



Boston University Study Abroad
London

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

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

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.