ENGLISH 335
WRITING FICTION
Fall 1995

Instructor: Dennis Jones
Times/Place: 10:00-11:30 TR in HH 139
Office Hours: 11:30-1:00 TR in HH 256; other times by appointment

Texts: Renni Browne and Dave King. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*
      Jack Hodgins. *A Passion for Narrative*

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This section of English 335 takes a practical approach to writing both short and long
fiction. By the end of the course you will have produced several short pieces of fiction,
and will have written, revised and completed either a short story or the first chapter of
a novel. The form you pick (novel, short story, or novella) is up to you, and as far as
grading is concerned it does not matter at all whether you choose to write “literary” or
“popular” fiction. What does matter is learning to produce work that will engage your
readers’ interest from beginning to end. Writers have a wide range of tools to
accomplish this, and in this workshop we will explore most of them.

You may find writing fiction to be very unlike the formal, essay-based work you
are used to. If you are having difficulty, do not hesitate to talk to me about it.

Course Outline:

WEEK 1 (Sep. 12, 14): Getting Started
Identifying and analyzing the major forms and genres. Finding story ideas and turning
ideas into stories. The central importance of conflict. Overcoming writer’s block.
Readings: APN, chapters 1, 2.

WEEK 2 (Sep. 19, 21): Plotting
Key objectives of protagonist and antagonist. What does a plot do? Readings: APN,
chapter 6.

WEEK 3 (Sep. 26, 28): Characters, Part One.
Fitting characters to plot, and vice versa. Creating three-dimensional characters.
Readings: APN, chapter 5; SEFW, chapter 2.

WEEK 4 (Oct. 3, 5): Characters, Part Two
Creating three-dimensional characters, continued.
WEEK 5 (Oct 10, 12): Viewpoint
Deciding on the main character, and the angle of vision from which the story is told. The varieties of viewpoint, their strengths and weaknesses. Traps to avoid. Readings: APN, chapter 8; SEFW, chapter 3.

WEEK 6 (Oct 17, 19): Settings

WEEK 7 (Oct 24, 26): Dialogue
Maintaining the illusion of natural speech. Making dialogue appropriate to character. The dramatic uses of dialogue. Readings: APN, chapter 5 again (the section on dialogue); SEFW, chapters 4, 5, 6.

WEEK 8 (Oct 31, Nov. 1): Style
Avoiding generalization, over-writing, clichés, and monotony. Improving your writing through rhythm, simile, metaphor, and the perfectly chosen word or phrase. Readings: APN, chapter 3; SEFW, chapters 7, 8

WEEK 9 (Nov. 6, 8): Story Development, Part One
The hook: how to find it and write it. Chronology of events versus sequence of scenes. Scenes and scene transitions. Readings: APN, chapter 7; SEFW, chapter 1.

WEEK 10 (Nov. 13, 14): Story Development, Part Two

WEEK 11 (Nov. 20, 22): Revision
Identifying and solving problems of structure and style in a completed first draft. APN, chapter 10; SEFW, chapters 10,11,12.

WEEK 13 (Nov. 27, 29): Selling Fiction; or, Should I Quit My Day Job?

ASSIGNMENTS AND MARKING

The best way to learn to write is to do a lot of it, and we will do a lot of it. Ten Thursdays, beginning September 21 and ending November 22, will be devoted to in-class writing and critiquing. The method is called “timed writing”. This simply
means that for 10-15 minutes we will each write furiously on a set topic. When the time is up, each of us will read the results to the rest of the class, and get everybody’s reaction. Your writing will be rough, ungrammatical, and likely riddled with clichés. You will probably think it is junk. This does not matter. The purpose of the exercise is to get something, anything, down on paper.

After the class, however, you won’t destroy the writing (no matter how much you’d like to) because each of the ten exercises is worth 5% of your final mark. You will take it away and type it up, warts and all, and give me the typed copy on the following Thursday. I will return it the following Tuesday, with editorial comment. You will likely find in typing it out that you can improve it a little; by all means do so. However, don’t spend vast amounts of time on it, because the five marks given for it are given for handing it in, NOT for the quality of the writing. If you give me the typed copy on time, you get five marks, even if it’s gibberish. My experience with this technique suggests that you won’t produce gibberish, however.

These ten exercises make up 50% of your final mark. The balance is given for work on, and completion of, a short story or the first chapter of a novel, as follows:

Package 1, due Thursday, November 1:
   a) A detailed character sketch of the protagonist: 5%
   b) A synopsis of the story/chapter, not more than 500 words long.  
      It should include a clear statement of the conflict central to the work. 5%
   c) The first draft of the story/chapter, with beginning, middle, and end: 10%

I will return this package to you the following Thursday, with editorial suggestions for further development.

Package 2, due Thursday, December 7:
Final, polished version of the work, to be not less than 3000 words long: 30%

Late Submissions:
In the real world of writing and publishing, editors become cranky with authors who don’t meet deadlines. Late work will therefore attract the following penalties:
   a) for each typed-up writing exercises not submitted on time: minus one mark for each day late, up to a total of five for any given late exercise.
   b) for the story packages: minus one full letter grade for each week, or portion thereof, overdue. That is, an A becomes a B, and so on.

Please note: all submissions must be typed or computer-printed.