

Fall 2022 Course Proposal

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Course Title

H Mysteries and Histories

Course Description

Mysteries and historical novels, two popular genres among avid readers, are written within a context, a specific time, place, and culture, like early 20th century America or colonial Australia. But novels also have a context within the author's personal history and a specific literary tradition. For this course, we will read and discuss mysteries and historical novels within their specific cultural and literary contexts. Course website is available at <https://sites.google.com/udel.edu/novels/>

495 with spaces

Course Content

For the fall, I'm returning to the origins of this course, mysteries and historical novels, two of the most popular genres among OLLI members who have taken this course. These preferences are also verified by the recent survey of literature classes distributed this past spring. Although my evidence is anecdotal, members of my classes seem to enjoy discovering authors, subjects, or books that they are not familiar with. In other words, they want to learn something new. These are the criteria of members interested in specific courses.

My criteria for selecting novels also include literary value and/or historical importance. For example, this past spring, we read and discussed *The Secret River*, by Kate Grenville, a novel that some found a little difficult to read, but the book is a "literary" novel, beautifully written, and awarded numerous prizes. It also sparked some controversy, the "history wars," because the subject matter impacts Australian national history and identity. By contrast, *The Personal Librarian* is a popular novel and has made some of the best seller charts, although it is at best competently written. But the content of that novel is historically important because it focuses not only on the development of the Morgan Library and Museum but on Belle Greene, its first librarian, a Black woman who passed as white. Her accomplishments were significant and women's achievements are all too often lost to history. In other words, the context of the novel is one of the criteria that I evaluate in choosing novels and will be the focus of selections for fall.

As usual, I have not as yet made final book selections; the people who take my courses have high standards for quality, as do I, and listed below are some of the novels I'm considering. And, as usual, I have created a website for the course; the link to that site is listed in the description. I will have made the choices and posted them to the website by registration so that members considering the course can review the books listed. I will also include a link to the website for fall on the current semester's site so that members familiar with the site can link to the upcoming fall schedule. As registration approaches, I can also email past members with this information.

As for format, I will once again follow the practice I've used over the past several courses, with both lectures and discussion, alternating between them. The schedule will therefore include 6 novels, three mysteries, three historical novels, and I may offer members a choice for one of these groups as I have done in the past.

Possibilities include:

- Among historical novels, those focusing on women have become increasingly popular. Choices include:

- Marie Benedict, *Her Hidden Genius*, on Rosalind Franklin's DNA research appropriated by Watson and Crick. But her subject matter is historically important women and she has also written *The Only Woman in the Room*, about Hedy Lamarr, too beautiful to be taken seriously, *The Other Einstein*, on his wife, a physicist as well, and *Lady Clementine*, on Churchill's wife.
- Sonia Purnell, *A Woman of No Importance* (Virginia Hall, WWII American spy)
- Alan Hlad, *Churchill's Secret Messenger*, (female spy)
- Among other historical novels, I'm considering
 - Maggie Shipstead, *Great Circle*, about a daredevil female aviator determined to fly across the globe, and 100 years later the actress who will play her role in a film. Best-seller, award winner, good critical reviews.
 - Kate Atkinson, *Life after Life*. She's an author I have been considering for some time, and have to include simply because her books are so often listed as some of the best written.
 - Donna Everhart, *Saints of Swallow Hill*, set among the turpentine camps and pine forests of the American South during the Great Depression
 - Amor Towles, *The Lincoln Highway*, or *The Rules of Civility*
 - Rachel Kadish, *The Weight of Ink*, with two story lines, one set in England in the 1660s, the other set in the early 20th century, about Jewish history.
 - Geraldine Brooks, *March*. This book won a Pulitzer for its fictionalization of the absent father, fighting in the Civil War, based on the novel *Little Women*.
 - Richard Flannigan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. This novel, about an Australian doctor during WWII, won the Booker Prize. But it interests me because it is a "savagely beautiful novel about the many forms of good and evil, of truth and transcendence, as one man comes of age, prospers, only to discover all that he has lost."
- Among mysteries, options include:
 - Richard Osman, *The Thursday Murder Club*, currently popular, about 4 senior citizen ladies who solve a crime.
 - Nita Prose, *The Maid*, also currently popular, a locked-room mystery with a rather eccentric detective.
 - Lisa Scottoline, *What Happened to the Bennetts*
 - Frieda McFadden, *The Locked Door*
 - Lucy Foley, *The Guest List* or *The Paris Apartment*
 - Laura Dave, *The Last Thing He Told Me*
 - Lisa Jewell, *Watching You*
 - Walter Moseley, numerous choices, award winner, bestselling author, someone I haven't done and someone most class members don't seem to know. Excellent writer
- Among strange alternatives, I'm considering books that don't fit under one of these categories, but fascinate me. They include:
 - Alex Lasker, *The Memory of an Elephant*, " 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. Two narrators provide two perspectives and one of the narrators is the elephant.
 - Lynda Rutledge, *West with Giraffes*, historically true saga about two giraffes who miraculously survive a hurricane while crossing the Atlantic, their 12-day trip to the San Diego zoo and its first female director, during the depression and the dust bowl

NOTE: I have submitted this proposal as both an online course and as an in-person course for Arsht Hall to accommodate the different preferences of OLLI members. If I teach both, I will extend the online course to 13 weeks to accommodate the in-person course.