TEACHING WRITING IS BUNK. — CORMAC MCCARTHY

NO, CORMAC MCCARTHY IS BUNK (AT LEAST THIS TIME). — NIOCE RETSEH

Think of it: no one would possibly claim that "teaching piano is bunk" or "teaching singing is bunk" or even "teaching painting is bunk." And even if someone advanced such a preposterous notion, he'd suffer a withering avalanche of derision and quickly issue a withdrawal before skulking away. For, plainly, anything can be taught — and learned. Or, otherwise, the human species would've died out long ago. Yet McCarthy's absurd quote, strangely, endures. Why? Hmm... one thing among many that we will come back to time and time and time again.

For, in fact, we learn to write fiction the way we learn all forms of expressive communication — through, first, imitation, then through emulation, and, finally, through emancipation, i.e., through liberation — through struggling to free ourselves from the shackles of those whom we imitate and emulate; for, in that struggle and freedom, we find in ourselves what separates art from artifice: namely: authenticity.

In this class though — doubtless, the second or third you have taken — we will, rather, concentrate on our attempt to rid ourselves of the first step of imitation and ascend to that second level: that of emulation.

Texts: Stealing from Thieves, Colin Hester (instructor supplied PDFs); Diamond Sutra, Colin Hester (excerpts), (instructor supplied PDFs).

Instructor Contact Info:

Office: Black 225-26 (a location I rarely, if ever, frequent).
Phone: Do not phone my office number; I won't answer (since I'm rarely if ever there), and I do not have remote voice mail access.
Email: professorbrityank@live.com (links directly to my Q10; hence possesses the immediacy of texting me).
Office Hours: MWF 9:00-9:50 in the computer lab above Hebeler 121 and any daytime by appointment 7 days a week.

Learning Objectives

- In this business, there's only one, but it's the biggie: to discover the yellow-brick road that leads to our readers' gleefully-willing suspension of disbelief.
Class Format

We will write 8 short emulations and, once we have covered the techniques in *Stealing from Thieves*, we will use those techniques to write full fictional stories. I will guess that with 8 emulations, we will begin to write full stories after the 17th class. Since we have 37 total classes, that will leave us 20 classes in which to workshop our stories. Since we have 20 students, if we devote 20-odd minutes to workshop each story, then you will each write two full-blown stories. The other 10 minutes per class we will devote to reading and other deviant and suspicious behaviours.

You will upload your emulations and stories into the class’s Amazon Cloud account. To log in to that Amazon account, at the log-in page, you will enter the following email, eng364@live.com and the password: fiction364. **You must upload all your submissions as Microsoft Word docs.** Do not use iDocs or Googledocs or iGoogle or RottenAppledocs. If you do, I, and a vast majority of your classmates, will be unable to open them, print them, and critique them, which is tantamount to not having submitted them at all, which is the equivalent of not attending class, which will earn you a "non-participatory event" tikkie, more than three of which will begin to lower your final grade (see 'Attendance' screed below).

Once your classmates have uploaded their emulations, we will critique as many as we can in the two class periods before we move on to the next round of emulations. And do not email me your emulations. Use the appropriate Amazon Cloud folder. Once we have exhausted the eight emulations, we will begin writing full-blown fictions using the *Thieves* techniques. If I assign you to craft and upload a story you will do so and then upload it into the Cloud no later than 6:00 p.m. on the day before your scheduled workshop torture session. Then, each of your classmates will print off a hard copy, read it carefully and meticulously, and respond, critiquing it with either pencil or ink (these crude and ancient tools can be found in the anti-Millennial section of the CWoo bukestore and purchased for pittances). Be exact in your critique. Do not worry about being too harsh. The line between harshness and cruelty lies in the amount of precision you use, i.e., the amount of specifics.

To that end, avoid vague generalities. Never, ever praise a submission with, "I thought this story was pretty cool." And never, ever, **ever** damn a submission with, "I just couldn't connect with the main character." Both stand as worthless beacons in the fiction-workshop cliché basket. Instead, tell your classmate where and why — where exactly in her story did you go, "Cool!" and why; and where exactly in her story did you wish you were watching weeds grow (notice the plural)). She neither seeks nor needs your faint praise or limp approbation. And even if she does, we're not going to give it to her. Right?

Workshop etiquette: when we discuss your story, you must remain completely silent. You may offer no defense, clarification, or explanation. Not a single, solitary word. Yes, I know — pretty brutal. Tough. However, in return, I will hold those workshopping your story to the highest standards. As in the written comments, I will allow not a single unsupported criticism to go unchallenged by me.
Grading: Grading an undergraduate fiction class comes fraught with conundrums. How can we possibly come up with a grading rubric? Sellable? Publishable. Poetic? Readable? Finishable? All vagaries, and as the syllabus states several times earlier, we don’t allow vagaries in this class. And truth to tell, I’ve encountered a despairing number of award-winning contemporary works of fiction whose first paragraph (let alone chapter or page) I could not complete (for example, one of Jonathan Franzen’s and most of Jonathan Safran Froer’s — hey, wait a minute, do I have some subliminal grudge against ‘Jonathan’s?) Anyway, what to do (about the grading not the grudge)? Well, essentially, you will earn the grade your effort in this class deserves. The more you integrate the Thieves techniques into your stories, the more vivid and moving will they read; the more vivid and moving, the higher the grade. Fair enough? Let me answer for you: more than fair enough.

Rough Class Schedule:

Introduction & Syllabus
Part the First: Beginnings
Landscape
Dialogue
Interiors
Scenes
Transitions
Endings
Part the Second: Workshops

Attendance:

You are allowed three excused non-participatory events (absences) and no more, regardless of the reason — influenza, stock market troughs, intergalactic war. For each subsequent absence beyond the third, your final grade will be lowered one step (i.e. a B sinks to a B-). By “attendance” I mean showing up to class with your required emulation/story uploaded and/or assigned reading done. Otherwise you will earn a Non-Participatory Event tickie. And, yes, some students in the past have earned 2 (count them: 2) NPE tickies on the same day.

If you miss a class, you and you alone bear the sole responsibility to get notes, assignments, and handouts from a classmate.

Classroom etiquette:

No cell phones, no head phones, no texting. Repeat: No cell phones, no head phones, no texting. (Did I say, “No cell phones, no head phones, no texting?”) And no talking — unless called upon. I have absolutely no tolerance for any of the former and if you resist you will be summarily dispatched.
Plagiarism:

Don’t. I’ll catch you and you’ll fail this class — and face certain expulsion.

Final:

For the final exam, you will rewrite one of your stories and submit it to the English Department during finals week.

ADA Statement:

If you have a disability and wish to set up academic adjustments in this class, please give me a copy of your “Confirmation of Eligibility for Academic Adjustments” as soon as possible so we can discuss how to implement the approved adjustments. If you do not have this form, contact the Disability Support Services Office, Bouillon 205 or dss@cwu.edu or 963-2171.

Diversity

In my classroom, diversity is welcomed and celebrated. I will not tolerate any forms of prejudice or discrimination, including those based on age, color, disability, gender, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, or veteran status. We are here to learn in a climate of civility and mutual respect.