



**Course Title:** Introduction to Creative Writing

**Instructor:** Emma Sweeney

**Course Objectives:**

Students will be encouraged to develop their own creative writing within the context of contemporary British fiction. We will analyse the approaches taken by various British novelists and short story writers. Our focus will be decidedly practical as we learn to read as writers, gleaning tips on the craft of constructing prose fiction. The course will invite students to consider the issues raised in the process of writing, aiming to uncover various methods of confronting potential problems. Our textual analysis will provide a springboard for our own writing. Students will develop their own imagination, self-criticism and craft through a combination of structured creative writing exercises and independent assignments.

**Course Learning Outcomes:**

In the process of better understanding contemporary British fiction, students will have learned to read as writers. They will have developed their critical faculties so that they can analyse their own writing as well as that of others. The creative writing exercises will help them to improve the technicalities of writing, helping them to identify the intricacies of the craft. By the end of the course they will have learnt to structure a narrative through a variety of different voices and narrative perspectives.

**Required Texts:**

Heller, Zöe, *Notes on a Scandal*, London, Penguin (2004)  
 Mc Ewan, Ian, *Atonement*, London, Jonathan Cape (2001)

**Further reading will include:**

Dawson, Jill, *Watch Me Disappear*, London, Hodder and Stoughton (2006)  
 Hadley, Tessa, *Sunstroke and Other Stories*, London, Jonathan Cape (2007)  
 Ishiguro, Kazuo, *An Artist of the Floating World*, Faber and Faber (1986)  
 Kay, Jackie, *Why don't you stop talking?* London, Picador (2002)  
 Smith, Ali, *The Whole Story and Other Stories*, London, Penguin (2004) and *Free Love and Other Stories*, London, Virago, (2005)  
 Welsh, Irvine, *Trainspotting*, London, Vintage (2004)

Due to the evolving situations, the topics, co-curricular activities and the readings used for this course are subject to change. An updated outline and schedule is given to students at the start of each course.

Anderson, Linda, *Creative Writing: A Workbook with Readings*, London, Routledge in association with the Open University Press (2006), ISBN: 0415372437

Franzen, Jonathan, *How to be Alone*, New York, Perennial (2004): ISBN: 0007153589

Gardner, John, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*, London, Vintage (1991): 0679734031

Graham Robert, ed., *The Road to Somewhere*, Basingstoke, Palgrave (2005), ISBN: 1403916403

Stafford, Kim, *The Muses Amongst Us*, Georgia, The University of Georgia Press (2003), ISBN: 0820324965

The New York Writers Workshop, *The Portable MFA in Creative Writing*, Ohio, Writer's Digest Books (2006), ISBN-13: 9781582973500Ed

### Topics covered will include:

- **Openings**

- The introductory session will allow students to introduce themselves and engage in exercises designed to encourage trust within the group.
- We will start the course with a structured discussion about the practicalities of writing, touching upon subjects such as keeping a writer's notebook, redrafting, discipline, reading as a writer, living as a writer and the role of the subconscious.
- We will then look at various openings of short stories and novels, discussing what make arresting beginnings. What do these openings lead us to expect about the genre, form, character? How can we start writing? How do we find the courage to set pen to paper?
- The class will end with timed creative writing exercises aimed to invite the students to set pen to paper. The emphasis will be on experimentation and play.

**Reading:** handouts will be provided at the class (the content works better as a surprise).

- **Characterisation**

- Student-led presentation on characterisation
- Class discussion about issues raised in the presentation. We will consider how to create a character and examine the ethics of using 'real' people in fiction. Do characters need to be believable? How do we move beyond stereotypes? Does a writer have a responsibility to treat his/her characters with respect? What does this mean?
- Timed creative writing exercises focussing on character.
- Feedback workshop on students' own work.

**Reading:** Photocopying packet

- **The short story**

- Student-led presentation on the short story form.

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- Class discussion about issues raised in the presentation. We might look at the following issues: how best to structure a short story; how a writer needs to adapt his/her approach to writing in relation to his/her chosen form; the short story as an arena for a novelist to learn his/her craft; the short story as an art form in itself; threats to the short story form; the short story as a dying form in Britain.
- Timed creative writing exercises focussing on story and form.
- Feedback workshop of students' own work.

**Reading:** Photocopying packet

- **Plot and Structure**

- Student-led presentation on plot.
- Class discussion about issues raised in the presentation. We will examine the necessity of plot and consider methods of creating and maintaining narrative drive. How should we subvert the reader's expectations? Can a novel be both plot-driven and literary? In what ways does plot relate to genre?
- Timed creative writing exercises focussing on plot.
- Feedback workshop on students' own work.

**Reading:** Photocopying packet

- **Omniscient and third person narration**

- Student-led presentation on omniscient and third person narration.
- Class discussion about issues raised in the presentation. We will analyse the recent shift away from omniscient narration. How might we sabotage the third person/omniscient perspective? Are there different levels of third person narration? What are the advantages and disadvantages of it?
- Timed creative writing exercises focussing on omniscient and third person narration.
- Feedback workshop on students' own work.

**Reading:** *Atonement* by Ian Mc Ewan

- **First person narration**

- Student-led presentation on first person narration.
- Class discussion about issues raised in the presentation. We will look at what the 'I' perspective offers while also considering its potential limitations. How does a writer identify with and distance his/herself from their first person narrator? Why choose to write in the first person? How can we use the first person narrator to collude with or deceive the reader?
- Timed creative writing exercises focussing on first person narration.
- Feedback workshop on students' own work.

**Reading:** *Notes on a Scandal* by Zoe Heller

- **Sex and the body**

- Student-led presentation on sex and the body.

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- Class discussion about issues raised in the presentation. How do we write about sex and the body given that our language might founder on the clinical or the flowery? Does reading porn help? What is an erotic language? What narrative perspective do we choose: that of the voyeur or the participant? How is the representation of sex and the body influenced by cultural and historical contexts?
- Timed creative writing exercises focussing on sex and the body.
- Feedback workshop on students' own work.

**Reading:** *Notes on a Scandal* by Zoe Heller and photocopying packet

- **Dialogue**

- Student-led presentation on dialogue.
- Class discussion about issues raised in the presentation. We will discuss how to achieve a balance between realism and artful presentation of voices. How should we convey dialect? Can too much dialogue be a bad thing? How should dialogue be laid out? What is the role of dialogue in fiction? Do people really say what they mean? What lies behind the words character's say? Is it always a question of power?
- Timed creative writing exercises focussing on dialogue.
- Feedback workshop on students' own work.

**Reading:** Photocopying packet

- **Description**

- Student-led presentation on description.
- Class discussion about issues raised in the presentation. We will look at the necessity of descriptive writing and how to make it relevant. How does a description of landscape tell us about the narrator's state of mind? How can we ensure that descriptive writing doesn't bog us down. What is the difference between description and exposition? When do we 'show' and when should we 'tell'.
- Timed creative writing exercises focussing on descriptive writing.
- Feedback workshop on students' own work.

**Reading:** Photocopying packet

- **Emotion**

- Student-led presentation on emotion.
- Class discussion about issues raised in the presentation. Emotional writing can be despised as 'feminine' but surely we are not firing on all cylinders if our work is not driven by emotion. Is this a cultural issue? How can we move the reader without slipping into sentimentality? How should we approach disturbing or unsettling subjects? Is it possible to write about violence without glorifying it?
- Timed creative writing exercises focussing on emotion.
- Feedback workshop on students' own work.

**Reading:** Photocopying packet

- **Endings**

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- o Student-led presentation on endings.
- o Class discussion about issues raised in the presentation. We will talk about what constitutes a happy, sad, ambiguous ending and when such endings are appropriate. How do we create a satisfactory ending? Should we tie up all the threads or does 'good' fiction keep certain secrets enclosed within the text?
- o Timed creative writing exercises focussing on endings.
- o Feedback workshop on students' own work.

**Reading:** handouts will be provided at the class (the content works better as a surprise).

### **Instructional Methods:**

Tutor-led presentations, student-led presentations, discussion sessions, creative writing exercises, creative writing workshops.

### **Attendance Policy:**

The only acceptable reason for missing class is sickness (you must produce a doctor's note) or a serious personal emergency. If at all possible you must e-mail me 48 hours in advance. If you do not attend a class and fail to provide an acceptable reason you are liable to fail the 'active class participation' element of assessment.

### **Assessment Plan:**

Active class participation – both written and oral feedback in classes and workshops (10%), seminar presentation (15%), 1,500 words of revised exercises (25%) **the beginning of class (date provided on syllabus)**, final assessment: 3000 words of original fiction (50%) **the beginning of class (date provided on syllabus)**.

### **Grade Scale:**

**Grade A:** Assignments in this category will be outstanding and show potential for publication. There will be a sense of a distinctive writer's 'voice' emerging. The writing will show a combination of strong imagination and technical sophistication and control. Tone, style and structure will be appropriate. There will be some degree of originality in the subject matter or approach. The language will be alive and supple or otherwise appropriate to the writer's purpose. The level of achievement will be sustained throughout. Work will be astutely edited and professionally presented in terms of layout, correct grammar, punctuation and spelling.

**Grade B:** These assignments will show a great deal of promise and technical expertise. They will be a 'good read' but the overall piece of writing may be less consistent or fully achieved. The use of language will show some flair and clarity but may falter at times. Good editing and redrafting practice will be in evidence. The assignments will be well presented with correct layout and a

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high level of accuracy in grammar, punctuation and spelling.

**Grade C:** These assignments will be competently conceived and written, showing a grasp of relevant concepts, but they may be somewhat unoriginal or underdeveloped. There may be gaps, omissions or implausible elements. The language may sometimes be striking, but sometimes also stale and unfocused. Some editing will have been undertaken though this may not be complete. Presentation will attain a general good standard, with some inconsistencies.

**Grade D:** Assignments in this band show some attempts at using appropriate methods or concepts, but there will be too many gaps and confusions. Language and/or structure may be muddled. Some editing may be in evidence, though parts may be seriously over-written or under-developed. Presentation will be variable, inaccurate at times in layout or in basic grammar, punctuation and spelling.

**Grade F:** There may be some evidence of familiarity with appropriate methods or concepts but quite a lot of confusion and misunderstanding, and few coherent attempts at using suggested methods. Parts will be in need of greater development, redrafting and editing. Presentation will be inconsistent or poor.

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