

Course Content

Title: Novels: History, Mystery, and Such

Site: <https://sites.google.com/udel.edu/novelties/home>

For the Fall 2023 course, I plan to continue to use the format and content that I have used in previous courses. The books will be a varied assortment of mysteries, historical novels, and other books that might be classified as literature. Or simply just good novels.

In terms of the course schedule, I plan once again to offer a combination of background information one week followed by book discussion the next, with a total of 6 books for the course, one every other week. All class sessions are a combination of lecture and discussion.

And, as usual, I will offer two sections of the same course, one online and one in-person.

Over the past several years, I have focused on various themes, including Australian novels, Scottish, or American literature from the South and West. I've also focused on specific genres, like mysteries or historical novels. And more recently I've added "anthropomorphic" novels, or novels with an animal as its protagonist. I've also looked at historical novels that cast a new light on figures largely ignored or forgotten in the annals of traditional history. And I've discovered something as a result.

Readers often don't pick up on the author's intent in writing the novel. They don't see below the surface. For example, when I assigned *Perestroika in Paris*, a novel by Jane Smiley, class members thought I was giving them essentially a children's book about a horse who wanders from her stable at the racing track into the city of Paris, and along the way befriends a raven, a dog, a couple of mallard ducks, and a little boy. But I knew that Jane Smiley, renowned, versatile, and Pulitzer Prize winning author that she is, had more in mind when she wrote it. And that's what we uncovered during class discussion. One class member, in fact, thanked the class at the end for their discussion and comments that unveiled what was really going on in that novel.

And with another novel, Maggie O'Farrell's *Marriage Portrait*, most everyone found the history fascinating and the story enjoyable, but they didn't see the skillful, professional writing that crafted it. As I said, this isn't just an historical novel; it is in fact literature. And we discussed the elements of plot, style, and symbolism, as well as its homage to Robert Browning's dramatic monologue, "My Last Duchess," that came together in this exquisitely written novel.

So that's what I intend to do with the course in the fall. As usual, I have a long list of books from which to choose.

I have already created the website for the course, which is accessible through the web link, and will post selections there as I make them, before registration dates so that people know the books I've chosen. I'm looking at:

- *Wolfe Island*, Lucy Treloar, (author of *Salt Creek*)—a little "sci-fi"
 - I loved *Salt Creek*; it's one of those novels I keep thinking about and it was one of the seminal novels in my course that term, so I had to check out this new publication. It is vastly different from *Salt Creek*, but beautifully written. According to the Amazon blurb, Kitty Hawke is the last inhabitant of a dying island sinking into the wind-lashed Chesapeake Bay because of climate change. She has resigned herself to annihilation until, one night, her granddaughter blows ashore in the midst of a storm, desperate, begging for sanctuary. It is a "richly imagined and mythic parable of home and kin that cements Lucy Treloar's place as one of our most acclaimed novelists. It has also garnered the following awards—already!

- Winner of the Barbara Jefferis Award, 2020,
 - Shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Fiction 2020
 - Shortlisted for NSW Premier's Literary Award for Fiction, 2020
 - Shortlisted for ABIA Literary Fiction Book of the Year, 2020
 - Longlisted for the Voss Literary Award 2020
 - With these two novels, Lucy Treloar is verging on "epic" status. She's an author to pay attention to.
- *American Dirt*, by Jeanine Cummins
 - This novel is about a woman immigrating to the US when forced to flee her home in Acapulco. According to the Amazon blurb, Lydia and son Luca find themselves joining the countless people trying to reach the US. but find that everyone is running from something. But what exactly are they running to? It's an Editor's pick on Amazon, with a rating of 4.6/5.0 from over 108,000 reviews. And it's a *New York Times* best seller. And it's one of the novels referenced in the "cultural appropriation" discussion introduced this term with Geraldine Brooks' *Horse*.
 - *The Shifting Landscape*, Katherine Kovacic, (an Alex Clayton art mystery)
 - This is another art history mystery, a favorite theme for people in my class, so I am seriously considering this book, which will mesh nicely with the Daniel Silva. According to the Amazon blurb, art dealer Alex Clayton travels to Victoria's Western District to value the McMillan family's collection. But the family patriarch dies under mysterious circumstances and the painting is stolen; then a toddler disappears and Alex's faithful dog, Hogarth, goes missing.
 - Again, this novel is the result of my fascination with Australian writers, as well as art history. And it's the first novel in a series, which gives readers who like the book a chance to read on.
 - *Dirt Creek*, Hayley Scrivenor—psychological thriller and police procedural
 - Again, Australian literature, and it has gotten a lot of press attention. It "blends a taut psychological thriller with a suspenseful police procedural. Fans of Liane Moriarty and Jane Harper won't want to miss this page-turner." In fact, Jane Harper recommended it.
 - According to the *New York Times Book Review*, it's "a novel of sharp-edged tempers, accidents waiting to happen and dark inheritances."
 - *The Memory of an Elephant*, Alex Lasker—animal theme, epic
 - Amazon Blurb: *The Memory of an Elephant* is an epic saga told by an aging African elephant as he makes a last, perilous journey to find the humans who rescued him as an orphan some fifty years ago. Interwoven with his narrative are the tumultuous lives of the family who raised and then lost him. This timeless story is alternately heartwarming and heart-wrenching, spanning east Africa, Great Britain and New York from 1962 to 2015. Note: the elephant is one of the narrators! It got excellent reviews, with a 4.7 on Amazon.

And there are many more on my database.