ENGLISH 335
WRITING POPULAR NOVELS
Fall 1994

Instructor: Dennis Jones
Times/Place: 4:00-5:30 TR in HH 139
Office Hours: 3:00-4:00 TR in HH 245; other times by appointment

Texts:
Robert C. Meredith and John D. FitzGerald. Structuring Your Novel: From Basic Idea to Finished Manuscript
Writer's Digest. This monthly magazine is available from the campus bookstore and many other local book and magazine retailers.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

The focus of this section of ENGL 335 will be on the writing of popular novels, the type of fiction that multitudes of people read simply for the pleasure of a well-told story. Often these novels are dismissed as "category" or "formula" fiction, which suggests, inaccurately, that they are easy to write. It is true that the popular genres — such as mystery, heroic fantasy, thriller, and romance — do have certain required ingredients, but writers of such novels also have considerable freedom of invention within these constraints. If writing popular fiction is not an "art" (and there's plenty of room for argument) it is at least a craft, and up to a point it is a craft that can be learned.

Over the next few weeks we will approach this craft in a methodical and organized way. By the end of the semester, you will have produced the plot outline for a novel of your choice, a polished first chapter (or most of it), and a plan for marketing the completed work. The course goals will be:

- to give you the confidence to take on a long and complex writing project;
- to give you practical experience at creating competently written and commercially acceptable fiction;
- to examine and understand the process of writing a saleable manuscript for the popular marketplace, from the first glimmer of an idea to (we must be optimistic) the signing of a contract with a publisher.

The major concentration will be on each person's fiction project, but there will also be team presentations beginning in late October.
OVERVIEW OF ASSIGNMENTS, DUE DATES, AND MARKS:
A. Genre Analysis (in-class presentation by a small team) 20%

B. Individual project, broken down as follows:
i) Oct 18-21 Private presentation of your proposal for a novel 20%
ii) Nov 8 Opening chapter sample (6-8 pages) 20%
iii) Dec 15 Subsequent scene/part chapter (6-8 pages) 25%
     " Plot synopsis (2-3 pages) 10%
     " Cover letter (1 page) 5%
     100%

There is no set percentage for in-class participation. However, there will be a good deal of discussion as we go along, and your willingness to contribute could help colour your overall grade.

Late delivery of assignments will be penalized by one full letter grade per week. That is, an assignment delivered one week late can earn no more than a B range grade.

DETAILS OF ASSIGNMENTS

Please note: All assignments must be typed or computer printed.

A. In-Class Presentation of a Genre Analysis (20%)

Students will choose or be assigned to a specific genre, and the class will be subdivided into small teams of three people or so. These teams will analyze a particular segment of the market, and present their findings in class on Thursday afternoons beginning in late October. The presentation should last no more than 25 minutes, and each member should participate in it.

As soon as possible after the teams and their categories are decided (during the second week of classes), each group should arrange a meeting with me. In it we will establish an understanding as to your approach, a suitable author, and a suitable title. Note: The order of presentations will be drawn from a hat during the second week of classes. At the same time the class will vote (by simple majority) on whether the presentations will be marked individually, or as teams.

The teams should organize their presentations as follows, with each team member speaking to one of the following topics:
1) **Genre Report**  What are the defining characteristics of this genre? What's happening in it today? What are the market prospects in it during the foreseeable future? Who are the leading publishers and authors?

2) **Author Profile**  Focus on a popular author you feel best represents the genre. Introduce us to his/her career, a quick overview of the novels, and reasons for his/her success at attracting a solid and loyal readership. If you like, also use a less prominent author for comparison or contrast.

3) **Craftsmanship:** Using one or more recent titles by the above author, show how and why certain of his/her techniques contribute to the success of the book(s). For example, consider: the way the opening gets your attention; the use of dialogue; the handling of action; the way characters are made sympathetic (or the reverse). Illustrate your points with reference to appropriate passages from the book(s), keeping in mind that the rest of the class may have not read this author.

Remember, as you prepare your presentation, that it is an examination of the craft and the business of creating popular fiction, and is an important and necessary part of the course. We should all be able to learn something from each presentation, no matter which genre our individual projects focus on.

**B (i). Presentation of Project Proposal (20%). Due October 18-21.**

We will not meet in class during Week 6, that is on October 18 or 20. Instead, each of you will make an appointment to meet me in my office. You will have 20-30 minutes to present your work and ideas as you have developed them so far. Your book proposal should include the following:

1) **Title:** A working title, which should not duplicate that of another book currently in print. You can check on this in *Books in Print*, a reference you can find in any library, or in the campus bookstore.

2) **Objective:** A short statement of purpose, describing exactly what you are aiming at. For example, "I am planning a mainstream novel of approximately 100,000 words, targeted to the crime thriller market." If you are targeting a specialized market (for example, Harlequin SuperRomance, or the various heroic-fantasy series of short novels) include the specific guidelines for it.

3) **Marketing Ideas:** Notes on the market niche you're writing for, including the top three or four publishers in the category. Look for these in the various marketing guides, like *Writer's Market*, found in most libraries. Include the
publishers' addresses and phone numbers, and the appropriate editors' names, if you can discover them.

4) **Outline:** A rough outline of the plot, either point-by-point, or one short paragraph per chapter, or a prose synopsis.

5) **Character Biographies:** Background details of the major characters, either in "fact-sheet" layout or thumbnail sketch. Also a shortlist of the key secondary characters.

6) **Settings:** How much written research work you put into these is up to you, but you must present some evidence that you're thinking about them.

7) **References:** List of key hard-information sources (books, magazines, people, etc.) you will need in order to develop the characters, settings, and plot for your novel.

8) **Queries:** List of questions you feel you need to answer, and problems you need to solve (for example, plot structure, chronology, research difficulties).

**B (ii). Sample of Opening Chapter (20%) Due Nov 8.**

This is to be a revised draft of part or all of your novel's opening chapter. It should be between 1500 and 2000 words long. (This is 6 - 8 pages of typescript in standard manuscript format, i.e. 8.5" x 11" paper, with 1" or 1.25" margins, double spaced, typed or computer-printed in Courier 10 pitch or equivalent.)

**B (iii). Second Sample, Synopsis, and Cover Letter (25%, 10%, 5%) Due Dec 15.**

This second sample can continue on from your first sample, or be a subsequent (and preferably contrasting) scene/chapter. It should be the same length and format as the first sample. The plot synopsis, which should be a refinement and elaboration of the version presented to me in Week 6, should by now be condensed into three or four pages, no more. We will cover the details of the covering letter (the sales pitch for your manuscript) in class.

This final package of your writing is due two weeks after term end. PLEASE don't be late with it; the late penalty for an assignment this large will be quite costly to your overall grade.
COURSE OUTLINE, SUGGESTED WORKPLAN, AND REQUIRED READINGS

CGW = Complete Guide to Writing Fiction and Nonfiction
SYN = Structuring Your Novel: From Basic Idea to Finished Manuscript

WEEK 1: Groundwork (Sept. 13/15)
Readings:
  · CGW: Preface; Chap 10, "Theme"; Chap 18, "Whom Are You Writing For?"
  · SYN: Preface; Chap 1, "How to Develop an Idea into a Novel"

To do:
  · Check out books in a genre that interests you
  · Focus on a potential project

In class: Tue. Sept 13
  · Overview of course requirements and grades
  · The major genres of popular fiction. "Crossover" novels

In class: Thu. Sept 15
  · Useful resources for writers
  · Finding story ideas
  · The right place, time, and attitude for writing

WEEK 2: Getting Started (Sept. 20/22)
Readings:
  · SYN: Chap 2, "How to Develop the Basic Conflict"; Chap 5, "How to Develop a Theme"

To do:
  · Write down all the ideas and story elements you can think of

In class: Tue Sept 20
  · The popular fiction marketplace
  · Class discussion: what's trash, what's not — "serious" versus "popular" fiction
  · Divide into teams for genre analysis assignments, and draw lots for the order of the presentations; vote on team or individual marking for the genre presentations

In class: Thu Sept 22
  · The writer's idea collection
  · Testing story ideas — a methodical approach
  · Practical exercise: apply the approach to a specific story idea you are considering
WEEK 3: Plotting (Sept. 27/29)
Readings:
- SYN: Chap 3, "How to Develop a Plot or Story Line"; Chap 4, "How to Select the Right Viewpoint"
- CGW: Chap 1, "Dynamics of Plot"; Chap 2, "Viewpoint: The Magic Key to Publishing"

To Do:
- Pick the story concept you like best, and work seriously on the plot structure, paying special attention to chronology, causality, and plausibility

In class: Tue Sept 27
- Brainstorming story ideas into plots: practical exercises in groups of 3-4

In class: Thu Sept 29
- 10-minute writing exercise: introduce a major character to your reader
- Deriving characters from the plot, and how character choice can change plot direction

WEEK 4: Plot Enrichment and Characterization (Oct 4/6)
Readings:
- SYN: Chap 9, "How to Characterize"
- CGW: Chap 4, "The Art of Creating Three-Dimensional Characters"

To Do:
- Work out biographies of the leading characters
- Continue developing the plot, enhancing it with a sketch of a subplot

In class: Tue Oct 4
- 10-minute writing exercise: introduce a secondary character to your reader
- Researching and establishing characters; character relationships; supporting characters

In class: Thu Oct 6
- 10-minute writing exercise: an interaction of two major characters
- More on characters: enhancement through detail; the backstory;
- What exactly is a subplot, how does it work, and why do I need one?
- Integrating the subplot(s) into the main plot

WEEK 5: Settings and Scenes (Oct 11/13)
Readings:
- CGW: Chap 7, "How to Create Settings"; Chap 12, "Research Made Easy"; Chap 8, "How to Create the Story: Scene, Summary, and Transition"
- SYN: Chap 6, "How to Employ Exposition"; Chap 7, "How to Employ Description"; Chap 8, "How to Employ Narration and Action"
To Do:
- Overhaul plot structure as needed
- Refine the essentials of your characters
- Rough out the setting and events of your first (draft) chapter

In class: Tue Oct 11
- 10-minute writing exercise: establishing a setting in time and space
- Researching and presenting technological, geographical, and historical backgrounds — opportunities and traps
- Accuracy, plausibility, and illusion: making the reader believe in your fictional world

In class: Thu Oct 13
- 10-minute exercise: write a very brief scene that concentrates on action and dialogue
- Using narration, exposition, description, and action within scenes
- Scene transitions

WEEK 6 (Oct 18/20)
NO CLASSES: Individual meetings with me to present the project proposal you have prepared (see attached sheets for detailed requirements). Also, if you haven’t already started writing your first chapter draft, do so.

WEEK 7: Openings; Time Transitions (Oct 25/27)
Readings:
- SYN: Chap 10, "How to Write the First Chapter of a Novel"; Chap 11, "How to Hold a Reader's Interest"
- CGV: Chap 3, "How to Open a Short Story or Novel"; Chap 9, "How to Get Back and Forth in Time"

To Do:
- Draft your first sample, i.e. assignment B(ii)

In class: Tue Oct 25
- 10-minute exercise: write an effective hook sentence or paragraph
- Creating and maintaining suspense
- Chronological transitions

In class: Thu Oct 27
- Presentations 1 & 2, and discussion

WEEK 8: Dialogue (Nov 1/3)
Readings:
- CGV: Chap 5, "How to Create Effective Dialogue"
To Do:
- Revise your first sample. ASSIGNMENT B (ii), FIRST SAMPLE, IS DUE TUESDAY NOV 8

In class: Tue Nov 1
- 10-minute exercise: read the supplied scene and write down everything (not only the dialogue) that you think is wrong with it
- Discussion of results of above
- Dialogue as an illusion of natural speech, and how to achieve it

In class: Thu Nov 3
- Presentations 3 & 4, and discussion

WEEK 9: Middles (Nov 8/10)
Readings:
- SNW: Chap 12, "How to Employ Craftsmanship: Part I"; Chap 15, "How to Develop Your own Style"
- CGW: Chap 6, "How to Develop a Good Style"

To Do:
- HAND IN FIRST SAMPLE, Assignment B(ii)
- Make rough notes toward your second sample (may be either a continuation of your first sample, or a later scene or chapter of your novel)

In class: Tue Nov 8
- Writer's block and what to do about it
- Subplots; avoiding the sag in the middle
- Set-piece ("big") scenes

In class: Thu Nov 10
- Presentations 5 & 6, and discussion

WEEK 10: Endings (Nov 15/17)
Readings:
- CGW: Reread Chap 1, "Dynamics of Plot"
- SNW: Reread Chap 3, "How to Develop a Plot or Story Line"

To Do:
- Draft second sample, i.e. assignment B (iii)

In class: Tue Nov 15
- The climax and the novel's resolution

In class: Thu Nov 17
- Presentations 7 & 8, and discussion
WEEK 11: Revision (Nov 22/24)
Readings:
- *SNW*: Chap 13, "How to Employ Craftsmanship: Part II"
- *CGW*: Chap 11, "Do Titles Really Matter?"; Chap 19, "How to Approach a Publishing House"; Chap 20, "How to Develop . . . the Novel Package"

To Do:
- Revise second sample, i.e. assignment B (iii)
- Rework plot synopsis, i.e. assignment B (iii)

In class: Tue Nov 22
- Publishers, editors, and revisions
- Self-editing your manuscript

In class: Thu Nov 24
- Presentations 9 & 10, if necessary; otherwise we make a start on marketing, focussing on the preparation of manuscripts, cover letters, and synopses

WEEK 12: Marketing (Nov 29/Dec 1)
Readings:
- *CGW*: Chap 21, "Everything About Literary Agents"; Chap 22, "Whee! You Received a Book Contract"

To Do:
- Polish second sample, i.e. assignment B (iii)
- Revise and complete plot synopsis, i.e. assignment B (iii)
- Plan and write cover letter, i.e. assignment B (iii)

In class: Tue Nov 29
- The business of writing
- Copyright, plagiarism, and protecting yourself
- Agents, editors, and publishers

In class: Thu Dec 1
- Selling yourself, or selling out?
- Getting paid: royalties, advances, writing for hire
- Dealing with rejection and success

DECEMBER 6:
Individual meetings with students who want to discuss their project.

DECEMBER 15
ASSIGNMENT B(iii): SECOND SAMPLE, PLOT SYNOPSIS, AND COVERING LETTER DUE (WORTH 20%, 10%, AND 5% RESPECTIVELY)