

## Course Description for English 815

Spring 2021

Thursday 3p-5:40p ONLINE

Instructor: Mauricio Kilwein Guevara (maurice@uwm.edu)

English 815-001

Seminar in Fiction Writing: Seriocomic Fiction

Required text: *How I Became a Nun*, a novel by César Aira

Too often, contemporary literary fiction published in the United States employs a rigorously fixed tonal register. An example many of us read recently was Omar El Akkad's *American War*. This debut novel was for me in many ways auspicious, and the final third of the narrative was remarkable. However, the work also seemed doggedly attached to staying in its dystopian, minor key. As I read, I couldn't help but wonder how Omar's novel would have looked and what more it could have communicated had it complicated the tonal registers it employed.

With these ideas in mind, our course will study how to modulate tone to maximum effect in the fiction we write, which will be neither monochromatically tragic/dramatic nor comic, but instead an interplay of these two classic tonal modes. I like to think of tone as the twin to the element of conflict (or tension) in fiction; the interplay of each can add complexity, depth, paradox, character revelation, and irony to both short and long-form fiction. Examples of extraordinary writers whose work is in the seriocomic mode are legion, but here are a few off the top of my head: Karen Tei Yamashita, Miguel de Cervantes, Franz Kafka, Ramona Ausubel, Gabriel García Márquez, Sam Lipsyte, and Andrey Kurkov.

We'll discuss Steve Kaplan's notion of "straight line/wavy line" in character development and share our own examples of seriocomic fiction that we admire. Students will write new stories or novel chapters-in-progress. The class will involve weekly Zoom sessions in the first thirteen weeks as well as Canvas activities.