ADVANCED FICTION: UNDERSTANDING STORY

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Course Description

Stories are everywhere: in novels, films, television series, advertisements, computer games, social media... We all make use of stories every day and our lives are shaped by stories. Not only do we tell stories, but stories tell us who we are (and who we were, and who we would like to be). There are few aspects of life which are not bound up with strategies and effects of story.

But what is story? How does it function? What are its essential characteristics?

The simplest way to define story is as a series of events in a specific order: with a beginning, a middle and an end. But when will the story have begun? And what will happen to make the middle? And how will the end begin?

Is 'writing a story' even enough? Is the point, actually, to write a *good* story? We often think of a good story as one that we cannot put down, one that we compulsively read to find out what happens at the end. But how can we endow our stories with this quality of anticipation? How can we best satisfy our readers' desire to know? Is it a case of rushing them towards a fixed goal, or delaying their arrival there? How can we balance digression, on the one hand, with progression towards a conclusion, on the other? Ultimately, is the ending really the reason we told the story in the first place?

Perhaps, instead of appealing to the idea of a sequence of events, we should ground our understanding of story in terms of telling someone else that something happened. Perhaps we should focus less on events and actions than on the kind of relationship we want to establish with the reader. Who are we professing to be? What are we trying to convince others of? What is our message?

Or maybe it would be better to forget about the reader altogether and focus on characters. Can characters alone be relied upon to shoulder the burden of story? Are characters *the* story? As long as we have characters, can we dispense with plot altogether? Should we be aiming to make our characters as 'vivid' or as 'life-like' as possible? What would a non-realist character look like? Would it be a voice? A collection of voices? A place? An object? A mood?

Then again, maybe thinking in terms of characters amounts to nothing a form of lying. Would it be more honest just to write about myself? I am an expert at being myself, am I not? Why should I pretend to know, or to be, anything more than that?

In this course, we will consider such questions as we work – slowly and thoughtfully – to construct a single, functioning, compelling story. Each week, at home, we will read a short story or stories. In class we will perform close textual analyses 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? What is the story?

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.

In the final three (possibly four) weeks, we will undertake workshops in which we will read, annotate, and discuss each other's work-in-progress. The idea here will be to support each other as we find out, step by step, what story we are actually telling (as opposed to the story we think we are telling).

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 FALL 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

In week eleven, students will make an individual in-class presentation on the topic 'What is Story?'.

At the end of week fourteen, 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%
Presentation: 10%
Portfolio of Writing Exercises (uploaded weekly to Google Drive, no less than 2000 words in total): 25%
Final Project (a short story or stories, minimum 2900 words, maximum 3100 words): 35%

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 whole 90 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 important to understanding story:

Week One: **Being a writer**
Week Two: **THE BEGINNING**
Week Three: **Consciousness**
Week Four: **Secrets**
Week Five: **Voices**
Week Six: **THE MIDDLE**
Week Seven: **Desire**
Week Eight: **Conflict**
Week Nine: **Suspense**
Week Ten: **THE END**

In Week Eleven, students will make in-class presentation on the topic 'What is Story?'

In Weeks Twelve to Fourteen, 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.

The fall semester runs from Monday, August 29 and runs until Friday, December 16, with fall

break planned from Monday, October 24 – Sun, October 30. Normal course sessions end on Friday, December 9. Completion week is from Monday, December 12 through Friday, December 16. 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, December 9 at 5pm **for all graduating students.**
The deadline for the final project is Friday, December 16 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)

Week Two: **THE BEGINNING**

Anton Chekhov, 'The Lady with the Dog', from *The Essential Tales of Chekhov*, 1999. (pp. 347 – 362)

Week Three: **Consciousness**

J.M.G. Le Clézio, 'Then I shall be able to find peace and slumber', from *Fever*, 1965. (pp. 203 – 209)
E.O. Wilson, 'Trailhead', from The New Yorker, 2010. (pp. 1 – 24)
Jamaica Kincaid, 'Girl', from Charters, Ann, Ed. *The Story and its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction,* 2003. (pp. 320 – 321)
Ray Bradbury, 'There Will Come Soft Rains', from *The Martian Chronicles*, 1950. (pp 1 – 5)

Week Four: **Secrets**

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

Week Five: **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)

Week Six: **THE MIDDLE**

Anton Chekhov, 'The Lady with the Dog', from *The Essential Tales of Chekhov*, 1999. (pp. 347 – 362)

Week Seven: **Desire**

Marcel Proust, two extracts from *The Way by Swann's*, 1913. (pp. 7 – 50 and pp. 275 – 279)
Kevin Barry, 'Across the Rooftops', from *Dark Lies the Island,* 2012. (pp. 1 – 6)

Week Eight: **Conflict**

ZZ Packer, 'Brownies', from *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*, 2003. (pp. 1 – 28)
George Saunders, 'Adams', from The New Yorker, 2004. (pp. 1 – 7)

Week Nine: **Suspense**

Ambrose Bierce, 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge', from *Bierce: The Devil's Dictionary, Tales, and Memoirs,* 2011. (pp. 10 – 19)

Week Ten: **THE END**

Anton Chekhov, 'The Lady with the Dog', from *The Essential Tales of Chekhov*, 1999. (pp. 347 – 362)
Joyce Carol Oates, 'The Lady with the Pet Dog', from *Marriages and Infidelities,* 1972. (pp. 1 – 14)

Week Eleven: **Presentations: 'What is Story?'**

David Vann, 'Ichthyology', from *Legend of a Suicide*, 2009. (pp. 1 – 10)
James Lasdun, 'It's Beginning to Hurt', from *It's Beginning to Hurt*, 2009. (pp. 239 – 240)
Lydia Davis, 'The Fish', from *The Collected Stories,* 200 (p. 33)

During the in-class presentations, students will be expected to ask questions and discuss each other's ideas.

Weeks Twelve to Fourteen: **Workshops**

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