

# LT217 Detective Fiction

Instructor: Laura Scuriatti

Course Times: Friday and Fridays, 9:00-10:30

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Office Hours: online or in person by appointment

## Course Description

As he got older, the notoriously misanthropic English novelist Kingsley Amis insisted that he would not read anything that did not begin with the words "a shot rang out." What is it about the detective fiction form that exercises a grip on readers, even when all aesthetic interest or ornament has fallen away? This fundamentally compelling quality has allowed detective fiction to nestle at the heart of even the most intricate and complex literary performances (think of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*), or alternatively, to explore issues of identity and social codes that might be deemed unpalatable in more demanding guise. Most gloriously (and disturbingly) detective fiction can achieve a vertiginous purity of form, shaping itself around a void, as in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter." The figure of the detective him or herself has become a cultural icon: mysterious, alone, cerebral, aesthete. Currently, cultural theorists and critics argue that the genre's success in some of its most recent forms (cosy mystery, for example), in spite of, or perhaps because of its formulaic structure, offers readers reassuring closure in a historical moment of uncertainty and turbulence.

In the course, we will examine the basic components of the genre and its effectiveness, as well as the other kinds of investigation it makes possible beyond the discovery of agents of crime. In order to understand this form, we will read standard literary theories of genre, works of narratology, structuralism, post-structuralism and cultural history. Following a loosely chronological structure, our journey starts in the Victorian era, exploring anxieties surrounding modernity and massive urban growth, and reaches contemporary times to reflect on the spreading of the genre as a global phenomenon. We will read works by Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Walter Benjamin, W.H. Auden, Jorge Luis Borges, Vikram Chandra, Suki Kim, and others.

## Requirements

Students are required to attend all classes, to come to class prepared and with the relevant materials and textbooks. Participation consists in contributing productively to class discussion in a respectful manner, and in demonstrating a sound knowledge of the texts assigned.

Please note that in seminars we will work on printed texts: NO COMPUTERS OR TABLETS allowed in class. Texts which are made available in digital format should be printed for use in class. All assignments must be completed in order to pass the course.

## 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.

### Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, ([accommodations@berlin.bard.edu](mailto:accommodations@berlin.bard.edu)) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the Bard College Berlin Accessibility page. Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker ([j.harker@berlin.bard.edu](mailto:j.harker@berlin.bard.edu)) or Maria Anderson-Long ([m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu](mailto:m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu)).

### **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 may 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.

### **Assessment and Writing Assignments**

Required assignments for the course are: **ONE 20 minutes PRESENTATION** on a chosen text among the ones assigned, including presentation notes (circa 1500 words), **ONE WRITTEN EXAM** (circa 1500 words), **ONE FINAL ESSAY** (2500 words) and **a contribution to a discussion panel on the last day of class.**

Students can choose the topic and date of presentation. Presentation notes should be handed in to Laura Scuriatti for assessment.

#### **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. Students will receive feedback for their course work during and at the end of the semester. 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.

#### **Policy on Late Submission of Papers**

As stipulated in the Student Handbook, *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.*

#### **Grade Breakdown**

Essay: 25 %  
Presentation: 20 %  
Panel discussion: 15 %  
Exam: 30%  
Participation: 20%

#### **Schedule**

##### **Week 1 – Beginnings**

**Wednesday, 28 January**

Introduction to the course

Reading for the session: Edgar Allan Poe, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”

R. Alewyn, “The Origins of the Detective Novel” and Roger Caillois, “The Detective Novel as Game”

Extra reading: D. A. Miller, “The Novel and the Police”

**Friday, 30 January**

Readings for the session:

Edgar Allan Poe, “The Purloined Letter”

Edgar Allan Poe, “Review of Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge*” (1841)  
Jaques Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’”

**Week 2 – Beginnings II**

**Wednesday 4 February and Friday 6 February**

Reading for the week: Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*

Extra reading: Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of the Four*

**Week 3 – Theorizing the beginnings: the problem of knowledge**

**Wednesday 11 February**

Reading for the session: Carlo Ginzburg, “Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: the Scientific Method”

**Friday 13 February**

Reading for the session:

Ernst Bloch, “A Philosophical View of the Detective Novel”

Dorothy Sayers, “Aristotle on Detective Fiction”

**Week 4 – Poe and Benjamin: Detective Fiction and the Modern City**

**Wednesday 18 February**

Reading for the session: Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man of the Crowd”

**Friday 20 February**

Reading for the session: Walter Benjamin, excerpts from “The Painter of Modern Life”; “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century”; “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”

**Week 5 – The Golden Age I**

**Wednesday 25 February and Friday 27 February**

Readings for the week:

Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

Ronald Knox, “Decalogue of Detective Fiction”; S. S. Van Dine, “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories”; W. H. Auden, “The Guilty Vicarage. Notes on the Detective Story, by an Addict”

**Week 6 – Detective Fiction and Narrative Theory I**

**Wednesday 4 March**

Reading for the session:

Roland Barthes, “Delay and the Hermeneutic Sentence”

Excerpts from: Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*; Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*

**Friday 6 March**

Reading for the session:

Peter Hühn, "The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction", *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1987, pp. 451–66.

**Week 7 – Detective Fiction and Narrative Theory II**

**Wednesday 11 March**

Readings for the session:

Tzvetan Todorov, "The Typology of Detective Fiction"

13 MARCH NO CLASS due to conference attendance

**Week 8 – Narrative Desire**

**Wednesday 18 March**

Reading for the session:

Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (ch. 1 and ch. 2)

**Friday 20 March: IN-CLASS EXAM**

**Spring Break**

**Week 9 – American Modernism and American Classic Detective Fiction**

**Wednesday 8 April**

Reading for the session: Gertrude Stein, *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor*; Gertrude Stein, "Why I Like Detective Fiction"

**Friday 10 April**

Readings for the session:

Raymond Chandler, *Killer in the Rain* (selection)

**Week 11 – American Classic Detective Fiction II**

**Wednesday 15 April and Friday 17 April**

Reading for the week:

Raymond Chandler, *Killer in the Rain* (selection); Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder"

Recommended film: Howard Hawks, *The Big Sleep* (1946)

Week 12 – Metaphysical Detective Fiction

Wednesday 22 April

Reading for the session:

Jorge Luis Borges, “The Garden of the Forking Paths”

**Friday 24 April**

Reading for the session: John, T. Irving, “Mysteries We Reread, Mysteries of Rereading: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story”

Week 13 – Detective Fiction as World Literature

Wednesday 29 April

Reading for the session: Vikram Chandra, “Kama”; Claire Chambers, “Postcolonial Noir: Vikram Chandra’s ‘Kama’”, in N. Pearson, *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World*, Routledge (2009).

**Friday 1 May: No class, Federal holiday**

Week 14 – Suki Kim, *The Interpreter*

**Monday 4 May, 23:59 hrs: ESSAY DEADLINE**

Wednesday 6 May and Friday 8 May

Readings for the week: Suki Kim, *The Interpreter* (2003)

Week 15 – Completion week

**Monday 11 May, 10:45 am: Make-up class:**

Panel discussion

**Required Books**

Students are required to buy or borrow from the library the following books (the library owns a number of copies of most textbooks, which will be given on a first-come first-serve basis); the rest of the material will be made available online or in print. A Reserve Shelf in the library holds a number of useful and/or assigned books.

Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*

Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

Suki Kim, *The Interpreter*

