

Writing Contemporary Short Fiction (Online) – by Siavash Saadlou

Fridays, June 12 – July 31st

Description

This intensive, 8-week online workshop is designed for writers who want to break away from conventional narrative formulas and master the sharp, subtext-driven landscape of contemporary short fiction. Moving past predictable plots, we will analyze the technical mechanics of stories that feel alive, dangerous, and emotionally bruising.

To anchor our craft lectures, we will closely study the machinery of some of today’s most acclaimed contemporary voices, reading the works of Jamel Brinkley, Jhumpa Lahiri, Ottessa Moshfegh, and others.

Each two-hour session pairs deep-dive structural analysis of these authors' stories with immediate, high-stakes writing sprints. This is not a passive lecture course. You will draft live, dissect craft machinery, and workshop your own fiction in a rigorous, supportive environment modeled on top-tier MFA programs. By looking closely at how today's masters engineer desire, proximity, and domestic friction, you will learn to build short fiction that lingers long after the final sentence.

What You Will Learn

- **The Economy of Scale:** How to isolate a narrative “seed” and compress massive life events into sharp, claustrophobic short forms.
- **Subtextual Dialogue:** How to strip away clunky exposition and write high-stakes conversations where the true conflict lives entirely unspoken between the lines.
- **The Psychological Setting:** Techniques for transforming physical, domestic spaces into literal pressure cookers that mirror and distort character psychology.
- **Close POV & Psychic Distance:** How to manipulate narrative distance to filter wild or unreliable characters through an intimate, deeply biased lens.
- **Resisting Sentimentality:** Strategies for writing about heavy themes—like grief, envy, and alienation—with sharp, dark humor and unsentimental precision.
- **Anti-Formulaic Structure:** How to build tension through shifting expectations and construct endings that snap like a string rather than tying up in a neat, artificial bow.

Week 1: Anatomy & Scope of Short Fiction

- **Required Reading:** “The One Who Swims with the Stars” by C Pam Zhang
- **Craft Focus:** Scope, structural constraints, and finding the core narrative seed.
- **In-Class Exercise:** *The Micro-Sliver*. Pick a massive life event (e.g., a wedding). Write a 300-word scene focusing entirely on one tiny sensory detail (e.g., a stained tablecloth) to convey the entire emotional weight of the event.

Week 2: Character Mechanics, Desire, & Vulnerability

- **Required Reading:** “Witness” by Jamel Brinkley
- **Craft Focus:** How generational dynamics, community observation, and unstated emotional vulnerabilities drive character friction.
- **In-Class Exercise:** *The Shielded Vulnerability*. Write a dialogue-heavy scene where a character desperately tries to hide a physical discomfort or emotional hurt from someone close to them while discussing something completely mundane.

Week 3: World-Building, Domestic Settings, & Alienation

- **Required Reading:** “A Temporary Matter” by Jhumpa Lahiri
- **Craft Focus:** Using a changing physical environment (a house experiencing nightly blackouts) as a literal and psychological pressure cooker for a relationship.
- **In-Class Exercise:** *The Domestic Shift*. Describe a room through the eyes of someone who feels entirely at home, then rewrite the description after an unsettling secret is revealed. Do not mention the secret explicitly.

Week 4: Structural Architecture, Tension, & The Funhouse Mirror

- **Required Reading:** “Didi” by Amber Caron
- **Craft Focus:** Structuring a narrative around a shifting centerpiece. Notice how Caron sets up structural expectations for a “troubled teen drama” but systematically subverts them by letting every adult project their own biases onto Didi.
- **In-Class Exercise:** *The Projector*. Introduce a silent, enigmatic third character into a conversation between two people. Write a 400-word scene where the two main characters argue *about* the silent person, revealing their own deep insecurities through how they interpret the silent person's actions.

Week 5: Dialogue, Subtext, & Dark Humor

- **Required Reading:** “Bettering Myself” by Ottessa Moshfegh
- **Craft Focus:** Crafting a highly unreliable, self-destructive narrator whose inner commentary sharply contrasts with how they interact with others.
- **In-Class Exercise:** *The Self-Deception Dialogue*. Write a conversation between a teacher or boss and an authority figure where the narrator is clearly failing or lying, but their spoken dialogue attempts to project absolute, calm control.

Week 6: Point of View, Psychic Distance, & Identity

- **Required Reading:** “Roy” by Emma Binder
- **Craft Focus:** Using close first-person POV to filter a wild, dangerous character (Uncle Roy) through a young protagonist's evolving lens of identity. Notice how the psychic distance shifts between childhood memory and adult realization.
- **In-Class Exercise:** *The Unconventional Lens*. Write a 200-word scene where the narrator describes a deeply irresponsible action by an adult or peer, but filters it entirely through awe, fascination, or a sense of protection.

Week 7: Parallel Narratives & The Art of Revision

- **Required Reading:** “Housewifely Arts” by Megan Mayhew Bergman
- **Craft Focus:** Managing parallel narratives (the real-time road trip vs. the historical relationship with the mother). We will also dissect how to write about grief and longing without falling into cheap, unearned sentimentality.
- **In-Class Exercise:** *The Dual Timeline Track*. Take the scene you wrote in Week 2. Inject three brief lines of backstory or flashback memory into the present-tense action to reveal why the character's current vulnerability is so terrifying to them.

Week 8: Angular Envy, Projections, & The Unresolved Ending

- **Required Reading:** “Marital Problems” by Robin Romm
- **Craft Focus:** Dissecting Romm's use of a missing dead bird, a contractor, and a younger neighbor to illustrate how characters project their own domestic exhaustion. We will look at how to end a short story not with a neat bow, but with an absurd, revealing escalation.
- **In-Class Exercise:** *The Disruption Crumbs*. Write a scene where a couple is searching for a small, missing household object. As they search, their physical movements and descriptions of the clutter around them must slowly morph into an argument about an entirely different, unspoken resentment.

About the instructor:

Siavash Saadlou is a 2026 Rising Star, selected by Writers' Trust of Canada. His short stories, essays, and translations have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Massachusetts Review*, and *New England Review*, among other journals. He is the winner of numerous literary contests, including the 2025 Conger Beasley Jr. Award for Nonfiction, the 2024 McNally Robinson Booksellers Creative Nonfiction Prize, and the 2023 Constance Rooke Creative Nonfiction Prize.