



## Introduction

by Jill Campbell, Professor of English

Why do stories recounting events that didn't happen to people who don't exist interest or even compel us? Can the experience of fictional narratives change us? Does reading about the experiences of non-existent people who are different from ourselves help broaden our knowledge of the world, or encourage us to develop sympathy with others? Why do the "memoirs" of real people, whether Holocaust survivors, addicts, victims of childhood abuse, or famously successful people, often incorporate some fictional component, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged? How, as Primo Levi has asked, does that fictional component sometimes help convey the "truthfulness" of the author's extreme experience, while departing from the historical truth? Can both fictional and nonfictional narratives work encourage the reader to internalize stereotypes of certain categories of people (for example, black, female, homosexual, mentally ill, underage) rather than encouraging him or her to think more openly about others' human experiences?

In approaching these general questions, as background for considering the teaching of several fictional and nonfictional narrative forms – novels, short stories, and memoirs – we will consider the standing of fictional narrative in our own culture, as well as recent claims about the potential of narrative to make us more reflective, responsive, ethically imaginative, "cosmopolitan" and broadly sympathetic people. Why is it important that young people experience both the traditional literary genre of "the novel" and other kinds of narrative forms (some of them available in the new media of the internet)? The philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues that the experience of realist fictional narrative is essential to developing young people's capacity for empathy and therefore for responsible citizenship not just of the nation but of our world: "The conclusion that this set of limbs in front of me has emotions and feelings and thoughts of the sort I attribute to myself will not be reached without the training of the imagination that storytelling promotes" ("The Narrative Imagination," in *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*). The journalist Rachel Donadio, on the other hand, argues that fictional narrative has become increasingly marginal in our culture: "Is fiction no longer essential?" she asks. "Fiction may still be an escape of choice – along with television and movies and video games and iPods – but when it comes to illuminating today's world most vividly, nonfiction is winning" (*New York Times Book Review*, 2005).

While reading selectively the provocative claims of such theorists and commentators, we will concentrate on considering the formal features and potential affective and ethical responses of the reader both to works that are patently fictional—*Charlotte's Web*, *Huck Finn*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, and/or *The Kite Runner*—and to works that draw considerable power from their reference to real lives and gripping historical events—such as Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Dave Eggers' *What Is the What*, a "novel" that provides the "autobiography" of someone other than the writer himself, one of the real Lost Boys of the Sudan. The syllabus of readings and focus of this seminar will be open to adaptation in accord with the interests of its participants.

---

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit [https://teachers.yale.edu/terms\\_of\\_use](https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use)