ITAL 360 Contemporary Italian Prose

Instructor: Prof. L. Kroha (lucienne.kroha@mcgill.ca)
T TH 1-2:30
Office hours: by appointment

Overview:
A study of Italian fiction, docu-fiction and non-fiction published since 1985, examined in the context of the debates on post-modernism, [its demise, and the return to the social novel]

NOTE: Students whose major is Italian Studies must write their final essay and tests in Italian. Students for whom this is an elective or who are minoring in Italian Studies must write their open book take-home tests in Italian but may write their final essay in the language of their choice. (English, French, Italian).

This course is designed to acquaint students with a cross-section of novels that have caught the attention of readers in contemporary Italy. These works are extremely diverse and testify to the fragmented nature of today’s Italy, in which there is no unifying, single societal or literary project among intellectuals and writers. We will read both best-selling popular works and more experimental works that challenge the reader’s expectations. These earlier works belong to the post-modern period in Italian writing, characterized by self-referential, highly stylized texts, while the more recent works herald a return to realism and focus on contemporary social issues – immigration and attitudes to “others” in a nation not accustomed to immigrants; crime; corruption; the Southern question, the role of women.

Three of these novels exploit the extremely popular detective genre, but they do so in radically different ways. The remaining novel, Elena Ferrante’s L’amica geniale focuses on the excavation of the past, through personal memory and imaginative reconstruction, while also providing a stinging indictment of the violent, crime-ridden world in which it is set. In each case we shall try to understand what type of readership the author(s) has in mind. Since many of the issues dealt with are also aired in the popular media (television, cinema, the press, the internet) we shall try to understand if literature has a specific role to play in today’s Italy and, if so, what that role may be.

Learning Outcome
Students will improve their reading comprehension of Italian, as well as their oral and written skills by regularly answering questions in writing and by making regular brief
summaries, oral and written, of what they have read. Classes will be used to elucidate obscure passages, answer questions, and discuss issues arising from the themes under consideration. By the end of the course students will have become acquainted with the characteristics of both post-modern and more realistic texts and will understand the assumptions about literature and its relationship to reality that underpin these approaches to writing. They will also become acquainted with some of the issues that plague Italian society today and with the ways in which some authors, by turning their backs on post-modern skepticism and returning to the overtly social novel, have attempted to address them.

**Instructional Method and Expectations for Student Participation**

Classes will consist of a combination of short lectures and group discussions to be held on Zoom. Each session will be based on a specific reading assignment, accompanied by a set of questions on Mycourses. This is a fixed activity, meaning that each session will take place once, live. Students who are in a time zone which makes it difficult for them to be present at fixed sessions, will find them recorded and available on Mycourses.

On Mycourses you will also find additional materials: scholarly articles in English or French, interviews with the authors, links to Youtube videos. None of this material is compulsory (unless you are told otherwise) but is there to supplement and support classes.

The sessions will be used primarily to give students a chance to express themselves in Italian, by answering the questions, by bringing their own questions and thoughts for discussions, and and by choosing passages they have prepared in advance that they consider important and explaining their choices.

The number of classes we shall spend on each book depends on its length and relative difficulty (see Calendar); calendar dates are approximate and may change depending on how the classes proceed, and how much reading students are able to complete.

At periodic intervals you will be asked to complete a short open-book take-home test for submission within a week.

If you are unable for some reason to be present at a Zoom meeting, you will be required to submit short written responses to the questions. Students who are unable because of their time zone to be present at Zoom classes should let me know immediately. They will have to answer the questions provided for each reading in writing. They will also be able to meet with me on Zoom at pre-arranged times. Given the small size of the class there will no fixed office hours. Rather meetings will be arranged by e-mail individually.

**READINGS:**

**Post-modernism:**
**Antonio Tabucchi, *Il filo dell’orizzonte* (1986).** An existential detective story which uses magic realism to create ambiguity, enigma, uncertainty. The “detective” is a former medical student who now works in Genoa’s morgue and who becomes obsessed with uncovering the identity of a young man whose anonymous corpse is brought in following a shoot-out with the police. A meditation on the anxieties created by an increasingly rootless post-modern society in which personal identity, traditionally constituted by fixed points of reference, struggles to find ways in which to anchor itself.

**TENTATIVE: Italo Calvino, excerpt (30pp. approx.) from *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* (1985) (on Mycourses)**

**Immigration and Identity:**

**Amin Lakhous, *Divorzio all’islamica a viale Marconi* (2010).** A young Sicilian who knows Arabic is recruited by the Italian Secret Service to infiltrate a terrorist cell supposedly hiding in the area of Viale Marconi, the centre of Muslim immigration in Rome. He manages to pass as an Arab himself and lives and works among the immigrants, but then unexpectedly meets up with Sofia, the wife of an Egyptian whose marriage is on the rocks. A light-hearted, satirical take on a serious subject, in which an Algerian-born writer living in Italy speaks for the many migrants who have chosen to make Italy their home, thus changing the face of Italian society, long a country of emigration and more apparently homogeneous than other European nations. Narrated in real time in the first-person, in chapters that alternate between the perspective of the Sicilian undercover agent and the perspective of Sofia, the Egyptian wife.

**Crime:**

**Massimo Carlotto and Carlo Videtta, *Nordest* (2007).** A popular *noir* thriller for mass consumption, in which the “detective” is a young lawyer from a wealthy family in Italy’s industrialized northeast striving to uncover the truth about the murder of his fiancée. The authors use this search to paint a portrait of a privileged corrupt oligarchy that will go to any lengths to preserve its wealth and power in a society which is now facing economic challenges from the East (Romania, China etc). The authors also focus on the environmental destruction of the landscape, the links between southern crime syndicates and northern oligarchs, and the effects of widespread corruption on the family.

**Excavating the past:**

**Elena Ferrante, *L’amica geniale* (2011).** The first of a quartet of first-person novels which trace the friendship between two women over the arc of a lifetime from the post-war Fifties to the present day, beginning on the backdrop of the slums of Naples and
intertwined with sixty years or so of Italian history. Volume one, covering childhood and adolescence, focuses on the poverty and violence of a neighbourhood in the grip of the camorra and on the choices, and possibilities, that lead two very bright young girls to very different outcomes. The narrator, now an older, successful woman who has long since escaped the world of her youth, tries to understand the nature of this long-lasting and somewhat mysterious friendship, and its role in her own life, as she recreates the brutal atmosphere of her early years.

All books are available in hard copy from the McGill Bookstore or as e-books from Internet Bookshop (www.ibs.it).

Evaluation:
Three open-book take-home tests 45% (in Italian)
Final essay 35% (in English, French or Italian for students not majoring in Italian Studies)
Oral presentation 10% (oral presentations will be on L’amica geniale)
Participation 10%

Mode of Delivery & Technical Requirements
Classes will meet remotely during the regularly scheduled class times. All students are required to have access to a computer, the internet, a microphone, and, if possible, a webcam. Although use of the webcam is not compulsory, it is desirable, as it contributes to creating a “class atmosphere”. However, students who prefer not to appear on screen will not be penalized. We will use Zoom and the link to the meetings will be posted on myCourses. Please do the following before you join the course:

• Create a basic account by clicking on the following link: https://mcgill.zoom.us/ You must sign in with your McGill username/password. Having a Zoom account will help you facilitate virtual meetings for collaborative assignments.
• Read this article on getting started. If the link does not work, go to: https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/201362033-Getting-Started-on-Windows-and-Mac
• Contact your instructor if you do not have a webcam or microphone, so that we can find a solution together and make appropriate accommodations.

Remote Learning Resources
Since learning remotely is a new skill that we all have to acquire, I would encourage you to look at the resources that McGill’s Teaching and Learning Services compiled: https://www.mcgill.ca/tls/students/remote-learning-resources
Consider looking at all the tips, particularly the following points:
• 5 Strategies for Success
• Study Tactics
• Learning Strategies Inventory
Learning with Zoom

Recordings
Periodically, instructors may record a portion of a Zoom lecture that would be uploaded to myCourses. During a meeting, you will be notified through a “pop-up” box in Zoom if the class is being recorded. You can turn off your camera, so that only your name appears on screen. If you do not feel comfortable being in a class that is recorded, you may leave the meeting by logging off Zoom. In the latter case, you should watch the recording later so that you do not miss any content.

Copyright
© Instructor-generated course materials (e.g., handouts, notes, summaries, exam questions) are protected by law and may not be copied or distributed in any form or in any medium without explicit permission of the instructor. Note that infringements of copyright can be subject to follow up by the University under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures

CALENDAR: (dates and topics covered are subject to change)

September 3 Introduction to course, discussion of modalities, introduction of students and instructor

September 8 Literature and its relation to reality: Realism, naturalism, modernism, post-modernism. The case of Italy: post-modernism and the return to realism and social themes after 1990.


September 25, 29. Reading and discussion of excerpt from Calvino, *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* as an example of post-modern aesthetics. (TENTATIVE)

October 1, 6, 8, 13,* 15. Reading and discussion of Lakhous, *Divorzio all’islamica a viale Marconi*. The plight of immigrants in Italy, a parody of *Divorce Italian Style* (classic Italian comedy), an interrogation of the meaning of identity.

October 17, 20, 22, 27,* 29. Reading and discussion of Carlotto and Videtta, *Nordest* Brief history of the detective story, its Italian iterations, differences between the “giallo” and the “noir”. The Mediterranean noir. The northeast of Italy (the Tri-Veneto) and its industrial boom in the late 1970’s and 80’s, different from the earlier “boom” in the Milan-Torino-Genoa triangle. Corruption, greed, betrayal.
November 3, 5, 10, 12, 17, 19, 24, 26. Reading and discussion of Ferrante, *L’amica geniale*. Naples after WWII. The neighbourhood as a setting, poverty, organized crime, the struggle for survival, the destiny of women and the struggle for the right to education.

December 1 Summing up.

December 8 Final essays due.

*The three open-book take-home tests will be distributed just before the end of the discussion of each book, on the dates followed by an asterisk. They will be due a week later but, of course, may be submitted earlier. Final essay topics will be made available at the beginning of November.*

CLASS MANAGEMENT
Participation in class discussion is essential and will determine the participation mark. THIS MEANS THAT READING MUST BE COMPLETED ON TIME AND STUDENTS MUST ALWAYS HAVE WITH THEM THE BOOK THAT IS BEING DISCUSSED. Students who wish to observe religious holy days MUST refer to McGill University's Religious Holy Days Policy.

Deadlines
Deadlines must be met. No accommodations will be made for any missed evaluation unless a medical note is provided. There will be no supplemental and no additional work to upgrade marks.

PLAGIARISM
McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see<http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity>http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity for more information).

L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter <http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity>http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity).

Student guide to avoid plagiarism

Academic integrity is important. Anything that undermines the evaluation process at McGill undermines the value of our degrees. McGill's Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures appears in Chapter 3 of the Handbook on Student Rights and Responsibilities. Article 15(a) of the Code, which is devoted to plagiarism, reads as follows:

No student shall, with intent to deceive, represent the work of another person as his or her own in any academic writing, essay, thesis, research report, project or assignment submitted

- When writing a paper try to use your own words the majority of the time.
- When you do use another person's words, use quotation marks and give credit to the source, either within the text or in a footnote.
- Don't make slight variations in the language and then fail to give credit to the source. If the expression is essentially the same, the author still deserves credit.
- Even if you aren't directly quoting the material, you should still document information and ideas that you use in your paper whenever they are new to you (i.e., something that you discovered in your research).
- If you're unsure, add the footnote or citation. It is better to be extra cautious than not give credit when you should.

These rules concern information obtained from any source (e.g., books, journal articles, the Internet, other students) and apply to any written submission (term papers, essays, assignments, take-home exams and lab reports).

Remember that, according to McGill's Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures, plagiarism is an academic offence. Students who are suspected of violating the Code will be reported to the Disciplinary Officer of their faculty, and appropriate action will be taken.