

Write-by-the-Lake Writer's Workshop & Retreat, June 15-19, 2009

Section #5 –Write Mysteries, Play Jazz

Led by John Galligan

Held at the Pyle Center, 702 Langdon St., 9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Contact: John Galligan at (608) 258-2489, jgalligan@matcmadison.edu

Syllabus

This syllabus is intended to serve as a guideline only. Revisions may occur at any time according to the needs of the class.

Suggested Reading (try to read at least one, according to your interests; the primary example in class discussion will be *Blue Ridge*)

- *Blue Ridge*, by T.R. Pearson (quirky, funny, poetic, uplifting)
- *Mystic River*, by Dennis Lehane (gritty, deep, disturbing, sad)
- *A Confidential Source* by Jan Brogan (traditional, crisp, wry, well-crafted)
- *The Chocolate Snowman Murders* by Joanna Carl (theme-based, cozy, frilly, fun)

Daily Schedule

Monday: Choosing Your Instrument

First things first: mystery writers need to make strong and clear decisions at the outset to avoid a cacophony of voices, effects, directions, tones, audience expectations, etc. We've all been there! Kind of like a junior high band concert on the written page. Let's not go there again!

- Course and Student Introductions
- Week Overview
- Quick Write #1
- Discussion: Genre, Sub-Genre, Conventions, and Point of View
- Revision #1
- Homework: Choose Your Instrument

Tuesday: Finding Your Melody

Hey—it's all been done before, so what song do you want to play? Embracing the recursive nature of mystery writing—the way jazz musicians embrace jazz standards—is a great way to start. Don't worry: once we liberate the genuine you around a solid, time-tested melody, the result will be something no one has ever heard before.

- Feedback Session #1 (Choose Your Instrument)
- Quick Write #2
- Discussion: Characters, Setting, Theme, and Tone; Story Analogs
- Revision #2
- Homework: Find Your Melody

Wednesday: Playing it Hard and Straight

I think it was Robert Frost who said that poetry without rules is like “playing tennis with the net down.” It is the net, lines, and rules that make brilliance possible—without them, no McEnroe, no Williams sisters, no nothing. In the same way, the foundation of good jazz is not the frills and innovations but the framework that holds things together, making creativity and surprise possible. You need to know your story and make it work. You need to nail it.

- Feedback Session #2
- Quick Write #3
- Discussion: Plot, Pacing, and Dramatic Tension; Scenes and Sequences
- Revision #3
- Homework: A Scene in a Sequence in a Plot in a Story

Thursday: The Jazz in Your Voice

Just like your mom always said, you are unique (and probably wonderful, too). No one has your experiences, your voice, your style. If your story is a standard—done a thousand times before—then what makes it sing is you. Not you the plotter and practitioner, but you the one and only—you the genius—unleashed over the catch net of solid craft. Today we get real and fool around.

- Feedback Session #3 (A Scene in a Sequence in a Plot in a Story)
- Quick Write #4
- Discussion: The Elements of Voice, Style, Tone, Chi, Wa, MoJo, and Umph
- Revision #4
- Homework: Another Scene in a Sequence in a Plot in a Story

Friday: The Jazz of Love, Death, and Detail

Let’s wax slightly philosophical: don’t murder mysteries have value because they allow us to triangulate between love, death, and laughter? Or between fear, death, and hope? Pick your triangle (just include death in it). And don’t we need this kind of exercise to survive? Maybe none of what we’ve done so far is the real reason people will read our mysteries. Maybe we’ve only engaged them to read, but we haven’t yet taken them to the place they want to go. Maybe the payoff is in the giggles (around death), the romance (around death), the salvation (around death), the beauty and the re-birth and the hope (around death). You think? If not, I’ll try to convince you.

- Feedback Session #4 (A Scene . . .)
- Quick Write #5
- Discussion: Sub-Plot, Love Stories, Thematic Development, and Resolution
- Revision #5
- Closing: Goals, Follow-Up, and Feedback

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.