

Historical fiction: recreating the past

Start date 30th January 2021

End date 31st January 2021

Venue Virtual Classroom

Tutor Elizabeth Speller

Course code 2021NDR228

Director of Academic Centres Dr Corinne Boz

For further information on this course, please contact Head of Academic Centre Administration, Sarah Blakeney
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Tutor biography

Elizabeth's novels include *The Return of Captain John Emmett* (Virago, 2011 - Orange Book of the Month, Richard & Judy pick) and *At Break of Day* (Virago, 2014 - CNY State One Read 2015 in the US). They are published in eight countries. Her non-fiction includes *Following Hadrian* (Hodder/OUP US, 2004) and a memoir, *The Sunlight on the Garden* (Granta, 2007). She was short-listed for the Forward Prize for Poetry and provided the libretto for Michael Berkeley's work *Farewell*, written in memory of Sir Paul McCartney's wife Linda. She has taught at Cambridge, Bristol and Birmingham Universities. She was Royal Literary Fund Fellow at the University of Warwick and is currently completing a further novel for Virago. She teaches on the Certificate, Diploma and MSt Creative Writing programmes at ICE.

Course programme

Historical fiction is extremely popular with readers and it has become accepted as a literary form equal to the best contemporary fiction. Historical novels appear on all the major prize lists and are frequently the basis of television and film adaptations. We will look at the techniques and research that can turn the past into a compelling story. This will involve reading some fiction extracts but also trying out some writing exercises.

Saturday 30th January 2021

Session 1: 10.00 – 11.15am

What is historical fiction. Why do we read it and why do we write it?
What are its advantages for a writer and what are the pitfalls? Are there any boundaries?

Session 2: 11.45am – 1.00pm

“The historian, at the most basic level, seeks to answer the question “What happened?” By contrast, the writer of historical fiction seeks to explain “What was it like?” Scott Dalton

Setting the scene: how do writers of historical fiction make it feel real? Which novels are unforgettable? What different approaches can we use?

Sunday 31st January 2021

Session 3: 10.00 – 11.15am

Research: what can be done with the big recorded events and how to finding the telling tiny details.

The internet: an invaluable resource but a potential devourer of time.

Session 4: 11.45am – 1.00pm

Characters, dialogue and technical tricks.

Course syllabus

Aims:

- To consider techniques for researching and writing historical fiction.
- To enable students to experiment and enjoy writing fiction set in a variety of different periods.

Content:

Session One: Introductions. What is historical fiction and where are its boundaries? Why do we read it? Why has it become such a popular genre for writers?

Session Two: Looking at some examples of existing historical fiction, to test its advantages and pitfalls (the tutor will bring handouts).

Where can we find inspiration? What comes first: the story or research? And how much research does a work of fiction actually need?

Session Three: Resources: from the internet to national records to small objects, diaries, old newspapers or scraps of clothing, which might have a story hidden in them.

Exploring techniques, focusing on one given year in the past.

Session Four: Structure and dialogue: possibly the greatest difficulty for any writers of fiction set in the past. How can we sound right for both the period and a modern reader?

Exploring techniques around a second given year in the past

As a result of the course, within the constraints of the time available, students should be able to:

- To understand why historical fiction is such a popular genre and how it differs from other forms of fiction.
- To consider the relative usefulness of the many research possibilities that are now available to writers.
- To be able to start, or continue with, a piece of historical fiction.

Reading and resources list

Listed below are texts that might be of interest should you wish to supplement your learning on the course.

Author	Title	Publisher and date
Mason, Daniel	<i>The Winter Soldier</i>	Mantle, 2018
Sansom, C. J.	<i>Dissolution</i>	Pan (new edition), 2015
Bake, Jo	<i>Longbourn</i>	Black Swan, 2014

Website addresses

On being a historical novelist

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2017/apr/04/hilary-mantel-historical-fiction-cringing>

On history and historical fiction

<https://www.historyextra.com/period/all-history-lies-to-us-but-at-least-historical-fiction-admits-it/>

TV/Film

It is worth watching historical films or television series to see how they turn history or historical novels into film. For instance, the recently released film, *The Favourite*, shows a very different Anne than in Joanne Limburg's *A Woman of Kindness* (Atlantic, 2016) or the historical account in Anne Somerset's *Queen Anne: The Politics of Passion* (Harper Press, 2012)

Additional information

What you will need

The course is open to anyone, however it is taught via a virtual classroom. You will be able to see, hear and interact with your classmates and the tutor. In order to participate you will need to have a laptop, computer, tablet or other device equipped with a camera (webcam), speakers and a microphone. Full instructions and support on the use of the software will be given on request.

Venue

This course takes place online using the teleconferencing software ZOOM.

If you have any queries about the software or accessing the course, please contact us by e-mailing creativewriting@ice.cam.ac.uk.

Note Students of the Institute of Continuing Education are entitled to 20% discount on books published by Cambridge University Press (CUP) which are purchased at the Press bookshop, 1 Trinity Street, Cambridge (Mon-Sat 9am – 5:30pm, Sun 11am – 5pm). A letter or email confirming acceptance on to a current Institute course should be taken as evidence of enrolment.

Information correct as of: 23 November 2020