



Boston University Study Abroad London

The Writer in the World: Meet the Writer CAS EN 387 (*Elective A*)

Course Overview

This course marries two complementary areas of study: the opportunity to conduct in-depth interviews with a group of contemporary novelists, poets, dramatists, and non-fiction writers, alongside the critical analysis of (mainly) post-2000 British literature. The texts we'll be studying cover a broad range of contemporary and historic subjects: we'll study poetry about Neapolitan ice-cream, a North Korean satellite, and Brexit; we'll read a play in which the protagonists consume mind-altering butterflies in a dystopian, war-torn London; we'll respond to a novel which charts the emergence of an illicit love-affair in the genteel suburbs of 1920s Champion Hill. In class, we'll adopt two principle critical strategies when we respond to our texts: firstly, we'll analyse the linguistic, structural and thematic features intrinsic to each text, and secondly, we'll locate each work within its wider sociological, cultural and literary context; on occasion, we'll survey a text's critical reception too. We'll forge links between our very contemporary syllabus, and other noteworthy genre-linked and/or historic examples.

Meanwhile, we'll also be readying ourselves for our author meetings through a consideration of the style, content and ethos of the literary interview genre. We'll assess Malcolm Cowley's essay 'How Writers Write'; we'll compare a contemporary *Paris Review* interview with an example from the *Writers & Company* series; we'll respond to CBC journalist Eleanor Wachtel's recommendations for productive (and unproductive!) interview strategies. Taken alongside our critical evaluation of the writers' works, these investigations of the author interview genre will help students define their own interview priorities, styles and approaches. Students will be encouraged to prepare carefully for their interviews (which will generally be conducted in pairs). They will refer to preparatory notes during brief introductory remarks (outlining the writers' backgrounds, wider oeuvre, and the book up for discussion) but once conversation is established, students will be encouraged to consider the interview format as an exciting and dynamic space in which they should think and perform creatively. Students may want to consider how, for example, they might distinguish their interview from the previous published or broadcast versions? Students will write up their author meetings in the style of a *Paris Review* 'Art of Fiction' interview. It might be worth noting that *The Paris Review* is a literary quarterly established by young Americans living in Europe in the 1950s!

We'll analyse our writer interviews through ongoing discussions. As the course progresses, and the answers to our questions proliferate, students will attempt to define what Malcolm Cowley describes as 'the mind and method' of the writer. Students will, for example, establish connections between our writers' creative practices; they will reflect on the authors' speculations on the imagination's association with the unconscious; they will compare the writers' differing (or, indeed, likeminded) approaches to conceiving new works, executing preliminary drafts, and to the crucial revisionary stages of a new novel, memoir, poem or play. Discussions will also explore the

degree to which external interventions (by editors, agents, actors, fellow writers etc.) shape the form and content of the completed published works.

Course Objectives

This course fulfills two areas of the Hub, BU's general education programme: (1) Aesthetic Exploration, and (2) Creativity and Innovation.

(1) Aesthetic Exploration

Students will demonstrate knowledge and appreciation of notable works in literature and/or the arts, including the cultural contexts in which those works were created, and be able to identify their ongoing significance and relevance.

Students will describe and analyse a broad range of contemporary writing, comprised of post-2000 fiction, drama, poetry and non-fiction written in the English language (AE LO1a).

Students will demonstrate an understanding of the cultural climates in which the texts were produced (alongside the specific working conditions of each writer) contextualising the novels, poetry, plays and non-fiction texts within a framework of other noteworthy contemporary and/or historic genre-based examples (AE LO1b).

Students will synthesise their critical responses to the texts with the commentaries and insights they have gleaned from their personal interviews with the authors (AE LO1c).

Students will demonstrate the reasoning skills and vocabulary necessary to interpret a work of art.

Students will communicate coherent analytical responses to seven contemporary texts employing critical and theoretical terminology where necessary (AE LO2a).

Students will critique these texts from the standpoints of genre, language-use, modes of characterisation, theme, and formal arrangement (AE LO2b).

Students will identify how the writers' creative practices, working conditions, and biographies shape structure and meaning within the individual texts (AE LO2c).

Students will produce evaluative, analytical, or creative works that demonstrate an understanding of the characteristics – such as genres, modes, styles, and cultural history – of at least one literary or artistic medium.

Students will complete a 2,500-word write-up of their writer interviews following the style and genre requirements of a *Paris Review* author interview; they will complete an examined response combining critical analysis of the texts' linguistic, thematic and structural features with an evaluation of the writers' own reflections therein (AE LO3a).

(2) Creativity and Innovation

Students will demonstrate understanding of creativity as a learnable, iterative process of imagining new possibilities that involves risk-taking, use of multiple strategies, and reconceiving in response

to feedback, and will be able to identify individual and institutional factors that promote and inhibit creativity.

Students will understand that conducting a successful interview is a masterable process requiring diverse preparation. Students will undertake research within the author-interview genre, critiquing best practice examples, thereby facilitating the on-going development of the students' own interrogative strategies. Students will appraise their own and each other's performances in dry-run interviews, reflecting upon the types of enquiries which were productive as well as those which could have been redacted, altered or refined. As the course progresses, students will draw on their growing experience of conversing with authors during 'question generations' in which they will write, draft and redraft highly relevant and insightful enquiries (C/I LO1a).

Students will define the writers' variant creative strategies, placing these strategies within the context of each writer's unique working conditions. Specifically, the students will distinguish between the writers' differing approaches to conceiving a new project, the creative practices enacted during the actualisation of a new project, and the numerous strategies the writers employ during the editorial (re-drafting and revisionary) stages of a new project. Students will identify specific subjective factors (behavioural, psychological, sociological) which foment creative thinking and work (C/I LO1b).

Students will compare and contrast the degree to which the writers receive feedback from external agencies during composition, and they will appreciate the degree to which the process of composition is dynamic and collaborative (C/I LO1c).

Students will identify the sources (editor, literary agent, director, actor, mentor, academic, journalist, fellow writer) and content of editorial feedback, and they should be able to describe the impacts (both beneficial but also constraining) of external voices and/or institutions on the completed works (C/I LO1d).

Students will be able to exercise their own potential for engaging in creative activity by conceiving and executing original work either alone or as part of a team.

Pairs of students will conceive, plan and conduct one author interview, coordinating their respective interview strategies, and collaborating subsequently to arrange and cohere material (C/I LO2a).

Students will appreciate that the author-interview is simultaneously a learnable art form *and* a dynamic, dialogical space in which the interviewer should be ready to adapt and innovate. Students will be able to enact both well-honed *and* inventive, impromptu interrogative approaches (C/I LO2b).

Students will complete a 2,500-word write-up of their author meetings following the style of a *Paris Review* interview whose format (specifically the introductory phase) encourages a subjective and imaginative response to the experience of interviewing writers (C/I LO2c).

(3) Content and Discipline-specific Objectives

Students will collaborate to research and plan interview content; they will reconvene in the aftermath to organise and cohere material.

Students will describe individual behaviours and routines which effectively harness creative thought.

Students will describe key distinctions between different phases of individual works with specific reference to characterisation, language, and structure.

A Note on Developing a ‘Meet the Writer’ Mindset

In line with General Education programme learning outcomes, CAS EN387 invites the evaluation of literary works alongside deep engagement with the writers’ creative practices. During the course of ‘Writer in the World,’ we’ll develop an approach which conjoins insightful, complex and nuanced responses to our texts with an assessment of the works very much informed and mediated by the content of our conversations with the authors. The course will focus not merely on the text’s content (the ‘what’ so to speak – the linguistic, formal and thematic features) but also on the ‘how’: *how* the text was conceived; *how* our biographical knowledge of a writer’s life reinvigorates our understanding of a specific passage; *how* our awareness of the content of an early draft shapes our response to the completed work. In his introduction to *The Paris Review Interviews – Writers at Work First Series*, Malcolm Cowley cites Henry James who defines the germ of a novelistic idea as the ‘precious particle...the stray suggestion, the wandering word, the vague echo, at a touch of which a novelist’s imagination winces as at the prick of some sharp point.’ An exemplary approach to this course will see students synthesising their critical appreciation of literary works with their newly acquired understanding of these ‘precious’ creative ‘particle(s)’. As Salman Rushdie suggests, ‘the “how” of literature (is) in many ways more interesting than the “why.”’

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.

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 (see following section in Academic Conduct Code)

Please refer to the Academic Handbook for detailed grading criteria and policies on plagiarism. This can be accessed via Blackboard Learn: <http://learn.bu.edu>

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

Attendance Policies

Classes

All Boston University London Programme students are expected to attend every class session, seminar, and field trip 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:

The Authorised Absence Approval Request Form is available through the Academic Affairs section of the BU London Personal Page: <https://fm.bu-london.co.uk/fmi/webd/>

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

Students who expect in advance to be absent from any class should notify a member of Academic Affairs and complete an Authorised Absence Approval Request Form ten working days in advance of the class date.

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 notify Academic Affairs as soon as possible by submitting an Authorised Absence Approval Request Form in advance of the class. If it is the student's first absence of the semester (from any class) a doctor's note is not required.
- **Illness (multiple days):** If a student is missing more than one class day due to illness, the student must complete an Authorised Absence Approval Request Form and a sick note from a local doctor excusing their absence from class. Once well enough, the student will need to meet with Academic Affairs.
- 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 Academic Affairs 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 the 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 the BU-DAS. We cannot accept letters from other universities/centres.

All disabilities need to be known to the 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 Academic Affairs and if the lateness continues, may have their final grade penalised.