

Title: Novels: Refocusing the Lens

Course description:

When women writers began adapting the literary genres, they focused on topics unexamined by others, adopting a new perspective on the novel tradition. Perhaps they are shifting perspective again, this time aiming the literary camera lens on themselves. We'll take a look at that, but also discuss other novels where the lens has been re-focused, including mysteries, historical novels, and a literary classic. For more information, see the course website at <https://sites.google.com/view/readnovels/>

(499)

Course content:

During my research for the current novels course, I found an article, a discussion really, among 5 women authors who have had long publishing careers and have reached that "certain age"--somewhere past middle age, but not yet "old." More specifically, they talked about creating female characters who have reached that "certain age." What kind of women are they? Too often, novels consider women old when they've only reached their 40s, but these women authors are all in their 70s. So, what exactly are the characteristics of women who have reached full maturity and lived interesting lives. How do you draw them? What are their concerns? Where are they in literature.

Well, I was fascinated by the topic and this term am concluding the course with a discussion of *Tom Lake*, Ann Patchett's most recent novel, specifically because the story revolves around a mother and her daughters who come together for a summer. In the midst of their various turmoils, they discover that their mother had had a love affair with a famous man when she was young, long before they were born. In other words, she had a life as a single woman before she married and had children. The daughters want to know what that life was like, and so she has to revisit those years.

In a strange way, this topic echoes other work I've been doing at OLLI, specifically the OLLI Scholars program which will offer a scholarship to students in any graduate program across the university to teach a topic of their choosing in spring 2025. It's an intergenerational initiative. I've also been working with 2 other groups doing demographic research on OLLI members and know from my 30+ years of directing an internship program that students have a relatively narrow perspective. That's not a fault or failing; it's simply a fact of life. They lack experience because they have yet to live long enough to acquire some. As OLLI members, however, we have lived long enough to develop a larger, more inclusive perspective.

So, for the Fall 2024 course, which I have titled "Refocusing the Lens," I'm going to discuss novels in which characters adopt a new perspective, or multiple characters reflect differing perspectives. Although I don't mention it in the course description, I'm going to start with a classic, E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, not only because it contrasts British and Indian cultural perspectives during the Raj, but because it also, quietly, compares the perspectives of Adela Quested, the young woman who has come to India to marry Ronny Heaslop, and her elderly friend, Mrs. Moore, Ronny's mother.

Adela's not sure about marrying, and her indecision leads to a catastrophic outcome.

I'm looking at another novel with the same theme, and there are several possibilities, including novels by Julia Alvarez, considered a literary fiction author. And she's one of the women in the discussion about "women of a certain age," the article that started all this. In her novel, *The Cemetery of Untold Stories*, a celebrated writer "doesn't want to end up like her friend, a novelist who fought so long and hard to finish a book that it threatened her sanity. So when Alma inherits a small plot of land in the Dominican Republic, her homeland, she has the beautiful idea of turning it into a place to bury her untold stories—literally. She creates a graveyard for the manuscript drafts and the characters whose lives she tried and failed to bring to life and who still haunt her. Alma wants her characters to rest in peace. But they have other ideas and soon begin to defy their author: they talk back to her and talk to one another behind her back, rewriting and revising themselves."

Julia Alvarez has also written *In the Time of Butterflies* and *Afterlife*, both up for consideration.

Elizabeth Strout is also one of the women authors in this discussion. Although I have included one of her novels, *Olive Kitteridge*, in my course several years ago, I will consider her again, with such books as *My Name is Lucy Barton*, or *Olive Again*, or *Anything is Possible*.

Although I will include a classic novel, like Forster, or maybe two, I know that class members also like mysteries and historical novels and so will include those; in fact, at least 4 or the 6 novels will be more traditional fare.

For historical fiction, I'm looking at novels like *An American Beauty: A Novel of the Gilded Age Inspired by the True Story of Arabella Huntington*. She quite literally climbed the social ladder from a woman of dubious reputation to the wealthiest woman in the country. I would love to pair that with Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*, about a woman of the same era whose life slides down the ladder.

Among mysteries, I'm seriously considering the latest Sara Paretsky, *Pay Dirt*, just out as #22 in her series of Vic Warshawki novels. But she takes a turn with this one. Vic leaves Chicago, travels to Kansas, and of course solves a murder mystery, but this is a change of pace for her detective, which might make an interesting discussion.

I've also lately been fascinated by novels that set their stories in bookshops, which would pick up on the theme in the Julia Alvarez novel. *The Last Bookshop in London*, by Madeline Martin is one; C. J. Archer's *The Librarian of Crooked Lane* is another possibility, as is *The Lost Bookshop*, by Evie Woods. For some strange reason, there are several of these currently on the market.

I'm considering a number of novels, as always, and will list them on the course website, already up and running. I plan a 13-week course for both the in-person and online variations—two sections of the same course. And it will be both lecture and discussion as usual.