary readings of your choice, and a 1-2 page written response to each (SLO #1, #3).

Extra Credit Assignments

For extra credit you can attend at up to two more literary readings (and write responses). These must be turned in by the date the final revision is due.

Attending Readings / Lectures

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* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and in *Metro* weekly. After attending each reading, you will write a brief response (1-2pp) and turn it in to me. You may respond to any aspect of the reading: the speaker, the venue, the material performed, the Q&A with the audience, etc.

Here are some of the readings being offered on campus this semester:

Jan 29, 6pm, MLK 590 (Steinbeck Center) – MFA Program Open House featuring readings by SJSU Creative Writing Faculty, Lurie Visiting Writer Andrew Lam, and former California Poet Laureate Al Young.

Feb. 4, 7pm, MLK 225/229 - Bay Area Doubleheader with bestselling novelist and short-story writer **Michelle Richmond** (*Golden State*, *The Year of Fog*) and award-winning poet **Randall Mann** (*Straight Razor*, *Breakfast with Thom Gunn*).

Feb. 25, 7pm, MLK 225/229 - Literary Spouse Tag Team with fiction writer and memoirist **Bich Minh Nguyen** (*Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, *Short Girls*) and novelist **Porter Shreve** (*The End of the Book*, *When the White House Was Ours*).

March 4, 7:00pm, MLK 590 (Steinbeck Center)- Former Steinbeck Fellow **Charles McLeod** reads from his new collection of short stories, *Settlers of Unassigned Lands*.

March 18, 7pm, MLK 255 - Poet, essayist, fiction writer and translator **Kazim Ali**. Presented by Persian Studies, Middle East Studies, Dept. of English and Comparative Literature, and the CLA.

April 2, 7pm, MLK 225/229- 2015 Lurie Distinguished Visiting Author **Andrew Lam**. Presented by the Creative Writing Program, the Dept. of English and Comparative Literature, and the CLA.

April 7, 7pm, MLK 225/229 - Santa Clara County Poet Laureate **David Perez** (*Love in a Time of Robot Apocalypse*).

April 15, 7:00pm, MLK 590 (Steinbeck Center) - 2014-2015 Steinbeck Fellows **Cara Bayles**, **Yalitza Ferreras**, and **Reese Okyong Kwon**, read from work in progress.

April 22, 7pm, MLK 225/229 - The 2015 Martha Heasley Cox Lecture with novelist **Susan Choi** (*American Woman*, *My Education*, *A Person of Interest*).

April 23, 1pm, MLK 225/229 - Susan Choi in Conversation with CLA Director Andrew Altschul.

May 4, 6:00pm, MLK 590 (Steinbeck Center)

SJSU MFA alumnus **Daniel Arnold** reads from *Snowblind*, a new collection of mountaineering adventure tales in the tradition of Jack London and Robert Louis Stevenson.

Grading

Grades will be based on the quality and quantity of writing you do as well as the quality and constructiveness of the criticism offered during the workshops. Some of you may have some natural ability writing fiction, and some may not. Think of talent as extra credit – it can make up for a blown quiz, but it won't get you an A if you neglect the other class requirements.

Creative writing, though subject to the instructor's individual subjectivity, can be evaluated according to general standards used to determine how well a piece of writing works. These include: 1) Textual and/or technical competence and eloquence. 2) Imaginative risk. 3) Energy and freshness of language. 4) Effective use of metaphor and other forms of figurative language. 5) Clarity and precision of detail. 6) Capacity for mixed feelings and uncertainty. 7) Effective use of grammar, syntax, and rhythm. 8) Naturalness and believability. 9) Appropriateness of style to subject. 10) Compelling audience interest.

Final grades will be the product of the following factors:

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| • Your Fiction (2 stories and 1 revision) | 60% |
| • Responses to Classmates' Fiction (hand in binder at end) | 15% |
| • Reading Quizzes and Class Participation | 15% |
| • Attendance at Literary Readings (and 1-page write-ups) | 5% |
| • In-class Writing Exercises | 5% |

Grades given conform to the English Department and university grading policy. The Department of English is committed to the differential grading scale as defined in the official SJSU Catalog (“The Grading System”). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A = excellent; B = above average; C = average; D = below average; F = failure.

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT GRADING STATEMENT: In English Department courses, instructors comment on and grade the quality of writing as well as the quality of ideas being conveyed. All your writing should be distinguished by correct grammar and punctuation, appropriate diction and syntax, and well-organized paragraphs.

Late Assignment Policy

I do not accept late assignments. It is crucial that you turn in your stories when you say you're going to. I won't pass around the sign-up sheet until a few weeks into the semester. By then you should know when your work for other classes will be due, so choose your workshop dates wisely.

Required Texts

- Egan, Jennifer and Heidi Pitlor, eds. *The Best American Short Stories 2014*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-547-86886-8.
- *Reed Magazine*, Volume 67 (2014 edition). *Reed* is the campus literary journal and will be sold in class by a *Reed* staff member.

Schedule and Assignments

This class meets every Monday and Wednesday, starting on Monday, January 26. The last class is Wednesday, May 13. Class will not be held on Monday, March 23, or Wednesday, March 25 (SJSU Spring Recess).

All reading assignments are in *The Best American Short Stories*, unless otherwise indicated.

Mon, Jan 26

Introduction

Wed, Jan 28

Topic

Characterization

Reading Due

Craig Davidson, "Medium Tough" (89)

Benjamin Nugent, "God" (243)

Mon, Feb 2

Topic

More on Characterization

Reading Due

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, "The Judge's Will" (179)

Will Mackin, "Kattekoppen" (202)

Wed, Feb 4

Topic

Conflict

Reading Due

Joyce Carol Oates, "Mastiff" (254)

Mon, Feb 9

Topic

Setting

Reading Due

Michael Caleb Tasker, "Silly Boy" (*Reed*, 43)

Wed, Feb 11

Topic

Point of View

Reading Due

Charles Baxter, "Charity" (1)
Philip Jason, "A Blow to the Head" (*Reed*, 14)

Mon, Feb 16

Topic

Voice

Reading Due

Peter Cameron, "After the Flood" (43)
O.A. Lindsey, "Evie M." (194)

Wed, Feb 18

Topic

Form

Reading Due

Brendan Mathews, "This Is Not a Love Song" (211)
Shelly Weathers, "The Problems of Odessa" (*Reed*, 3)

Mon, Feb 23

Topic

Material

Reading Due

Frank Scozzari, "Too Old for War" (*Reed*, 33)

Wed, Feb 25 – Mon, May 11

Student Workshops (see "Workshop Procedure")

Wed, May 13

Last Class – Final Revisions and Response Binders Due

Workshop Procedure

Once the class roster is settled, I will pass around a sign-up sheet where each of you will choose two dates when you want to hand in your stories. On those dates, you will pass out photocopies of your story to everyone in the class. Your story must be **double-spaced, single-sided**, and include **page numbers**.

Your classmates will read your story, make comments on the manuscript, and type up a half page (minimum) of comments. At the next class meeting, we will discuss your story. We'll do two or three stories per class, so your story will get about twenty minutes of discussion. At the end of the discussion, everyone will hand the author their marked-up manuscripts and the typed comments. Everyone will also put a copy of their typed comments in a binder ("Response Binder"). This binder will, by the end of the semester, contain your responses to all of your classmates' stories.

You will turn it in with your final revision, and you will be graded on the quality and quantity of the feedback you provided your peers.

So what do you comment on? You have two responsibilities. The first is to indicate what you got out of the story. What's your interpretation of it? If the piece were in *The Best American Short Stories*, what would you say about it? This helps the writer understand what came across and what didn't. The second responsibility is to suggest avenues for improvement. How can the writer make this story better? Often this requires putting yourself in the writer's shoes. Remember that you can help a fellow writer with thoughtful commentary even if you would not have chosen the same topic or style in your own work.

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 personal criticism will not be tolerated.

Academic Honesty

Your own commitment to learning, as evidenced by your enrollment at San José State University and the University's Academic Integrity Policy, 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 Policy on academic integrity can be found at: <http://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct/>.

Avoiding Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use of somebody else's words or ideas and is considered an instance of academic dishonesty that instructors must report. You commit plagiarism by:

- buying, stealing, or borrowing a paper (or story)
- hiring someone to write a paper (or story)
- building on someone's ideas without providing a citation
- copying from another source or using a source too closely when paraphrasing

In other words, submit only your own work.

Peer Connections

Peer Connections is an on-campus center that provides peer tutoring for San José State University students. They offer assistance with writing, and if you feel you need intensive help beyond what I can provide during office hours, please request a writing tutor. Peer Connections has two locations on SJSU's main campus: in the Student Services Center (SSC) 600, on the corner of 10th and San Fernando (inside the 10th Street parking garage building), and in the Academic Success Center in Clark Hall, on the first floor next to the Computer Lab.

Disabilities Policy

If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible, or see me during office hours. Presidential Directive 97-03 requires that students with disabilities register with the DRC to establish a record of their disability.