"Imaginary Countries": A Conversation with Professor Alexander Chee


Whoever coined the phrase, "Those who can't, teach," clearly never met Alexander Chee. At Dartmouth, Chee, who holds a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Iowa and a Bachelor of Arts from Wesleyan University, teaches fiction and essay writing. Outside the classroom, he has various projects going on in his personal writing career.

Chee has penned the books "Edinburgh," an award-winning novel about a young man forced to confront the demons of his past, and "The Queen of the Night," a novel whose subject rises from an American orphan upbringing to a Parisian operatic diva. In 2018, readers will be able to get their hands on his first collection of essays, entitled "How To Write an Autobiographical Novel." Previously, his essays have been published in The New York Times Book Review, Slate, NPR and various other publications. Chee has been awarded the 2003 Whiting Award, a 2004 National Endowments for the Arts Fellowship in prose and a 2010 Massachusetts Cultural Council of the Arts Fellowship.

Needless to say, Chee is about as accomplished as they come. This term, Chee is teaching English 80, "Writing and Reading Fiction," and English 87.04, "Imaginary Countries."

"Imaginary Countries" is a creative writing course that teaches students how to approach writing in the genre of speculative fiction. In the course description, Chee classifies this as, "science fiction, magical realism or myth, or a mix of these, so the author can reinvent a country's history, the country itself -- even the world."

The reading list includes "Sula" by Toni Morrison, "Orlando" by Virginia Woolf and "Never Let Me Go" by Kazuo Ishiguro.

"In a general way, these kinds of stories and novels that we're looking at in the course are attempts by writers to hold up a mirror to culture in a way that a more conventional mirror would probably fail to do," Chee said of the syllabus. "George Eliot calls it the far mirror. Readers are capable of seeing themselves more comfortably with that little bit of distance."

Before creating this class, Chee was inspired by an observation he made about realist fiction.

"For me, the class was inspired by the growing awareness that realist fiction seemed stuck in a way, representing a status quo idea of the world," Chee said. "It was being outstripped by other modes of description."

Students may find this class different from any fiction writing class they have previously taken because it doesn't emphasize the form of realist fiction that has become seemingly customary.
"I think realism in conventional fiction writing classes is taught as a default mode, and I think that's a mistake." Chee said. "It should be taught as one of a range of responses. We aren't helped by overly simplistic approaches, which unfortunately is what realism can be if it is a default mode of expression."

Chee wants his students to break free from that convention, and, in doing so, allow themselves a new opportunity to write even more honest and confronting stories, as he finds that "part of what we look to these fictions for is the truth about our lives that we've hidden even from ourselves."

Though it might seem counterintuitive, some of these truths can only emerge outside of the constraints of realistic fiction.

He called upon television shows like "Westworld" and "Black Mirror" to exemplify the kind of departure from realism that he would like to encourage. In his opinion, shows like these have an ability to present us with "a different way of thinking about how we stay human and what that even means."

"Imaginary Countries" is a course that will push its students to explore forms of writing with which they may have been less familiar. Through this, their writing will hopefully become more effective at forcing the readers to discover revelations that would otherwise remain stuck behind the stipulations of realism. In this way, they may learn to hold up the "far mirror" better than ever before.

"I think writers owe it to themselves to have imaginations that are at least as strange as the world is," Chee said.