Writing London: Heroes, heroines and Harry Potter

A passionate enquiry begins with something one loves. Writers, like all craftspeople, learn by attending to the best work in their field and by practising their skills. By studying classical Greek and other myths, Joseph Campbell’s ideas on universal story structures, superhero and Bible stories, we will learn how stories are built. We will then analyse great literature and ‘Harry Potter’ (©) to see how other people employ these ideas. Throughout, we will practise how to observe, listen and analyse better as a first step to writing better, all the while using London as our sensory playground.

Each week we will do in-class story exercises- either individually or collectively. This class is not, however, structured as a workshop. I don’t therefore, ask students to comment on each others’ work; though, when we arrive at a state of comfort with one another, I do encourage collaboration and the sharing of work.

Each class begins with a short recap and recall session. The short term purpose of this is to prepare you for the class test towards the end of the term. The long term purpose of this is to strengthen your memory muscles and learn how the telling of a story can make things memorable.

Students’ final submission can be either a fiction piece or a piece of creative non-fiction

What you will learn:

1. How to develop a story muscle
2. How to work in diffuse thinking (intuitive) mode and how and when to switch to rational thinking mode
3. How to switch off/get in the zone for writing
4. How to analyse motivation
5. How to remember better by visualising- using stories- to recall what you learn
   (Points 2-5 are transferrable skills which you can use in your other studies and in the workplace)
6. Why and how myth is at the heart of storytelling
7. The value of symbols (Both points 6-7 are important not just for literature students but for Business ones as well, as symbols and myth are at the heart of marketing- think of Nike-the goddess of victory and the tick symbol; Apple’s bitten apple- the tree of knowledge, but also temptation)
8. How to analyse texts as a would be writer: looking for dramatic turns, examining motivation, contradictions, and of course, how writers use/play with language
9. And, of course, how to write better

You may be:

1. Someone who wants to learn/extend their practice of the craft of writing
2. A literature major who wants to enhance his/her analytical skills of literary texts
3. Someone who wants to write more felt/dramatic/structured academic writing assignments (all writers- fictional, factual, academic, bloggers- use the same tool box)

4. A Business major who understands that creating/building a business is also about telling good stories; someone who is interested in better understanding what motivates people or someone who wants to learn maverick mode thinking, what it is and how to do it.

Course outline

Week 1

Introduction

What we are doing and why: Myths, fairy-stories and legitimate stealing. Themes, structure, questions

Required reading: The analogy of the cave in Plato’s ‘The Republic’ and H.G. Wells’ ‘The time machine’

Week 2

Class trip: Cinema

Week 3

The real and the unreal

Recap and recall

Introduction to diffuse/creative thinking. First steps.

Analysing the story of the cave as a creation myth, a political myth and a religious myth. Examining Plato’s use of symbols. Analysis of ‘The time machine’, and the film.

Required reading: The first chapter, ‘Myth and Dream’ of Joseph Campbell’s in ‘The Hero with a Thousand Faces’.

Submission: First piece of writing.

Week 4

The magic of myth

Recap and recall

Introduction to the Pomodore technique, or writing to the command of a chicken egg timer.
Analysis of Campbell’s chapter and class analysis of a poem in Ted Hughes’ version of ‘Metamorphoses’

Collective story exercise: Story cubes.

Week 5

Class trip

Class trip: London walk and visit to the Dennis Severs’ House

http://www.dennissevershouse.co.uk/booking-and-visiting/private-group-visits/

Where you go round a Georgian house where the inhabitant seem to have gone out moments before you enter each room. Who are/were these unknown people?

Required preparation for a class presentation on a myth: Greek, superhero or any religious text.


Week 6

Shields and Achilles’ heels

Recap and recall

Analysis of the class trip. In creating a story, a life, where to begin: with a sensory impulse or research? Looking at entries and exits.

Class presentations.

Examining heroes’ strengths and weaknesses. Analysing the Graham Greene story.

Required reading: ‘Oedipus’ or ’King Lear’

Submission: 2nd piece of writing

Week 6

Tragedy: The Inverse of the Hero’s Journey

Recap and recall.

Introduction to Robert Graves’ ideas of myth.

Analysis of ‘Oedipus’/’King Lear’
Class trip: theatre.

Week 7
Class trip: Harry Potter walk
Required recall: ‘Harry Potter’

Week 8
Orphans and other outsiders
Recap and recall
Analysis of ‘Harry Potter’
Class writing exercise: Off the page with Tarot cards
Required reading: Martin McDonagh’s ‘Pillowman’. McDonagh also wrote the film, ‘In Bruges’: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KoE9edjEDCI

Week 9
Black comedy
Analysis of Mc Donagh’s play and examination of genres.
Required reading: An Ursula le Guin short story
Submission: 3rd piece of writing

Week 10
Local and far off places
Class trip: The Viktor Wynd Museum - it's all about Victorian curiosities, strange hobbies/collections and other weird stuff
Analysis of the le Guin short story
Required reading: Several chapters of ‘Wuthering Heights’
Week 11

To be loved or not to be loved

Recap and recall

Analysis of the class trip.

Analysis of ‘Wuthering Heights’

Required reading: A Robert Walser short story

Week 12

The potency of language

Recap and recall

Analysis of the Walser short story.

One-to-ones with students to discuss their final submissions

Week 13

Class test

Further one-to-ones with students

Week 14

Recording a podcast of our work

Have a listen to our earlier work:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4xjgw2Tz4M

and

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q21bYdgzDDQ

and

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azorJ2joE4MM
Use of non-material texts:
By all means, read books/texts online and bring in your laptops and other devices to class.

Assessment:
Students are required to submit at least three pieces of writing before their final paper. This is in order to see where strengths and weaknesses lie, and what needs to be improved. From this work I will be able to tell you- by mid-term- where your grades stand at this moment in time. However, it is strongly recommended that you write and submit work regularly. The more you write, the stronger your writing will be.

Grade breakdown
Students need not be literature students but they should have a yen for writing or a strong desire to try. You are encouraged to submit a piece of work- however long or short - every week. This will be read and commented upon but not be graded.

But because this course begins with the premise that you must know in order to do, there will be a test on the texts we are studying.

- This will be on the thematic issues we have discussed and will be worth 20% of the final grade
- A final essay of 2,500 + words will make up the remaining 80%. This will be in a few days before our last class in order to give me time to edit the stories for publication.
- In the final class, we make a podcast of our work which is subsequently uploaded onto YouTube.