The Past Is Never Past: Writing Historically Based Fiction  
Stanford Continuing Studies Creative Writing Program, Summer 2015  
Instructor: Deborah Johnson

Required Materials

The English Patient  
Michael Ondaatje  

Devil in a Blue Dress  
Walter Mosley  
ISBN-10: 0743451791  

Write Away  
Elizabeth George  
ISBN-10: 0060560444  
http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/write-away-elizabeth-george/1111739213?ean=9780060560447

Course Description

Have you ever fallen in love with something that happened in the past? Has history seemed as real to you as anything going on right now, and just as relevant? Has your imagined peopled history with people you made up? You are not alone. Most historical novels—and historical novelists—started that way as well. Margaret Mitchell used to take long drives outside Atlanta where she saw the burned-out shells of great houses that
had been destroyed as Sherman marched to the sea. She once said it was the “eeriness” of the countryside that inspired her to write *Gone with the Wind*. Hilary Mantel became fascinated by Thomas Cromwell and his effect upon the Tudor England, which led to her writing *Wolf Hall*. Before that, she’d become fascinated by the French Revolution and this fascination led to her wonderful novel *A Place of Greater Safety*. Jean Rhys read Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* and this inspired Rhy’s own *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Fortunately, there is enough history—and enough unexplored nooks and crannies within that history—to inspire us for years to come,

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 an historical event that interests you and grow this event into a novel. We will explore character and setting and theme and that are relevant to the historical setting and to what we want to say through it. We’ll 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?
The Work You Will Do Here

I have been writing historical fiction for quite some time now and had my first books published—a trilogy on Italy during the Hundred Year’s War—some fifteen years ago while I was still living in Rome. Since moving back to the US I’ve concentrated on writing historical novels about the South during times of great change. I’ve had the privilege of working with some top notch editors and my books have won awards. It was along slog getting published initially and I want to use what I’ve learned since I first got started to make the process easier for you. In order to do this the class will be broken down into two sections: Writing Exercises and the Writing Workshop.

WRITING EXERCISES:

During weeks 1-5, I will give short writing assignments that will specifically address an important craft point as it pertains to historical fiction. At times, participants will be asked to write a paragraph that sets a particular mood; other times we may explore our characters—what they look like, how they act, their defining features, etc. These are components particular to all good fiction but our goal will be to tweak them so they become particular to the historical novel we are writing. Ideally, all of these pieces should fit within the context of our larger work and move it forward. These exercises can be quite short but will help us look at ideas and work actively with the craft points that make for good historical fiction. Course participants are also encouraged to set individual writing goals, to share these goals with the group and to actively use the Forums (posting work, reporting success or frustrations, encouraging each other, asking questions) as a support in reaching these goals. I’ve found that keeping in touch with an encouraging group of fellow writers can be essential to success as we form solid writing habits.

WRITING WORKSHOPS:

Weeks 6-10 will be devoted to our Writing Workshops. These Workshops will differ from the earlier Writing Exercises in that each participant will submit one longer piece (typically about 5,000 words) along with a brief (1,000 words or less) working synopsis. This will be done at the beginning of week 6. The course will then break into two groups. This is so that an intensive and encouraging critique can be given to each participant’s work. In addition to critiquing our workshop pieces, each student will continue to learn new craft points and expand upon the ones already studied. It is important that participants not be shy about showing their early work. Drafts are just that—drafts. They are not expected to be perfect, indeed, early constructive criticism can be extremely
useful in helping to focus a piece and give the writer the confidence and enthusiasm to keep going. Please note: While participants may turn in anything they’d like feedback on to the Writing Workshop, it is strongly recommended that they submit the first chapter of a work already in progress or one that they are seriously considering pursuing.

We will be using Elizabeth George’s *Write Away* as our basic text. Although Ms. George is essentially a mystery novelist, I’ve found her book to be very helpful in focusing setting, character and idea and welding them into a cohesive story. We will also be examining two very successful short novels: Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* and Walter Mosley’s *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Both take place either during or shortly after the Second World War but are entirely different in characterization, point of view, place, plot, setting, etc. We’ll see what makes them work.

**OUR WEEKLY ROUTINE:**
In the interest of establishing a writing routine, most of our weeks will involve these tasks:

1. Comments for Writing Exercise and Writing Workshop Groups
2. Discussion Forums for our readings in historical fiction.
3. Discussion Forums for our own work: recap of the previous week (challenges and successes), problem solving, goals for next week.
4. Discussion Forums for craft issues that may arise.
5. Writing Exercises or Writing Workshop submission for the following week.

Every week throughout this course you will have an assignment that is due by Thursday noon CST. You may submit earlier if you’d like. You will submit your writing in small groups of $ (group composition will change each week) and you will have through Monday of the following week to respond to the other members of your group.

Please use the following as a guide: give one positive assessment (something you like about the piece and why you like it); give one comment on something you think is not working as well as it could (and why); write one question about something that confused you or was not clear and give one suggestion for revision. You are aiming for a paragraph but feel free to give more feedback if you would like. Also feel free to make line comments, as I will, if you are so inclined.
By learning how to edit others you will also learn how to self-edit. Give the kind of thoughtful and constructive feedback that you would want to receive from others.

Workshop is a system of reciprocity so it is important that everyone participate fully.

CLASS PARTICIPATION:

The goal of this course is to establish a working foundation for the writing of historical fiction. At the beginning of the quarter each participant is encouraged to briefly share goals and ideas for a specific piece with the rest of the class. As I mentioned earlier, it’s important to remember that our pieces will evolve as the course moves forward and so anything and everything we do or say is subject to revision and change. That’s part of the joy of writing! Good plotting is essential to any fiction: it’s what keeps readers turning the pages. However, our intention will also be to explore character, mood, period and place—prime elements that make an historical piece relevant and exciting today while at the same time remaining true to its own time and circumstances. We will learn about these by carefully reading the assigned texts, writing our own pieces, and then joining in with respectful and enthusiastic critiques of others’ work. In order to do this, it is important that each of us comes to the sessions prepared and on time, having completed both the reading and the written assignments. Writing and then sharing what we write is crucial to our success, otherwise we will not be able to fully benefit from the course. Likewise, students should be courteous in their interactions with their fellow writers. Writing is a solitary life, often filled with more than its share of rejection, and we should be mindful of this as we give respectful feedback to each other—and also to ourselves.

Grades:

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 6th week, and participation in exercise and workshop critiques of others’ work.

SCHEDULE (subject to change)

WEEK ONE: 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 syllabus and logistics and tech resources.
Go over the essential importance of character to story.
Read through pp. 3-17 in Write Away.
Prepare Character Prompt Sheet for one or more characters.
WEEK TWO: **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, using examples from *Devil* and *Patient*.
Prepare character Writing Exercise.
Read pp.17-29 in *Write Away*

WEEK THREE: **PLACE IN FICTION**
Eudora Welty’s quote from *Place in Fiction*
Discuss how Michael Ondaatje and Walter Mosley use words to position the reader squarey into the time/place settings for their historical novels.
The importance of differentiating places from one another.
Discuss researching the historical setting: How I did it for *The Secret of Magic*.
Writing Exercise: Paragraph or two describing a place that is of particular importance to your tale.

WEEK FOUR: **FROM IDEA TO PLOT**
*Write Away* pp.39-47
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 FIVE: **VOICE AND VIEWPOINT**
*Write Away* p.76-97
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 sections in order to provide specific critiques for our longer pieces. Although reading assignments will still be occasionally given, the emphasis will shift to one of a hands-on process of writing and rewriting the participants own work.

WEEK SIX: **FROM PLOT TO THEME**
*Write Away* pp. 47-53.
Discuss the universality and timelessness of theme. How the themes in *Devil* and *Patient* are still relevant today.
Fairy tales, myths and legends.
Writing Workshop Discussions and Critique
WEEK SEVEN: 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 EIGHT: THE ALL-IMPORTANT BEGINNING
Write Away pp. 65-76
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 NINE: 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 TEN: 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.

My Commentary
You will turn in your work on Thursday and I will respond with line edits and comments
to each of your writing exercises and to your workshop piece. You will also gather
feedback from the members of your small groups and from the class as a whole. You are
couraged to resubmit your edited pieces for me to look at. The goal is to teach you to
rigorously redraft your work until you bring it to publication standards. All Writers
revise. No idea springs fully born, Minerva-like, from the author’s head. I will create an
optional revision thread starting in Week 2 where you may post revisions on your short
pieces if you want.