



SYLLABUS

CREATIVE WRITING IN LONDON

Instructor: Susie Thomas

Contact Hours: 45

Language of Instruction: English

LONDON, ENGLAND

“I think the greatest education is reading on a vast scale.” (Alexander Baron)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This undergraduate writing workshop is designed so that students can take full advantage of the possibilities for creative writing in London, using the capital as a setting for fiction or as a base for travel writing, reportage and the personal essay. It introduces the basics of good writing in any form: students can choose whether to focus primarily on creative nonfiction or fiction in their final portfolios.

Through the readings and visits, students will develop a lively understanding of London’s cultural life and develop skills for observing and recording the city in their own work. Take your notebook with you wherever you go! Note down overheard dialogue and details of particular localities. Students will be assigned to seek out theatre, art, music, dance, architecture, restaurants, markets, shops, parks, and street life (among other possibilities), and then to write about what they encounter in several different forms, from the review essay and the journalistic report to the short story.

We will read excerpts from a range of contemporary London novels, short stories, newspaper articles and travel writing, which will enrich your experience of living in the city. The readings are fundamental to the course: to become a good writer one must also be a good reader. You are expected to read widely and analytically: it is through engagement with a variety of different texts that you will learn new techniques and become aware of possible directions for your own creative writing.

You will also be encouraged to attend a variety of literary events at venues such as The London Review Bookshop, The British Library and Bishopsgate Institute.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The course will:

- Introduce students to the practice of “creative” writing. Whether students are primarily interested in the short story, or reportage, or simply want to become better prose writers this course will teach the necessary skills and techniques.
- Encourage students to develop their imaginative capabilities and willingness to experiment.
- Develop students’ critical skills by analyzing examples from published works, including novels, short stories, memoir and reportage.
- Introduce students to a variety of London locales and the practice of observing, listening and recording impressions.

Students who successfully complete this course will:

- Be able to offer and utilize constructive criticism of each other’s work.
- Be able to express themselves clearly and imaginatively in a variety of prose forms.
- Have developed critical writing skills.
- Be able to develop and refine an idea through several drafts.
- Be more effective communicators both orally and in writing.

INSTRUCTIONAL METHODOLOGY

This course is conducted as a series of workshops. In the first half of the course we will analyze a variety of short texts (fiction/nonfiction) and engage in creative writing exercises that allow students to experiment with the techniques we have been analyzing.

In the second half of the course students will be reading and responding to each other’s work in a series of workshops.

Workshop guidelines for the second half of the course:

- 1) In the margins, offer comments as they occur to you while you read. Mark favorite passages, sections you don't understand, crucial images or ideas, problems or interesting uses of language, point of view, setting, etc. Mark your copy of the work with your name before handing it back to the author.
- 2) On a separate piece of paper, or on the back of the work (include your name here, too), offer the author 2-3 short paragraphs that address your main reactions to the work. Include the following:
 - your overall "reading"
 - what you feel the main intention or theme is
 - what you found strongest/most compelling
 - what you found most problematic

These final comments should offer the writer the heart of your reactions to his or her work - smaller, more specific remarks should go in the margins. You must make a copy of the-2-3 paragraphs of comments for me, as they will form apart of your final grade. (Note: in evaluating these reader reactions, I'll be looking for insight and usefulness, not length or "correctness" of interpretation. Informal style is fine here; so are legible handwritten comments.)

- 3) Remember that the object of workshop feedback is to give the author an idea of how a variety of intelligent readers interpret his/her work. Suggestions and criticism are fine; dictatorial comments are not. Refer to specific passages by page number whenever possible. (Authors: please remember to number your pages.)

METHOD OF EVALUATION (GRADING)

Because of the participatory nature of the class, faithful attendance and punctual completion of all assignments is essential. Active engagement in class and supportive critique of others' work is expected. Have all assignments ready at the beginning of class on the due date. Please double space. If you have questions about an assignment, see me well before it is due. Keep copies of everything that you turn in to me. Students are responsible for photocopying work to be distributed for workshop discussion.

Every class (whether on- or off-site) must be attended. Absence will only be accepted on the grounds of sickness. Sickness must be notified in advance in person (by phone, note or email). Any absence, other than sickness, will affect your grade.

Final portfolio (15-20 pages):

50%

This may include journalistic reports, review essays and short stories. Fiction/nonfiction will be graded according to the following criteria: originality; skillful use of language; level of insight; intricacy or mastery of plot, structure, characterization, setting, dialogue; and the extent to which the work rewards multiple readings. Poor grammar and mechanics will detract from your grade.

Essay and presentation:

25%

1) Choose two books from the list on the syllabus. Ideally, you should browse through a number of these works, and choose them according to what you want to write about, and whether your own work is in fiction or nonfiction. Discuss your choices with me if you have questions.

2) Write a 4-5 page titled essay in which you compare the ways in which the two authors use plot, or place, or tension or dialogue or voice or alternative structures. Throughout the course you will be encouraged to read instrumentally: to analyze the texts in order to see how particular effects are being achieved and how you can employ and adapt these techniques in your own work. The final assignment is a formal essay which explores the literary devices of the two chosen texts and how they have influenced your own writing. **BE VERY SPECIFIC.** Don't try to discuss too much; instead, zero in on a particular issue that interests you, or a particular tendency in the works. Your essay is not a research paper; neither should it be a book review or a summary. (Assume that your reader -- me -- is very familiar with the books you've chosen, and doesn't need a recap of the plots.) In sum, how is the author using a particular technique, and what effect does that usage have? The essay is due on the date for which you sign up -- the same day as your presentation.

3) The presentation in class should take 20 minutes. The purpose of the final presentation is to develop communication skills and to share knowledge.

Students will report on the literary techniques of the two books they have chosen to study. Students will be aware that the rest of the class have not read this material so they must gauge what their audience needs to know and how to structure their talk so that the key points are clear. Listening to the presentation will allow the rest of the class to learn about new writers and techniques. The presentation must be based on your essay, but may not involve reading from your essay. Instead, report to the class on the questions that you addressed in your essay, as well as your ideas about the issues raised (structure, voice, tone, etc). How did your study of the two authors affect your own writing projects? Be prepared with examples to back up your ideas. Be prepared to take questions. Articulateness counts. The presentation may be traditional or experimental in style: relevant props, visual aids, and/or involvement of other students is encouraged.

Critical input (writing exercises, discussion and written responses to others' work)

25%

This grade is based on class participation. In the first half of the course this involves analysis of extracts from *London* (an anthology of prose inspired by the city) as well as handouts that I will provide. This will be followed by creative writing exercises in class which allow students to experiment with the techniques we have explored. In the second half of the course the focus is on offering constructive criticism of others' work (for precise details of this see workshop guidelines above).

COURSE OUTLINE

- Wed 6 Sep: Introductions. The basics of good writing in any form. We will begin with George Orwell's essay "Why I write" (handout) and a discussion of what kind of writers we want to become. Effective use of the senses (sound, sight, touch, smell and taste) and concrete detail. Walking and writing London: excerpt from Lauren Elkin, *Flaneuse*. **Visit British Library**
- Wed 13 Sep: Workshop on people-watching. Analysis of extracts from Doris Lessing *London Observed* (handout); Patrick Wright, Keith Waterhouse, Julian Barnes and Xiaolu Guo (in *London*). **Visit Postman's Park**
- Wed 20 Sep: Workshop on place. "In London we lay our scene." Analysis of extracts by Virginia Woolf (*Mrs Dalloway*), Jan Morris, Ruth Rendell, Peter Ackroyd and Sukhdev Sandhu (in *London*). **Mrs Dalloway Walk**
- Wed 27 Sep: Workshop on narrators, voice and tone. Analysis of Hanif Kureishi's "My Son the Fanatic" (handout). Will Self, Iqbal Ahmed and Virginia Woolf (in *London*). **Visit Dickens' House**
- Wed 4 Oct: No class. Scotland
- Wed 11 Oct: Workshop on the art of eavesdropping and how to write dialogue. Analysis of extracts from Will Self, Xiaolu Guo and A. N. Wilson (in *London*) and Zadie Smith's *NW* (handout).

MID TERM BREAK

Wed 25 Oct: Conferences. Bring outline for presentation/essay and plan for portfolio

Wed 1 Nov: Workshop on plot: the quest, the journey, the return. (1) Write three possible opening paragraphs to the same story, taking three different approaches: Making a startling or arresting statement of fact. Offering an invitation to the exotic or particular world of your story. Taking the reader 'in medias res' – the action has already begun. This may mean beginning with dialogue, in the midst of a conversation. (2) Construct a narrative around an object. It could be anything: a jewel, a coin, a bottle opener

Wed 8 Nov: Workshop on creating character (back story, psychology, conflict, motivation). (1) Spend a few minutes thinking about your own extended family: who was the outsider? Describe as accurately as you can what he or she looked like. Focus on a precise moment that you remember seeing them. Create a dialogue with the outsider: What would you like to tell them? What do you think they might want to say?
(2) Write 100 words on your own name. Do you like it? Do you hate it? Who gave it to you? Have you changed it? Do you have nicknames? What do your characters think of the names you have given them?
(3) Work in pairs: tell your partner something dramatic that happened to you in detail. Then write one another's stories, changing the names and locations so that it becomes your story. Read out the story to your partner.

Wed 15 Nov: Workshops on student portfolios

Wed 22 Nov: Workshops on student portfolios. You are encouraged to use the last week to make final revisions to your portfolio based on the feedback from the workshop.

Wed 29 Nov: Presentations **DUE**: Final Portfolio

Wed 6 Dec: Presentations

COURSE READINGS

- 1) *London* (City-Lit Series), ed. Heather Reyes (Oxygen Books, 2009). Please bring this to each class in the first half of the semester.
- 2) Xerox selection of short stories, essays and excerpts from travel writing for use in the workshops in the first half of the semester.
- 3) Work turned in for discussion by enrolled students in workshops (second half of the semester).
- 4) Two of the works listed below – your choice. These works will form the basis of your essay/presentation. You may choose other London texts in consultation with me. The London Fictions website is a good resource.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

V. S. Pritchett, *London Perceived*
Doris Lessing, *London Observed*
Bill Bryson, *Notes from a Small Island*
Diaspora City: The London New Writing Anthology, ed. Nick McDowell
Ian McEwan, *Saturday*
Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*
Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*
Zadie Smith, *NW*
Granta: Best of Young British Novelists 4, ed. John Freeman
Penguin Anthology of New British Writing 13, eds. Ali Smith and Toby Litt
Granta: Book of Travel, ed. Bill Buford
Faber Book of London, ed. A. N. Wilson
Alexander Baron, *The Lowlife*
Andrea Levy, *Small Island*
Maggie Gee, *The White Family*
Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*