

FICTION LABORATORY

program website: <http://academic.evergreen.edu/curricular/fictionlab>

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Faculty: Steven Hendricks **Email:** hendrics@evergreen.edu

Phone: 867 5745 **Office:** Sem 2, C 3108

Office Hours by appointment (usu. Monday p.m. / Tuesday p.m.)



Program Syllabus

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The vague label “experimental fiction” conceals a world of creative work and study that fiction writers are often taught to ignore and reject—“leave it to the English majors.” This will-to-ignorance leaves student writers out of step with literary history and subject to writing by committee through workshops; it aligns them with an educational and creative process geared not toward knowledge and innovation but toward conformity and commodification.

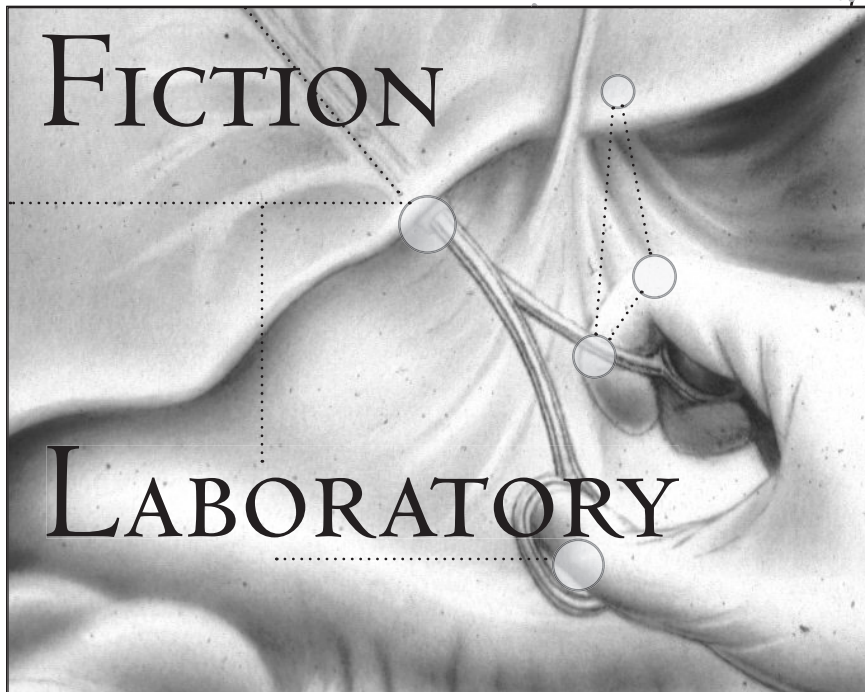
In this program, we will treat literary works—our own included—as creative experiments and research into the possibilities of language and narrative. The alphabet, the language, the myriad tropes and formulae for literary expression, and the archetypal patterns of narrative we will view as a vast table of elements that can be combined and synthesized into new substances: new genres, new prose forms, new syntax, new strategies for reading and making meaning, new reasons to write.

Program seminars will emphasize a lineage of exceptional exceptions: novels and short fiction of the last half century by writers who have taken careful stock of shifts in literary and cultural theory, who have learned their art in the ruptures between modernist, high modernist, and postmodernist criticism. We’ll begin our story with “The End,” digging ourselves out of Samuel Beckett’s exhaustive void to locate those new voices, forms, and innovative projects that replenish literature and invest the writer’s work with the possibility of creating meaning, not merely reproducing or consecrating received forms of thought and expression.

We’ll surround our study of innovative literature with introductions to the thinking that motivated and buttressed movements like the nouveau roman, the Oulipo, and post-structuralism; we’ll examine how this same thinking has led many writers and scholars once dedicated to understanding authorship to Italo Calvino’s conclusion that “the decisive moment of literary life will be that of reading.” Working in the shadow of such theories, we’ll seek to construct new hypotheses about the act of writing, the art of reading, and the function of literary form.

Our own creative work will provide a rigorous testing ground for ideas. Student work will be examined by faculty and peers on a regular basis with half a mind toward developing a manuscript, the other half toward investigating the creative process and continually redefining the complex relationship between reader, text, and writer.

We will read a range of challenging texts, write consistently in the spirit of experimentation and play, conduct independent research into complex questions relevant to program texts and themes, and create active program seminars, workshops, and critiques.



Schedule, Faculty

Day	Activity	Time	Location
Tuesday	Lecture	10-12	A 3107
	Pre-Seminar	1-2	CRC 109
Wednesday	Theory Seminar	10-12	C 3109
Thursday	Critique	9-1	C 3109 / 05
Friday	Workshop	10-12	A 3107
	Fiction Seminar	1-4	A 3107

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Goals & Components

Program Goals

- To develop some of the basic skills of literary study: critical reading, research, seminar, analytical writing.
- To develop a beginning understanding of literary theory and its relationship to creative work, philosophy, and culture.
- To develop fiction writing skills and techniques that contribute to creative process and intellectual rigor.

Components

Lecture: Every Tuesday Morning will begin with a presentation to the full group by Steven (me). I'll use these times to deal with program business and lay out the practical aspects of our week, but most of this time will be committed to providing conceptual and practical context for the texts and themes under study. I will present my own agenda and perspectives relative to the program materials and activities I've chosen for the class, attempting to link theory with practice, to

Credits & Evaluations

Credit will be awarded in

- (8) FICTION WRITING (final manuscript & workshops)
- (4) INTRODUCTION TO LITERARY THEORY (theory seminar, lecture, & final essay)
- (4) LITERATURE (seminars, lectures, & final essay)

Students interested in alternative or more specific credit categories

should discuss their ideas with me by the end of week two.

Credit is awarded for "passing" work in each separate credit area.

Written evaluations function to characterize the nature and quality of a student's credit-worthy work. In the case of a complete loss of credit in any one area, evaluations are completely silent on that aspect of the program.

Policies: This program requires self-discipline, individual work, and group-work. Please follow the schedule closely and prepare for and attend all seminars, workshops, lectures, and critiques. I expect all work to be submitted on time. Late submissions communicate that you are not keeping up with your work. In all but the most extenuating of circumstances, work that is submitted past its due date and time will not be read. Failure to attend all program meetings or to submit all work could result in a loss of credit.

During *Week Five*, you will have a brief mid-quarter evaluation with your seminar faculty. At this meeting, you will have a chance to discuss your progress and specific aspects of your work. This date also marks a cut-off after which work from the first half of the quarter can no longer be considered for credit.

Any student who plagiarizes material will lose credit, be asked to leave the program, and may be required to leave the college. Ask me if you have any questions. The Evergreen writing center also has information on plagiarism.

The Reader

In addition to the weekly novels and the assigned portions of our theory texts, we will be reading selections from a program **Reader**, an assemblage of relevant essays and short fiction.

Not everything in the reader will be required.

Examples of Reader Content:

Essays by Susan Sontag

Essays by Roland Barthes

Essays by John Barth

Stories by Jorge Borges

Excerpts from Philippe Sollers

Essays and stories by Italo Calvino

Essays by bell hooks

Essays and work by Alain Robbe-Grillet

Critical and historical pieces re: nouveau roman,

Tel Quel, Modernism, Postmodernism, and art

form connections between what we do in seminar and what we do in our creative work.

Preliminary Fiction Seminar: Every week, students will be reading a book-length work of fiction and, occasionally, several short pieces. After the morning lecture, we'll use a short session to begin the seminar process. Students will not be expected to have finished the readings by this time, but should instead come to discuss the readings in process, to propose some agenda items for Friday seminar, consider possible connections to program themes and other texts, and to deal upfront with any problems related to the reading, the seminar process, and so on.

Theory Seminar: In addition to the fiction texts each week, students will be expected to read material from the program "Reader" and from our theory texts (Eagleton, Culler, Belsey, White). The texts for this seminar will be on two tracks: one, independent study of theory through our primary texts; the other: occasional precise correlation with our fiction readings. These will often be challenging texts. Come to theory seminar (Wednesday morning) prepared to collaborate with others to dissect a variety of critical and philosophical approaches to literature. Use the web to clarify terms and gather context, and treat every seminar as if you were responsible for helping others to learn.

Critique: Each student will be a member of a small critique group (4) that will meet at least twice a week for focused critique of each other's work (assignments and manuscripts). On Thursday mornings, one of these critique meetings will take place near to my

office so that I can wander through your conversations. Each Thursday, I will dedicate time to certain groups and participate more closely in their critiques.

Workshop: Our Friday morning workshops will serve a variety of functions, generally emphasizing creative practices, critique strategies, and the integration of program themes with our actual work as writers. These sessions will likely also be the forum for occasional student presentations. Weekly assignments will be given and turned in during the workshop sessions.

Fiction Seminar: Friday afternoon will be our focussed fiction seminar on the week's book. We'll do what we can to integrate the text with other readings and program work. We have a three hour block so that we can accomplish a great deal and be somewhat relaxed. There will usually be a writing task due in seminar (short essay, notes, questions, etc.). Your seminar (fiction & theory) work culminates in a final essay.

Books

The Complete Short Prose, Samuel Beckett	1
*Compact, Maurice Roche	2
Geometric Regional Novel, Gert Jonke	3
The Old Man and the Wolves, Julia Kristeva	4
*Conversions, Harry Mathews	5
If on a winter's night a traveler, Italo Calvino	6
The Age of Wire and String, Ben Marcus	7
Point and Line, Thalia Field	8
House of Leaves, Mark Danielewski	9
Unconsoled, Kazuo Ishiguro	10

Workload

In a full-time program, you are expected to be occupied for at least 40 hours per week. Your work will vary week-to-week. The numbers below reflect a rough guess—how I have imagined your workload. I recommend tracking your time yourself in order to be more efficient and to ensure that you are meeting expectations.

In class:	13-16	hours/week
Reading:	10-18	hours/week
Research & Study:	2 - 6	hours/week
Writing:	10-14	hours/week

Literary Theory: An Intro, Terry Eagleton

*Monstrous Possibility, Curtis White

A Very Short Introduction: Barthes, Jonathan Culler

A Very Short Introduction: Poststructuralism, Catherine Belsey

Expectations

to writing practice/exercises; this section includes all assigned writing pieces. In every workshop, even when group work is entailed, you should be conscientious about maintaining your own, individualized notes for your portfolio. Please organize workshop materials neatly and include any handouts/instruction sheets as a cover to their respective workshop.

Seminar Papers, in chronological order

Seminar papers will be described in more detail elsewhere. Assignments fluctuate according to workload and program themes.

Manuscript drafts & critique materials (incl. your critiques of others).

All materials related to peer critiques and manuscript development should be included here, including handouts, critique tasks, and so on.

Notes: Reading (substantial), Lecture, Seminar, and Research

Your notes are an important part of your portfolio. They should exhibit your care and diligence in every aspect of the program, your independent research abilities, your attention to lectures and seminars, and your rigorous processing of program themes and concepts.

Other

Anything else relevant to your growth this quarter as a writer and student of literature, particularly anything that might substantiate credit, specialized credit, or demonstrate exceptional effort.

Students are **not** expected to have previous experience with literary theory or experimental fiction.

Students **are** expected to have serious interest in both the study of literature and fiction writing.

Students are expected to be skilled readers and writers, dedicated to improvement and expansion, not ego.

Students are expected to participate consistently in program seminars, lectures, and workshops, and to maintain a program portfolio that includes notes, research, and drafts toward final products of all work.

Students are expected to take an interest in the work of the program community; this interest takes the form of engaged work in peer critiques, careful listening and speaking in seminar, and disciplined collaboration on workshop activities.

Final Portfolio

~Summary of Basic Student Work~

The contents of your final portfolio will be the primary artifact with which you substantiate your credit and your level of achievement in relation to program and personal goals. A complete portfolio does not, however, make up for significant absences.

This section lists the final contents of your portfolio and provides brief descriptions of assignments and the regular work of the program.

Portfolio Contents:

1. Self-evaluation *Draft*
2. Portfolio Introduction
3. *Final Fiction Manuscript*
4. *Final Essay*
5. Workshops, in chronological order
6. Seminar papers, in chronological order
7. Manuscript drafts & critique materials
(incl. your critiques of others).
8. *Notes*: Reading (substantial), Lecture,
Seminar, and Research
9. Other

Self-evaluation *Draft*

This allows me to write an evaluation that will make the most sense when combined your own evaluation in your transcript.

Portfolio Introduction

In which you hold forth on the cumulative learning represented by your portfolio, including a discussion of your best work, worst work, significant aspects of each section below, and including a description of accomplishments not represented by the portfolio materials. The Introduction must include significant commentary on both your final ms. and final essay.

Final Fiction Manuscript

Your final fiction manuscript can be a single piece of substantial length or several smaller pieces which together represent a "body" of work with some form of coherence. This manuscript will have been reviewed multiple times by your peer group and by me. We will have had at least one individual meeting about your manuscript.

Final Essay

This piece is a culmination of your seminar work, a synthesis of your best ideas from seminar papers and discussions and your engagement with the theoretical concepts of the program. This, too, will have been reviewed by peers and by me, and we will likely have the opportunity to meet about it one-on-one. The primary constraint on this piece is the necessity of incorporating ideas from our theory texts and from at least two pieces of fiction.

Workshops, *in chronological order*

Workshops range from skill-building to concept development