

LT353 Historical Fiction

Seminar Leader: Andreas Martin Widmann
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Course Times: Tuesday and Thursday, 10:45-12:15
Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description

This seminar explores the intricate interplay between fact and imagination in historical fiction. We will investigate how writers across eras and cultures use fiction to grapple with personal and collective memory, archives, as well as competing interpretations and re-tellings of the past. Our primary texts will range from Heinrich von Kleist's early 19th-century novella *Michael Kohlhaas* via Marguerite Yourcenar's fictional recreation of the life and death of a ruler of the ancient world in her *Memoirs of Hadrian* to Art Spiegelman's graphic depiction of the Holocaust in *Maus*, Toni Morrison's examination of American history in *Jazz*, W.G. Sebald's reflections on history and belonging in *Austerlitz*, to recent counterfactual and speculative historical novels such as Catherine Lacey's experimental *Biography of X*. Through close readings and discussions, we will engage with key questions of historiography and literary fiction and analyze narrative strategies that inform writing along the boundaries between history and invention. We will do so in the context of critical engagement with the genre by thinkers such as Georg Lukacs or Fredric Jameson. Course visits and discussions with contemporary writers will supplement our engagement with the course material.

Books to be purchased for the course

Heinrich von Kleist: *Michael Kohlhaas* (translated by Michael Hofmann)
Marguerite Yourcenar: *Memoirs of Hadrian* (translated by Grace Frick in collaboration with the author)
Toni Morrison: *Jazz*
Art Spiegelman: *Maus*
W.G. Sebald: *Austerlitz* (translated by Anthea Bell)
Catherine Lacey: *The Biography of X*

Requirements

Students are required to come to class prepared and with the relevant materials and texts, as well as to take part in field-trips to places off-campus. This may involve allowing for extra-time to get back to BCB during the lunch break.

Participation consists in contributing productively to class discussion in a respectful manner, and in demonstrating a sound knowledge of the texts assigned.

Reading materials will be made available prior to classes dedicated to these texts and subjects. Unless stated otherwise, these texts should be printed for use in class. COMPUTERS, TABLETS OR PHONES should usually not be used during in-person classes.

Please note that 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. If an extension for an essay is agreed, the essay 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.

All assignment must be completed 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) 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) or Maria Anderson-Long (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 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.

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.

Grade Breakdown

Participation and Homework: 35%

Midterm Essay (1500 words): 20%

Reflection on reading material (in-class writing, 700 words): 10%

In-Class Presentation: 10%

Final Essay (2000 words): 25%

Schedule

Please note that this syllabus is subject to change. You are responsible throughout the semester for knowing what you have to do for each class.

Week 1: Origins and Theories of the Historical Novel

Tuesday, September 1

Introduction

Thursday, September 3

Theories of the Historical Novel: Georg Lukacs and Fredric Jameson

Reading tbc.

Week 2: Heinrich von Kleist: *Michael Kohlhaas*

Tuesday, September 8

Heinrich von Kleist: *Michael Kohlhaas*

Thursday, September 10

Heinrich von Kleist: *Michael Kohlhaas*

Week 3: Heinrich von Kleist: *Michael Kohlhaas*

Tuesday, September 15

Heinrich von Kleist: *Michael Kohlhaas*

Thursday, September 17

The 19th Century Historical Novel

Reading tbc.

Historical Drama

Friedrich Dürrenmatt: "Problems of the Theatre" (excerpts)

Week 4: Marguerite Yourcenar: *Memoirs of Hadrian*

Tuesday, September 22

Marguerite Yourcenar: *Memoirs of Hadrian*

Thursday, September 24

Marguerite Yourcenar: *Memoirs of Hadrian*

Week 5: Marguerite Yourcenar: *Memoirs of Hadrian*

Tuesday, September 29

Marguerite Yourcenar: *Memoirs of Hadrian*

Thursday, October 1

Guest speaker Matthias Nawrat (novelist)

Week 6: Toni Morrison: *Jazz*

Tuesday, October 6

Toni Morrison: *Jazz*

Thursday, October 8

Toni Morrison: *Jazz*

Week 7: Toni Morrison: *Jazz*

Tuesday, October 13

Toni Morrison: *Jazz*

Thursday, October 15

Reflection on reading material (in-class)

Friday, October 16: Midterm Essay due

Fall Break Mon, Oct. 19 - Sun, Oct. 25 2026

Week 8: Art Spiegelman: *Maus*

Tuesday, October 27

Art Spiegelman: *Maus*

Thursday, October 29

Art Spiegelman: *Maus*

Week 9: Art Spiegelman: *Maus*

Tuesday, November 3

Art Spiegelman: *Maus*

Thursday, November 5

Excursion (off-campus): Deutsches Historisches Museum - Exhibition „Umstrittene Verwandtschaft: Koloniale und nationalsozialistische Gewalt / Controversial Kinship: Colonial and National Socialist Violence”

Week 10: W.G. Sebald: *Austerlitz*

Tuesday, November 10

W.G. Sebald: *Austerlitz*

Thursday, November 12

Class moved to the evening of either Thursday, November 12 or Friday, November 13: LitFest at Bard College Berlin reading

Week 11: W.G. Sebald: *Austerlitz*

Tuesday, November 17

W.G. Sebald: *Austerlitz*

Thursday, November 19

W.G. Sebald: *Austerlitz*

Use and function of images in *Austerlitz*
Reading tbc.

Woche 12: Catherine Lacey: *Biography of X*

Tuesday, November 24

Catherine Lacey: *Biography of X*

Use and function of images in *Biography of X*
Reading tbc.

Thursday, November 26

Catherine Lacey: *Biography of X*

Woche 13: Catherine Lacey: *Biography of X*

Tuesday, December 1

Catherine Lacey: *Biography of X*

Thursday, December 3

Guest Speaker: Stefanie de Velasco (novelist)

Woche 14: The End of History

Tuesday, December 8

Counterfactual History as Popular
Entertainment

Essay Clinic

Thursday, December 10

Final Discussion

Completion Week

Thursday, December 17: Final Essay due

The Fall semester runs from Monday, August 31 and runs until Friday, December 18, with the Fall break planned from Monday, October 19, - Sunday, October 25, 2026. Normal course sessions end on Friday, December 11. Completion week is from Monday, December 14 through Friday, December 18. Make-up classes may take place in completion week. 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/>