

The Imagined Past: Historical Fiction

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Starting with Homer writers have looked to history for stories to tell or re-tell. Yet despite such a pedigree, the term historical fiction has a slightly cheesy ring to it, as if these novels are all about costume, scenery, and quaint spelling. In truth, some of the greatest works of literature are based on a historical figure or event, sometimes well known, sometimes forgotten. In this class we will read ten novels inspired by the past. Each reinvents history in its own way, relying on and discarding fact in order to create art. Some are set in a past distant from the author's own time; some reimagine recent headlines. Some of the questions we will address are: Why, and how, old stories can be made new again? What can the fiction writer accomplish that the historian and the biographer cannot? How to effectively mine the past without letting historical fact drag down a story? While the emphasis is on reading and a discussion of the books, we will also cover more practical topics for the writer interested in historical fiction, such as research, investigation, and how to evaluate history as a potential source. Two writing assignments are required, one a critical paper, the second a creative work based on historical fact.

Novels

Taras Bulba by Nikolai Gogol
Of Love and Other Demons by Gabriel Garcia Marquez
An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter by Cesar Aria
Hadji Murad by Leo Tolstoy
The Red Badge of Courage by Stephen Crane
Regeneration by Pat Barker
The Hours by Michael Cunningham
When the Emperor Was Divine by Julie Otsuka
Black Water by Joyce Carol Oates
The Known World by Edward P. Jones

Stories

"A Wilderness Station" by Alice Munro (Xerox to be distributed in class)
"Brokeback Mountain" by Annie Proulx
"The Shawl" by Cynthia Ozick (Xerox to be distributed in class)