

Course Title: The Past Is Never Past: Writing History-Based Fiction

Course Code: FICT 38 W

Instructor: Deborah Johnson

Class Sessions and Recording

Meeting days and times: Thursdays, 12:00pm PT

Meeting location: Zoom

The class sessions will be recorded.

Course Features

- Live session
 - Lecture, discussions, and Q&A
 - Requires interaction and active participation
- Assignments & Coursework
 - Assignments and course materials posted in Canvas
 - Required discussions in Canvas
 - Students will submit one large workshop piece (5,000 words).
 - Instructor will provide feedback on assignments
- Individual 15-min. meetings available by request

Grade Options and Requirements

- No Grade Requested (NGR)
 - This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.
- Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)
 - Score will be determined by student attendance and participation.
- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)
 - Grades will be based on involvement in class discussions, short writing assignments given during the first five weeks of the quarter, a longer writing piece of approximately 5,000 words due at the beginning of the sixth week, and participation in exercise and workshop critiques of others' work.

**Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.*

Learning Objectives

Historical novels inspire, educate, and illumine. The themes within the best ones are as relevant today as they were back in the day. In this course, you will:

- learn to take a historical event that interests you and grow this event into a novel

- explore character and setting and theme as they relate to the historical setting and to what we want to say through it.
- learn to write dialogue that's essentially true to the period we're writing about and yet doesn't sound stilted to present-day readers.

Research is important to any historical novel, and we'll explore how best to weave what we've learned into the fabric of our novels. Most of all, we'll concentrate on having fun with our work.

My goal is to make this course as rewarding and enriching as I can for each of you, to help you meet your own personal goal as writers, to train you to think like an editor of historical fiction so you know what they are looking for in a manuscript, and to show you how to get your work into the best possible shape that it can be to increase its chances of acceptance. We want to make you a stronger writer—and did I mention that we'll also have fun?

Textbooks/Required Materials

- Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 978-0679745204
- Walter Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, 978-1982150341
- Elizabeth George, *Write Away: One Novelist's Approach to Fiction and the Writing Life*, 978-0060560447

Tentative Weekly Outline

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTIONS/"THE IMPORTANCE OF (BEING) EARNEST" OR CHARACTER AS ESSENTIAL TO STORY

Introductions. Discuss, briefly, our own work and goals for the course.

Go over the essential importance of character to story.

Read pp. 3-17 in *Write Away*.

Prepare Character Prompt Sheet for one or more characters.

WEEK 2: THE NEED: MOTIVATION AS ESSENTIAL TO STRONG CHARACTERIZATION

Go through Character Prompt Sheets for shared ideas and inspiration.

Discuss assigned pages in *Write Away*.

Discuss words and concepts that breathe life into a character

Prepare character Writing Exercise.

Read pp. 17-29 in *Write Away*.

WEEK 3: PLACE IN FICTION

Eudora Welty's quote from *Place in Fiction*.

Discuss how Michael Ondaatje and Walter Mosley use words to position the reader squarely into the time/place settings for their historical novels.

The importance of differentiating particular places or settings within the story from one another.

Discuss researching the historical setting: How I did it for *The Secret of Magic*.

Writing Exercise: Write a paragraph or two describing a place that is of particular importance to your tale.

WEEK 4: FROM IDEA TO PLOT

Read pp. 39-47 in *Write Away*

Discuss ways to get started with what you want to say.

Various ways of organizing and outlining—or not outlining—your work. Writing

Exercise: Write your plot as a short narrative statement.

WEEK 5: VOICE AND VIEWPOINT

Read pp. 76-97 in *Write Away*.

Point of View: Deciding what works best for your novel.

Choose the right “voice” for your story. Writing Exercise: (TBD)

WRITING WORKSHOP SECTION:

NOTE: This is where we break into smaller groups in order to provide specific critiques for our longer pieces. Although reading assignments will still occasionally be given, the emphasis will shift to one of a hands-on process of writing and rewriting participants’ own work.

WEEK 6: FROM PLOT TO THEME

Read pp. 47-53 in *Write Away*.

Discuss the universality and timelessness of theme. How the themes in *Devil* and *Patient* are still relevant

Fairy tales, myths, and legends.

Writing Workshop Discussions and Critique

WEEK 7: CRAFTING

Discuss dialogue in the historical novel and the importance of words.

The Flow: Moving gracefully from scene to scene.

Turning places into settings.

Another word on research and fitting fact into fiction.

Writing Workshop Discussions and Critique

WEEK 8: THE ALL-IMPORTANT BEGINNING

Read pp. 65-76 in *Write Away*.

Discuss why the beginning of your novel is not necessarily the beginning of your tale.

“Popping” the first pages of a novel.

Writing Workshop Discussions and Critiques

WEEK 9: NOBODY WANTS A SAGGY MIDDLE

Discuss how to maintain momentum from beginning to end.

More research: How to jumpstart your plot.

The importance of bringing on “the guy with the gun.”

Assignment: Any last questions or clarifications that should be addressed in the final class?

Writing Workshop Discussions and Critiques

WEEK 10: ENDING WITH A BANG

Moving quickly from resolution to the novel's end.

Where do we go from here?

Some notes on editing and selling your work.

PRELIMINARY COURSE SYLLABUS

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
365 Lasuen St., Stanford, CA 94305
continuingstudies@stanford.edu
650-725-2650