ENGL 296.01 – Techniques of Fiction  
Tues-Thurs 8:50 am – 10:10 am  
Location: Fisk305

Syllabus and Course Overview

Fall 2016 | Wesleyan University  
Instructor: Matthew Burnside  
Email: mburnside@wesleyan.edu  
Office: 285 Court Street, 303A  
Office Hours: By Appointment, Mondays & Wednesdays 3:00-4:00

“Sometimes I make up stories. And sometimes they make up me. Who can tell the difference? A tint of black agitates a patch of green. An amethyst attracts Peru. And here it is. Actual as skin. Explicit as a pin.” —John Olson

“He brought a door with him and placed it against the hillside. Then he went in and closed it. What happened to him next is not known, because the door was for him alone. Later when they heard him scream, there was nothing anyone could do.” —Norman Lock

Techniques of Fiction  
This is a course about possibilities, namely the possibilities of language and narrative. We will approach fiction, flash fiction, interactive fiction, and hybrid forms as disciples of Yes, open to everything. We will encounter strange and rich literary landscapes together and seek to understand how we use our words to build tactile worlds and living, breathing characters on the page. We will learn the various tools at our disposal and how we might use them to create certain desired effects. We will work hard and play hard, read the good, the bad, and the weird, and emerge in the end with a better understanding of our own work as writers. This class will be divided into two parts: the first half will consist of activities and various writing exercises, along with lectures, and the second half will be reserved for workshop, in which you'll produce your own writing and discuss the writing of your peers. You'll be exposed to a generous survey of classics as well as more contemporary literature in this course. Some of the writers whose work you'll meet: Graham Greene, Flannery O'Connor, Karen Russell, J.D. Salinger, Ursula K. Le Guin, Shirley Jackson, and more.

This course is writing and reading-intensive, so consider your commitment to it before adding it to your roster. In your own writing, I will ask you to be stylistically self-aware, and to develop the voice and language of your story in concert with its goals. We will attempt to merge these two aspects of creative writing into work that is self-consistent and interesting on all levels. I expect you to participate actively in every class discussion. You will be evaluating your classmates' work, and vice versa, weekly. Attendance and participation are mandatory.

Required Materials
° All other stories will be provided by your professor  
° A journal (in which you'll complete all of your writing exercises and homework assignments)  
° Eventually, you'll need a receptacle for your portfolio but we'll discuss what this should look like later on  
° Enthusiasm  
° An intellectual curiosity in what makes for compelling storytelling  
° A willingness to read closely, write/revise painstakingly, and offer civil constructive criticism to your peers  
° A Wesleyan e-mail account

Grading  
The fruit of your work throughout the semester will culminate in a final portfolio, from which 50% of your grade will be derived. This portfolio will include both original and revised drafts of all workshopped pieces, your writing exercises, and an artist's statement (a 2-3 page double-spaced document in which you briefly describe the fundamental underpinnings of your work, which literary tradition it falls into, and what unique craft issues you wrestled with during its production).

The other half of your grade will be derived from your active participation in class, which entails speaking up during workshop and discussion, writing thoughtful and courteous feedback on your peer letters, being present (not tardy) for the opening writing exercise, and generally maintaining an open attitude to the material with genuine investment in your own intellectual and artistic development.

Participation – 50 pts
° Workshop input/critiques – 50% (25 pts)  
° Writing exercises – 50% (25 pts)

Final Portfolio – 50 pts
° Artist's statement, writing exercises, and homework assignments – 50% (25 pts)  
° Original and revised drafts of all workshopped pieces – 50% (25 pts)

Total = 100 pts

All grading is done on a standard letter +/− scale. Because this is a creative course, I will not be grading you based on the quality of your work, but on the level of care and dedication you have for your work and the class in general. A-grade students in participation come to class, actively participate in discussions (the times I call on you don’t count), group and individual projects, and workshops consistently and frequently. The work in an A-grade portfolio shows me that you are trying hard in your own writing, that you care about what you create, and that you revise as well as you possibly can.
Attendance and Participation
My attendance policy is in bold below—note that this is not a class where it’s okay to only show up to turn in your work and take the final. There is no final (your portfolio is your final, rather) and your work and participation are your grade. In the event that you have an unavoidable absence, such as a doctor’s appointment or other obligation, let me know (if you know about it beforehand, tell me about it beforehand) and I’ll see what I can do to help you.

Attendance and absence policy: Attendance and active participation are absolutely vital in this course; our time is at a premium. Therefore, you are allowed 2 UNEXCUSED absences for the entire semester. After these 2 absences, I will fail your participation grade. After 3 unexcused absences, I will fail you for the entire course.

Late: don’t be late.

Formatting for Assignments
Formatting for creative work is varied, but in general, the rules are: 12-pt Times New Roman or Garamond font, standard margins, with your name and class information at the top of the 1st page. Multiple pages should be numbered. Double-space your lines.

Turning in Work
I will not accept late work under any circumstance except documented medical emergency or other unavoidable event. Hangovers and printers running out of ink are not considered unavoidable events. In general, work for workshop should be turned in to me in class one week before its workshop.

Classroom Behavior
Because this is a college class, I expect you to act like the mature adults you are, and I will treat you as such. A lot of what we’ll be talking about will be sensitive and possibly controversial for some of you. I expect you to talk calmly about sex and sexuality, race, religion, politics, philosophy etc. You won’t be able to get the most out of this class if we have to constantly censor our discussions, especially since creative work frequently deals with these sensitive topics. However, this is also not a license to slander, spew profanity, nor incite others with harmful comments. I expect you to be respectful, especially when we talk about hard subjects.

Your phone and other electronics should be off during class, and texting is absolutely forbidden. Seriously, it can wait an hour or two. If you are expecting a very important call or message during class, please tell me so I can allow you to take it without problems. Computers are fine for taking notes, but not for Facebook, Twitter etc. This is college; your attention should be on the class.

Grade Complaints and Questions
My contact information is listed on this syllabus. If you receive a grade you are unsatisfied with for any reason, please come talk with me. If you have any questions about the course, email me, or set up an appointment to see me.

Changes
I reserve the right to amend and append this syllabus and schedule of assignments at any time, with notice, and probably will at some point depending on how we move through the material. If I make changes, I will announce them in class or by email.

Schedule: All assignments are due the next week, unless otherwise noted.

Opening Exercise: Slip Prompts
Mini-lesson: Confronting the White Abyss of the Blank Page + Traditional Modes of Storytelling + Workshop Sign-up + Empathy/“This is Water” video - David Foster Wallace (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIqTLRoUo)
Mock Workshop.
Homework: Read “A Good Man is Hard to Find” by Flannery O’Connor and “To Kill a Man” by Jack London (http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204559045577166030157604896.html); Play online game “Small Worlds”

WEEK 2 – Tues. Sept. 13 / Thurs. Sept. 15
Opening Exercise: Constraints
Mini-lesson: Process + POV + Shape of Stories + Detail
Homework: Read “Ripple” by Denzel J. Hankinson and “The Destroyers” by Graham Greene + Workshop pieces + Critiques

WEEK 3 – Tues. Sept. 20 / Thurs. Sept. 22
Opening Exercise: Household Objects
Mini-lesson: Omission & Exclusion + Characterization & Character Arcs + Arcs of Attention Workshop.
Homework: Read “St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves” by Karen Russell and “Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes” by J.D. Salinger (http://dibache.com/text.asp?cat=51&id=174); Workshop pieces + Critiques

WEEK 4 – Tues. Sept. 27 / Thurs. Sept. 29
Opening Exercise: All Dialogue Sketch
Homework: Read “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson and “Navigators” by Mike Meginnis + Workshop pieces + Critiques

Opening Exercise: Alien Tourist
Homework: Read selected flash pieces (TBA); Workshop pieces + Critiques

Opening Exercise: “The Solution to ______’s Problems”
Mini-lesson: Form = Content + Experimentation
Workshop.
Homework: Read “An Index of How Our Family Was Killed” and “Contrapasso” by Roxane Gay + Workshop pieces + Critiques

Opening Exercise: Visual Stimulant Flash Exercise
Mini-lesson: Appropriation, Postmodern Approaches, Flash & Hybrid forms
Workshop.
Homework: Read “Memento Mori” by Jonathan Nolan + Workshop pieces + Critiques

WEEK 8 – NO CLASS on Tues. Oct. 25 (Fall Break) / Thurs. Oct. 27 -
Opening Exercise: Revisionist Tale
Mini-lesson: Fragmentation & Nonlinear Storytelling + Conflict + “Out of Gas”
Workshop.
Homework: Read “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” by Ambrose Bierce and selections from “Grim Tales” by Norman Lock; Workshop pieces + Critiques

WEEK 9 – Tues. Nov. 1 / Thurs. Nov. 3 –
Opening Exercise: Detective Case File
Mini-lesson: Tension + Strangeness + Endings Part II: 7 Shapes of Resolution & Their Narrative Effects
Workshop.
Homework: Selected new media works (TBA); Workshop pieces + Critiques

WEEK 10 – Tues. Nov. 8 / Thurs. Nov. 10 –
Opening Exercise: Choose Your Own Adventure
Mini-lesson: Intro to New Media Writing + Digital & Hypertext Narratives
Workshop.
Homework: Read “Johnny Mnemonic” by William Gibson + Workshop pieces + Critiques

WEEK 11 – Tues. Nov. 15 / Thurs. Nov. 17 –
Opening Exercise: TBA
Mini-lesson: World Building + Genre + “Villains”
Workshop.
Homework: Workshop pieces + Critiques

WEEK 12 – NO CLASS (Thanksgiving Break)

WEEK 13 – Tues. Nov. 29 / Thurs. Dec. 1 -
Opening Exercise: Collaborative
Double Workshop (if needed) OR [craft lessons as voted on by the class]
Homework: Final Revisions

Opening Exercise: Something is Missing
Mini-lesson: Good Submission Practices + “Being a Writer” + Parting Letters
Peer revisions of final portfolio pieces.
**Portfolio due next time**

FINAL EXAM WEEK – **Portfolio due**
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WORKSHOP DATES

*Stories due 1 week before your workshop date; you will be responsible for printing out hardcopies for all of your peers to be handed out the week before your workshop.

**All stories should also be emailed as a doc or PDF file to mburnside@wesleyan.edu

***All stories should be formatted as follows: Times New Roman/Arial/Garamond, 12 pt. font, double-spaced; PAGE NUMBERS must be included; include a centered TITLE; stapled, not paper clipped; finally, a left-hand header should include:

YOUR NAME
BURNSIDE, FICTION
WORKSHOP DATE (DAY WE'RE DISCUSSING YOUR WORK)
TURNED-IN BY DATE (DAY YOU EMAILED IT TO ME)

****Everyone will be workshopped NO LESS than 2 times.

*****You will submit no less than 10 to no more than 25 pages for each story, and two stories total for the semester, though more may be included – and indeed, are welcome – in your final portfolio. Remember: QUALITY over QUANTITY is most important.

******All stories will be revised and polished.

THURS. OCT. 13:

THURS. OCT. 20:

THURS. OCT. 27:

THURS. NOV. 3:

THURS. NOV. 10:

THURS. NOV. 17:

NO CLASS / THANKSGIVING BREAK

THURS. DEC. 1:

THURS. SEPT. 22:

THURS. SEPT. 29:

THURS. OCT. 6: