

Iowa Summer Course

The Irish Novel

Reading List

Core

The Gathering by Anne Enright

Let the Great World Spin by Colum McCann

Secondary

The Butcher Boy by Patrick McCabe

Room by Emma O'Donoghue

The Dark by John McGahern

The Story of Before by Susan Stairs

Ulysses by James Joyce (will be reading small extract in class)

Memoir by John McGahern

Armathea by Frank McGuinness

The Spinning Heart by Donal Ryan

A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing by Eimear McBride

The Master by Colm Toibin

Ross O'Carroll Kelly series

The Country Girls by Edna O'Brien

The Snapper by Roddy Doyle

TERM ASSIGNMENT: Up to 1,500 words MAX

Here are six openings of famous Irish novels:

‘The snow is coming down out there like I don’t know what? And we’re all freezing our nuts off in the church here. I’ll say this for the old fart – he picked some time of the year to die.’ (*Ross O’Carroll Kelly – Nama Mia!* by Paul Howard – the bestselling Irish fiction title of 2013)

‘Whatever’s wrong with us is coming in off the River. No argument: the taint of badness on the city’s air is a taint off that river. It’s the Bohane river we’re talking about.’ (*City of Bohane*, Kevin Barry)

‘Don’t be coy, Fergus. You’ve known me since I was yay high. I beg your pardon? Oh, it’s like that is it? I see. Very well. As you wish.’ (*The Devil I Know*, Claire Kilroy)

‘I wakened quickly and sat up abruptly. It is only when I am anxious that I waken easily and for a minute I did not know why my hearts was beating faster than usual. Then I remembered. The old reason. He had not come home.’ (*The Country Girls* by Edna O’Brien)

‘From the new glass bridge which spanned the inscrutable waters of the Grand Canal, the tram purred downhill and glided gently into the heart of the city.’ (*Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow* by Eilis Ni Dhuibhne)

‘It was a modified bomber. A Vickers Vimy. All wood and linen and wire. She was wide and lumbering, but Alcock still thought her a nippy little thing. He patted her each time he climbed onboard and slid into the cockpit beside Brown.’ (*Transatlantic* by Colum McCann)

Take one of the introductory sentences and continue writing in the same register (without copying the original story!).

Class 1: (1-4pm)

Introduction & The Irish Novel and the Voice of the Child

Reading: *The Butcher Boy* by Patrick McCabe, *Room* by Emma O'Donoghue

- Introduce the course (15-20 mins) Let them know there are five classes (the first two will be three hours long, the final three will be two hours long). Give them the theme of each week's classes. Reassure them there will be time at the start of every lesson to ask questions on the previous week's assignments.
- Ice breakers. Do a couple of simple ice breakers to get the class talking.
- Read the opening pages of *The Butcher Boy*. Get the class to comment on the piece. Who do they think is talking? How do they know this? What are the key words/phrases used to convey that. Is there an actual physical description of the protagonist? Is it grammatically correct? Does he use full sentences? Does the character contradict/repeat themselves? Is character important to a story? What is a story without character?
- **Features of a child's voice in fiction:**
 - Run on sentences – the use of 'and'
 - Clarity mixed with coherence
 - 'he said, she said'
 - Simple vs complex words
 - Quoting adults
 - Adverbs?
 - Hyperbole?
- **Divide class into four groups.** Give each group an image (see handouts) of children/parents. Get them to list out (no plot/story – this is about building character) the words/phrases they could imagine the person saying, from the obvious to the more obscure. Reassure them there is no right or wrong. 20-30 phrases/words per each group.
- Get the group to read out the phrases each has come up with. Which phrases work best? Which don't work? Why? Are they clichés? Why are clichés wrong? Are they flat/unsurprising? (15 minutes)
- **Break (10 mins)**
- Read the opening pages of *Room*. Get the class to comment on the piece. Who do they think is talking? How do they know this? What are the key words/phrases used to convey that. Is there an actual physical description of the protagonist? Is it grammatically correct? Does he use full sentences? Does the character contradict/repeat themselves? Is character important to a story? What is a story without character?
- **Class assignment: 500-700 words. Write a monologue from the point of view of a child, following the conventions discussed in class (refer back to *The Butcher Boy*, *Room*, *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*). What is important is how well you capture the register of a child.**

Assignment must be finished for next week's class.

Class 2: (1-4pm)

Memory and Place in the Irish Novel

Reading: *The Dark* by John McGahern, *Memoir* by John McGahern, *The Story of Before* by Susan Stairs

- Collect Child's Voice Exercise from the first week. Ask one or two of the students to read their pieces. Give positive feedback.
- GIVE OUT TERM ASSIGNMENT FOR COLLECTION IN WEEK 5

Memory

- Read the opening of *The Dark*. Compare the life of John McGahern and how closely it influenced his work – his relationship with his father and mother. Questions: how close to reality should fiction be? Can reality damage fiction?
Ask the students the question – what were they doing on this exact day last year. Why can't they remember it? Because reality, for the most part is BORING!
- Memory exercise: Get them to list out ten foods that remind them of childhood (make sure they list a number of them as the first few will be obvious). What is the scene like around the sweets. Five senses. What time period is it? Who made the food? Sold the food? Ate the food? What brand was the food (exact)? 2. From this food – how did the person talk – what phrases did they use? Voice. 3. Then, what event happened around this food? Make a list of ten things – from the believable through to the fantastical – move away from the initial obvious ideas. Then, where is the crisis in this story – does it occur at the beginning/middle/end? Where is the beginning middle and end of the story? I.e. they now have story to work with.
- Break (10 mins)

Setting

- Read text: *The Garden of Evening Mists*

Setting is never photographic. It has mood. When you watch a film, has everything in the scene been picked? Chosen?

What is the difference between a real life setting vs. a fictional setting?

One is incidental/accidental – the other is created/malleable

No meaning – discovered meaning

Is one a more likely a reflection of the people it contains?

Could setting be described as a character?

Using the five senses

POV – what would the protagonist notice about the scene.

Should a setting blend in or stand out?

Read *The Story of Before opening scene.*

What is the key detail in this story? There's just one. Why?

Class exercise: A couple standing by a lake after the wife has just found out she's pregnant. The same couple by that lake six months later, after the wife has lost the baby. Describe the lake in both scenes.

Class 3: (1-3pm)

The polyphonic Irish Novel / Plot

Reading: *Let the Great World Spin* by Colum McCann, *Arimathea* by Frank McGuinness

- **Return the Child's Voice assignment**
- Discuss the structure of a polyphonic novel. What are its strengths/weaknesses? So students like polyphonic novels? What is the difference between a polyphonic novel and a collection of linked short stories?
- Discuss novel structures – the classic plot (see handout)

Exercise: Using the classic plot outline (seven points), apply them to one of the three novels discussed. Identify the points in the story, why you think they are the case.

How I (Jamie O'Connell) structure a story:

1. Get character – what is their voice – a few character exercises (think of what we have done – their food etc. Use the character handout I gave you)
2. What makes them desperate? What is their biggest fear? If they were on their deathbed, what would be the story they would tell?
3. What is the crisis of this story? The key decision they must make? Structure your story up to this moment. Generally after this moment, you are tying up loose ends.

Exercise: Practice maintaining a consistent writing flow by writing a succinct story. Pick one plot piece from each column below and try to tie them together into a more cohesive tale with a clear beginning, middle, and end. (*Again, try to write past the point of comfort. Last week, we went 40 minutes, and we felt like that was a long time.*)

The Set Up

- Character adopts a dog
- Two criminals get locked in a van
- The barn is painted blue
- Teacher's pet gets an "F"
- Planning a party

The Climactic Moment

- A snowstorm
- Character chokes
- Character sees ex-lover in the store (or somewhere else)
- Character joins the military
- Someone vandalizes the public pool

The Resolution

- A child is born

- The boat sinks
- Character gets a good night's sleep
- The team loses the game
- The Gods go back to sleep

Class Four: (1-3pm)

Dialogue and Communication (or lack thereof!) in the Irish Novel

Reading: *The Gathering* by Anne Enright, *Academy Street* by Mary Costello

- Read James Ryan's essay piece of dialogue – ask class what is wrong with it?
THINK OF THE INFO DUMPS IN SCOOPY DOO

Discuss the issue of using dialogue to give information/back story vs the need for characters to speak in an authentic way. Which of these two things should be prioritised? Why?

DIALOGUE VS SPEECH. What are the differences? Think of all the 'So' 'ahem' 'Well' swearword use. Think back to the points on voice.

Functions of dialogue (divide class into groups):

Reveals character
Reveals plot (avoid 'info dumps' – think Scooby Doo)
Shows dynamics of relationships
Moves story along

QUOTE: 'Every character should want something' (Kurt Vonnegut). Minor characters in dialogue should not just be ciphers for the main protagonists.

READ MARY COSTELLO'S ACADEMY STREET (PAGE 81/82) – DIALOGUE AS MERE TIPS OF THE ICEBERG WHEN IT COMES TO PEOPLE'S THOUGHTS. SIMILARLY WITH THE GATHERING BY ANNE ENRIGHT. THE THINGS THAT ARE UNSAID.

Danger of dialogue is you put words in the characters mouths as it suits the plot – is it what they would say?

How do we know who is talking? Three ways:

- If it's two people, sometimes it's implied
- He said, she said (avoiding 'exclaimed' 'retorted' – they are words that 'tell don't show')
- Following dialogue with an action by the character

It allows for the reader's imagination to fill in 'the blanks'.

In a piece of fiction, is effective or ineffective communication more interesting to read?

Authenticity is achieved through incoherence. Emphasize that puzzlement is part of the reading process. *'Comedy of errors' – Importance of Being Ernest (Oscar Wilde)*

Discuss the use of adverbs. When do they work? Not work? (Children's literature vs adult literature). Why do they not work, considering the reader's imaginative journey? Use of the word 'said'. Trying to keep immediacy of scene.

Balance of puzzlement vs predictability.

If a conversation is utterly predictable (the reader could've predicted it before it began) better to get it over with quickly. Often reported speech will do.

Class exercise: 'Close the door,' she said crossly. Write this omitting the adverb.

Class exercise: Girl telling her new boyfriend that she is bored watching the match.

Class exercise: Daughter asking father for money to buy makeup. Write the exchange (one page) between the two without using any ancillary narrative (just dialogue).

Homework: Gerry and Paula are in a restaurant. Gerry is about to ask Paula to marry him. Paula is pregnant. But Gerry is not the father. Write the conversation.

- **COLLECT ASSIGNMENTS FOR COURSE**

Class Five

James Joyce and the use of lists in *Ulysses*; Editing and the Irish Novel; The Irish Publishing Industry

Reading: *Ulysses* by James Joyce (I'll bring an extract to class)

- **LISTS: Read *Ulysses* (Episode 17) by James Joyce**

What lay under exposure on the lower, middle and upper shelves of the kitchen dresser, opened by Bloom?

On the lower shelf five vertical breakfast plates, six horizontal breakfast saucers on which rested inverted breakfast cups, a moustachecup, uninverted, and saucer of Crown Derby, four white goldrimmed eggcups, an open shammy purse displaying coins, mostly copper, and a phial of aromatic (violet) comfits. On the middle shelf a chipped eggcup containing pepper, a drum of table salt, four conglomerated black olives in oleaginous paper, an empty pot of Plumtree's potted meat, an oval wicker basket bedded with fibre and containing one Jersey pear, a halfempty bottle of William Gilbey and Co's white invalid port, half disrobed of its swathe of coralpink tissue paper, a packet of Epps's soluble cocoa, five ounces of Anne Lynch's choice tea at 2/— per lb in a crinkled leadpaper bag, a cylindrical canister containing the best crystallised lump sugar, two onions, one, the larger, Spanish, entire, the other, smaller, Irish, bisected with augmented surface and more redolent, a jar of Irish Model Dairy's cream, a jug of brown crockery containing a naggin and a quarter of soured adulterated milk, converted by heat into water, acidulous serum and semisolidified curds, which added to the quantity subtracted for Mr Bloom's and Mrs Fleming's breakfasts, made one imperial pint, the total quantity originally delivered, two cloves, a halfpenny and a small dish containing a slice of fresh ribsteak. On the upper shelf a battery of jamjars (empty) of various sizes and proveniences.

- Say something about the protagonist. A visual portrait
- Exact products/brands essential. Be definite
- Writing lists in fiction - must include one thing surprising
- Must raise questions – not everything needs to be fully explained

Exercise: *Create the following lists for a thirty five year old divorced secretary with no children:*

- 1) **Books on her shelve (titles and authors).**
- 2) **iTunes Music**
- 3) **Movies**
- 4) **Items in the attic**
- 5) **Photographs on display**

- **EDITING**
- Review handout (attached) using examples from the number of texts that have been discussed through the term.

- **IRISH PUBLISHING INDUSTRY**

- Explain the publishing industry in Ireland, drawing on my five years of experience in Irish publishing houses. How submissions work etc. Review handout. **WHY WRITE? If you get time discuss with them your own journey as Irish writer, ups and downs, where you are at, what you hope for etc. Give them a sense of a writer's life, how to make it work in a practical sense.**