

LT326 Advanced Fiction Workshop

Seminar Leader: Rebecca Rukeyser
Email: r.rukeyser@berlin.bard.edu
Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description

No book worth its salt is meant to put you to sleep, it's meant to make you jump out of your bed in your underwear and run and beat the author's brains out.

- Bohumil Hrabal

You've got to follow those signs. One does not look the muse in the eye and say, "Ah forget it."

-Rita Dove

The aim of this course is to hone your abilities as a writer and a reader of fiction through an examination of creative writing craft and theory, workshop model criticism, and the writing and revising of creative work.

We will read and discuss both classic and contemporary works of short fiction, write from prompts during class time, consider the functions of the critic, and present on short stories and literary journals—all with the goal of gaining understanding you can apply to your future fiction-writing practice.

Requirements

Reading assignments: Good writers read; we'll be close reading one short story every week. Much of our discussion on the theory of creative writing craft hinges on these stories. Please make sure to complete the assigned reading before coming to class.

Workshop pieces: Each student is required to submit **two** fictional pieces for peer workshop. You're not bound by genre: these can be anything from a series of speculative flash fiction to a realist short story to an excerpt from a detective novel.

However, there are a few rules: the pieces should be **1,500 to 4,500 words, double-spaced, twelve-point font**, and they are due the **Thursday before your assigned workshop**.

Workshop revisions: Workshops are a great editing tool. Following your workshop, you'll be revising your fiction piece and handing in a second draft. The revised pieces should also be **1,500 to 4,500 words, double-spaced, twelve-point font**.

The first and second revised pieces are due: **December 19th**

Revision Key: In addition to your revised fiction piece, you'll be handing in a **750-word informal key** to the revisions you made. What did you change about your piece, and why? How does this reflect the feedback you received in workshop? How do you believe these revisions improved your fiction?

Presentation: As stated above, good writers read. They also recommend—an invaluable part of any writing community is the constant back-and-forth of reading suggestions. To this end, you'll be asked to give an informal, conversation presentation on a piece of fiction that you recommend. There's no need for a written component or essay: just spend a thoughtful ten minutes telling the class why they should read this particular piece of fiction.

You'll sign up for a presentation slot in the first week. We'll have one presentation each week.

Literary journal overview: Literary journals are the vanguard of new literature. Most authors are published for the first time in literary journals. Novels are serialized in literary journals. Prestigious prizes are won as a result of appearing in literary journals. And yet, literary journals remain tragically underfunded and under-read.

So: go out, find a literature journal, read it cover to cover—or the online equivalent!—and write up an overview of it. This can be conversational rather than essayistic, but must include:

- Reviews of the stories/poems/essays that appear in the journal
- 500 words on what you think the aesthetic project of the literary journal is

Note: Not all journals that contain fiction are literary journals. Please clear your choice with me.

This project is due December 19th

Workshop Letters: You're required to submit workshop letters to each workshopper. These are due **each week**. They must be at least 250 words long.

These letters serve as analysis and guidance for the fiction being workshopped. They should answer the following questions: what is the fictional piece about? and what the story's biggest strength? They should also then examine the weaknesses of the fictional piece and give constructive, critical advice on how to improve the story.

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the staunchest regard for academic integrity and expects good academic practice from students in their studies. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section III Academic Misconduct.

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, whether excused or unexcused.

The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Please refer to the following policy from the Student Handbook on the submission of essays:

Essays that are up to 24 hours late will be downgraded 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 and cannot receive a grade of higher than C. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment.

Although this class doesn't include formal essays, this applies to all written work *and* presentations due in class.

Grade Breakdown

Classroom participation: 40%

We're here to challenge one another in our perception and comprehension of fiction: this means showing up prepared and engaging in discussions. Part of your participation grade also includes the workshop letters you write to your fellow workshopers.

Workshop pieces and revision: 40%

These pieces are the crux of the class. While I'm not going to grade you on in terms of aesthetics, I will be grading you on the thoughtfulness of your revisions and your revision key.

Presentation and literary journal overview: 20%

These should be thoughtful pieces; your presentation should be well prepared and your literary journal overview should demonstrate a thoughtful reading and consideration of the journal.

Schedule:

September 5th

Syllabus and course overview

Exercises: Why do we need to write? What do we need to write?

In-class reading: "The Creative Process," James Baldwin; "The Liar," Tobias Woolf

Homework:

Reading: "On Keeping A Notebook," Joan Didion

Assignment: Accumulating characterizing details

September 12th

Flash fiction: "prayers, or simply observations."

Exercises: Working in miniature: crafting stories in less than 500 words

In-class reading: "On the Very Contemporary Art of Flash Fiction," John Dufresne; selected flash fiction: Lydia Davis, Ernest Hemingway, Jamaica Kinkaid, Adhiraj Singh

Homework:

Reading: Excerpt, *Reading Like a Writer*: "Character," Francine Prose

September 19th

Character fiction I: The building blocks

Exercises: What sparks characterization?

Discussion: How do we workshop?

In-class reading: Excerpt *Reading Like a Writer*: "Gesture," Francine Prose; "The Red Girl," Jamaica Kinkaid

Homework:

Reading: "The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street," Mavis Gallant, "Young Lions," Edward P. Jones

September 26th

Character fiction II: Developing character; developing narrative

Exercises: How do characters drive narrative?

In-class reading: "How Do Some Writers Lose Control of Their Characters?" Jim Davies

Presentation #1 _____

Workshop #1: _____

Homework: N/A

October 3rd

Guest Lecture: TBD

Homework:

Reading: "Misery," Anton Chekhov, "Point of View," Lucia Berlin

October 10th

Psychic distance I: point of view and point of telling

Exercises: Switching between point of view; switching between point of telling

Presentation #2: _____

Workshop #2: _____

Homework:

Reading: Excerpt, *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner, “In a Bamboo Grove” by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa

October 17th

Psychic distance II: the five levels of psychic distance in fiction

Exercises: Moving between levels of psychic distance: how and why

Presentation #3: _____

Workshop #3: _____

Homework:

Reading: “The Cinnamon Shops,” Bruno Schultz, “The Huntress,” Sofia Samatar

October 31st

Description: the implications of exactitude

Exercises: Choosing what to focus on; guiding the readers’ attention

Presentation #4 _____

Workshop # 4 _____

Homework: “Why I Like Country Music,” James Alan McPherson, “The Quarry,” Mariana Enriquez

November 7th

Location as plot; plot as location

In-class reading: "My First Goose," Isaac Babel, "Now Wait for This Week," Alice Sola Kim

Exercises: Site-specific plots

Presentation #5 _____

Workshop # 5 _____

Reading: "Beauty and The Beast: or the Enormous Wound," Clarice Lispector, "Non-Zero Probabilities," N.K. Jemison

November 14th

Genre I: turning realism on its head

In-class reading: "A Terrible Twist," Kate Bernheimer

Exercises: Creating worlds through fabulism

Presentation #6 _____

Workshop #6 _____

Reading: "The Snow Child," Angela Carter, Excerpt, *Gingerbread*, Helen Oyeyemi

November 21st

Genre II: Rethinking the Hero's Journey

In-class reading: Excerpt, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell

Exercises: Contemplating identity through myth

Presentation #7 _____

Workshop #7 _____

Reading: "Inventory," Carmen Maria Machado, "Black Box" Jennifer Egan

November 28th

Formal constraints I: limitations can be freeing

In-class reading: "The Choice of Constraint," Rebecca Hazelton

Exercises: Choosing formal constraints to fit the goals of your texts

Presentation #8 _____

Workshop #8 _____

Reading: "Country Cooking from Central France," Harry Mathews, "Lion-Eating Poet in The Stone Den," Yuen Ren Chao

December 5^h

Formal constraints I: Oulipian games and beyond

In-class reading: Excerpt, *Exercises in Style*, Raymond Queneau

Exercises: Lipograms, anagrams, larding, and acrostics

Presentation # 9 _____

Workshop # 9 _____

Reading: N/A

December 12th

*** Guest Lecture: Rethinking Genre with Bennett Sims ***

Project Deadlines

Workshop pieces (first draft): **the Friday before your assigned workshop**

Workshop piece 2 (revision, with revision key): **December 19th**

Literary journal overview: **December 19th**

Reading Materials

There is no reader/book purchase. Hard copies of the assigned fiction readings will be given out in class each week, and PDFs will also be made available.