



Boston University Study Abroad
London

Historical Fictions: Retrospection in Contemporary British Literature
CAS EN 388 (*Elective B*)
[Semester] [Year]

Instructor Information

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Course Description

This course offers an aesthetic and historical understanding of contemporary British literature through a consideration of work by British writers in the 21st century. Most of the writers are well known to the British public but we will not necessarily be reading their most acclaimed or most recent work. Rather, the texts have been selected for their engagement with some of the major problems and contentious issues within contemporary British society, and their ability to provoke debate as to accepted definitions of literature and our expectations of such. We will be looking at the social and historical contexts of the texts and their authors' writing and lives, and dealing with the major themes of much contemporary literature, including notions of utopia/dystopia, the impact of social media and artificial intelligence, gender and sexuality, storytelling and memory and now Brexit.

Students will learn about the British psyche, culture, and the history that generated these texts. We will consider how major events of the last century into which all of the authors were born, including two world wars, continue to have an impact on the literary imagination. They will hopefully be confronted with some of the most important aspects of the human condition, both in a sense of that condition as peculiarly British and as a generality. They will also be made aware of the historical consciousness that so informs much contemporary British literature where many of our writers look to the past to understand the present.

Our first three novels are historical fictions – a genre that surely raises questions as to content and intent in the minds of contemporary writers who see the Western world defined by two world wars and their consequences; the geopolitics of retribution and reparation are still determining the fate of a Europe formed in the wake of the second, and in the devastation of the Middle East. As with many

instances of very immediate responses to the immediate situation—such as those within social media—contemporary literature can lack the perspective and reflection that often occurs with hindsight. I have therefore selected texts that draw on the past to make sense of the bewildering present. Few novels published in the wake of the Brexit referendum, as a recent example, have any sense of anything other than an immediate and personal impact, but the sublime Scottish writer Ali Smith has turned the chaos into an enlightening beauty.

Hub-aligned Course Objectives

Through the intensive study of notable works of British literature by both well-known, prolific ‘best-selling’ authors including Martin Amis, Pat Barker, Ian McEwan and Jeanette Winterson, and the younger, lesser-known writer Luke Sutherland and poet Fiona Benson, students on this course will develop knowledge and appreciation of both the historical and cultural contexts of British society over the past 15 years, during which the texts studied were written and disseminated. Students will also develop a deep understanding of the impact, effect and role of literature on and in the lives of both the writers and their readers. (*aligned to Aesthetic Exploration Learning Outcome 1*)

Students will encounter different literary forms, including the novel, the short story and the poem and learn the terms used to discuss these forms. They will recognise various narrative devices, such as first and third person and free indirect discourse, and their effect on the reader’s understanding and emotional response. Students will also learn and be able to apply definitions of relevant literary styles and movements, such as Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, Gynocentric writing and various critical lenses through which these works have been viewed. (*aligned to Aesthetic Exploration Learning Outcome 2*)

Students will demonstrate their understanding of the historical, cultural and technical terms and literary genres encountered through formative writing assignments in class and three summative writing assignments, analytical and creative. They will evaluate the primary texts assigned, create academic arguments about these through analysis of others’, and through a synthesis of the various historical, cultural, social and sexual contexts described produce a creative response to their reading of *Vertigo & Ghost*. (*aligned to Aesthetic Exploration Learning Outcome 3*)

Through a consideration of the paradoxically named genre of historical fiction, students will create their own historical narratives in formal essays wherein they will evaluate interpretations based on historical evidence and construct historical arguments about Britain past and present. (*aligned to Historical Consciousness Learning Outcome 1*)

Students will demonstrate an ability to interpret and evaluate primary source material— including novels, journals, archives, museum exhibits,

films/documentaries, artworks, perambulatory exercises into reading London as a historical text and a place in contemporary fiction—using a range of interpretative skills, such as textual and semiotic analysis to situate the texts in their historical and cultural contexts. (*aligned to Historical Consciousness Learning Outcome 2*)

Through reading, discussion and their written work, students will acquire and demonstrate knowledge of: religion in a largely secular society, where the head of state and church are united in a king or queen; the legacy of empire, the impact of immigration and the rise of the Windrush generation; initial literary responses to Brexit, the advent of social media and the Frankenstein monster of AI. (*aligned to Historical Consciousness Learning Outcome 3*)

Additional Course Objectives

- Reading, writing, and exploring literary London, students will connect with several of the works under discussion by being in the place that inspired them and is often their subject
- Students will assess the aesthetic and ideological strengths and weaknesses of contemporary British literature
- Students will practice ways in which they too can ‘speak’ for their time and their generation, and even, perhaps for another time

Course Methodology

Lecture; open discussion; field trips and museum and art gallery visit

This course will run over 10 four-hour sessions. Some of the classes will incorporate a field trip and I will be using various media for presentation purposes, but the discussion group will form the basis of classes and will centre on the primary texts, which must be read in advance of the relevant class.

Assessments

One Minute Tests and One Sentence Summaries; Five Minute Writing Assignment – Formative: Ungraded

Undertaken in class to assess students’ understanding of literary terms and their prior experience of literature.

Writing Assignment one – Creative, Collaborative, Formative: 20%

Following our reading and class discussion of Fiona Benson’s *Vertigo & Ghost* students are split into groups to write a collective poem on the subjects raised in Benson’s anthology, using Benson’s techniques, adding tropes and cultural references pertinent to their experience of adolescence and the impact of recent debates in sexual politics.

Writing Assignment two – Academic, Formal, Summative: Graded 35%

Students will write a research paper of 2,000 words (approximately eight double-spaced pages) due in Session 8 using the ‘Guidelines and Style Sheet’ provided.

Students will identify potential paper topics through locating primary source material at the Imperial War Museum with a guided practice exercise to be previewed in class. Students will note how the stories told about certain events and objects are told in the set texts, and through the curation of similar and related objects on display at the IWM. They will note the relationship of selected objects to the texts they have studied; identify what it means for British concepts of culture and society during these wars; identify the argument the curation of these exhibits make; synthesise that argument with those of the set texts to make their own argument about what the narrative is and what it means. Students will choose a curated object to present the cultural significance and arcing historical narrative of in Session 5.

Following the visit, and individual discussions with the tutor, students will choose a topic suggested by their reading of *Small Island*, *The Zone of Interest* or *Toby’s Room*. This topic must be presented in a brief proposal (approximately 100 words) emailed to the tutor after the field trip to the Imperial War Museum. The paper will be graded and returned in the penultimate class, in good time for preparation for the final examination.

Writing Assignment three – Final Closed Examination, Formative: Graded 35%

In the *Final Closed Examination* students will be given a choice of 8 prompts relative to the material covered over the term, including narrative techniques and specific texts, as starting points for two responses/essays (closed book). Students will be expected to know all the texts well enough to be able to write on any of them but this test is not only one of memory and assimilation and representation of material but of the ability to select a particular text or topic top best showcase those talents. There will be prompts/questions for individual texts and for a more general consideration of themes throughout.

Class Participation: Graded 10%

This assessment is tracked throughout the term and allows students a reward for thoughtful and consistent effort, application and engagement with me, his or her peers and the material.

Grading

The following Boston University table explains the grading system that is used by most faculty members on Boston University’s Study Abroad London Programmes.

<u>Grade</u>	<u>Honour Points</u>	<u>Usual %</u>
A	4.0	93-100

A-	3.7	89-92
B+	3.3	85-88
B	3.0	81-84
B-	2.7	77-80
C+	2.3	73-76
C	2.0	69-72
C-	1.7	65-68
D	1.0	60-64
F	0.0	Unmarked

Grading Criteria

‘Incomplete’ or **I** grades are not permitted because of the obvious difficulty in making up missed work once the student has left the country. All work must be completed on time. We also do not allow **‘Audits’** (AU), **‘Withdrawals’** (W), or **‘Pass/Fail’** (P) grades.

The grades reflect the quality of the work. Lecturers and students should use the following criteria for an understanding of what each grade means.

A This exceptional grade is assigned only to work that has persistently outstanding quality in both substance and presentation. The student must demonstrate a sustained capacity for independent thought and extensive study, producing rigorous and convincing analyses in well-ordered prose.

A- Awarded to work that is clearly focused and analytical, and based on wide reading. The student must cover all the principal points of a question and systematically develop a persuasive overall thesis, allowing for one or two venial omissions or inapt expressions.

B+, B, B- This range of grades indicates that the student has shown some evidence of original thought and intellectual initiative. The student has cited sources beyond the class materials, and shown a degree of originality in perception and/or approach to the subject. The work will show thoughtful management of material, and a good grasp of the issues. The differences between a B+, a straight B and a B- may reflect poor presentation of the material, or mistakes in punctuation, spelling and grammar.

C+, C, C- Work in this grade range is satisfactory, but uninspiring. If the work is simply a recitation of the class materials or discussions, and shows no sign of genuine intellectual engagement with the issues, it cannot deserve a higher grade. Should an essay fail to provide a clear answer to the question as set, or argue a position coherently, the grade will fall within this range.

Quality of presentation can lift such work into the upper levels of this grade range. Work of this quality which is poorly presented, and riddled with errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation, will fall into the lower end of the range. To earn a C grade, the work must demonstrate that the student is familiar with the primary course

material, be written well enough to be readily understood, be relevant to the assignment, and, of course, be the student's own work except where properly cited.

D A marginal pass can be given where some but not all the elements of the course have been completed satisfactorily.

F The failing grade indicates the work is seriously flawed in one or more ways:

- Obvious lack of familiarity with the material
- So poorly written as to defy understanding
- So brief and insubstantial that it fails to properly address the subject
- Material presented is not relevant to the assignment
- Demonstrates evidence of plagiarism

Please refer to the Academic Handbook for further details and for policies on plagiarism.

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

Attendance

Classes

All Boston University Study Abroad London Programme students are expected to attend each and every class session, tutorial, and field trip in order to fulfil the required course contact hours and receive course credit. Any student that has been absent from two class sessions (whether authorised or unauthorised) will need to meet with the Directors to discuss their continued participation on the programme.

Authorised Absence

Students who expect to be absent from any class should notify a member of Academic Affairs and complete an Authorised Absence Approval Form 10 working days in advance of the class date (except in the case of absence due to illness, for which students should submit the Authorised Absence Approval Form with the required doctor's note as soon as possible). The Authorised Absence Approval Request Form is available from: <http://www.bu.edu/london/report-absence/>

Please note: Submitting an Authorised Absence Approval Form does not guarantee an authorised absence

Students may apply for an authorised absence only under the following circumstances:

- **Illness (first day of sickness): If a student is too ill to attend class, the student must phone the BU London Student Affairs Office (who will in turn contact the student's lecturer).**
- **Illness (multiple days):** If a student is missing more than one class day due to illness, the student must call in to the Student Affairs Office each day the

student is ill. Students must also provide the Student Affairs Office with a completed Authorised Absence Approval Form and a sick note from a local doctor excusing their absence from class.

- Important placement event that clashes with a class (verified by internship supervisor)
- **Special circumstances which have been approved by the Directors (see note below).**

The Directors will only in the most extreme cases allow students to leave the programme early or for a significant break.

Unauthorised Absence

Any student to miss a class due to an unauthorised absence will receive a **4% grade penalty** to their final grade for the course whose class was missed. This grade penalty will be applied by the Academic Affairs Office to the final grade at the end of the course. As stated above, any student that has missed two classes will need to meet with the Directors to discuss their participation on the programme as excessive absences may result in a 'Fail' in the class and therefore expulsion from the programme.

Religious Holidays

Boston University's Office of the University Registrar states:

'The University, in scheduling classes on religious holidays and observances, intends that students observing those traditions be given ample opportunity to make up work. Faculty members who wish to observe religious holidays will arrange for another faculty member to meet their classes or for cancelled classes to be rescheduled.'

Special Accommodations

Each student will need to contact Disability & Access Services to request accommodations for the semester they are abroad. Students are advised by BU-DAS not to expect the same accommodations as they receive on campus.

BU London can only uphold special accommodations if we have received the appropriate documentation from BU-DAS. We cannot accept letters from other universities/centres.

All disabilities need to be known to DAS in Boston if they are to be used as a reason for requiring a change in conditions, i.e. reduced internship hours or special accommodations for the internship schedule.

Lateness

Students arriving more than 15 minutes after the posted class start time will be marked as late. Any student with irregular class attendance (more than two late

arrivals to class) will be required to meet with the Assistant Director of Academic Affairs and if the lateness continues, may have his/her final grade penalised.

Course Chronology

Session 1: Welcome to my World

This session will constitute an introduction to me, to the course, and to each other and to the various narrative structures of the texts we'll be studying. In discussion we will start telling our own contemporary tales through our stated passions – highlighting the connection between the oral and the lapidary narrative and the differences.

Assignment: Five minutes given to writing a paragraph about an event occurring in the students' lifetimes that they feel has had the greatest impact on their life in national, global and personal terms. As a representative of the majority of writers whose work we are reading in generational and national terms, I will also undertake this assignment. Our written responses will be shared in class then collected and read by me.

FIELD TRIP: The British Library

We will take the underground to the British Library on Euston Road to consider the necessity of libraries and how they contributed to the development and distribution of literature as a means of entertainment and education, and to see some of the treasures of the collection held on this site. Ali Smith was so distressed at the recent closures of public libraries across Britain she wrote in 2015 a collection of stories *Public Library and Other Stories*, one of which we will read in class together.

Reading: Students should be well into *Small Island* by **Andrea Levy** which must be read in full for our next class.

Session 2: Two Small Islands

Levy's much lauded fourth novel illustrates the effects of war and of colonialism on the lives of both the colonised and the colonising. We will be considering ideas of England, class and race in a text that charts the birth pangs of the multicultural society in which Levy and I grew up and which our fathers, both British subjects from small islands, helped to create.

Reading: *Small Island*, by **Andrea Levy**

Session 3: Britain at War

Sessions 3, 4 and 5 will be given over to an examination of the effects of the First and Second World Wars on the psyche of contemporary writers through a reading of two novels. The first is part two of Barker's second trilogy about the impact of the First World War on the lives of real and fictional characters by a master of historical fiction.

Reading: *Toby's Room*, by **Pat Barker**

(*Regeneration* by Pat Barker does not have to be read for class but would greatly add to the students' understanding of the topic should they wish to do further reading.)

Session 4: The Age of Horrorism

The second 'war' novel is Martin Amis' revisiting of the subject which has haunted him all his writing life, a subject with which he first engaged so devastatingly in 1991 in *Time's Arrow*, the Holocaust. *The Zone of Interest*, as with *Time's Arrow*, invites complex and often contradictory responses in the reader and forces us to consider the morality of writing Holocaust fiction. It is of course a subject with which many late 20th and early 21st century novelists have attempted to engage – how could they not?

Reading: *The Zone of Interest*, by Martin Amis

(I will be referring to *Time's Arrow* should students wish to do further reading on the topic.)

Field Trip: The Imperial War Museum, Lambeth

Nearest Tube Lambeth North - from Gloucester Road tube take the District or Circle Line to Embankment and change to the Bakerloo line, two stops to Lambeth North then follow the signs to The Imperial War Museum.

I will give a brief talk on the history of the Museum and its connection to our walking tour of Spitalfields in Session 9, and direct students to certain exhibits pertinent to the three novels. Students will need to email me a brief proposal of their chosen text and topic before our next session (5), after which I will meet with students in one-to-one sessions to discuss their proposals.

Guidelines and style sheet will be posted on Blackboard.

Session 5: Brave New Worlds I

Examining ideas of Englishness, of Utopia and Dystopia, Otherness and Belonging, through the work of one of the most paradoxically 'English' contemporary authors and Nobel Prize for Literature winners, the Japan-born Ishiguro, who became a British citizen in 1982.

Reading: *Never Let Me Go*, by Kazuo Ishiguro

(I will be referring to *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley during this and the next session and it would be most beneficial if students could read it in advance of the classes.)

Items from the museum

Please note that students will be talking about their chosen objects from the Imperial War Museum at the start of this session.

Session 6: Brave New Worlds II

Since the referendum on 23rd June 2016, several well- and lesser-known British authors have sought to deal with the consequences of Leave in their writing. Few have succeeded in anything lasting or enlightening, with the notable exception of the

Scottish writer Ali Smith. She has so far written three of her proposed seasonal quartet and we will be reading *Autumn*, an homage to Keats, Shakespeare, love and friendship.

Reading: *Autumn*, by Ali Smith

Session 7: Brave New Worlds III

Jeanette Winterson, like McEwan in his latest novel *Machines Like Me*, engages with AI and takes us into the future with *Frankenstein* which also incorporates a familiar life/story from the past. Applying various theoretical lenses Winterson shares her kaleidoscopic retelling of one of the most critiqued texts in literature.

Reading: *Frankenstein*, by Jeanette Winterson

(I will be referring to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* throughout the session.)

Session 8: Secular Gods

In a country where church and state are united in the person of the Queen but the role of the Church of England is fast waning, and 25.1% claimed to have no religion in the last census for England and Wales in 2011, McEwan raises questions around religion and free will and the exercise of judgement.

Reading: *The Children Act*, by Ian McEwan

FIELD TRIP: The National Portrait Gallery, nearest tube station Leicester Square (Piccadilly line) for Illustrated History of British Literature.

I will be talking about some of the most important names in British Literature, many of whose faces we will see in the gallery and on whose shoulders our authors stand. I will also suggest that these portraits constitute another form of narrative and that indeed every picture tells a story.

Please note: Research papers due this session.

Session 9: The Silence of the Girls – speaking out/rage

In the wake of #metoo we will be reading the very disturbing second collection of one of our most exciting new poets. Following our discussion of the poems students will undertake a group exercise in writing their own poetry in response.

Reading: *Vertigo & Ghost*, by Fiona Benson

I will also be referring to Pat Barker's latest novel, *The Silence of the Girls*, should anyone wish to do some extra reading.

Please note: research papers will be returned this session and time given over to discuss grading and any queries.

Session 10: Sex and the City

In a London novel that begins in the most northerly part of Britain Sutherland invites us to consider the complexities of human sexuality through a central character who is both mythic and contemporary.

Reading: *Venus as a Boy*, by Luke Sutherland

FIELD TRIP: From Bedlam to Brick Lane

Our last session will start at the Kindertransport Memorial outside Liverpool Street station from where we will be journeying through Spitalfields to contextualise some of the lives of the writers and their characters, and the truly multicultural and multifaith aspects of London, ending our walk at 93 Feet East, Brick Lane – the starting point for *Venus as a Boy*.

* **Contingency Class Date: [Day and date].** Students are obligated to keep this date free to attend class should any class dates need to be rescheduled.

Final Examination Session: See examination timetable for time (posted 2 weeks before exams)

REQUIRED READING is noted above in the Course Chronology. It is essential that all students read and reflect upon the relevant reading, the primary texts, *before* each class. The reading will constitute a major commitment but I have paced the novels according to their length. In view of the heavy reading schedule the supplementary reading is not mandatory but would greatly enhance the educational experience of the sessions should students be able to do any.

Primary Texts

Small Island, by Andrea Levy, 2005
Toby's Room, by Pat Barker, 2013
The Zone of Interest, by Martin Amis, 2014
Never Let Me Go, by Kazuo Ishiguro, 2005
Autumn, by Ali Smith, 2016
Frankisstein, by Jeanette Winterson, 2019
The Children Act, by Ian McEwan, 2014
Vertigo & Ghost, by Fiona Benson, 2019
Venus as a Boy, by Luke Sutherland, 2005

Supplementary and Secondary Reading

The following texts will be referred to in the course of discussion of the primary texts.

Strange Meeting, Susan Hill, 1971
Regeneration, Pat Barker, 1991
The Remains of the Day, Kazuo Ishiguro, 1989
Nineteen Eighty Four, George Orwell, 1949
Time's Arrow, Martin Amis, 1991
Brave New World, Aldous Huxley, 1932
The Silence of the Girls, Pat Barker, 2018
Frankenstein, Shelley, 1818 (1823 edition)