

LT326 TIME TO EXPERIMENT: ADVANCED FICTION

Seminar Leader: Gavin McCrea
Email: g.mccrea@berlin.bard.edu
Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description

As writers, we're constantly learning how to do what we do. There will never come a moment in our writing career when we will be able to say, "Now I know for certain how this is done." Ours is, and will remain, the role of the doubter, the questioner, the analyzer, the student, the experimenter.

Where does our writing come from? The answer, simply, is other writing. It is by learning how to read writing that we become writers. In order to grow and develop as writers, we must read regularly and widely. But the quantity of works we read will count for nothing if we do not learn how to read carefully. If we do not approach every book, chapter, page, paragraph, sentence as an opportunity to find out what we like and why we like it, what we dislike and why we dislike it, and, importantly, what we will choose to emulate or to recast in our own work. Reading carefully in this way, for this purpose, means slowing down. It means forgetting the race to the end, overcoming the desire to get on to the next story, the next book, and instead approaching each page as a world to immerse ourselves in.

This course, then, is an antidote to fast judgements, fast fashions, speed reading, speed writing. In it, we will slowly and carefully analyze a number of short fictional texts in order to learn specific lessons about certain themes relevant to all fiction writing: **consciousness, secrets, voices, desire, body, violence, illness, hatred, history**. We will then put these lessons into practice in our own writing.

Each week, at home, we will read a short story or a novel extract. In class we will perform close textual analyses of a number of passages from that week's text. During these analyses, we will not be overly concerned with rhetorical jargon (although some of that might be useful). Our focus, really, will be on identifying what information the writer is transmitting in a specific unit of text, how she conveys that information, what she seems to hide or elide, what questions she is trying to answer, and what further questions her answers raise. Why did the writer convey the information in this way, and not in another? What specific techniques did she use? Faced with the task of conveying similar sort of information, how would we ourselves proceed?

In addition to the reading, we will perform a series of writing experiments. These experiments will spring from our in-class textual analyses. For example, having spent time in class looking at how the writer constructs a specific transition between the narrative present and the narrative past, we might set ourselves the task of writing a short piece of prose containing a similar kind of transition. We will be invited to share our experiments in class. Here, the idea is to show our writing in a raw state, as fragments that have yet to be built upon or integrated into larger narrative bodies. Structured around specific themes, seminars will be devoted to sharing writing experiments and performing close textual analyses, and writing exercises.

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR SPRING 2022: Some students may need to begin the semester remotely due to travel restrictions caused by the pandemic. In addition, all students and instructors must refrain from in-person attendance if they are feeling ill. Instructors should make efforts to offer alternatives to in-person attendance where needed, including remote participation or asynchronous options.

Assessment

Each week students will share an individual writing experiment with the class by uploading it onto Google Drive. By the end of the semester, these experiments should amount to a portfolio of work, no less than 2000 words in total. Each student's portfolio will be assessed and will count for 30% of the overall grade.

Assignments

At the end of week 14, students will submit a final creative writing project (a short story or stories, minimum 2900 words, maximum 3100 words). This final project will count for 40% of the overall grade.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Class Attendance and Participation: 30%

Portfolio of Writing Exercises (uploaded weekly to Google Drive, no less than 2000 words in total): 30%

Final Project (a short story or stories, minimum 2900 words, maximum 3100 words): 40%

Schedule

The seminar group will meet twice a week: Tuesday and Thursday at 10:45. Each seminar will be 90 minutes long. The seminars will be structured in the following way:

Tuesday Seminar: The first 30 minutes will be spent informally sharing our writing experiments (homework). The following 60 minutes will be spent performing close textual analyses of a short story or novel extract.

Thursday Seminar: The first 30 minutes will be spent informally sharing our writing experiments. The following 60 minutes will be spent performing writing exercises based on the themes of our analyses in Seminar A. Students will be expected to work on these experiments (expand them and/or edit them) as homework. Students will then share these experiments with the class via Google Drive.

For the first ten weeks of the course, we will focus on specific themes relevant, in some way or another, to all fiction:

Week One: **Being a writer**

Week Two: **Consciousness**

Week Three: **Secrets**

Week Four: **Voices**

Week Five: **Desire**

Week Six: **Body**

Week Seven: **Violence**

Week Eight: **Illness**

Week Nine: **Hatred**

Week Ten: **History**

(These themes might change according to the make-up of the class, and the students' responses and interests.)

In the final four weeks, we will undertake intensive workshops of student work. Three or four students will submit work to be workshopped in each 90-minute seminar. This is an opportunity for students to get feedback on the story or stories that they are going to submit as their final projects.

Spring classes start on Monday, January 31 and run until Friday, May 20, with spring break planned from April 11 – April 18. Completion week is from May 16 through May 20. Students are required to be on campus during completion week.

Scheduled class times will be available online under the relevant course heading:

<https://berlin.bard.edu/academics/courses/>

Final Project Deadline

The deadline for the final project is Friday 13 May at 5pm **for graduating students only.**

The deadline for the final project is Friday 20 May at 5pm **for all other students.**

Course Materials

Students do not need to purchase any books. All required course materials will be uploaded (in PDF format) to Google Classroom one week before the relevant class. Below is a week-by-week list of the required reading. (These texts might change according to the make-up of the class, and the students' responses and interests.)

Week One: **Being a writer**

Rainer Maria Rilke, extract from *Letters to a Young Poet*, 1929. (pp. 17 – 22)

Walter Mosley, 'For authors, fragile ideas need loving every day,' from *New York Times*, 2000. (pp.1 – 3)

Audre Lorde, 'Poetry is not a luxury', from *Sister Outsider*, 1984. (pp. 1 – 2)

Saidiya Hartman, 'Wayward: A short entry on the possible', from *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 2019. (p. 1)

Week Two: **Consciousness**

Thomas Nagel, extract from 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?', from *The Philosophical Review*, 1974. (pp. 435 – 450)

Paul Auster, extract from *Timbuktu*, 1999. (pp. 3 – 47)

Susan Blackmore, extract from 'There is no stream of consciousness', from *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2002. (pp. 1 – 11)

James Joyce, extract from *Ulysses*, 1920. (pp.690 – 704)

J.M.G. Le Clézio, 'Then I shall be able to find peace and slumber', from *Fever*, 1965. (pp. 203 – 209)

Week Three: **Secrets**

Jennifer Egan, extract from *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 2010. (pp. 3 – 19)

Week Four: **Voices**

Ali Smith, 'The Second Person', from *The First Person and Other Stories*, 2008. (pp. 1 – 6)

Claire Keegan, 'The Parting Gift,' from *Walk the Blue Fields*, 2007. (pp. 3 – 13)

CN Lester, 'Finding my Voice,' from *Trans Like Me*, 2017. (pp. 32 – 40)

Week Five: **Desire**

Marcel Proust, two extracts from *The Way by Swann's*, 1913. (pp. 7 – 50 and pp. 275 – 279)

Garth Greenwell, extract from *What Belongs to You*, 2016. (pp. 127 – 136)

Nina Leger, extract from *The Collection*, 2019. (pp. 1 – 37)

Week Six: **Body**

Ralph Ellison, 'Prologue' from *Invisible Man*, 1952. (pp. 3 – 8)
Colum McCann, extract from *Dancer*, 2003. (pp. 167 – 169)
Thomas Page McBee, extract from *Amateur*, 2018. (pp. 3 – 6)
Andrew McMillan, four poems from *Physical*, 2015. (pp. 4 – 7)

Week Seven: **Violence**

Allan Gurganus, 'Forced Use', from *Faber Book of Gay Fiction*, 1992. (pp. 557 – 578)
Laline Paull, extract from *The Bees*, 2014. (pp. 205 – 213)

Week Eight: **Illness**

Anton Chekhov, 'Ward No. 6', from *The Essential Tales of Chekhov*, 1892. (pp. 131 – 182)

Week Nine: **Hatred**

Joyce Carol Oates, extract from *Zombie*, 1995. (pp. 26 – 57)
Fernanda Melchor, extract from *Hurricane Season*, 2017. (pp. 37 – 62)

Week Ten: **History**

Sebastian Barry, extract from *Days Without End*, 2016. (pp. 117 – 141)
Kazuo Ishiguro, extract from *Klara and the Sun*, 2021. (pp. 1 – 44)

Weeks Eleven to Fourteen: **Workshops**

During the workshop weeks, students will be expected to read and annotate each other's work.