

MA IN CREATIVE WRITING

LITCM017 The Art of Short Fiction

Tutor: Jean McNeil

Autumn Semester 2008

Office hours and Room TBC

Wednesdays 2pm–5pm

Introduction

Short fiction is too often defined in terms of what it is not – namely, a novel. Whether stories, novellas or experimental short fiction, short fiction is an art form in its own right. While acknowledging that there are no ‘rules’ as to what makes a good short story, we will look at the expectations and technical challenges created by the form, and in so doing to sharpen our analytical and critical faculties. This is predominantly a practical, workshop-based course oriented at writing short fiction, although students will also be asked to form critical opinions and perspectives on published short stories, the technical aspects of writing in the form, and on themes and trends in short fiction.

Assessment

A piece of original short fiction, whether a complete story, several stories, or an extract of a longer novella, minimum 3,000 words, maximum 5,000 words in length will be assessed.

Course Aims

To develop students’ awareness of the history and development of the short fiction form, its technical and aesthetic requirements, and the publishing market realities of the short fiction form; to sharpen critical faculties with regard to the analysis and appreciation of the short story form; to participate in weekly seminars where published short stories, novellas, and students’ work-in-progress will be discussed; to encourage experimentation and originality within the short fiction form; to write an original piece of short fiction; to outline genres, expectations and markets for the publication of short fiction, both in the UK and abroad.

Course Structure

This course will run on Wednesday afternoons, 2pm-5pm, from 26 September until 12 December, with a Reading Week break the week of 5 November.

The course will look at the following issues:

1. History of the form.
2. Genres in the English-language short story.
3. Short fiction in other languages/writing cultures.
4. Craft and technique – through writing workshops.
5. Theme – a look at contemporary themes and intents.
6. Publishing – venues, strategies, issues.

Structure of the Seminars

Each seminar will begin with a short lecture, followed by questions and feedback, followed by student presentation on a set piece of short fiction or critical reading. A 10-minute coffee break will be followed by a writing workshop and critical feedback for the remainder of the seminar.

Requirements

Original short fiction: 5,000 words of short fiction, either in the form of a complete story, or two pieces of short fiction, or a section of a novella. To be discussed with the tutor.

Submission deadline TBC.

Course workbook: notes, sketches, ideas for a collection of short fiction. Students will be asked to bring new written work, or an idea for a new short story, to each class. This is not assessed for marks, but it is very important that this be adhered to for the duration of the course.

Student presentations: Each student will present a critical and personal reflection on a piece of short fiction through the course.

Reading materials

Many will be given out in the form of photocopies; reading and assignments for the next class will be given out at least one week in advance. Occasionally you may need to get an entire collection or critical work from the library.

Critical Literature

The Short Story: the Reality of Artifice by Charles E May
The Elements of Short Fiction – a handout.

'Happy Endings' by Margaret Atwood
[See: <http://users.ipfw.edu/ruflethe/endings.htm>]
The Broken Estate and The Irresponsible Self by James Wood

Collections/Novellas

Death in Venice by Thomas Mann (novella)
Any collection of stories by Chekhov
The Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad
Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage by Alice Munro
Runaway by Alice Munro
City of Boys by Beth Nugent
Self-Help by Lorrie Moore
Collected Stories/The Snows of Kilimanjaro by Ernest Hemingway
Pedro Páramo by Juan Rulfo (novella)

Course Plan

September 24th: Introductions; course aims. Assignment of weekly student presentations. Discussion of expectations.

Assigned reading *for the following week*:

1. Edgar Allan Poe, bio, some thoughts on the tale and 'The Tell-Tale Heart'.
2. Anton Chekhov, 'The Lady with the Pet Dog'

Recommended reading: James Wood, 'What Chekhov Meant by Life'

October 1st: History and form of the short story. *Student presentation on last week's reading. Writing workshop.*

Assigned reading *for the following week*: Joseph Conrad, 'The Secret Sharer'

Recommended reading: Conrad, 'The Heart of Darkness'

October 8th: Psychology and development of the short form. *Student presentation, writing workshop.*

Assigned reading *for the following week*: Thomas Mann, 'Death in Venice'

Recommended reading: Critical handout on Thomas Mann's stories.

October 15th: The novella.

Assigned reading: Ernest Hemingway – 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro' and 'Hills like White Elephants' from *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*

Recommended reading (1): Critical Handout on Hemingway's stories;

Recommended reading (2) Jean Rhys – ‘Let them call it Jazz’ from *Tigers are Better Looking*.

Recommended reading (3) Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* and *Passing*

October 22nd: Modernism in the European and American short story/novella. *Student presentation* – Hemingway. Writing workshop.

Assigned reading: ‘City of Boys’ and ‘Cocktail Hour’ by Beth Nugent

Recommended reading: ‘Self-Help’ (collection) by Lorrie Moore.

October 29th: Contemporary American short stories (1); voice, tense. *Student presentation*. Writing workshop.

Assigned reading 1: George Saunders, ‘The End of FIRPO in the World’

Assigned reading 2: Thom Jones, ‘I Want to Live!’ and ‘Unchain My Heart’

READING WEEK – w/o November 3, no class.

November 12th: Contemporary American short stories (2); voice, tone. *Student presentation*. Writing workshop.

Assigned reading: Juan Rulfo, ‘*Pedro Páramo*’

Recommended reading: ‘The Interpreter of Maladies’ by Jhumpa Lahiri; ‘Drown’ by Junot Diaz.

November 19th: The short story in other languages/cultures; Transnationalism/transhybridity. *Student presentation*. Writing Workshop.

Assigned reading 1: ‘As Birds Bring Forth the Sun’ by Alistair McLeod

Assigned reading 2: ‘Passion’ by Alice Munro, from *Runaway*.

Recommended reading: ‘La Ragazza’ by Andrea Lee

November 26th: Traditionalism in the contemporary short story, ‘The *New Yorker* short story’ *Student presentation*. Writing Workshop.

Assigned reading: AL Kennedy, story TBA; Ali Smith, story TBA.

December 3rd: UK short story writers.

Assigned reading (1): ‘Mouths, Open’ and ‘Grace’ by Lisa Moore

‘Not Her Real Name’ by Emily Perkins.

Anne Carson dossier

December 10th: LAST CLASS Experimentalism; Contemporary short fiction: UK. Themes and intents.. *Student presentation*. Writing Workshop.

Due date for assessed short fiction TBC