Reader engagement is rooted in two things: a story’s momentum and its resonance. By resonance, I mean the reader’s attachment to the story; the story’s power. It is possible for a story to have lots of conflict but still fail to resonate. Think of all the TV series you’ve consumed in your life; many of them were quite effective at getting you to watch, but how many of them stuck with you? How many of them affected you? How many of them really had you rooting for the main character? Momentum comes from conflict and tension, but resonance comes from below-the-surface things: how we identify with the character, how a character perceives conflict, and what the conflict means. This course will focus on upping the wattage, getting readers to care about characters and their objectives. We’ll look between the lines, between the actions, between the dialogue, as we examine how to craft subtext, how to imply motivations, and how to convey characters’ interiority. Though this course is a follow-up on my class of the past three years, students will not need to have taken the Momentum course to get a lot out of this one. Anyone writing stories—novelists, short story writers, memoirists, essayists—needs to be sure those stories matter.

Throughout the week, we’ll provide examples of both successful and unsuccessful Resonance. But our focus will always be on improving your writing; our exercises in class and our homework each night are designed for you to get the most from each day’s lesson. Crucial to your development as a writer will be your insightful reading of your classmates’ work. Email 10 pages of a short story, novel, or memoir by May 30th to tdstorm@wisc.edu. (You’ll be reading each other’s manuscripts, occasionally working in pairs or in small groups to discuss one another’s Resonance. At no point will you be the recipient of a whole-class critique, nor will you be required to give each other your edits. But I’ll occasionally make references to the work of your classmates, so you will get the most out of
the class if you’re familiar with their submissions. You will receive edits from me.)

Tim Storm received his MFA from Pacific University. He has work published in multiple anthologies and journals, including Short Story America Vol. IV and Black Warrior Review. He’s been a finalist in several writing contests and is the winner of the 2013 Reynolds Price Short Fiction Award. For the past 16 years, he has taught literature and writing, and he currently edits both fiction and nonfiction and teaches online and in person. For more information, visit his website: tdstorm.com.

Syllabus

Stories That Matter: Creating the Resonance That Publishers Crave

The readers that matter—for the sake of publishing—are those who will both buy your books and buy into your books. The two usually go hand in hand. You want agents, publishers, and/or reviewers to feel attachment to the people in your story. You want to move them. Because here’s the thing about readers: they’re contagious. Infect/affect one and you’ll start a chain reaction, especially if you can get to those key readers—readers who read a lot, mind you. If you’re going to affect them, you’ve got to have a story that engages deeply, that resonates.

This course will focus on deepening the reader’s attachment to character and objective. As such, we’ll spend a lot of time examining character interiority. We’ll refine your skills in narrating character interiority and past, and we’ll get you closely examining your portrayal of setting, objects and dialogue in order to create stories that matter.

Monday: Story People

The two extremes of modern story: on one end, the fast moving, high octane tales of adventure, sex, and life-threatening danger; on the other end, the leisurely, “character-driven” sketches of morose people battling internal demons. If you can slog through to the end of the character-driven pieces, they might leave an impression, but the high-octane tales hardly ever have anything of substance to communicate. And therein lie the problems with the extremes. They rarely marry momentum and resonance.

On this first day, we’ll recap some of the key concepts from my Momentum course—the elements of story, the interaction between action and inaction, and the famous Storm Cycling Metaphor. But we’ll quickly turn our focus to Resonance and its sources, which are all rooted in character. I’ll reveal a
controversial assertion: you don’t need to know everything about your characters, certainly not their motivations.

Really?
Yep. But we do need to know some other key aspects of our characters if we’re to create people who engage readers.

Our driving questions:
- How do we make engaging characters?
- What’s the relationship between momentum and resonance?
- Where does resonance come from?
- What do we need to know about our characters?

We’ll look at some tips on bringing characters to life and giving them direction. And we’ll explain the number one rule of character creation: apply stress. Our first night’s homework will be to put that lesson to practice with a character of your own.

**Tuesday: A Penny for Your**

Even bestsellers are sometimes clumsy with their handling of what goes on inside their characters’ heads, committing one of several errors in *interiority*: giving us too little of it, telling us too much of it, or delivering it through p.o.v. violations. We’ll focus in on narration on this day, looking at the relationship between narrator, character, and reader, and examining effective and ineffective interiority.

Our driving questions:
- How do we go about conveying interiority?
- Should we avoid mental action verbs like wonder, think, feel?
- What is close narration and how do we best handle it?
- When does narration produce tension for the reader and when does it produce tension for the character?

We’ll see both effective and ineffective depictions of what is going on inside a character’s head and provide some concrete tips on how to make your interiority more fluid and more in-sync with your plot. We’ll also look at the concept of psychic distance. Today’s homework will be to examine and revise a bit of interiority from whatever you’re currently working on.

**Wednesday: Identity = Past Experience**

The past arguably impinges upon all of our interactions and motivations. Our sense of self, as many current neuroscientists have stated, is a narrative we’ve created of our past experiences. And so, characters in our stories need to have back stories. Indeed, those back stories can provide a lot of the resonance of a
story. There’s more poignance to a character facing, say, a cancer diagnosis if her father died of the disease. But how much of those back stories should we include?

Our driving questions:

- How do we incorporate the past into our narration?
- When can we leave the main action of the story to delve into the past?
- What are the pitfalls of including the past?

We'll examine some do's and don'ts of including a character’s past. Homework will be a revision or creation of some scene that includes a flash back or a back flash or otherwise delves into back-story exposition.

**Thursday: Reading between the Lines . . . of Dialogue**

Dialogue is rife with opportunity to convey character interiority. That much is obvious. But writers sometimes err on the side of overdoing the dialogue—dumping information, neglecting narration and stage business, or using dialogue to telegraph interiority.

Our driving questions:

- How and why should we strive for subtext?
- How do we flesh out dialogue with narration and stage business?
- What does effective character gesture look like?

Following the pattern for the week, we'll look at what works and what doesn’t work, providing very practical tips not so much for dialogue itself; rather, for dialogue-driven scenes. How can you make such scenes deliver some resonance? Homework will be—you guessed it—a revision or creation of a dialogue scene.

**Friday: The Flies on the Wall, and the Wall**

Our characters’ environments—the objects or props they interact with, and the settings in which they find themselves—can often do much to convey character interiority. We’ll look closely at how props can be instrumental to both plot and character development. And we’ll examine how setting can reveal character desire. Our investigation of setting and objects will culminate in our final take-away lesson on how to best bring together the internal and external worlds of our stories.

- How can objects reveal character?
- How does setting reveal character?
- When are objects and settings ineffective?

Ultimately, what we’re examining is how and why the exterior world in stories
reveals anything about character interiority? (It doesn’t always seem to do so in real life.) By week’s end, you’ll have worked hard to deepen reader attachment to your stories. You’ll likely leave exhausted (because I’m going to make you work), but you’ll also leave inspired to continue that work and get your stories to matter.

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 one’s own and other’s work. To earn 2 credits, participants submit an additional five pages of work. Participants earn 3 credits by completing all of the above, and by submitting another additional 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. All work must be handed in within two weeks of the final class date.