

# CRWR 465: Novel/Longform Fiction

Professor: Chelsey Johnson

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Class Meets: TR 12:30-1:50 pm, Tucker 325

Office: Tucker 032 (in the basement)

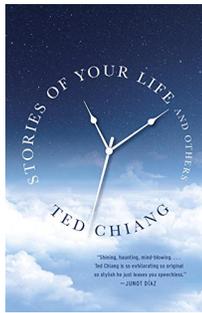
College of William & Mary, Spring 2017

Office hours: TR 2:00-3:00, or by appointment

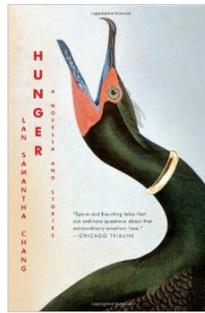
No one says a novel has to be one thing. It can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o'clock news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by demons.

— Ishmael Reed, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*

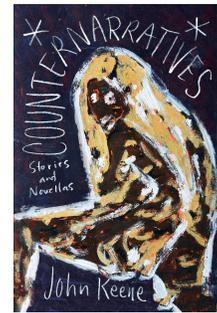
## TEXTS



Ted Chiang, *Stories of Your Life and Others*



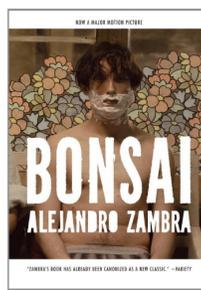
Lan Samantha Chang, *Hunger*



John Keene, *Counternarratives*



Max Porter, *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*



Alejandro Zambra, *Bonsai*



PDFs on Blackboard

## I. OVERVIEW

This course is for experienced student writers to practice writing a project longer than the typical workshop story: a long story, a novella, or even the first draft of a novel. You'll spend the semester writing and revising one coherent, sustained work of fiction, from 15,000-30,000 words in length. The task is for the brave and enthusiastic. Prepare to commit! Your longform project will teach you entirely new things about writing and storytelling.

## II. THE WORK

**WRITING:** Your ultimate goal for the semester is to write a *complete* draft of a novella in fourteen weeks. To keep up, this means you'll write at least 1,500-2,000 words per week.

- **Weekly pages.** Every Sunday, post to Blackboard your output for the week, no matter how raw and rough, with your current word count at the top. I won't always read them closely, but I'll glance at them to see how things are going. Each week, you get two points for turning in about 1500+ new words by the deadline. You get one point if your word count is low or late. If you don't turn in anything at all, you get a zero for the week, though you do get one free pass during the course of the semester, since as we all know, some weeks are just intractably difficult.

- Many past students of this course, having learned the hard way, would advise that you set your sights on a novella, or at most a very short novel, rather than a full-blown novel. It has proven impossible thus far for anyone, even the fastest and most all-out dedicated, to *complete* a draft of a novel in fourteen weeks. (However, several have succeeded in finishing 50-100-page stories.)

- The majority of the work submitted should originate during the course. It's fine to come with a chapter or two already in the works or a story you want to use as starter material. But please don't resurrect a story you were fond of in high school, the fantasy epic you've been working on for a year, or the novel you already banged out during NaNoWriMo. (This too is something we have learned the hard way.)

- We are going to do a ton of in-class writing to generate material and work out questions you have, so always bring your notebook and/or your laptop.

**READING.** Reading for pleasure is probably what made you want to write in the first place. We'll read five novellas, as well as each other's stories-in-progress and occasional craft essays. Read it all thoroughly and come prepared to discuss, question, and analyze what makes a story work. Whether you love, loathe, or feel lukewarm about something you read, try to figure out what makes it tick. *Structure* is especially key in this course—pay attention to how the writers we read build and sustain their stories.

**WORKSHOPS.** Each piece will receive a full class period of workshop in the second half of the semester. In the first half, workshops of excerpts are optional; some find them helpful, some find them detrimental to work in progress. If you don't workshop in the first half, we'll meet before the break for a one-on-one conference instead.

**WORKSHOP RESPONSES.** Read each other's drafts carefully and write a candid, generous letter in response, describing what the work or work-in-progress is about, its strengths, and suggestions for development. These are not only enormously helpful for the author, they're also incredibly effective for honing your own sensibilities and editorial faculties (which will come in useful as you turn to your own writing.)

Letters should be about a page long, single or 1.5-spaced—I'll send out examples. Typed and print these for the author on workshop day so they have a hard copy to read and write notes on; just e-mail a copy to me as well.

**FINAL PORTFOLIO.** A final portfolio containing

- your complete draft of your longform project
- a cover letter that describes the state of this draft + your progress in the course
- and a compilation of your workshop response letters

is due by e-mail at 5 pm on Wednesday, May 10, the last day of exams.

**READINGS:** Attend at least two of the Patrick Hayes Series readings this semester. All are at 5pm in Tucker Theater, except Sharon Olds, who's at 7.

- Award-winning fiction writer Edwidge Danticat, Feb. 8
- Our own Artist-in-Residence Eddy Harris, Feb. 28
- Emerging poets (and WM alumni) Richard Lucyshyn and Jack Christian, March 30
- Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Sharon Olds, April 6

### III. ACCESSIBILITY AND ACCOMMODATION

Your success in this class is important to me. If you have a documented disability for which you may require accommodations, please see the Office of Disability Services and/or let me know so we can make sure those needs are met.

If there are other circumstances that may affect your performance in this class, please let me know as soon as possible so that we can work together to develop strategies for adapting to meet both your needs and the requirements of the course.

## IV. GRADING

Your fiction will *not* be graded throughout the semester, but I'll give you feedback in person and in writing. The goal here is not to be mysterious—it's to let you write and explore in relative freedom, and to write for the sake of writing, not reward. However, the College does expect a grade at the end of the semester, so here's how it will break down.

10-20 points\*: Participation (attendance + preparation for class discussion)

10-20 points\*: Workshop letters (thorough, specific, generous)

30 points: Weekly pages, 0-2 points per week (you get a starting bonus of 6 points)

40 points: Final project (quality and coherence)

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100 points

**WHAT "QUALITY" MEANS:** For the longform project, here's what I look for.

1. **Coherence:** A story whose structure has emerged clearly—a project with a clear beginning, middle, and end, in whatever form that may take. Whether your story is traditional or experimental, realist or fabulist, roughly newly finished or carefully revised, by portfolio time there should be a strong sense of narrative control over the whole.
2. **Depth.** The writing yearns and pushes, has guts and heart. It eschews stock characters and clichéd plots and language. I love to read work that is *adventurous*. Be a little reckless. Be brave and strange. Steer clear of the obvious. Be persistent.
3. Basic but meaningful: **Take care with the fundamentals.** You'll be writing quickly, so I don't expect copy-edited perfection, but do take care. Proofread your prose; fix sloppy typographical or grammatical errors; correct usage of the language; punctuate dialogue correctly, etc.

*(\*What's this? You may choose to weight participation and letters as you wish, as long as they add up to 30—default is 15 points each. For example, if you strongly prefer listening to talking in class, and you know written responses are where you can really shine and demonstrate your engagement, you could take 10 points for participation and 20 for letters. Or vice versa, if you're an avid conversationalist and tend to keep your letters briefer. This isn't license to blow off either requirement, but to allow for flexibility and accommodate diverse learning modes.)*

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- Feel free to check in with me at any time during the semester if you would like a sense of your grade.
- Your grade doesn't reflect on my opinion of you as a person, or predict your future as a writer.

## V. COURSE VALUES

### **Participation: BE RESPECTFUL.**

Discussion is the heart of the class. The quality of it depends on the preparation and participation of each of us. Try to speak up at least twice every class period. Come prepared and well-read, and remember that **respect** is vital to creating an atmosphere conducive to artistic growth. We want everyone to feel invited to contribute their evaluations, ideas and questions—and, of course, share their writing. Differing viewpoints are welcome and encouraged; sarcasm and mockery are not, inside and outside the classroom, online and off. We live by the Vegas rule: What happens in this class stays in this class. Embrace difference, respect privacy, listen and read generously, and always assume the best about each other.

### **Attendance: BE HERE.**

When everyone is present and on time, every time, the class is so much better for all of us. Class starts at 12:30 sharp. I understand sickness and emergencies happen, so you may miss twice without question. If absence becomes excessive, bring me university or medical documentation. Multiple absences or

tardies affect the whole class, and thus may affect your final grade.

### **Timeliness: BE READY.**

This is of paramount importance in the longform class! When your work is due to be workshopped, please send it out on time—48 hours in advance. No exceptions. **Late work cannot be workshopped**—it's logistically complicated and puts far too much time pressure on your classmates.

### **Electronic Devices: BE PRESENT.**

You can use laptops and tablets to access assigned readings, with the wi-fi turned off. Otherwise, they're best closed. We need your full engagement here. Out of respect for your classmates and discussion, please keep phones turned off and tucked away. No texting, social media, or internet browsing in class, even if you think it's relevant to the conversation or you're itching to look up a clarifying fact—it tends to pull us all out of the moment. We only see each other a few hours a week; let's be fully present for each other.

## VI. PLAGIARISM

I don't expect this to be a problem, but will say this anyway. *Plagiarism* comes from the Latin word for "kidnap" and it can range from lifting passages from a source without citing it to recycling an entire assignment written by another person. Plagiarism violates W&M's Honor Code. It is also extremely embarrassing to be busted for. Just...don't.

# SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND WORKSHOPS

*As of January 19, 2017. Subject to minor change, with advance notice.*

DATE	TUESDAY	THURSDAY	
<b>Week One</b> January 19		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introductions, syllabus.</li> <li>• In-class writing: Generating material, writing beginnings.</li> </ul>	<b>Practice:</b> Post your beginning sketches, just for practice.
<b>Week Two</b> Jan. 24-26	<p><b>Read:</b> Lan Samantha Chang, "Hunger", pages 11-90</p> <p><b>In-class writing:</b> Character development.</p>	<p><b>Read:</b> Finish "Hunger" (pp 90-114)</p> <p>Everyone bring in an example of one great character description from a published work of fiction.</p>	<b>Approximate word count goal by the end of this week:</b> 1,500
<b>Week 3</b> Jan. 31- Feb. 2	<p><b>Read:</b> Max Porter, <i>Grief is the Thing With Feathers</i>, pages 1-70</p> <p><b>In-class writing.</b></p>	<p><b>Read:</b> <i>Grief is the Thing With Feathers</i>, p. 71 to the end</p> <p><b>Three-Minute Workshop:</b> Everyone reads aloud from the beginning of their novella for three minutes.</p>	<b>Word count goal:</b> 3,000
<b>Week Four</b> Feb. 7-9	<p><b>Read:</b> Ted Chiang, "The Story of Your Life" (the title story)</p> <p><b>In-class writing.</b></p>	<p><b>NO CLASS.</b> (Professor at conference.)</p> <p><b>But read:</b> Karen Russell, "Engineering Impossible Architectures" (craft essay, PDF)</p>	<b>Word count goal:</b> 4,500
<b>Week Five</b> Feb. 14-16	<p><b>Read:</b> John Keene, "A Gloss..." from <i>Counternarratives</i></p> <p><b>In-class writing:</b> Beginnings</p> <p>People who want to workshop settings will email me their excerpts to compile for the class.</p>	<p><b>Workshop: Early excerpts:</b> Settings.</p> <p><b>In-class writing:</b> Dialogue strategies</p>	<b>Word count goal:</b> 6,000
<b>Week Six</b> Feb. 21-23	<p><b>Read:</b> Alejandro Zambra, <i>Bonsai</i></p> <p><b>In-class writing:</b> Creating tension</p> <p>People who want to workshop character-based excerpts will email me their writing to compile for the class.</p>	<p><b>Workshop: Early Excerpts:</b> Characters.</p> <p><b>Schedule your midterm conference for next week.</b> We'll go over your draft so far, one on one, and talk about where you want to take it and how to get there.</p>	<b>Word count goal:</b> 7,500

<b>Week Seven</b> Feb. 28- March 2	<b>In-class writing:</b> Multiple endings  <b>Three-Minute Workshop:</b> Everyone reads aloud from a new section of their novella for three minutes.	<b>EPIC IN-CLASS STRUCTURE CLINIC.</b> Bring an entire printed draft.	<b>Word count goal:</b> Self-determined: use this week to catch up, pause, or surge ahead and bank pages
<b>SPRING BREAK</b>			
<b>Week Eight</b> March 14- 16	<b>Workshop 1</b> One story, likely not complete but as close as it can be.	<b>Workshop 2</b> One story.	<b>Word count goal:</b> 9,000
<b>Week Nine</b> March 21- 23	<b>Workshop 3</b> One story.	<b>Workshop 4</b> One story.	<b>Word count goal:</b> 10,500
<b>Week Ten</b> March 28- 30	<b>Workshop 5</b> One story.	<b>Workshop 6</b>	<b>Word count goal:</b> 12,000
<b>Week Eleven</b> April 4-6	<b>Workshop 7</b> One story.	<b>Workshop 8</b> One story.	<b>Word count goal:</b> 13,500
<b>Week Twelve</b> April 11-13	<b>Workshop 9</b> One story.	<b>Workshop 10</b> One story.	<b>Word count goal:</b> 15,000+
<b>Week Thirteen</b> April 18-20	<b>Workshop 11</b> One story.	<b>Workshop 12</b> One story.	<b>Complete &amp;/or Revise</b> 15,000+
<b>Week Fourteen</b> April 25-27	<b>Workshop 13</b> One story.	<b>Workshop 14</b> One story.  <b>Course evaluations.</b> Bring laptop to class.	<b>Complete &amp;/or Revise</b>