

LT212

Advanced Fiction Writing Workshop

Seminar Leader: Clare Wigfall

Email: c.wigfall@berlin.bard.edu

Office Hours: By appointment

With over eighteen years experience of teaching creative writing, British author Clare Wigfall has developed a method that aims to break down the barriers that inhibit so that the creative process can come naturally. Under her gentle guidance, you will develop a body of new work, learning craft organically through practice and exposure to great writing. The carefully structured workshops are a springboard, designed to stimulate ideas and encourage experimentation; one or two might even move off campus – how might a museum prove a source of inspiration, for example? A park? The city we live in? Focus will be given to new genres you might not yet have considered, such as fantasy, magic realism, historical fiction, or how you might weave myths and legends into your work. Also explored will be the subject of how our own experience can shape our fiction, while also considering the issue of how writing fiction can give us scope to imagine places, times, and experiences we've never encountered in our own lives. You have already begun to develop a voice that is uniquely your own, and will take this further now with opportunities to share your work with a group of fellow writers who you can trust to give you invaluable critique. Alongside this, the reading element of this course will be key; from writers such as Toni Morrison to Carmen Maria Machado, or Katherine Mansfield to Neil Gaiman, the selected reading will cast the net wide to throw you in to the literary sea, also introducing you to writing *about* writing from authors such as Zadie Smith and Alexander Chee. With a proven track record of inspiring her students to produce award-winning, publishable writing, Clare will also offer the opportunity to talk about getting published and how to submit work to literary journals. Plus, there'll be a chance to share new work with the world at a public reading. This class welcomes students who have already taken an introductory fiction workshop, as well as new students with some creative writing experience under their belt.

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 expected and is fundamental to the success of the workshops. Notification via email or in person is required for **all** excused absences. After two such absences, additional documentation is required (ie. doctor's note, proof of military obligation, court date, etc.) in order for the absence to be excused. Unexcused absences will impact upon

the participation grade received. If necessary, please consult the Student Handbook for regulations governing periods of illness or leave of absence. As each session needs to begin promptly, lateness will count against attendance and will also affect the participation grade.

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.^[L]_[SEP]

Assessment

Your final grade will be composed of four parts: Original Work (30%), Active Participation in the Workshops (30%), Constructive Critique of Your Peers (20%), and Personal Essay (20%). Please see the Grade Breakdown below for further details of these categories. Midterm grades are determined on the basis of the revised original work, peer reviews, and class participation, each of which are given equal weight.

Writing Assignments, Deadlines and Course Structure

This advanced writing workshop is designed to offer a space where you can further develop your body of creative work and hone your individual voice through experimentation with new techniques and styles. You are urged to come to each workshop with an open mind, a willingness to experiment and explore, and the courage to follow your own imagination and inspiration. You will find that there is as much to be learned from your peers as from the workshop tutor. You will be writing in class, so please purchase a new lined notebook in advance (for example a Moleskine) and bring this, along with a favoured writing implement, to every session. Opportunity will be given to share this work aloud. You will have the opportunity to develop these in-class writing assignments for your workshop piece if desired. Please note that you will be expected to write longhand in class and to work (in most cases) with a printed text for the reading discussions. Laptops and other electronic devices are NOT welcome in the workshop unless you require the use of one on medical grounds.

The best way to learn how to write is to read, and read, and read. You will note that the reading list is wide-ranging. The intention is to expose you to a wide variety of authors and styles, with work dating from as early as 1899 and by authors from all over the globe. For each workshop you must come well-prepared by reading the pre-assigned texts and listening to any assigned podcasts or watching assigned videos on the web. All podcasts are from the New Yorker Fiction series which you can find online (<https://www.newyorker.com/podcast/fiction>) or wherever you download your podcasts. The Ted Talks can be found on YouTube. You are encouraged to write a short response to each story/essay/video in your notebooks so that you keep a critical record of your reading. You should be working with printed copies of the text where possible (texts for the podcast stories will also be included in the reader), and should mark these up before class with your commentary, and highlight lines or sections that particularly stand out to you. Some of the course reading on the list may be assigned as in-class reading. You will be informed where this is the case. We will also be reading more writing from established authors together in class that is not on the list, and this will be distributed in the sessions. You will note on the syllabus that each week includes potential “discussion sparks” (e.g. What does it even mean to say we are writers?/Permission to imagine/Flipping the single story/Considering voice etc). These are by no means meant to be prescriptive, but are subjects that dovetail well with the week’s reading and the in-class writing

exercises, and can be used, if desired, as springboards for inspiring lively and interrogative discussion. You are encouraged to give some thoughts to these “discussion sparks” as you are preparing for the class and may wish to prepare related questions or thoughts to share.

In addition to the texts in the course reader, a selection of books on writing by various authors and interviews with authors about their practice are available in the library. You are absolutely **not** expected to read all of these books, instead they are there for you to dip into. They will demonstrate that while many people over the years have had theories on “how to” write, there is no definitive answer. By dipping into this selection, you may well find authors who speak to you in terms of their approach, or advice that feels relevant in developing you as a writer. This selection is also intended as a resource that you can use if you are thinking about a specific craft question on subjects such as structure, character, plot, etc. Of course, any questions like this can also be brought up for class discussion. Your perusal of these resource books will also be crucial in helping you to find your subject for the Personal Essay.

Students in the introductory class expressed a desire for more out-of-class writing exercises. Inspired by this, each week you will receive a short writing prompt to embark on outside of class. The prompt for the first week will be given by the tutor but after that a student will be assigned to each class to design and deliver the week’s prompt. The resulting writing will be shared at the opening of each class and your presentation of these exercises will contribute to your participation grade. **Don’t feel too much pressure about these pieces**; you are not expected to spend more than 30-60 minutes on each exercise and should feel free to experiment and have fun with them. You may be inspired to develop one of these pieces as your workshop submission.

In an early class, we will also make a schedule of writers and submission dates for the workshoping sessions. Graduating students should be sure to sign up for the first submission batch as they will need to submit their final subsequently revised piece sooner. You will have two opportunities to submit work for constructive critique and are expected to submit a piece of writing of typically 2,000 to 3,500 words. Most likely this work will be a development of a piece of writing started in class or following the external prompts, although exceptions can be made following consultation with the tutor. Work to be workshoped during a given week shall be submitted in the preceding week’s workshop with sufficient printed copies to go around the group. Submissions should be typed-up and formatted as follows: double spaced, 12pt Times New Roman, 1” margins. Pages should be numbered and the title and author name should be included on the first page. It goes without saying that texts should be proof-read and spelling/grammar checked carefully before submission. The author may include an additional note if they wish the class to focus on any particular points, and it should be noted if a text is unfinished. Only the highest of the two grades for these pieces of revised Original Work will be taken forward for the final grade. The intention here is that you should feel there is the space to experiment and take risks with your writing, rather than simply submitting work that you expect will achieve a “safe grade”.

On the weeks where we have workshoping sessions, the assigned reading will be the texts submitted by your peers. Honour your peers by giving due time and attention to their work.

Ideally you will read each piece twice – first for an initial response, and secondly so that you can read the work with a critical eye. For each piece you are expected to mark up the texts legibly where appropriate, and also to formulate a separate written personal response

(approximately 200-400 words), including what you feel works well and suggestions for what might make the piece even stronger. This will help you in developing your own critical skills and in formulating your ideas for the class discussion. At each workshopping session, you should submit a copy of your written response to each individual author (either printed and distributed or emailed directly **AFTER class NOT before**) and to the course tutor (in the case of the tutor these can be submitted to the Google Classroom assignment). These peer reviews are expected to be delivered **on the same day of the workshop discussions** so that the authors can review them before beginning their revisions, and the quality of this constructive critique of your peers will contribute to your final grade.

After your work is discussed in class you will return to it and work on a second draft which will be resubmitted to your tutor and which you are invited to share with the group via the Google Classroom. At the end of the semester, you are also expected to submit a **Personal Essay** which will likewise contribute to your final grade.

Another request from former students was to experiment with writing in new locations, so two of the workshops are scheduled to move off-campus. In one of them we will be exploring the **city** as we write and in another we will visit a **museum** together.

In recent years, the Advanced Fiction Writing class have had the privilege of attending the British Council Literature Seminar midway through the semester and we hope to return again this year. If this cannot be arranged, every effort will be made to arrange a guest visitor and/or a different literary excursion. The full details will be confirmed nearer the time.

We will also be giving a public reading at the end of the semester, hopefully hosted by our old friends at the Weinsalon in Friedrichshain. This is pencilled in for penultimate week of classes, but the date may be subject to change.

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 a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. 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.

[SEP]

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

- **Original Work (30%)** - the highest grade received for your two revised workshop pieces will be taken forward for this portion of the grade. The Original Work consists of a piece of creative writing which is expected to be a reworked and polished version of one of the pieces you submitted for class discussion. Typically this should be between 2,000 to 4,000 words in length. Your grade will take into account factors including originality of subject and voice, style, use of imagination, characterisation, structure, the craft of the writing, as well as

evidence of your ability to embrace revision, especially in regard to the feedback received following the workshop presentation of your texts.

- **Active Participation in the Workshops (30%)** - this is a class that is made rich by student participation, therefore the contributions you make to discussion, critique, and via sharing your work are crucial and the participation grade reflects this. It is important that the class environment feels comfortable and supportive to all involved so that everyone can find room to share their thoughts and writing. The assessment for the participation portion of the grade will be influenced by factors including attendance, punctuality, evidence of having read/listened to and given thought to the pre-assigned texts, engagement with the writing exercises in class, and most importantly contribution to discussion of the assigned texts and the in-class exercises as well as in-class critique of your peers. If you lack confidence in speaking up within a group, don't feel afraid to talk about this with the course tutor.
- **Constructive Critique of Your Peers (20%)** - You will be offering feedback to your fellow writers via in-class discussion, mark-ups on their printed text, and the written responses to each piece that you will submit to the author and the course tutor at the end of each workshopping session. 20% of your final grade will be awarded for the quality of this feedback. Be honest, insightful, rigorous in your critique, and have the confidence to identify and stand by your own opinion. Meanwhile, always show respect for the opinions of others, even when they differ from your own, and be open to the possibility that sometimes the group discussion might cause you to reconsider your initial response. Additionally, please ensure that you are, at all times, thoughtful and respectful in how you voice your feedback (both in the discussion and in your written response), always listen to the views of others, and remember that the aim of the workshop is not only to offer constructive suggestions for improvement of the text, but also to be supportive and considerate of the author, especially in regard to their effort and ambitions: the value of kindness and positive encouragement cannot be underestimated.
- **Personal Essay - an Opportunity to Reflect (20%)** - for the final part of the grade, you are asked to submit a personal essay. The form and subject is free for you to choose as desired, but the essay should be personal in nature and have some connection to you and your writing practice and what you have learned during the semester. Consider the essays we have read during the course, such as those by Zadie Smith and Alexander Chee. **Approach the essay imagining that it has been commissioned for publication and should have appeal for a general reader.** Perhaps you want to explore a particular element of craft, such as character or plot, or to look at how the various resource books approach this and what conclusions you have come to. Perhaps one of the discussion sparks has raised a question you wish to explore further; why is this of particular relevance to you and your practice? It may be that advice you have come across has changed your thinking about your writing and you wish to share this. Experiments with style and genre might have proved inspirational to you during the course and this could be something you wish to discuss. Was there a specific work that changed the way you think about writing? You are urged to see the Personal Essay as a way to think more deeply about what writing means to you and should feel free to discuss your subject with your tutor in advance. Judged on both content and form, this evaluation will typically be between 1,500-2,500 words in length and **may be creative in nature**. It is due for delivery at our **final class** and, once again, you are invited to share your essay in the class stream.

Schedule

Please note, the syllabus that follows should be viewed with some flexibility. Some dates are yet to be finalised. Likewise, it is not yet confirmed which museum we will visit, but it will likely be the Kunstgewerbemuseum. You will be given due warning of any changes to the syllabus scheduled below.

All workshops will be held on Friday afternoons from 12:30 - 15:45

n.b. Please come to class well-prepared, having read/listened to the assigned reading/podcasts on the schedule below for each session and made notes/mark-ups on the text which you should bring with you to the class. Do not forget your course reader, your notebook, and a writing implement.

- Week 1 - Feb 2nd** Introductory session - *How to Become a Writer* In-class reading (no need to read in advance): **Lorrie Moore**, "How to Become a Writer" (1985)
Junot Díaz reads "How to Date a Brown Girl (Black Girl, White Girl, or Halfie)" (1995)
Alicia Rodríguez, "How to Know You're a Woman in a Junot Díaz Novel"
Edwidge Danticat reads **Jamaica Kincaid's** "Girl"
- Discussion sparks - *The Writer and the Writing / What does it even mean to say we are writers?*
- Week 2 - Feb 9th** *Photo Stories*
- Read:
- Annie Proulx**, "Brokeback Mountain" (1997)
Clare Wigfall, "The Numbers" (2006)
Zadie Smith, "Fascinated to Presume: In Defence of Fiction" (essay)(2019)
Alexander Chee, "How to Unlearn Everything - When it Comes to Writing the "Other" - What Questions Are We Not Asking?" (essay) (2019)
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "Jumping Monkey Hill" (2006)
- Watch:
- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**, "The Danger of a Single Story" (Ted Talk) (2009)
- Discussion sparks - *Permission to Imagine / Flipping the Single Story / Considering Voice*

Week 3 - Feb 16th *Using History*

Read:

Michel Faber, *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Chapter 1 (2002)

Jessie Greengrass, *An Account of the Decline of the Great Auk, According to One Who Saw It* (2015)

Maggie O'Farrell, *Hamnet*, excerpt from Chapter 1 (2020)

Fleur Jaeggy, "Thomas de Quincey" (essay) (2015)

Sarah Hall, "The Nightlong River" (2011)

Listen to:

Joyce Carol Oates reads **Cynthia Ozick's** "The Shawl" (1980)

Discussion sparks - *(Re)Searching for Story Gold / But how Much Research Is Too Much Research? / Historical Scene-Setting / Playing with your Reader's Knowledge / Voices from the Past*

Week 4 - Feb 23rd

Workshopping Session 1

Read:

Writing submissions from your peers

Week 5 - Mar 1st

Workshopping Session 2

Read:

Writing submissions from your peers

Week 6 - Mar 8th

Public holiday - NO CLASS

Week 7 - Mar 15th *Grand Themes*

Read:

Sally Rooney, "At the Clinic" (2016)

Jhumpa Lahiri, "A Temporary Matter" (1998)

Ali Smith, "A Story of Love" (1999)

Carmen Maria Machado, "Inventory" (2017)

Joan Didion, "On Keeping a Notebook" (1968)

Etgar Keret, "Breaking the Pig" Listen

to:

Etgar Keret reads **Janet Frame's** "You Are Now Entering the Human Heart" (1969) Read (optional):

Toni Morrison, "Recitatif"

Scholastique Mukasonga, "Grief" (2020)

Discussion sparks - *The stories that move us, the ones with gravity / How our own experience can shape our fiction*

Week 8 - Mar 21st-23rd

To be confirmed

British Council Literature Seminar, chaired by **Helen Oyeyemi**

SPRING BREAK No class on Friday, 29th March

Week 9 - Apr 5th *To be confirmed after class discussion*
EITHER:

Writing the City / Conjuring Place

Read:

Teju Cole, extract from *Open City* (2011)

Barbara Hepworth, extract from a BBC interview with the artist (1950)

Mariana Enriquez, "The Dirty Kid" (2014)

Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction" (1955) (will be shared via the Google Classroom)

Listen to:

Allegra Goodman reads **Eudora Welty's** "No Place for You, My Love" (1952)

Discussion sparks - *Capturing place / Grounding our fiction*

OR:

Writing in the Museum

Read:

William Trevor, "After Rain" (1995)

Katherine Mansfield, "Bliss" (1918)

Tim O'Brien, "The Things They Carried"

Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel" (1941) Listen

to:

Cynthia Ozick reads **Steven Millhauser's** "In the Reign of Harad IV" (2006)

Discussion sparks - *Making Art / Striving for Beauty and Perfection*

Watch:

Andrew Stanton, "The Clues to a Great Story" (Ted Talk) (2012)

Week 10 - Apr 12th *Myths and Magic*

Read:

Gabriel García Márquez, "Eyes of a Blue Dog" (1950)

Neil Gaiman, "Ramadan" from *The Sandman* (1993) (will be

shared via the Google Classroom)

Aoko Matsuda, "Smartening Up" (2014)

Carmen Maria Machado, "The Husband Stitch" (2014)

Kurt Vonnegut, "Harrison Bergeron" (1968)

Ursula Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973)

Discussion sparks - *Embracing fantasy / Building worlds / Re-versioning / Multimodal approaches*

Week 11 - Apr 19th Workshopping session 3

Read:

Writing submissions from your peers

Week 12 - Apr 26th Workshopping session 4

Read:

Writing submissions from your peers

Week 13 - May 3rd (tbc) **Final date, time, and location to be confirmed**

Reading for students and faculty

We will have a short class starting at 12:30 to prepare for the evening's reading

Week 14 - May 10th Final session - *The Wild Card*

"Nobody knows anything about the art of fiction" Virginia Woolf, 1927

Read:

George Saunders, "The Lady with the Dog" - *A Quick Glance Back* (2023)

Anton Chekhov, "The Lady with the Dog" (1899) Optional:

James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues" (1957)

Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People" (1955)

Alice Munro, "Wenlock Edge" (2005)

Grace Paley, "Wants" (1974)

Discussion sparks - *Reading as a life work / Why there are no rules / What next?*

Reference books

Marie Arana (editor), *The Writing Life: Writers On How They Think And Work* (2003)

Dorothea Brande, *Becoming a Writer* (1934)
Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (1989)
Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones* (1986)
Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story* (2002)
E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927)
Stephen King, *On Writing – A Memoir of the Craft* (2000)
Verlyn Klinkenborg, *Several Short Sentences About Writing* (2012)
Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (1994)
Ursula Le Guin, *Steering the Craft – A Twenty-First Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story* (1998)
David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (1994)
Paris Review Interviews Vols. I-IV
Francine Prose, *Reading Like a Writer* (2006)
Richard Skinner, *Writing a Novel* (2018)
William Strunk Jr. And E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* (1920)
Kurt Vonnegut and Suzanne McConnell, *Kurt Vonnegut - Pity the Reader* (2019)
Eudora Welty, *On Writing* (2002)

Required books for the course

- Course reader
- New lined notebook e.g. a Moleskine

Essay and Assignment Deadlines

The following submission dates will also be posted in the Google Classroom where work can be uploaded. In one of the first weeks, students will sign up to be in either the first or second submission group. Seniors must be sure to sign up for the first group. A Prompt List will also be distributed.

- February 16th (week 3) - **First batch of the first-round writing submissions** (for discussion in week 4)
- February 23rd (week 4) - **Second batch of the first-round writing submissions** (for discussion in week 5) plus **Peer Reviews** for the first batch of submissions
- March 1st (week 5) - **Peer reviews** for the second batch of submissions
- March 8th (week 6) - **Revised writing submission (Original Work)**
- April 12th (week 10) - **First batch of the second-round writing submissions** (for discussion in week 11)
- April 19th (week 11) - **Second batch of the second-round writing submissions** (for discussion in week 12) plus **Peer Reviews** for the first batch of submissions
- April 26th (week 12) - **Peer Reviews** for the second batch of submissions plus (tbc)
****Seniors must submit their revised writing submission (Original Work) plus Personal Essay****
- May 3rd (week 13) - **Public reading** (tbc)
- May 10th (week 14) - **Revised writing submission (Original Work) plus Personal Essay**