



Boston University Study Abroad
London

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Writing in Today's Britain: Meet the Writer
CAS EN 387 (Elective A)
Spring 2016

Instructor Information

A. Name	Mary Condé
B. Day and Time	Monday and Tuesday, 1.15 – 5.15pm (with one Wednesday session, 13 th January, and one Friday session, 12 th February)
C. Location	Cassels room, 43 Harrington Gardens, SW7 4JU
D. BU Telephone	020 7244 6255
E. Email	maryeconde@gmail.com
F. Office hours	By appointment

Course Objectives

The aim of this course is the intensive study of some very recent literary texts in conjunction with an investigation of the writing process and the life and career of the writer. It is hoped that all the writers will visit personally.

No prior knowledge is required, but the more widely students can read in contemporary literature in English (from any part of the world), the better prepared they will be, and the more they will enjoy the course.

Course Overview

The course consists of an examination of some recent texts in English including two novels, a young adult novel, a memoir, a radio series, a play, a biographical dictionary, a collection of short stories and a collection of poetry. There are a variety of settings in time and place. Texts will be examined in the context of literary history, but also in terms of the marketplace. We shall also have a visit from a leading publisher. When the writers visit, and are interviewed by the class, we shall be able to track the process of publishing a book from the initial inspiration to the finished article to the publicity machine which lies beyond. We shall discuss such issues as: freedom of speech, the role of the literary agent, the role of the editor, writer's advances, and (last but not least) literary integrity. A major component of the course will be the comparison of writers in terms of literary merit, genre, and the working conditions for each individual.

It is hoped that students will find the experience of meeting the writers exciting in itself, but it should also enrich and inform the detailed analysis of their work in terms of social and economic contexts, and afford an opportunity to debate the relevance of a writer's intentions to the reader's response.

Course Methodology

This course will run over ten four-hour sessions. Each class session will place the text in context and draw on references to other works. Students will be expected to have read the entire assigned text in advance of the appropriate session. Students will contribute class presentations (one each) on some aspect of the text. There will be a general class discussion to which all students are expected to contribute. The writer will then visit the class and be interviewed by a chosen student or students (each of whom will participate in interviewing once per course). There will then be a general Q & A. Since it is courteous to end the class when the writer leaves, each class will usually begin with feedback from the previous class. PLEASE NOTE that not all writers' visits can be guaranteed. When the writer does not visit, the class will work from supporting materials such as published interviews and personal communications.

Preparation should be intelligently managed, which will often involve reading ahead.

Students are encouraged to make use of specialist academic libraries throughout London. Students will have a session about London libraries as part of their orientation week and will attend inductions to the specialist libraries for which they will receive memberships. Students will also receive information on visiting specialist libraries open to the public.

Assessment:

Class presentation (to be explained and assigned at first class, notes to total roughly 500 words) (20%)

Summary writing assignment (500 words):

'To what extent do you think a writer should take market forces into consideration?'

Hand in at start of second session, Monday 18th January. (10%)

Essay 1 (1,500 words):

'What are the arguments against meeting a writer?'

Hand in at start of fifth session, Tuesday 26th January. (15%)

Interview of a visiting writer (questions to total roughly 500 words) (20%)

Essay 2 (3,000 words):

Students will be asked to choose their own topics, but these must be submitted in advance for approval by start of seventh session, Tuesday 2nd February. Hand in at start of ninth session, Tuesday 9th February. (35%) (If you choose to write on Helen Simpson, Alex Wheatle or Martina Evans, you may have a small extension.)

Grading

Please refer to the Academic Handbook for detailed grading criteria and policies on plagiarism: <http://www.bu.edu/london/current-semester>

** Final Grades are subject to deductions by the Academic Affairs Office due to unauthorised absences.*

Course Chronology

Session 1: WEDNESDAY 13th January

General introduction to course, explanation of the context of the authors and their texts, assignment of presentations/interviews, and discussion of how to conduct an interview. Visit from Chris Rose, described as ‘a well-educated person universally acknowledged in parts of East Anglia as the world’s preeminent expert on inexpert writers’, who will answer questions about his book.

Reading: C.D.Rose(ed.), *The Biographical Dictionary of Literary Failure* (2014)

Session 2: Monday 18th January. Summaries in.

Visit from Lennie Goodings, publisher of Virago, and Sarah Waters’ editor

Reading: No reading required (but get ahead with your other reading!) but have questions about publishing ready to ask Lennie

Session 3: Tuesday 19th January. Summaries returned.

Discussion of a historical novel set in the nineteen-twenties

Reading: Sarah Waters, *The Paying Guests* (2014)

Sarah Waters is both best-selling and critically acclaimed. This is her sixth novel, and all her novels so far have been filmed. (Sarah shares this honour with Jane Austen.)

Session 4: Monday 25th January.

Discussion of a family memoir, and the narrative structuring required, with visit from Phyllida Law.

Reading: Phyllida Law, *How Many Camels Are There in Holland?: Dementia, ma and me* (2013)

Phyllida Law is a distinguished actor. She has an OBE, and two honorary doctorates in drama, the second in a joint ceremony with her daughter Emma Thompson.

This memoir is a sequel to a memoir of her mother-in-law. The *Guardian* said of it: ‘Scatty, funny and brisk, it reads like a series of postcards from a posh, dotty relative and then – quite by stealth – becomes completely heartbreaking.’

Session 5: Tuesday 26th January. First essays in.

Discussion of the exchange of love letters between the horses of Napoleon and Wellington, with visit from Robert Hudson.

Reading: *Warhorses of Letters*, ed. Robert Hudson and Marie Phillips (2012)

Robert Hudson has published two novels, *The Kilburn Social Club* and *The Dazzle*. He recently co-wrote the book for the musical *A Damsel in Distress* and he masterminds a stand-up collective at a pub in Kilburn, where this text made its first appearance before becoming a radio series

Session 6: Monday 1st February. Essays returned.

Discussion of a current massive bestseller, with visit from Paula Hawkins.

Reading: Paula Hawkins, *The Girl on the Train* (2015)

This is a spectacularly successful first novel, a psychological thriller.

Session 7: Tuesday 2nd February. Topics for second essay to be handed in.

Discussion of a very controversial play, with visit from Stephen Brown

Reading: Stephen Brown, *Future Me* (2007)

Stephen Brown has just been commissioned by the Hampstead Theatre, and has recently been working with Mark Rylance at the National.

**** Contingency Class Date: Friday 5th February.** Students are obligated to keep this date free to attend class should any class dates need to be rescheduled.

Session 8: Monday 8th February.

Discussion of a collection of short stories, with possible visit from Helen Simpson.

Reading: Helen Simpson, *Cockfosters* (2015)

Helen Simpson is one of our leading short story writers.

Session 9: Tuesday 9th February. Second essays to be handed in.

Discussion of a young adult novel set in South London, with visit from Alex Wheatle.

Reading: Alex Wheatle, *Liccle Bit* (2015)

This is the first young adult novel by Alex Wheatle, a writer who has been awarded the MBE.

Session 10: FRIDAY 12th February. Essays returned.

Discussion of a collection of poems about the collision of Irish and American culture, with visit from Martina Evans.

Reading: Martina Evans, *Burnfort, Las Vegas* (2014)

Martina Evans is an award-winning poet who is also a novelist.

Required reading is listed below and in the Course Chronology. It is essential that all students read and reflect upon the relevant reading *before each class*, and come with written notes on their own critical conclusions.

Stephen Brown, *Future Me* (2007)

Martina Evans, *Burnfort, Las Vegas* (2014)

Paula Hawkins, *The Girl on the Train* (2015)

Robert Hudson and Marie Phillips (eds.), *Warhorses of Letters* (2012)

Phyllida Law, *How Many Camels Are There in Holland?: Dementia, ma and me* (2013)

C.D.Rose (ed.), *The Biographical Dictionary of Literary Failure* (2014)

Helen Simpson, *Cockfosters* (2015)

Sarah Waters, *The Paying Guests* (2014)

Alex Wheatle, *Liccle Bit* (2015)

Supplementary and Secondary Reading:

The following texts are useful for expanding upon the required reading, for researching seminar papers and for preparing for the final examination.

James Acheson and Sarah C.E.Ross (eds.), *The Contemporary British Novel* (2005)

Nick Bentley, *British Fiction of the 1990s* (2005)

Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995* (1996)

James F.English, *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction* (2006)

James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (2005)

Antony Easthope, *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory* (1991)

Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (1995)

Lizbeth Goodman, *Feminist Stages: Interviews with women in contemporary British theatre* (1996)

Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (2002)

Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond* (2008)

Adam Kirsch, *The Modern Element: Essays on contemporary poetry* (2008)

Rod Mengham, *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction: International Writing in English Since 1970* (1999)

Jago Morrison, *Contemporary Fiction* (2003)

Emma Parker, *Contemporary British Women Writers* (2004)

Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel* (2nd ed., 2007)

Duncan Wu, *Making Plays: Interviews with contemporary British dramatists and their directors* (2000)

Liz Yorke, *Impertinent Voices: Subversive strategies in contemporary women's poetry* (1991)

Additional reading may be found on Blackboard: <http://learn.bu.edu>

Course Bibliography

Acheson, J. and Ross, S. (eds.). *The Contemporary British Novel*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Bentley, Nick. *British Fiction of the 1990s*. London: Routledge, 2005.

Childs, Peter. *Reading Fiction: Opening the Text*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

Connor, Steven. *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Easthope, Anthony. *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1991.

English, James F. *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*. Maryland: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006.

English, James F. *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Gasiorek, Andrzej. *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Goodman, Lizbeth. *Feminist Stages: Interviews with women in contemporary British theatre*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academics, 1996.

Head, Dominic. *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Head, Dominic. *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.

Mengham, Rod. *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction: International Writing in English since 1970*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003.

Morrison, Jago. *Contemporary Fiction*. London: Routledge, 2003.

Parker, Emma. *Contemporary British Women Writers*. Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer Limited, 2004.

Tew, Phillip. *The Contemporary British Novel*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd., 2007.

Wu, Duncan. *Making Plays: Interviews with contemporary British dramatists and their directors*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

Yorke, Liz. *Impertinent Voices: Subversive strategies in contemporary women's poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.