

Life-writing, Character and the Self - in twentieth-century fact and fiction

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This is a course that draws on a wide range of resources, from the short story to the memoir and even opera, in order to ask how character and the self are conveyed in twentieth century writing.

We are, as a society, obsessed with life stories, personality and character. Understanding your subject is one of the most fundamental concerns of the life-writer, and creating character is one of the most crucial elements of good fiction writing. Why do we crave character? Do we want to see ourselves reflected through the performing arts and through literature, or do we want to lose ourselves in others, and revel in our difference? What makes good characterisation in music and writing, and what tools do authors and composers employ? And crucially, how does life-writing relate both to fact and to fiction, in the exploration of character and self?

This course draws on a wide range of largely but not exclusively British twentieth-century writing and music, with guest appearances from acclaimed British writers and scholars. Curated by biographer Dr Kate Kennedy, this course draws on an interdisciplinary array of sources to ask fundamental questions about character and narrative. It looks at the creation of character in fact and in fiction, through objects and houses, on the internet, in music and through accounts of war and madness.

13 x 3 hour sessions, 11 – 2pm Sundays

10 September – 3 December 2023

Course structure

1 Introductory session – Fact versus Fiction

Fact versus Fiction introductory talk

Activity during the session: everyone comes prepared to discuss an example of a character both in fact and in fiction

*In groups, we look at some examples of character-creation. Including Magda Szabo's *The Door*, Hilary Mantel's *Every Day is Mother's Day*, Rachel Cusk's *Outline*.*

2 Biography - a whistlestop tour from the early modern to the present.

A discursive lecture on biography

*Discussion groups on extracts from Woolf's autobiographical writings and other quotes on biography, including Hermione Lee's *A Very Short Introduction to Biography*.*

3 How to (mis)read 'mad' lives – (Ivor Gurney, James Tilly Matthews, John Percival)

Guest historian Mark Lee, Associate Professor, Crandall University, New Brunswick

Talk from Mark on 'mad lives' and the challenges in approaching them

*Look in groups at Irving Goffman's *Asylums*, Mike Jay's *A Visionary Madness: The case of James Tilly Matthews*, and unpublished 'mad' late Gurney poems.*

4 Reading lives through houses - (Kennedy / Lee, *Lives of Houses*, Elizabeth von Arnim, Vera)

Focussed discussion on Vera and the role of the house in relation to character development

*Discussion in groups: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Elizabeth Bowen short stories inc. 'Ivy Gripp'd the Steps' and 'Stranger with a Bag', Deborah Levy's *Real Estate* and chapters of *Lives of Houses*.*

5 Reading lives through objects – (Elizabeth Bowen short story 'Making Arrangements', Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*, Alexandra Harris's chapter in *Lives of Houses*: 'Moving House')

Focussed discussion on Barnes

Group discussions of Ivan Gaskell's 'The Life of Things' from *The International Handbook of Museum Studies*, Bowen's *Making Arrangements* and Harris's chapter in *Lives of Houses*.

Students bring an object to talk about its story and the lives it represents. Free writing exercises around the objects.

6 Public lecture: The Wife's Tale – Aida Edemariam

7 Reading week

8 Character in opera: Peter Grimes – the outsider versus society.

Discussion of Grimes as outsider, and the characters of the opera.

*Activity during the session: look at passages from George Crabbe's *The Borough* to compare character development of Grimes from poem to opera. We will compare recordings of different performances, and talk about the ways in which Grimes is shaped by the composer, librettist and performers. Watch excerpts from production of Grimes on Aldeburgh Beach, 2013.*

9 Public lecture: Alison Light – on character in memoir and biography

10 Testimony, reliable or otherwise: First World War nurses' memoirs (Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone* and Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*)

*Focussed discussion of *The Forbidden Zone**

Mini-lecture on haunting and women's First World War memoirs

*Activity during the session: Look at Brittain's diaries in pairs, and passages from Enid Bagnold's memoir *A Diary Without Dates**

11 Public lecture: Anna Beer on Writing Women, or 'Eve Bites Back – resurrecting and re-examining female writers'

12 Life-writing, character and the Internet (Patricia Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, Roisin Kiberd, *The Disconnect: A Personal Journey Through the Internet*)

Guest: Oxford Centre for Life-writing scholar Charles Pidgeon

Focussed discussion led by Charles on life-writing and the internet

Activity during the session: compare Kiberd's essay collection and Lockwood's novel to examine how online culture has transformed the way we tell our life stories, plus excerpts from critical essays by Brant and Murray.

13 Student presentations on assignment topics, and concluding discussion.

Reading List

This course will focus around group and small group discussion of texts, close reading and presentations by students. **Texts will be discussed in excerpts, and when it is essential to have read the whole book, this will be indicated below in bold.** However students will benefit from reading as much of the texts as they possibly can, and not limiting themselves to the excerpted chunks discussed in class.

Week one:

Excerpts from: Magda Szabo, *The Door*, Hilary Mantel, *Every Day is Mother's Day*, Rachel Cusk, *Outline*

Week Two:

Hermione Lee, *A Very Short Introduction to Biography*

Other texts covered: Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being – a Collection of Autobiographical Writing*

Week Three:

Mike Jay, *A Visionary Madness: The case of James Tilly Matthews*

Other texts covered: Irving Goffman, *Asylums*, Ivor Gurney, *Collected Poems*, ed. PJ Kavanagh, Kate Kennedy, *Dweller in Shadows – A Life of Ivor Gurney*

Week Four:

Elizabeth von Arnim, *Vera*,

Other texts covered: Kate Kennedy and Hermione Lee, eds., *Lives of Houses*, Sylvia Townsend Warner *A Stranger with a Bag – collected short stories*, Elizabeth Bowen *collected short stories*

Week Five:

Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*,

Other texts covered: Elizabeth Bowen's short story *Making Arrangements*, Alexandra Harris's chapter *Moving House* from *Lives of Houses*, Ivan Gaskell, 'The Life of Things'

Week Six:

Aida Edemariam, *The Wife's Tale*

Week Seven: Reading week

Week Eight:

Benjamin Britten's opera *Peter Grimes*,

Other texts covered: George Crabbe, *The Borough*, Philip Brett, *Peter Grimes*, Paul Kildea, *Benjamin Britten*

Week Nine:

Alison Light, *A Radical Romance: A memoir of love, grief and consolation*

Week Ten:

Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone*

Other texts covered: Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, *Vera Brittain, Chronicle of Youth (her war diaries)*, Enid Bagnold, *A Diary without Dates*

Week Eleven:

Anna Beer: *Eve Bites Back*

Week Twelve:

Patricia Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*

Other texts covered: Roisin Kiberd, *The Disconnect: A Personal Journey Through the Internet*, Clare Brant and Rob Gallagher, '*Digital Media: Life-Changing Online. Introduction*, Simone Murray, '*10 Myths About Digital Literary Culture*'

Full details of all course reading

Elizabeth von Arnim, *Vera*, Vintage Publishing, 2017

Benjamin Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* (recommended recordings: Steuart Bedford - conductor, Alan Oke – Grimes, Britten-Pears Orchestra, Signum Classics 2013. Or Richard Hickox - conductor, Philip Langridge - Grimes, City of London Sinfonia, Chandos Records. Also DVD of Bedford / Oke production filmed live on Aldeburgh Beach – a historic performance in 2013 that can be found on EuroArts Channel on youtube)

Enid Bagnold, *A Diary without Dates*, Little Brown Book Group / Virago

Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*, Vintage, 2010

Anna Beer: *Eve Bites Back – An Alternative History of English Literature*, OneWorld Publications, 2022

Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone*, Hesperus Modern Voices, 2008

Elizabeth Bowen *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen*, Anchor, 1981

Philip Brett, *Peter Grimes*, Cambridge Opera Handbooks, 2008

Clare Brant and Rob Gallagher, '*Digital Media: Life-Changing Online. The European Journal of Life Writing*, 8 (2019), DM1–11 <<https://doi.org/10.21827/ejlw.8.35545>>

Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, Virago, 2004

Vera Brittain, *Chronicle of Youth*, Phoenix Publishers, 2002

Rachel Cusk, *Outline*, Faber, 2018

George Crabbe, *The Borough*, Echo library publishers, 2008

Ivan Gaskell, 'The Life of Things', *The International Handbook of Museum Studies*, 2015

Aida Edemariam, *The Wife's Tale*, Fourth Estate, 2018

Ivor Gurney, *Collected Poems* ed. PJ Kavanagh, Fyfield Books, 2012

Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and other inmates*, Penguin, 1991.

Mike Jay, *A Visionary Madness: The case of James Tilly Matthews*, North Atlantic Books, 2014

Kate Kennedy, *Dweller in Shadows – A Life of Ivor Gurney*, Princeton University Press, 2021

Kate Kennedy and Hermione Lee, eds., *Lives of Houses*, Princeton University Press, 2020

Roisin Kiberd, *The Disconnect: A Personal Journey Through the Internet*, Serpent's Tail, 2021

Paul Kildea, *Benjamin Britten*

Patricia Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2021)

Hermione Lee, *Biography, A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2009

Alison Light, *A Radical Romance - a memoir of love, grief and consolation*, Penguin, 2020

Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*, Fig Tree, 2007

Hilary Mantel, *Every Day is Mother's Day*, Fourth Estate, 2010

Simone Murray, '10 Myths About Digital Literary Culture', Post45, 2020
<<https://post45.org/2020/04/10-myths-about-digital-literary-culture/>>.

Magda Szabo, *The Door*, Vintage Editions, 2020

Sylvia Townsend Warner *A Stranger with a Bag and other short stories*, Faber Finds 2011

Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being – a Collection of Autobiographical Writing*, Harvest Books, 1985

Assignment:

This will be an approximately 15 page essay, on a topic or text of the students' choosing. Students will give a short presentation on their proposed work in the final week, for group feedback. Their essay could be on a book from the course, or any text or opera that enables the student to explore the key questions of the course, which include but are not limited to:

- How is character depicted in literature or music?
- How do we tell a life?
- What is the relationship between fact and fiction when writing a life?
- How does the narrative voice affect the ways in which character is depicted?
- How are objects and/or place utilised in the development or creation of character?
- How does an understanding of a creator's life and character affect our response to their work?