

## Syllabus

### **Section #3: Write your first novel fast and sure Write-by-the-Lake Writer's Workshop & Retreat 2009**

Led by Christine DeSmet, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Held at the Pyle Center, 702 Langdon St., 9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Phone (608) 262-3447, fax (608) 265-2475. Email: [cdesmet@dcs.wisc.edu](mailto:cdesmet@dcs.wisc.edu); UW-Madison Liberal Studies & the Arts, 610 Langdon St., Rm 621, Madison, WI 53703

Writing fast is one thing, but how do you find your “voice” and write something that will actually sell or that you’ll be proud to self-publish? What do you do when the story falls apart by Chapter Five or Three? Where do you find all that stuff to fill 300 or more pages? How do you make readers care? What’s a conflict that can sustain a novel? Why do lengthy character bio charts fail writers and what might serve you better? What things court rejections?

Get your novel underway with confidence and with a mentor who has “fiction first aid” at the ready.

Discover how to lay out “story” vs. “plot,” deepen characters, and write the first three chapters in a way that editors and agents can’t resist. We explore the 6 essential components of novels. Create true hooks for the beginning and “pinches” for the middle, find keys to pace and tension, improve your style, discover your ending, make settings a selling point instead of mere backdrop, and improve your dialogue.

We also cover the query letter, synopsis, pitching to agents, and other marketing matters.

Christine will critique 15 additional pages after the retreat, included in the fee.

Each day includes lecture/discussion, writing exercises, and group critique.

**Please e-mail the instructor with the first two pages of your work-in-progress by June 1.** [cdesmet@dcs.wisc.edu](mailto:cdesmet@dcs.wisc.edu). Include a short synopsis of under 250 words of what transpires in the beginning, middle, and end of your story (or as much as you know). The material will be shared the first day. Please double-space the novel pages and use 12-point Courier or Times New Roman, with one-inch margins. The synopsis may be single-spaced. To email, attach a Microsoft Word document (.doc) or a Rich Text File (.rtf). Send to: [cdesmet@dcs.wisc.edu](mailto:cdesmet@dcs.wisc.edu)

**Suggested reading beforehand**

It helps discussion immensely if we have a book in common we can talk about all week.

The two novels listed below are well-received ones that can teach you a lot; one is penned by a past retreat participant. Both novels are fast weekend reads. They're polar opposites in story and style, yet the authors employ similar techniques.

—For a literary, character-driven novel that has beautiful scene work, dialogue, plot, and more, I suggest Kent Haruf's famous *Plainsong*. Two older bachelor brother farmers take in a pregnant teenager. A parallel plot deals with two young brothers and their disintegrating family. And trust me—there's humor along the way.

—I also suggest the first novel by Wisconsin author Deb Baker. *Murder Passes the Buck* is a campy, fun, well-written mystery novel that takes place in Upper Michigan during deer hunting season. It also has "beautiful scene work, dialogue, plot, and more." The lead character is a 60-year-old widow sleuth who has plenty of trouble with her sheriff son, a lazy adult grandson, her zealous friends, and a love interest.

For "how-to" books, today's litmus test on your manuscript can probably be found within these two books: *Writing the Breakout Novel* by agent Donald Maass, and *The Writer's Journey/Mythic Structure for Storytellers & Screenwriters* by Christopher Vogler. Those aren't required reading; you won't be lost in class if you don't read them.

### **Monday, June 15**

*Discover the hidden elements that drive the novel more than you do.*

Learn 6 elements that make up a novel and keys to each. Learn what a logline is and how to write it effectively. You'll also get help in focusing your entire story down into a one-page synopsis. Learn ways to find your real story vs. the one that may not be working now. We'll begin to look at templates or "forms" of story structure for novels. Learn where to start your story. Discover keys to filling the pages: Do you need to find more stuff? Where does the stuff come from when your brain feels drained of anymore ideas? Organize all that "stuff" into chapters and scenes that make sense. Learn how to make readers care instantly.

For discussion, please submit the first two pages of your manuscript by June 1 to the instructor, with a one-page synopsis. Yup, one page, single-spaced, 12-point typeface. Stumble through it as best you can. Think of what's on the back cover of a book; write that.

Overnight: Write or hone your book's opening, or all of Chapter One (10 or so pages).

### **Tuesday, June 16**

*Create characters we care about.* Discover your hierarchy of characters. What do you do about a lazy lead character? A bland character? What should they be doing in their scenes? Or not doing? How do you keep characters from repeating themselves or getting in a rut? Can characters ever talk too much? Not talk enough? Learn how to write about your favorite issue or cause through fiction and not drive away editors with a preachy character. We'll also continue work on story structure.

Overnight: Fun character work exercise. Or continue work on Chapters One and Two.

### **Wednesday, June 17**

*How to improve your scenes, and find the tension and trouble on every page.* More on how to find the template for your particular story and how to create the last half. Discover the heart of structure and why it's never "formula." Just as each writer has a personality, so too does each novel. Novels are made of action/reaction, plotlines and storylines working in tandem and pushing each other, character narrative thoughts coupled with dynamic decision-making. Sometimes finding a symbol or metaphor is all it takes for the writer to go, "Aha, I know where my novel is going now." All of those things and more collectively give a novel its "connectiveness." Once you find that, then the writing becomes a joy; the story takes on a life of its own and may write itself. We focus on connecting Chapters One, Two, and Three to the last half of the story.

Overnight: Making scenes work better for you. A new look at your story's structure. A new look at how you'll improve dramatic tension.

### **Thursday, June 18**

*Increase tension, pacing, suspense—if you're serious about selling.* One of the common flaws of our first drafts is their lack of conflict or tension. Some writers are afraid of "conflict" and back off. But conflict is not just a fist fight, a stalker appearing, or a car chase, or somebody yelling in disagreement. Word choices, setting, a character's backstory and hobbies, and many more elements help bring emotional drama to each page. Gain mastery of ways to prevent plodding, episodic prose: transitions of time and emotional change, details that matter, setting, writing style, character traits and weaknesses, desires of villains and antagonists, functional characters often forgotten about, and more.

For fun: What does your favorite author do to keep things rolling at a good pace? Check out the books suggested for this course!

Overnight: A focus on the details that "sell" a novel. Continue working on Chapters One, Two, and Three.

### **Friday, June 19**

*Energize the last half of your manuscript.* Discover the key plot points of your novel and what readers (and editors) will be expecting of the character and action in your last 50 or 100 pages. We tweak your novel proposal. We discuss marketing and how to keep the writing on track until "The End." Some past

attendees of this retreat are now published. Why and how? We'll make a plan for the months ahead. You'll leave with clear, specific direction for your writing life.

**Credit Option:** Participants earn 1 credit by attending class and completing the assigned work for the week: daily reading, writing at least five pages of original work, and critiquing of own and others' work. To earn 2 credits, participants submit an additional five pages of their work. Participants earning 3 credits complete all of the above requirements supplemented by another five to 10 pages of creative work or a short paper synthesizing how the material covered during the week applies to their own creative projects and/or teaching. The work must be handed in within two weeks of final class date.

**Christine DeSmet** is an award-winning writer of novels and feature film screenplays. At UW-Madison, Christine teaches fiction and screenwriting, and mentors and critiques novelists and screenwriters throughout the year. Her first short story, "Sex with the Man in the Moon," was published in the anthology, *Tales from the Treasure Trove, Volume I*, which earned two national awards, including the *Romantic Times* magazine Reader's Choice Award. Her "Mischiefs in Moonstone" series of humorous, romantic mystery short stories have appeared in several anthologies from Whiskey Creek Press, including her own collection published in 2008; that collection is nominated for a 2009 award. Her romantic suspense novel, *Spirit Lake*, is a bestseller for publisher Hard Shell Word Factory. She's a member of Writers Guild of America, East, and Romance Writers of America. With a scriptwriting partner she's optioned feature film screenplays and a TV series, and was a past winner of the Slamdance Film Festival contest, and recently earned high placement on both the Austin Film Festival contest and Wisconsin's statewide playwright's contest. Past retreat students of Christine's include published author Kathy Steffen, now teaching at Write-by-the-Lake.