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Fall 9-1-2020

### CRWR 510.01: Fiction Workshop

Boris Fishman

*University of Montana, Missoula*, [boris.fishman@umontana.edu](mailto:boris.fishman@umontana.edu)

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## CRWR 510 •

Fall 2020 • W 6:00-8:50 • Room: Gallagher 113

Boris Fishman • [boris.fishman@mso.umt.edu](mailto:boris.fishman@mso.umt.edu) • Office: LA 130

Office hours: W 4:00-6:00

### Appetizer

**Arnold Schoenberg:** “I find those who need encouragement must be discouraged, because only those should compose to whom creation is a ‘must,’ a necessity, a passion, such as would not stop composing if they were discouraged a thousand times.”

It doesn’t have to be quite so certain for you, but presumably, there is no one in this class who is exploring a graduate degree in writing fiction without a highly self-motivated, accountable, and passionate commitment to the craft. So I hope it’s largely unnecessary to spell out most of the etiquette guidelines that follow.

### Learning outcomes

In this class, we will use published stories, craft manuals, and workshopping of each other’s stories to learn how to be better readers, better writers, and maybe even better human beings. What you take out of the class will be almost directly proportional to what you put in.

We will also practice being opinionated without being judgmental. **Tolstoy:** “If I were told that I could write a novel in which I should set forth the apparently correct attitudes toward all social questions, I would not devote even two hours of work to such a novel.”

### Grading

You will be graded on:

- Attendance (please see policy below) – 25%
- Sincerity of effort in your writing and critiques of writing by others – 50%
- Class participation – 25%
- There is *no* final project or extra credit. There is only the work you do throughout the semester.

### Prep materials

I am not asking you to purchase any books. In exchange, this class will involve a fair amount of printing. I am not asking for this without mindfulness of the environmental impact – there is no substitute for engaging with the work actively, pen or pencil in hand. Of course, it’s possible to do so electronically, but **laptops and cell phones will not be permitted in class**, so hard copies it will have to be.

### Withdrawal/dropping

Please see the university calendar for all deadlines: [UM Registrar Calendar](#)

A note about this supremely annoying moment in time

This is a *very* large class, about twice the ideal. The circumstances that created this situation are as outside my control as yours – though I’m happy to discuss them – so let’s just do the best we can together. Workshopping your stories will be our focus.

### Attendance/absence policy

**Please see the end of this syllabus for an extended discussion of the absence policy.**

**Students who know they will be absent should contact me in advance.** Communication, and the trust it builds up, goes a *very* long way. The more often and clearly you communicate about your needs – *before* your lateness or absence, not *after* – the more understanding and accommodation you are likely to receive. There are 13 other people counting on your presence for the class to run with maximum effectiveness. Please be respectful of their time and mine.

### Lateness:

Please be on time. Chronic lateness will result in docked grades.

### Absence:

We get to meet barely a dozen times. There can be no unexcused absences without repercussions for your grade. Three or more unexcused absences will result in a failing grade. Here’s the breakdown.

- 1<sup>st</sup> unexcused absence: final grade drops one letter grade (example: A drops to B)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> unexcused absence: final grade drops two letter grades (example A drops to C)
- 3<sup>rd</sup> unexcused absence: final grade is an F

## Class structure

### **Published stories/craft essays/*Paris Review* interviews:**

The plan right now is to use a hybrid model where those who wish to submit twice submit twice (and also do a weekly self-conceived exercise in response to the reading, for which see below) and those who wish to submit three times do that (with much encouragement from me to do the exercise as well, as I think your work will only benefit from it). The weeks when we are workshopping only two stories (roughly two weeks out of three) will allow us to spend more time on the other assigned reading. Of course, you should do it all the time.

I want you to have a voice in the stories and craft essays we read and discuss. In the second half of the semester, as discussed, I will ask you to contribute both. If you’d prefer not to do this, just let me know and I’ll do the assigning in your slot.

I want to know what kind of thinking or writing the stories/craft essays/interviews spur you to. **I require (if you’re submitting two stories) and encourage (if you’re submitting three) you to bring to class on Wednesday a printed 500-word response to this reading.** (Same style

conventions as for story submissions.) It can take any form you want. It could be a writing exercise you chose to do in response to what you read; it could be notes you took on it; it can be story-worthy things you noticed during the week. The idea is to get you thinking about craft, not to give you busy work. I would use it to write scenes imitating the author's voice, or a scene I know won't go into the story I'm working on (as a way of releasing some pressure on it), or to just take close notes, which I find the time to do less often than I'd like. This is extra work, but I don't think you'd regret doing it. When we advance to a certain point, we forget to stretch, to remember that writing can be more than a narrow focus on the story at hand.

NB: Right now, the only issues of *Paris Review* electronically available to us (through Mansfield Library, at [The Paris Review](#)) are 1994-2000, so your choices of which interviews will read will have to come mostly from these years. Due to the inconvenience of searching the database, I have gone through and selected the options, which appear at the end of this syllabus. All you have to do is choose. You are not required to print or mark up these interviews, though you are encouraged to. We *will* discuss them in class. You *are* expected to look up and be able to refer to some basic biographical and artistic information about the author in question. Dare to go beyond Wikipedia.

As mentioned, our focus will be the workshopping of the stories submitted for that week. Each of you will write and workshop at least two original stories. **Please e-mail your story to the class (and to me) no later than class time the Wednesday a week before it will be discussed.** Aim for stories that are at least 10 pages and at most 25 unless there's a good, considered reason to go short (or long). If you're submitting a revision, it has to be substantive. Novel excerpts are welcome, with the necessary context.

### Story writing requirements and etiquette:

#### DON'Ts

- a. Please do not turn in stories that have spelling errors.
- b. Please do not turn in stories that have not been proofread.
- c. Please do not turn in stories that are not grammatical, unless lack of grammar or non-standard grammar has purpose in your story.
- d. Please do not turn in stories that do not respect *some kind of* convention of fiction-writing. You can mark dialogue with double quotation marks, with single quotation marks, or with dashes – but please stick with one, and please use it every time someone speaks. Please put your commas inside your quotation marks. Etc.

#### DOs

- f. Please identify your stories with your name.
- g. Please double-space your stories.
- h. Please use 12-point Times New Roman font.
- i. Please number the pages in your stories.

- You are welcome and encouraged to write about people who are not like you, but please take care not to traffic in lazy stereotypes. Political correctness – NO. Curiosity, empathy, goodwill, and sensitivity – YES. Don't worry about making mistakes – as long as they're sincere, they're a

great opportunity to discuss something meaningful. This is a safe space for exploration, learning, trying things out – as long as the trying is sincere. We're all on the same team. Let's stay there. If you're not certain about how to handle something, please ask.

- In your stories, be as experimental and non-traditional as you like, but respect us by turning in work into which you've put genuine effort. You will be welcome to participate in the discussion of your story, but:

- "You didn't get it" is not a useful response to feedback. If more than one or two people didn't get something, it might be because you could do a better job with it. Have a listen – you can always ignore it later.

- "It really happened that way" is not a useful response – great fiction has a very different structure from real life.

- "It's supposed to be vague" is not a useful response – ambiguity (though never vagueness) has a place in great fiction, but in clarity is never a part of it. More like double-clarity.

- On the other hand, not everything you hear from your classmates (or me) will be useful. Feel free to ignore some, or all, of it. Trust your gut.

### Story reading requirements and etiquette:

Please print out the story, read it twice, mark it up, compose a **500-word critique** about what you think worked and didn't, print two copies of the critique (same style conventions as for story submissions), bring it all to class, and return the marked-up story + critique to the author, and the second copy of the critique to me. Five hundred words is not a little – but your classmates depend on your close attention to their work.

There are too many of us to go around the room one by one, and I don't like doing that, anyway – the point is to get a conversation going. Please volunteer your thoughts, or be prepared to be called on. The conversation will benefit from having everyone's voice, but if you are strenuously opposed to speaking, let me know.

### DON'Ts

- "I didn't like it" is not adequate criticism. "I didn't think there was enough at stake for the main character when they lose the dog – they never liked the dog in the first place" is.

- "I didn't understand it" is not adequate criticism. "I couldn't understand whether, in the end, the character becomes the dog, or remains human" is.

- "I don't like science fiction" is not adequate criticism. "I think that just because this is science fiction doesn't mean the universe shouldn't have rules and logic of its own" is.

- As I hope does not require saying, no ad hominem attacks – no attacks, period. You don't have to like the story, but you do have to help the author figure out how to make it stronger, in the context of what they were trying to achieve.

### DOs

- Your criticism should be like your writing: Concrete, specific, vivid. Please cite examples.

Please feel free to offer alternative solutions to what you see as the story's challenges, as long as they're suggestions rather than prescriptions.

- Please evaluate the story in terms of what the author was trying to achieve. If the characters are detached and remote, is that because the author seems to want to make them come alive and just

hasn't yet figured out how to do it, or because it's an intentional evocation of something essential to the story? Just because it's intentional doesn't mean it works, of course, and if you think it doesn't, you should say so (gently). But it's important to try to work from how they do it rather than how you'd do it.

- If you're looking for how to begin, it can help to start by summarizing what you understood to be the point, the contract, the intended achievement of the story. You might continue by specifying what worked well – and extreme concreteness is just as critical here. Then what didn't.

- Every story has to grapple with structure, pacing, characterization, dialogue, stakes, the usual craft business. Even alternative universes need logic and rules. Even autofiction needs to be shaped and distilled. If you're trying to figure out how to continue, work down the checklist.

### More important stuff:

- **Plagiarism** is defined in the [UM Student Conduct Code](#) as representing another person's words, ideas, data, or materials as one's own. In this course it will result in a failing grade. Or, as the Provost's office puts it, "All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code: ([UM Student Conduct](#))."

- Students with disabilities may request reasonable modifications by contacting me. The University of Montana assures equal access to instruction for students with disabilities in collaboration with instructors and Disability Services for Students, which is located in Lommasson Center 154. The University does not permit fundamental alterations of academic standards or retroactive modifications. Please see [Disability Services](#) for more information.

**There is more information at the bottom of this syllabus. In brief, a DSS letter by itself will not be adequate as a justification for unlimited missed classes.** In concert with DSS, the English Department has arrived at a policy that requires a failing grade after 8 absences for a student with reasonable accommodations.

- As the semester progresses, the class may need to amend this syllabus and schedule to suit changing needs, such as a shift to remote instruction. The university expects you to have ready access to computers or other electronic devices that will allow you to meet and communicate online.

- Moodle will not play a large, if any, role in our class. I will e-mail you everything.

### And:

John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*, p. 115: "Sentimentality, in all its forms, is the attempt to get some effect without providing due cause. (I take it for granted that the reader understands the difference between *sentiment* in fiction, that is, emotion or feeling, and *sentimentality*, emotion or feeling that rings false, usually because achieved by some form of cheating or exaggeration. Without sentiment, fiction is worthless. Sentimentality, on the other hand, can make mush of the finest characters, actions, and ideas.)"

One big problem of contemporary fiction is that in fearing sentimentality, the author forgets to include sentiment. So: Write from your heart, and write your heart out.

Week 1. August 19:

- Introductions, syllabus discussion, workshopping order, *Paris Review* selections, your turn at the wheel, switching Nov. 11 and 25

- **Craft:**

a. Zadie Smith, "Fascinated to Presume"

b. Leslie Epstein, "All right, not alright."

- **Stories:**

1) Amy Bonnaffons, "Horse"

2) Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, "Songs of the Eastern Slavs"

- *Paris Review* interview

- Story 1

Week 2. August 26:

- **Craft:**

a. James Wood, "Narrating," from *How Fiction Works*

b. Flannery O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" from *Mystery and Manners*

**Stories:**

1) Aleksandar Hemon, "A Coin" + "Love and Obstacles"

2) Mia Alvar, "Shadow Families"

- *Paris Review* interview x 2

- Stories 2-3

Week 3. Sep. 2:

- **Craft:**

a. Nadine Gordimer, "Adam's Rib: Fictions and Realities"

b. David Foster Wallace, "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky"

**Stories:**

1) Mary Gaitskill, "A Romantic Weekend" + "Secretary"

2) Anton Chekhov, "In the Ravine" + Introduction to "Chekhov: Stories for our Time"

- *Paris Review* interview x 2

- Stories 4-5

Week 4. Sep. 9:

- **Craft:**

a. Charles Baxter, "Dysfunctional Narratives" (1-20), "On Defamiliarization" (21-40), and "Stillness" (175-196), from *Burning Down the House*

- **Stories:**

1) Ottessa Moshfegh, pp. 1-42 from *Eileen*

2) Bernard Malamud, "The Last Mohican"

- *Paris Review* interview x 2

- Stories 6-8

Week 5. Sep. 16:

**Stories:**

1) Molly Antopol, "The Quietest Man"

- 2) Paul Beatty, pp. 3-35 from *The Sellout*
- 3) Franz Kafka, "A Hunger Artist"
- *Paris Review* interview x 2
- Stories 9-10

Week 6. Sep. 23:

**- Craft:**

- a. Zadie Smith, "Fail Better," "That Crafty Feeling," and "The Rise of the Essay"

**Story:**

- 1) George Saunders, "Love Letter"
- 2) Shirley Jackson, "The Daemon Lover"
- 3) David Bezmozgis, "Little Rooster" + "Immigrant City"
- *Paris Review* interview x 2
- Stories 11-12

Week 7. Sep. 30:

**- Craft:**

- a. David Huddle, "Down from the Pedestal: The Writer as Emotional Engineer"
- b. Andre Dubus, "The Habit of Writing"

**+ Story:**

- 1) Flannery O'Connor, "Parker's Back" + "How Racist Was Flannery O'Connor?" from *The New Yorker*.
- 2) Edith Pearlman, "Castle 4"
- + *Paris Review* interview x 2
- Stories 13-15

Week 8. Oct. 7:

- **Craft:** Students 1-2 + **Stories:** Students 1-2 + *Paris Review* interview x 2
- Stories 16-17

Week 9. Oct. 14:

- **Craft:** Students 3-4 + **Story:** Students 3-4 + *Paris Review* interview x 2
- Stories 18-19

Week 10. Oct. 21:

- **Craft:** Students 5-6 + **Story:** Students 5-6 + *Paris Review* interview x 2
- Stories 20-22

Week 11. Oct. 28:

- **Craft:** Students 7-8 + **Story:** Students 7-8 + *Paris Review* interview x 2
- Stories 23-24

Week 12. Nov. 4:

- **Craft:** Students 9-10 + **Story:** Students 9-10 + *Paris Review* interview x 2
- Stories 25-26

Week 13. Nov. 11:

- **Craft:** Students 11-12 + **Story:** Students 11-12 + *Paris Review* interview x 2
- Stories 27-29

Week 14. Nov. 18:

- **Craft:** Students 13-14 + **Story:** Students 13-14 + *Paris Review* interview x 2
- Stories 30-31

*The Paris Review*, “The Art of Fiction” interviews, 1994-2000 (with some options from poetry, nonfiction, screenwriting, etc.)

Spring 1994: Ken Kesey

Summer 1994: Alice Munro

Fall 1994: Louis Auchincloss

Winter 1994: Chinua Achebe, Czeslaw Milosz (**poetry**)

Spring 1995: Ted Hughes (poetry), Primo Levi

Summer 1995: P. D. James, Patrick O'Brian

Fall 1995: N/A

Winter 1995: Susan Sontag

Spring 1996: Billy Wilder (**screenwriting**), Richard Price

Summer 1996: Camilo Jose Cela, William F. Buckley, Jr.

Fall 1996: Richard Ford, Amos Oz

Winter 1996: Gary Snyder (**poetry**)

Spring 1997: David Mamet (**theater**), Wendy Wasserstein (**theater**), Sam Shepard (**theater**)

Summer 1997: John le Carré

Fall 1997: Seamus Heaney (**poetry**)

Winter 1997: Jeanette Winterson, Barney Rosset (**publishing**)

Spring 1998: Martin Amis

Summer 1998: Russell Banks, Ismail Kadare

Fall 1998: V. S. Naipaul

Winter 1998: Jose Saramago

Spring 1999: William Styron, Peter Matthiessen

Summer 1999: Robert Fagles (**translation**)

Fall 1999: Tahar ben Jelloun, Arthur Miller (**theater**)

Winter 1999: August Wilson (**theater**), Mavis Gallant

Spring 2000: N/A

Summer 2000: T. C. Boyle, Robert Giroux (**publishing**)

Fall 2000: Hunter S. Thompson (**journalism**), Gustaw Herling, William T. Vollmann

Winter 2000: N/A

**A couple of others that I have, with \*\*\* next to those we are reading:**

- Annie Proulx: PDF (Spring 2009)
- Tobias Wolff: PDF (Fall 2004)
- Bernard Malamud\*\*\*: PDF (Spring 1975)
- George Saunders\*\*\*: [The Paris Review - The Art of Fiction](#) (Winter 2019)
- Raymond Carver: PDF (Summer 1983)
- Nadine Gordimer\*\*\*: PDF (Summer 1983)

**Or any others you can find on the *Paris Review* site that are available in full.**

### Further info on absences:

Students who are registered for a course but do not attend the first two class meetings may be required to drop the course. This rule allows for early identification of class vacancies to permit other students to add classes. Students not allowed to remain must complete a drop form or drop the course through CyberBear to avoid receiving a failing grade.

Students are expected to attend all class meetings and complete all assignments for courses in which they are enrolled. I may excuse brief and occasional absences for reasons of illness, injury, family emergency, religious observance, cultural or ceremonial events, or participation in a University sponsored activity. (University sponsored activities include for example, field trips, ASUM service, music or drama performances, and intercollegiate athletics.) I will excuse absences for reasons of military service or mandatory public service; please provide appropriate documentation (see below).

Cultural or ceremonial leave allows excused absences for cultural, religious, and ceremonial purposes to meet the student's customs and traditions or to participate in related activities. To receive an authorized absence for a cultural, religious or ceremonial event the student or their advisor (proxy) must submit a formal written request to the instructor. This must include a brief description (with inclusive dates) of the cultural event or ceremony and the importance of the student's attendance or participation. Authorization for the absence is subject to approval by the instructor. Appeals may be made to the Chair, Dean or Provost. The excused absence or leave may not exceed five academic calendar days (not including weekends or holidays). Students remain responsible for completion or make-up of assignments as defined in the syllabus, at the discretion of the instructor.

Students in the National Guard or Reserves are permitted excused absences due to military training. Students must submit their military training schedule to their instructor at the **beginning of the semester**. Students must also make arrangements with the instructor to make up course work for absences due to military service.

As for the attendance policy: Without attending class, you cannot perform your role as a student involved in learning, planning, inventing, drafting; discussing reading and writing; learning and practicing rhetorical moves and concepts; or collaborating with your instructor and classmates. Remember, however, that this is why excused absences are allowed; but please reserve those for emergencies.

I reserve the right to adjust the policy in cases of significant, documented illness or emergency. Please note that instances of poor time management on your part do not constitute extenuating circumstances. If you must miss class, you are responsible for obtaining any handouts or assignments for the class from a classmate. Make sure you talk with me in advance if you are worried about meeting a deadline or missing a class.

**Lastly, just because an absence is excused does not mean you can have an unlimited amount.** The range of the flexibility and accommodation depends on the situation and your corroboration as per the requirements above. **(Please also see, below, the particulars of attendance accommodations for students with disabilities.)**

Further info on accommodation of students with disabilities ([Student Disability Services](#)):

“Class attendance and assignment policies are set by faculty or departments. When the functional limitations of the disability affect a student’s participation in his/her classes, the student’s coordinator may recommend flexibility with attendance and deadline policies as a possible reasonable modification.

However, flexibility with attendance and deadline policies may not be reasonable if class participation is determined as an essential component of the class.

Instructors do not have to grant retroactive modification requests from students.

When requesting extended deadlines, students must to notify the instructors before the due date and make arrangements with the instructor to determine the new due date. The extended deadlines should not compromise the integrity of the course.

Instructors determine policies about make-up work, missed quizzes or exams. The instructors have the right to hold to their academic standards and are not required to lower or modify essential course elements to provide modifications to students with disabilities.

Discussion between the instructor and the student is essential. Disability Services coordinators are available to participate in such discussions.”

## Preferred Name & Preferred Gender Pronouns

Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with differences of race, culture, religion, politics, sexual orientation, gender, gender variance, and nationalities. Class rosters are provided to the instructor with the student’s legal name. I will gladly honor your request to address you by an alternate name or gender pronoun. Please advise me of this preference early in the semester so that I may make appropriate changes to my records.

**University of Montana Policy on Discrimination, Harassment, Sexual Misconduct, Stalking and Retaliation:** <https://www.umt.edu/policies/browse/personnel/discrimination-harassment-sexual-misconduct-stalking-and-retaliation>

### **Covid-19 Safety Information**

- Mask use is required within the classroom
- The university had provided each student with a cleaning kit. The university expects students to clean their personal work space when they arrive for class, and before they leave the classroom.
- Classrooms may have one-way entrances / exits to minimize crowding.
- Please don't congregate outside the classroom before and after class
- The university is using specific seating arrangements to ensure social distancing and support contact tracing efforts
- The university may use attendance records to support contact tracing efforts
- Please try to avoid eating or drinking in the classrooms, as it requires mask removal
- As it goes without saying, if you feel sick and/or if you're exhibiting Covid-19 symptoms, or have reason to believe you have come in transmission contact with someone who has Covid-19, **please do not come to class** and contact the Curry Health Center at (406) 243-4330.
- Up-to-date Covid-19 Information from the University of Montana:
  - UM Coronavirus Website: [UMT Corona Virus Website](#)
  - UM Covid-19 Fall 2020 website: [UMT Covid 19 Fall 2020](#)