

## Course Content

Title: Novels: Art, History, Mystery, and Such

Site: <https://sites.google.com/view/novels2023/>

For the Spring 2023 course, I plan to continue with the novels, mysteries, and histories that the class has been discussing, with maybe an interesting wrinkle or two in the book selection. Mystery and historical novels are still the favorite reading matter for people in my class, but thanks to the selection of Geraldine Brooks' *Horse* this term, I started to investigate novels that focus on animals and already have 15 to 20 possibilities on my list.

So, I'm seriously thinking about including *Perestroika in Paris*, by Jane Smiley, a Pulitzer Prize winning author, about a race horse who wanders Paris, accompanied by a dog, geese, a raven, and a little boy. It's a best seller, a "feel good escape" according to the *New York Times*, and an Amazon Editor's Pick with a 4.5 review rating.

I'm also serious about including Lucy Treloar's new novel *Wolfe Island*, and would have chosen it for this fall except for the issue of availability. Thus far, it's on Amazon only, not in libraries, but I'm hoping the many awards it has received will broaden its availability.

As usual, I will organize the schedule around 6 novels for the term, beginning with an introduction to the genres and an overview of the books we will read and discuss. Then I will schedule a book for every other week, with a lecture during the week previous to that discussion. And I will maintain a website for the course, with class notes, the PowerPoint slides, and other resources.

I have not made a final decision yet about specific books, but I do have a number of excellent novels under consideration. They include:

- *The Marriage Portrait, Maggie O'Farrell*—historical novel, political, art
  - Maggie O'Farrell is of course the author of *Hamnet*, a novel we read this term, but this one is set in Florence, during the 1550s and focuses on Lucrezia, third daughter of the grand duke from the infamous Medici family. I have long been fascinated by this period in Italian history and am well versed in the art history of this period, so I couldn't resist.
- *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.
- *Portrait of an Unknown Woman*, Daniel Silva, #22 of 22 in the Gabriel Allon series—art history, mystery
  - I have done Daniel Silva before and specifically love this series of novels about art heists. This one is the latest as, according to the Amazon blurb, Gabriel Allon undertakes a high-stakes search for the greatest

art forger who ever lived. The work in question is a portrait of an unidentified woman attributed to Sir Anthony van Dyck, almost certainly a clever fake. Stylish, sophisticated, and ingeniously plotted, *Portrait of an Unknown Woman* is a wildly entertaining journey through the dark side of the art world.

- I love these novels and they're an entertaining read for the class.

- *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.

Although I have not made final selections, I will do so before registration so that people can review choices. I have already created the site however, available at <https://sites.google.com/view/novels2023/>