ENGLISH 561.001  
Graduate Fiction Workshop  
Fall 2021: Tuesdays, 6:00-8:30 pm

Dr. John A. McDermott  
214 Liberal Arts North  
Office phone: 468-2344  
e-mail: mcdermotja@sfasu.edu (Note the single “t” in my e-mail address)  
Office Hours: 11-Noon (MWF), 9:00-10AM (TTH), or by appointment.

REQUIRED MATERIALS:  
*Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott

I will supply you with multiple handouts as well, primarily of sample fiction.

If you don’t own a good dictionary, get one. There are also quite a few excellent style and usage guidebooks out there. Do some exploring and find a favorite. (Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* is always a smart way to start.)

OFFICIAL CREDIT HOUR JUSTIFICATION  
ENGL 5361 “Graduate Fiction Workshop” (3 credits) typically meets once a week in 150-minute segments, for 15-weeks, and includes a 2-hour final examination. Students are typically assigned four books—two creative and two theoretical—or a similar workload of open-source material. They are required to complete three writing exercises, each with a minimum word count of 1,000 words (or fifteen total pages). Students are expected to turn in, for workshop participation, three original works of fictional prose to total roughly 45 to 60 pages; participate in workshop by having read and responded to others’ work; are required to turn in a total of 40 to 60 pages of critical responses to the work submitted by others; to create a self-reflective final portfolio, and to attend meetings. These activities average at a minimum 12 hours of work each week to prepare outside of classroom hours.

OBJECTIVES  
This is a graduate workshop in writing fiction. The objectives are really quite obvious. You will leave the course as better writers—meaning more attentive readers, aware that fiction doesn’t spring fully formed from the heads of writers, but is a matter of skillful choices made at the right moments. It’s also a matter of talent and imagination, but I can’t really teach you those qualities. I can help you recognize what technical options you have as fiction writers and encourage you to work diligently on your craft. You will leave the course having written and revised five short stories. You will also have pondered stories by established writers and edited short stories by your classmates, both activities which will help strengthen your own work. This is not a class for the timid, but then making art never is for the meek. I consider you all writers in this course and I expect you to respect your
work and the work your classmates produce. We will help each other become better storytellers and better audiences. And we’ll have some fun.

Here are the official PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOMES for classes in the MA program:

1. The student will be able to write well-organized, substantial, grammatically and syntactically clean essays on literary and/or related topics.

2. The student will be able to demonstrate retention of key contents of selected literary texts as well as key concepts and themes informing literary study.

3. The student will be able to analyze a literary text with respect to form, contextual, and thematic matters.

4. The student will be able to conduct sophisticated literary research involving a variety of primary and secondary materials and/or library catalogues and databases and properly document that research.

5. The student will understand and be able to apply both traditional (e.g., New Critical) and current (e.g., postcolonial, feminist) literary theories/critical methodologies.

Obviously, these apply more directly to literature courses than a creative writing workshop, but we’ll adapt them as fits our creative goals.

Here’s grade breakdown:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Grading Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>100-90 = A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Editing</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>89-80 = B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Story</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>79-70 = C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Story</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>69-60 = D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Story</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>59-0 = F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flash Fiction</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Portfolio</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The official program objectives (the sort the state makes us construct) are as follows:

**GRADING**
How will I grade creative work? It’s partially subjective, of course—matters of taste do come to play—but I give you some ground rules in both format and content that should clarify what I’m looking for. Effort counts, too. I don’t know who said it, but art really is 98% perspiration, 2% inspiration. Perspire and you’ll
get an A. If you are spectacularly gifted and turn in sloppy work, you won’t get an
A. I will also grade you on your comments to your fellow writers and on your
presentation and analysis assignments, which I expect to be thoughtful and
informative.

As for PEER EDITING (10%), you must read every story that is up for
discussion, even if you are bored or offended by its content. If you don’t think a
piece is effective, we can discuss that in a constructive way, but you can’t choose
not to do the work because your aesthetics or sensibilities are different than the
authors. Authors have a responsibility not to use gratuitous sex, violence, or
hateful situations, yet there may be a situation when sex, violence, or hateful
situations are used effectively. I’m sure we’ll talk a lot about those issues.

I expect you to write helpful comments on the stories you read for workshop and
a brief summary of your advice should appear at the end of each of your peer’s
stories. Be constructive, neither too negative nor too vaguely positive. Editing is a
skill and an art you will develop this semester. I don’t ask to see the editing you
give each other, but I do ask for feedback about the workshops. If someone isn’t
offering advice or is unduly harsh, I hear about it, believe me. And I do take that
into the peer editing grade.

ATTENDANCE & PARTICIPATION (10%)
Since we meet only once a week, attendance and active participation in this
course are absolutely necessary. I give every student one excused absence. More
than one absence will lower your final grade. If you are sick or otherwise unable
to attend class, please get in touch with me. Being absent is not an excuse for
missed information or assignments. You should either call or write me or a
classmate to find out what went on in class if you are not able to attend. Brief
assignments are only accepted late if you have an excused absence. I don’t
accept late work on major assignments, especially stories intended for
group workshop.

You are responsible for the material discussed in class on the days you were
absent. You must return all essays to the writers, with editorial comments, even if
you are absent on that workshop night.

Please do not be late for class. One late arrival is excusable; consistent tardiness is
rude and will affect your grade.

Class participation is incredibly important in a course designed like this. This is a
workshop course, meaning we’re going to talk at length about your writing,
sample writing, and writing done by your classmates. This is a conversation. You
must talk in this course. Silence is golden, most of the time, but not in a
discussion-based course. When I ask a question, give me an answer. I hope that
you will respond not only to me but also to others in the class. I grade class
participation in 2 main ways: be prepared to talk about any readings on the
day we discuss them in class and listen to your classmates when they are
discussing the readings. There is always a chance that you will think that the person talking is a complete idiot, but then again, they may say something brilliant. Always treat people with respect and try to gain the most from what they are saying and you will be treated in the same way. Don’t talk while others have the floor and don’t whisper or pass notes. That’s rude. As you can tell by now, I’m not a fan of rude behavior.

**EXAMS (0%)**
There will be no exams in this course. So, relax, be happy, no tests. The flipside, of course—and there is always a flipside—is that your grade is substantially based on the writing you do outside of class. You must be disciplined about your writing this semester.

**STORIES (50%)**
You’re going to write four stories this semester, the first three each a full-length work (2000 to 4000 words). The last fiction assignment is to compose a piece of flash fiction (under 1000 words) which you will read aloud to the class. I don’t have any topic guidelines or thematic concerns, except: try to work outside your comfort zone. If you’ve never written literary fiction, try it. If you’ve never written speculative fiction, do that. I hope the varied inspire you.

And, as I suggest to all of my students, I do ask that you avoid gratuitous sex, violence, or hateful characters. Notice the word gratuitous. Sometimes sex, violence, and hateful characters have their place in accomplished fiction, but it takes skill. If you really want to write a disturbingly graphic story, see me. Perhaps you’ll convince me that your skills are up to it and we’ll let the class decide if you succeeded.

All in-class assignments must be written neatly in ink. Stories and out-of-class exercises must be printed by computer; no handwriting for those. Staple sequential pages. Your work must be presented in a neat and professional manner.

**PRESENTATIONS (10%)**
You will each present on a contemporary author of your choosing. Supply the class with a short story by your author (so we can read it ahead of time), then analyze and explain an aspect of your chosen author’s craft in a brief 5-10 minute presentation. We will also have a question and answer session after each presentation.

**PORTFOLIO (20%)**
The last thing you hand in this semester will be an anthology of the work you produced this semester. I expect it to be revised work; nobody produces their sharpest stuff first time out. The work you write in October will reappear in December, but it must be in a more polished form. Save your early drafts. I want to see multiple versions, so I can compare how your manuscript has improved. We’ll talk more about this as the semester progresses, but my warning now is you
must be prepared to revise. Writing is revision. (Say it again: writing is revision. It should be one of your mantras.) I also want a brief self-analysis of your work: your strengths, your weaknesses, your intentions, etc.

WITHHELD GRADES SEMESTER GRADES POLICY
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/

SFASU values students’ mental health and the role it plays in academic and overall student success. SFA provides a variety of resources to support student’s mental health and wellness. Many of these resources are free, and all of them are confidential.

On-campus Resources:
SFASU Counseling Services
www.sfasu.edu/counselingservices
3rd Floor Rusk Building
936-468-2401

SFASU Human Services Counseling Clinic
www.sfasu.edu/humanservices/139.asp
Human Services Room 202
936-468-1041

Crisis Resources:
Burke 24-hour crisis line 1(800) 392-8343
Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1(800) 273-TALK (8255)
Crisis Text Line: Text HELLO to 741-741

ACCEPTABLE STUDENT BEHAVIOR
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** (This is the official SFASU policy statement)

Academic integrity is the 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. 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. Please read the complete policy at:

http://www.sfasu.edu/policies/academic_integrity.asp.

**KEEP ME INFORMED**

Please keep me informed about anything you feel I should know about you, particularly if you feel it affects your performance in class. If you are having any difficulty with the material, please know that I will be more than happy to confer with you regarding it.

**OTHER THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW**

I will **FAIL** the following:

- Stories not handed in on time for peer workshopping.
- Incomplete drafts.
- Missing your own workshop discussion
Works not typed in standard format or with an abundance of spelling/grammatical errors.

Gratuitously nasty peer editing. No raking anybody over the coals in here. (Constructive criticism is not out for blood. It’s not falsely complimentary either. But that’s another issue.)

**Last advice**
Have fun. Be observant. Be open-minded. Be disciplined. Challenge yourself. Like the Greeks said, life is short, art is long. Make some art.

**Tentative Syllabus**

8/24
Introduction to course and each other. Explain and discuss the goals of the course. Why are you here? What do I want? HOMEWORK: Read handouts. Get yourself a journal. Begin work on first story.

8/31
Discuss handouts. Discuss journals. In-class assignments. HOMEWORK: Read handouts. First group, finish first stories for workshop.

9/7
Discuss stories. 1st group turn in stories for workshop. HOMEWORK: Read & comment on first stories. Read handout.

9/14
**Workshop 1**
HOMEWORK: Read & comment on next stories. Read assigned story.

9/21
**Workshop 1**
HOMEWORK: Write next story.

9/28
**Workshop 1**
HOMEWORK: Read & comment on next stories. Read one story from each anthology.

10/5
**Workshop 2**
HOMEWORK: Read & comment on next stories. Read one story from each anthology.

10/12
**Workshop 2**
HOMEWORK: Read & comment on next stories and read one story from each anthology.

10/19
**Workshop 2**
10/26 **Workshop 3**: Read & comment on next stories and read one story from each anthology.

11/2 **Workshop 3**  
HOMEWORK: Read & comment on next stories and read

11/9 **Workshop 3**  
HOMEWORK: Read & comment on last workshop stories and read one story from each anthology.

11/16 **Presentations on authors of your choice.**  
HOMEWORK: Write a short-short story.

11/23 **Thanksgiving Holiday**

11/30 **Read original flash aloud to class.**  
Final Workshop of the semester.  
HOMEWORK: Revise each of your stories for the Final Portfolio.

*There is no Final Exam for this course.*

Turn in your Final Portfolio on **Wednesday, December 8th at noon to my office, LAN 214.**

*No late portfolios accepted.*

Have a great winter break!