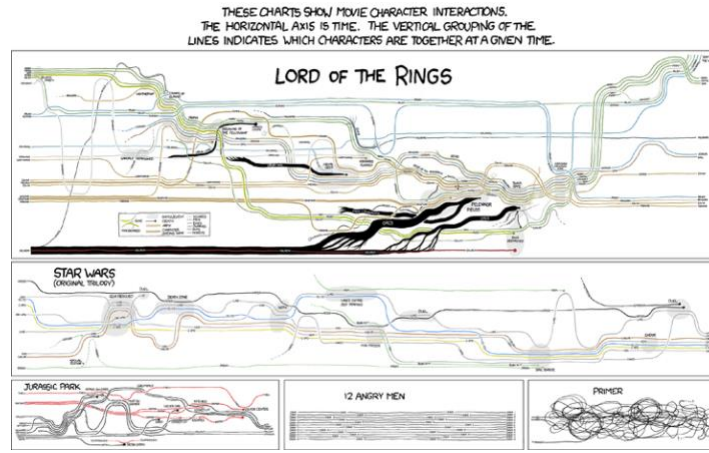# ENGL 270g: Studying Narrative

Tu/Th 11–12:20pm   Dr. Beatrice Sanford Russell, sanfordb@usc.edu
Fall 2022 – THH 108   Office Hours: Tu 12:30–1:20, Th 1:30–2:20

xkcd.com/657/

Course Description

People say that they "get lost" in a good story—as if a story were a maze, or a wilderness, or an unknown country. The metaphor of being lost suggests the strange magic that narratives perform in transporting us elsewhere: one minute we are sitting down with a novel or starting a movie, and the next we are suddenly penned up in a storm-exposed farmhouse on a Yorkshire moor in 1802 or haunting a small, "spiteful" building at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati in 1874. But just how does this narrative magic work? In this class we put together a basic guidebook for finding our way through narratives, analyzing major narrative features and techniques, and becoming familiar with some of the key theoretical approaches to narrative study.

We begin by examining the building blocks of narrative, including aspects of narration, characterization, and plot, ranging across different narrative platforms such as short stories, novels, narrative poems, essays, comic strips, films, and musical albums. We then follow what has been called the "ethical turn" in narrative studies in considering how narratives and our experiences of them are shaped by questions of identity, empathy, and trauma. Finally, we engage with recent experiments in narrative that challenge how we categorize and process stories, from Claudia Rankine's multimedia work in *Citizen*, to Phoebe Waller-Bridge's shattering of the fourth wall in *Fleabag*.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Define major narrative features and elements of narrative theory, and identify and analyze examples of these features in an unfamiliar narrative text.
- Experiment with narrative techniques to understand how they affect meaning.
- Analyze complex instances of narrative focalization and of the relationship between story and discourse.
- Draw on theoretical texts in order to reflect on how stories explore identity, alterity, trauma, and sympathy.

Course Books

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (1847; Penguin, 2002)
Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (1927; Harcourt, 1989)
Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; Vintage, 2004)
Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Graywolf, 2014)
Patricia Lockwood, *No One is Talking About This* (Riverhead, 2021)

H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2008)*
[*Available online through USC Libraries]

Assigned texts not in the course books will be posted to Blackboard.

Description of Assignments and Grading Breakdown

This seminar is designed around weekly intensive work rather than building to cumulative, high-stakes assignments. As such, it depends on your everyday curiosity, your willingness to take intellectual risks, and your lively engagement with the readings, with one another, with me, and with yourself.

You will complete **five short exercises**, which range from applying techniques for analyzing narrative to writing creative experiments.

You will sign up to become an expert on two narrative concepts and will submit **two entries to the class Narrative Encyclopedia** describing how each concept works and providing examples.

The narrative encyclopedia will serve as a study guide for a **take-home final exam**, in which you apply narrative terms from the class to analyze familiar and unfamiliar texts, and discuss how certain ethical questions reshape your understanding of course readings.

Assignment	Percentage
Exercises (5 at 10% each)	50%
Narrative Encyclopedia	10%
Participation	15%
Final Exam	25%

A note on grades. Research has shown that students take more intellectual risks and learn more when they receive comments rather than grades. This semester, I would like us to experiment with treating your reading, writing, and speaking as part of an ongoing conversation with me about your intellectual and creative growth, that I will carry out on my part through comments and conferences rather than through giving letter or numerical grades. At the end of the semester we will together consider your collected portfolio of work, keeping in mind the relative weighting of percentages above, and I will take your self-assessment into account when assigning a final grade for the course. (And if not having grades is too anxiety-producing for you, I will supply them. The goal of this experiment is to free up your energy for learning, not to raise your stress levels!)

Expectations

You will:

- **attend class regularly and on time**. Please clear legitimate absences—for illness, religious holidays, or emergencies—with me beforehand.
- **closely read assigned texts,** making notes while you read, and come to class prepared for discussion.
- **be engaged and focused in class**, listening to others respectfully and with openness to differing points of view, and avoiding the distractions of phones and computers. If you would like to use a laptop to take notes, please clear it with me before class.
- **work to produce creative and intelligent writing.**
- **turn your work in on time.**

I will:

- **prepare for class time** while remaining flexible to respond to your interests, questions, and concerns.
- **approach each day with enthusiasm** and an openness to learning alongside you.
- **communicate clearly and in a timely manner** about assignments and deadlines.
- **be available** over email and in office hours to discuss issues relating to the course, and to serve as a resource for your reading, thinking, and writing.
- **read your work carefully, provide thoughtful feedback, and evaluate it fairly** according to clear standards and in conversation with you.

Schedule of Readings

Plan to spend about three hours preparing for each class meeting.

		Readings	Tasks
Week 1 Aug 23	beginnings, middles, ends	Helen Oyeyemi, "books and roses"	
Aug 25	**Narration** narrative levels; embedding	Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights,* chs. 1–7 Abbott, "Framing narratives," pp. 28–30	Sign up for encyclopedia entries
Week 2 Aug 30	story v. discourse (order)	*Wuthering Heights,* chs. 8–12 Abbott, "Defining narrative," pp. 13–20	
Sept 1	story v. discourse (duration, frequency)	*Wuthering Heights*, chs. 13–21 Gerard Genette, fr. *Narrative Discourse*	
Week 3 Sept 6	narrator; narratee; focalization; distance	*Wuthering Heights,* chs. 22–27 Abbott, "Narration," pp. 67–78	

Sept 8	plot vs. character; character systems	*Wuthering Heights,* chs. 28–34 Aristotle, fr. *Poetics* Alex Woloch, fr. *The One and the Many*, pp. 13–14 E. M. Forster, fr. *Aspects of the Novel*	
Week 4 Sept 13	adaptation	Kate Beaton, "Wuthering Heights," parts 1–6 Kate Bush, "Wuthering Heights" William Wyler, *Wuthering Heights* Abbott, "Adaptation across media," pp. 112–127	Turn in exercise 1
Sept 15	film narration	Alfred Hitchcock, *Vertigo* Seymour Chatman, fr. *Coming to Terms*	
Week 5 Sept 20	**Characterization** agency; character psychology	Maya Deren, *Meshes of the Afternoon* Carmen Maria Machado, "The Husband Stitch"	
Sept 22	direct/indirect/ free indirect style	Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, "The Window," chs. 1–8 Dorrit Cohn, fr. "Narrated Monologue," pp 104–7	
Week 6 Sept 27	**Plot** agon	*To the Lighthouse*, "The Window," chs. 9–14 Abbott, "Narrative negotiation," pp. 193–99	Turn in exercise 2
Sept 29	motifs vs. themes	*To the Lighthouse*, "The Window," chs. 15–19 Abbott, "Interpreting narrative," pp. 95–97	
Week 7 Oct 4	gaps; acts vs. happenings	*To the Lighthouse*, "Time Passes" Abbott, "Interpreting Narrative," pp. 90–97	
Oct 6	causality	*To the Lighthouse*, "The Lighthouse" Abbott, "The rhetoric of narrative," pp. 40–46	
Week 8 Oct 11	**Narrative Ethics**	Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Part One, chs. 1–3 Ursula Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction"	Turn in exercise 3
Oct 13		NO CLASS – FALL RECESS	
Week 9 Oct 18		*Beloved*, Part One, chs. 4–8 Saidiya Hartman, fr. "Venus in Two Acts," pp. 1–4	
Oct 20		*Beloved*, Part One, chs. 9–14 Suzanne Keen, fr. "A Theory of Narrative Empathy"	
Week 10 Oct 25		*Beloved*, Part One, chs. 15–19 Cathy Caruth, fr. *The Unclaimed Experience*	Turn in exercise 4
Oct 27		*Beloved*, Part Two, chs. 20–25 Homi Bhaba, fr. "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation"	
Week 11 Nov 1		*Beloved*, Part Three, chs. 26–28 Kimberly Chabot Davis, fr. "Postmodern Blackness: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the End of History"	

Nov 3	**Narrative Experiments**	David Lynch, *Mulholland Drive*	
Week 12 Nov 8 Nov 10		Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*, Parts 1–5 *Citizen*, Parts 6–7	Turn in exercise 5
Week 13 Nov 15 Nov 17		Patricia Lockwood, *No One is Talking About This* *No One is Talking About This*	
Week 14 Nov 22 Nov 24		*No One is Talking About This* NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING	
Week 15 Nov 29 Dec 1		*No One is Talking About This* Phoebe Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag*, Season 2, Episodes 1–6	Turn in encyclopedia
Week 16			Final take-home exam due Dec 13 10am

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards" https://policy.usc.edu/student/scampus/part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

Discrimination, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, stalking, and harassment are prohibited by the university. You are encouraged to report all incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity/Title IX Office* http://equity.usc.edu and/or to the *Department of Public Safety* http://dps.usc.edu. This is important for the health and safety of the whole USC community. Faculty and staff must report any information regarding an incident to the Title IX Coordinator who will provide outreach and information to the affected party. The sexual assault resource center webpage http://sarc.usc.edu fully describes reporting options. Relationship and Sexual Violence Services https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp provides 24/7 confidential support.

Support Systems

A number of USC's schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* http://ali.usc.edu, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* http://dsp.usc.edu provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* http://emergency.usc.edu will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

Dornsife provides a full range of mental health resources, which can be found at https://studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling/

COVID Safety

Students are expected to comply with all aspects of USC's COVID-19 policy. Failure to do so may result in removal from the class and referral to Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards.