

Contemporary Short Stories in Translation

Winter Session, January 2024

Class Meetings: Weekdays (Mondays to Fridays) from January 9th-22nd

Time: 10:00am-12:00pm and 1:00pm-3:00pm

Synchronous meetings online via Zoom

Reading period: Tuesday, 1/23

Final essay due: Wednesday, 1/24

Instructor: Damion Searls

Email: dsearls@wesleyan.edu

Office hours: By appointment

Course Catalogue Description:

This course will introduce students to a wide range of contemporary short stories from four geographical regions privileged by the English-language publishing industry—Nordic Europe, Latin America, East Asia, Western Europe—as well as stories from outside these regions. Along with exploring the fiction itself, and keeping in mind the translator’s artistic role as an active co-creator of the works we are reading, we will consider how these different categories are defined and marketed to English-language audiences. In Week Two, we will pay special attention to the crucial professional role of the translator in getting these authors published and recognized, and there will be in-class visits from one translator in each cluster. The objective of the course is to get a basic overview of different contemporary trends and traditions, and their various paths to publication in English, as well as hopefully finding one or two new favorite writers.

Enrollment Cap: 12

GE Area: HA-WRCT

Course Requirements

1. Attendance, preparation of readings, in-class participation, and discussion (20%)
2. Mini reflections/responses to the reading (5) (20%)
3. Finding and introducing/pitching a published story (2 pages) (20%)
4. Creative Project: “translating” all or part of a story we’ve read (15%)
5. Final Essay (in lieu of exam): close reading of two stories or one story plus a theoretical approach you choose to bring in (25%)

Readings

Week One: apx. 80–100 pages per day

Nordic Europe:

- Per Petterson, “A Man without Shoes” and “The King Is Dead,” from *Ashes in My Mouth, Sand in My Shoes*, tr. Don Bartlett
- Jon Fosse, “Scenes from a Childhood” and “Dreamt in Stone,” from *Scenes from a Childhood*, tr. Searls
- Naja Marie Aidt, “The Green Darkness of the Big Trees” and “The Car Trip,” from *Baboon*, tr. Denise Newman
- Sjón, “Ink,” tr. Philip Roughton

Latin America:

- Roberto Bolaño, “Sensini,” from *Last Evenings on Earth*, tr. Chris Andrews
- Samanta Schweblin, “None of That” and “An Unlucky Man,” from *Seven Empty Houses*, tr. Megan McDowell
- Federico Falco, “The Hares” and “A Perfect Cemetery,” from *A Perfect Cemetery*, tr. Jennifer Croft
- Fernando Melchor, “This Is Not Miami,” from *This Is Not Miami*, tr. Sophie Hughes

East Asia:

- Yan Ge, “Sorrowful Beasts” and “Joyous Beasts,” from *Strange Beasts of China*, tr. Jeremy Tiang
- Bora Chung, “Cursed Bunny” and “The Head,” from *Cursed Bunny*, tr. Anton Hur
- Can Xue, “The Bizarre Wooden Building” and “Snake Island,” from *Blue Light in the Sky & Other Stories*, tr. Karen Gernant and Zeping Chen

Western Europe:

- Peter Stamm, “The Visit” and “Through the Night,” from *It’s Getting Dark*, tr. Michael Hofmann
- Marie NDiaye, “The Death of Claude François,” from *All My Friends*, tr. Jordan Stump
- A. J. Snijders, various “zkv’s” [=“very short stories”] from *Night Train*, tr. Lydia Davis (pp. 29, 36–38, 45, 52–53, 57, 61, 67–69, 78–79, 91, 94, 118, 122)

- Jhumpa Lahiri, “The Boundary” and “The Reentry,” from *Roman Stories*, tr. Jhumpa Lahiri

Day Five:

- Vimala, “The Dark Girl’s Laughter,” tr. Madhu H. Kaza and Sitaramayya Ari
- Tsering Döndrup, “The Disturbance in D— Camp,” “Piss and Pride,” and “A Show to Delight the Masses” (tr. Lauran Hartley), from *The Handsome Monk*, tr. Christopher Peacock
- Norman Erikson Pasaribu, “Enkidu...,” “A Bedtime Story...,” and “So What’s Your Name, Sandra?” from *Happy Stories, Mostly*, tr. Tiffany Tsao
- Lusajo Mwaikenda Israel, “A Neighbor’s Pot,” tr. Richard Prins, from the anthology *No Edges: Swahili Stories*

Optional: Author’s Notes by Fosse, Melchor, Can Xue, Lahiri, and Israel, and Translator’s Notes by Kaza and Tsao, will be available online. I encourage you to seek out and browse back-cover text, publisher’s websites, About the Author pages, and other promotional material for the books, when the stories are taken from books.

Week Two:

- Rónán Hession, “The Translator’s Funeral”
- Jennifer Croft, “Anaheim”

Course Plan and Assignments

Preparatory Period (Or, what to do over winter break)

- Review the course syllabus.
- Review the assignment sheets for all major course assignments. Start thinking about how you might approach them.
- Complete the reading listed for Tuesday, January 9th.
- Please do some, if not most, of the reading for days 2 to 5 as well, since Week One is a reading-intensive week: maybe one or more stories from each day.
- Submit your first “mini reflection” or response to the reading to the instructor before class by 9:00 a.m. Be ready to share your responses and impressions in class.
- Please introduce yourself! In addition to sharing your name and pronouns, please answer the following questions: Why are you interested in taking this course? What do you expect to get out of the class?

Note: The schedule below is subject to change based on the needs and interests of the class and at the discretion of the professor.

Week One

Tuesday, 1/9: Nordic Europe

Read the short stories in the first sub-list above.

By 9:00 am: Submit to me a short (up to 1 page) response to the reading. This can be personal—what you especially liked or didn't, why, what it reminded you of—and/or you can make it more analytically comparative: start reflecting on commonalities within the group of stories, and differences from (or similarities to) our other clusters, in terms of themes, narrative approaches, presentation (how they are published or pitched to readers—back cover blurbs, etc.).

I suspect the first half of the class will be spent discussing Fosse, the second half on the other stories.

Wednesday, 1/10: Latin America

Read the short stories in the second sub-list above.

Submit a response by 9:00 a.m.

Thursday, 1/11: East Asia

Read the short stories in the third sub-list above.

Submit a response by 9:00 a.m.

Friday, 1/12: Western Europe

Read the short stories in the fourth sub-list above.

Submit a response by 9:00 a.m.

I suspect the first half will be spent on the first three writers, the second half on Lahiri and the question of self-translation.

Monday, 1/15: Day Five

Read the short stories in the fifth sub-list above.

Submit a response by 9:00 a.m.

First longer writing assignment

By **5:00 p.m. on Monday, 1/15**, please turn in the first of the three longer assignments, which will be circulated among the class. You will want to have done most or all of the work over the weekend.

Your task is to find and then introduce or “pitch” a contemporary short story in translation, either from one of our four geographical zones or not. This story might have been published in an online translation magazine (*Asymptote*, *Words Without Borders*, *Circumference*, *Hopscotch*,...), or in a print magazine that often publishes stories in translation (*Granta*, *Paris Review*, *Kenyon Review*,...), or in a more focused, language-specific or country-specific periodical or collection. [Please avoid *The New Yorker*, which often publishes edited excerpts of novels as short stories.] You might go into this task with a goal in mind—looking for a story from Egypt or Puerto Rico, looking for a story on a certain topic or theme, looking for an author under a certain age—or you might decide to browse in the various venues and collections for a story that strikes your fancy.

Then introduce this story to English-language readers, assuming that they have no familiarity with the author or story. Write the kind of mini-essay (1-2 pages) on the story that might appear as a headnote to an online publication: who the author is, where they’re coming from, whether they’re famous, anything you can about their context. I don’t expect you to have instantly become an expert in a new national literature, but do some research (in English) to get a sense of the author’s position, and do some thinking about how the story itself fits into categories English-language readers might have in mind. Your writing will probably end up somewhere in between academic analytical writing (a close reading of the story) and marketing (trying to attract new readers to a story that no one is forcing them to read).

An alternate possibility: If there is already a translator’s note or other substantive introduction appended to your story, you can summarize it and analyze the way it decides to go about framing your author, and the strengths or weaknesses of that approach.

The goal of the assignment is to explore what’s out there, and also to think about stories as existing in sociopolitical reality, not just as works of art.

Week Two

Tuesday, 1/16

Read the short stories in the “Week Two” sub-list above, which were originally written in English but are about translation and translators, and should serve to open up into

the topic of Week Two, which is how short stories in translation actually reach us English-language readers.

Read your fellow students' "introduction" assignments.

We will vote, as a class, on which of the stories pitched by your peers we will want to read.

Wednesday, 1/17 and Thursday, 1/18

One or more short stories "pitched" by students.

We will be joined by two translators, one in each half of the class.

Translators TBD based on availability, but the current plan is: Sophie Hughes, Anton Hur, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Madhu Kaza. I will be the translator from the Nordic Europe cluster.

By 9:00 am on Wednesday 1/17: Submit your plan for your final paper.

By 5:00 pm on Thursday 1/18: Creative project due

Please "translate" one of the stories we've read, or a short excerpt of one (e.g., the opening, or a key scene), into the style of one of the other ones: a Fosse story as written by Can Xue, a Döndrup story as written by Snijders, etc.

In addition to the "translation" itself, submit a reflection on what you were trying to do, what challenges you encountered, and what discoveries you made through this process. Which of the two stories do you find yourself thinking about more, and learning more about? Is the content easier or harder than you thought it would be to express in a different style? Is the whole exercise doomed to merely reinforce stereotypes?

I will not be grading you on the artistic merits of the story, but rather on the understanding it shows of the questions that you are exploring. The reflection or self-evaluation is thus be the most significant part of this assignment, while the "translation" is for fun, and will not be judged beyond the extent to which I can determine dedication and insight into the class materials.

Friday, 1/19

Read one another's creative projects and reflections.

Monday, 1/22

A wider-ranging discussion of our conclusions from the course; pairing off in breakout rooms and discussing the final paper topics you are working on, what you find yourself

arguing, what problems you're having; coming back to the big group and introducing your partner's final paper topic to the group as a whole.

Tuesday, January 23rd: Reading Day

Please take this time to work on the final essay. The instructor will be available for individual consultations by appointment.

Wednesday, January 24th: Final Essays Due

The final essay (5–7 pages) is due by 11:59pm.