

## CONNECTING LIVES THROUGH LITERATURE

*LASE 3559/RUTR 3500*



**“Everything, like an ocean—everything flows and comes into contact. You touch in one place and at the other end of the world it reverberates.”**

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

### **What is this course about?**

Who am I? Why am I here? How should I live? In this course you will grapple in a profound and personal way with these and other timeless human questions explored by classical works of Russian literature. Russian literature is the perfect place to go searching for answers to these kinds of questions, for Russian writers from the past knew first-hand what it meant to struggle for freedom in an unfree society, search for beauty in a broken world, and seek personal truth amid value systems dictated by others. These writers wrote not just to entertain, but to educate, inspire, illuminate, provoke, and challenge. They wrote to jolt readers out of their familiar perceptions and comfort zones and awaken them to a deeper awareness of themselves and the world around them. Put simply, Russian writers wrote to change the world, one reader at a time.

What do you think? Can reading and discussing Russian literature change us, as individuals and as a community? In this class you'll explore this question, as well. However, you won't be doing it alone or exclusively within the context of a traditional UVa classroom, but with members of the larger community in which you live. Many years of teaching another community-based literature course, [Books Behind Bars](#), has convinced me that there is no more powerful way to explore the capacity of literature to change lives and connect us as human beings than to do so with people outside of our usual institutional frameworks and classroom confines. In the second half of the semester, then, you'll meet regularly and facilitate discussions with students at a [local alternative high school](#) who are themselves grappling with the big questions raised by Russian literature and who are excited to take this journey with you. As part of the class, you and your high school student partners will design an engaging and creative public presentation about what your collective journey through the world of Russian literature has meant to you.

By learning to facilitate meaningful, authentic conversations and engaging your near-peers in a collaborative project related to Russian literature, you will gain a deeper understanding of the purpose and relevance of literature studies and will begin to articulate your own answer to the question: Can reading and discussing Russian literature change us? Along the way you will develop essential professional and personal leadership skills that should be useful to you in the future. And, at a time of social divisiveness, this course can help you feel more connected to others, yourself, and the world around you through the power of conversation and collaboration inspired by great works of literature.

## **What will you learn?**

*Connecting Lives Through Literature* has a number of learning objectives. Some focus on tangible knowledge and skills while others are more abstract and of long-lasting benefit. Some of these objectives relate directly to the subject matter—literature—while others are more broadly related to your professional and personal success in life. By the end of this class you should be able to:

- Recognize key authors, works, characters and themes from some great works of Russian literature
- Effectively apply various forms of literary analysis to enrich your understanding of literature as both a reader and discussion facilitator
- Devise intriguing questions and creative activities designed to stimulate rich discussion of literature
- Communicate and collaborate with others in a more effective and authentic way
- Make connections between Russian literature, your own life, and the lives of others
- Write reflectively and insightfully about your personal journey with Russian literature and the “accursed questions” as a reader, learner, collaborator, and human being
- Devise engaging and creative ways to communicate the significance of your journey in this class with a wider audience

## **When do we meet?**

Mondays & Wednesdays 11:00-12:50

## **What will we do when?**

In the first four weeks of the class, before you start meeting with the Murray students, you’ll spend ample time gaining knowledge of the literature through a combination of individual reading assignments, small-group and full group class activities, including practice at co-facilitating mini meetings. You’ll learn how to formulate stimulating questions and activities as well as gain other skills necessary for facilitating discussions at Murray. Additionally,

during this preparation period you'll have an onsite orientation at Murray high school during one Wednesday class.

Over next nine weeks you'll begin your weekly literature discussions with the Murray students at Murray High School on Mondays, during regular class. These meetings will last approximately an hour and ten minutes, and you'll be co-facilitating each meeting with a UVa partner. (We will discuss in class the pairing process.) Then, on Wednesday, we will continue to meet in our regular UVa classroom to debrief and explore additional course material. In the latter part of the semester you'll begin working on the final collaborative project with your UVa co-facilitator and Murray partners, while still meeting at Murray on Mondays and UVa on Wednesdays. The final project will be presented at an event at the Jefferson Library just after the end of the semester, and your final reflection will be due on the last day of exams.

### **How will you be supported along the way?**

You can feel confident that you will receive ample support. Because this will be a small class, and there will be two teaching assistants in addition to myself, you will have the opportunity to work closely with and receive frequent feedback from experienced and caring teachers. Even though this is a new course, it is based on the same approach and teaching principles that have made my Books Behind Bars a successful learning experience for students for the past eight years.

### **How much time will the course require?**

All of the class meetings at UVa and Murray High School as well as travel time to and from Murray will take place during regular scheduled class times. As with any 4 credit course, there will be homework each week (approximately 4-5 hours), but out-of-class meetings with your UVa student partners are built into each week's homework assignment.

### **Who should apply?**

I am looking to create a small intimate learning community of people with a variety of academic and personal interests and backgrounds and invite all students to apply. No prior study of literature is required.

Students who have already done community service work and enjoyed it might find this course appealing, although prior community service experience is not a requirement. Literature majors also would enjoy this course, provided that they are attracted to the idea of connecting literature to life and are comfortable with the idea of using literary analysis not as an end, but a means to something larger. Students considering a career in teaching, who have already taught in some capacity, or who are studying education could also benefit from this course, although again, a background in teaching or education is not a prerequisite.

Ultimately, I am looking for students who are self-starters and want to stretch themselves academically and personally; students who are willing to work hard and take responsibility

for their own educational experience; students who are energized by the prospect of being part of something a bit different, experimental and impactful.

Enrollment in this class is by instructor permission, and you will receive 4 credits.

**For instructions on how to apply for enrollment in the course, please visit the [Application page](#).**

### **Instructor contact information**

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## Readings

In this class you'll have the opportunity to read slowly, carefully, and deeply. We'll be reading a small number of short works (roughly eight stories and a handful of poems). These carefully chosen readings are among the acknowledged classics of Russian literature. From the bizarre to the beautiful, the gritty to the godly, these works, and the characters that inhabit them, should inspire, challenge, and enlighten both UVa and Murray students. The works have at least three features in common:

- (1) They are entertaining, powerfully written, provocative and have stood the test of time. They are classics.
- (2) They are short and thus you and the residents will be able to delve into them deeply.
- (3) They radiate with a moral-spiritual intensity and emotional boldness, and they encourage readers to ponder timeless human questions:

- What makes for a successful life?
- What is happiness?
- Is spiritual wealth more valuable than material wealth?
- Is selfless love possible?
- What does it mean to be a hero?
- How can I be true to myself?
- Who *am* I?
- How much should I care what society thinks about me?
- What is my responsibility to others?
- Does evil exist in the world? Inside me?
- Given that I am going to die, how should I live?

### Primary Works of Fiction

All of these readings are available in Collab under Resources/Literature: Primary Works:

#### Stories:

-Nadezhda Mandelshtam, "Last Letter" from *Hope Abandoned* (1974)

-Varlam Shalamov, "My First Tooth" and "Handwriting" from *Kolyma Tales* (1970-76)

-Fyodor Sologub, "The Search" (1915)

- Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "Matryona's Home" (1963)
- Leo Tolstoy, "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" (1885)
- Leo Tolstoy, "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" (1886)
- Ivan Turgenev, "Living Relic" from *Notes from a Hunter's Album* (1852)
- Mikhail Zoshchenko, "The Lady Aristocrat" (1923), "The Bathhouse" (1925), and "The Adventures of a Monkey" (1945)

### Poems

- Alexander Pushkin, "To a Poet" (1830), "I loved you" (1829), "To..." (1825), "Seclusion" (1819), "Exegi Monumentum" (1836)
- Mikhail Lermontov, "Native Land/Motherland" (1841), "The Sail" (1831), "Alone I set out on the road" (1841), "If you forget me," "Farewell"
- Fyodor Tiutchev, "Silentium!" (1830), "You cannot understand Russia with your mind..."
- Karolina Pavlova, "Strange, the Way We Met" (1854)

### **Secondary Literature**

You will also be assigned to read short selections from *A History of Russian Literature* (D.S. Mirsky) and *Handbook of Russian Literature* (Victor Terras, ed.), as well as some background material from other sources. These readings will be available in Collab under Resources.

### **Other readings**

In addition to the primary literature and secondary literature, there also will be some short readings about teaching, education, and juvenile delinquency. All of these readings will be available in collab under Resources.

# Assignments

## *Participation*

Because the success of this course and your learning depend on your active participation in all aspects of the class, both at UVa and at Murray, you will be expected to come to each class prepared to contribute to and/or co-facilitate a discussion about the assigned material for that day. Classes at UVa will consist primarily of a combination of brief lecture and small group or full group discussion and activities. At Murray you and your UVa partner will be facilitating an hour-long discussion about that week's reading with the four high school students at your table. From time to time we will also do some full-group sharing and activities at Murray.

Since *Connecting Lives Through Literature* emphasizes risk-taking and learning process as opposed to getting a "perfect" result, your participation will be evaluated not on the basis how "brilliant" your in-class comments are, how often you speak, how perfectly you and your partner facilitate a discussion, or even how well a particular discussion goes. Rather, I will be looking for whether you come to class prepared, whether you make a real contribution to the full group and small-group conversations in a way that is true to you (not necessarily in quantity but in quality), and whether you take risks in order to grow as a discussion participant and facilitator. In an effort to help you achieve the course objective of more effective collaboration and communication, we will explore together what such personal risks could look like and what sorts of unique contributions to discussions you might see yourself making.

## *Reflective journal*

The purpose of the weekly reflective journey is for you to reflect, integrate, question, hypothesize, search, and generally explore your thoughts and feelings related to any aspect of your experience in this class. For some of the entries, you will be asked to respond to specific, prompted questions. For other entries you'll have the flexibility to write about whatever you wish. I will also let you know what each entry entails as part of that week's assignment. I'll be looking for how well your journal communicates ***what's important to you*** in your experience of this class. It should capture ***your unique voice and perspectives***.

You should aim for at least one entry per week, around 250-300 words per entry. Some weeks you might write a little less, others weeks a little more depending on your level of inspiration and time availability. But try for somewhere in that range, which usually comes out to at least a page or more of prose per week. By the end of the semester you should have at least 14 entries total.

Finally, please remember to *date* each entry. Also, although it's not required, I encourage you to come up with a *title or theme* for each entry you've written. Past students find this to be an enjoyable creative exercise, as well as a useful tool for grasping the bigger picture, the patterns, and the overarching thrust of your thoughts over the course of the semester. We will be discussing these journals in more depth in class after you've had a chance to practice writing a few entries.

### ***Short writing assignments***

Throughout the semester there will be short individual writing assignments whose purpose is to reinforce your understanding of various forms of literary analysis, practice devising intriguing questions and creative activities, and explore specific topics within the fiction and other course materials. There will be approximately 8 of these short (100-300 word) writing assignments throughout the semester. Over half of these will be assigned in the first four weeks of the semester, as part of your preparation before you start meeting with the Murray students. After that your short writing assignments will consist primarily of team meeting plans and self-evaluations (described below), but there will be still be a few short individual writing assignments from time to time. I expect you to be able to complete each of these short writing assignments in a single sitting. The most important criterion for evaluating them is whether you have done them in a timely manner, as they will be directly related to subject of the next class meeting. All of these short writing assignments should be submitted on collab by 9 am on the day of the next class (i.e., the class after which you received the assignment.) I will always try to provide you with some feedback on these assignments.

### ***Team meeting plans and self-evaluations***

In order to lead the best possible discussions and to learn to communicate and collaborate effectively with others, you will work closely with your UVa partner to develop weekly meeting plans before for each meeting and team self-evaluations afterwards. The meeting plans will be your blueprint for each week's discussion and the self-evaluation your opportunity to trouble-shoot and reflect on that week's meeting. You will start producing these once you begin meeting with your Murray student partners. We will talk more about what is expected and what makes for a good meeting and self-evaluation as the semester progresses.

### ***Midsemester self-evaluation essay (4-5 double-spaced pages)***

The purpose of the midsemester essay (4-5 pages double-spaced) is for you to assess your own progress toward the course objectives. I'll ask you to identify areas in which you believe you have grown the most as well as areas you would like to improve, and then to suggest some steps you might take in the second half of the semester to work toward those improvements. I will use these essays as the basis of an individual consultation with each student to discuss where you are, where you'd like to go, and how I can help support you in getting there. Far more important than what you say about

how well you think you are doing is how thoughtfully you reflect on your experience up to this point in the class. Here is a rubric that identifies the sorts of things I will be looking for in this essay.

### ***Final collaborative project: Connecting Lives Through Literature Community Roundtable***

The final project for this class will give you and your group an opportunity to share the significance of what you have collectively learned over the course of the semester about Russian literature, yourselves, and what it means to read and discuss the great literature in a community context. For this project you, your UVa co-facilitator, and your Murray high school student partners will jointly develop, design, and deliver a 5-7 minute creative presentation to your other classmates as well as other local high school students and members of the public at an event to take place at the Jefferson Madison Regional Library. As part of this 90-minute event, which will be co-sponsored by the library, each group will also facilitate a roundtable on a topic/theme/question of their choosing at their table with members of the audience. This project will not only help you to enhance your collaboration and communication skills, but it will allow you and your Murray partners to make an impact on your community and thus greatly expand the network of lives that are being connected through the works of Russian literature. This final project, then, is intended to be a tangible expression of the idea of “Connecting Lives Through Literature.” I will scaffold the project in a way that will allow your group to work on it in several steps in the second half of the semester. We will discuss this project in more detail later in the semester, and I will do my best to provide you with all the tools and support necessary to make your project excellent.

### ***Final reflective essay (3-4 double-spaced pages)***

In 3-5 succinct, but meaty pages I will ask you to reflect on the learning that did or did not take place for you while working on the final collaborative project. Although you are free to structure the essay however you'd like, I will suggest a few prompts such as: In what specific ways did your experience of working on the collaborative project enhance your understanding of the title of the course: “Connecting Lives Through Literature.” Although your focus will be on discussing the project itself, I will strongly encourage you to link your discussion of the project with your overall journey through over the semester. As part of your preparation for this assignment, then, I will ask you to read over everything you've produced over the semester (your journal, short written assignments, meeting plans and self-evaluations, notes, quotations from the literature, snippets of conversations at Murray, and anything else that was important to you on your journey). We will discuss this essay in more detail closer to the end of the semester.

# Weekly Schedule

## WEEK 1

### **Wednesday August 23 (at UVa): Why am I here? Why are we here?**

#### To prepare for class:

Watch trailer for documentary on Books Behind Bars

Short written reflection: A work that had an impact on you

Thinking exercise: What does the phrase “connecting lives through literature mean to you?

#### Topics to explore in class:

- Why am *I* here? Why are *we* here?
- Exercise: Russian literature and the “Accursed Questions” of life
- “To a Poet”: Finding your personal connection to the text
- Discussion: Core principles of *Connecting Lives Through Literature*

## WEEK 2

### **Monday August 28 (at UVa): What is success?**

#### To prepare for class:

- Read Leo Tolstoy, “How Much Land Does a Man Need?”
- Read “The Little Green Stick and The Lost House” from *Understanding Tolstoy*
- Short writing assignment: Develop three intriguing questions about “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” AND choose three intriguing facts about Tolstoy’s biography

#### Topics to explore in class:

- Lecture/Discussion: Leo Tolstoy, “How Much Land Does a Man Need?”
- Discussion facilitation practice in small groups
- Facilitation exercise: Developing intriguing questions about literature

### **Wednesday, August 30 (at UVa): What is happiness?**

#### To prepare for class:

- Read Ivan Turgenev, “Living Relic”
- Read biographical essay on Turgenev
- Short writing assignment: Choose three intriguing facts about Turgenev’s biography

- Thinking exercise: comparing “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” and “Living Relic”

Topics to explore in class:

- Lecture/discussion of Ivan Turgenev, “Living Relic”
- Student-led discussions: “Living Relic”
  - Facilitation debriefs
- Facilitation exercise: Developing follow-up questions

WEEK 3

**Monday, Sept 4 (at UVa): What is a community? What is collaboration?**

To prepare for class:

Read Parker Palmer, selections from *Courage to Teach*; ccouraHow we’ll work with them/ Education issues: Parker Palmer; what does facilitation look like plus literature

Topics to explore in class:

**Wednesday, Sept 6 (at Murray): On-site orientation at Murray High School**

To prepare for class:

Topics to explore in class:

In Orientation at Murray High School; meet some staff and students, learn about their high school and educational philosophy

WEEK 4

**Monday, Sept 11 (at UVa): Given that I’m going to die, how should I live?**

To prepare for class:

- Read Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*
- Read the document on “Core Ideas” and Edmundson on “Final Narratives”
- Short writing exercise: *Ivan Ilyich* Questions/Activity
- Short writing exercise: select *Ivan Ilyich* passage for close reading

Topics to explore in class:

- Student-led discussions: “The Death of Ivan Ilych”
  - Facilitation debriefs

- Lecture/Discussion: Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*
- Announcement of partners
- Introducing the meeting plan

### **Wednesday, Sept 13 (at UVa)**

#### To prepare for class:

- Short writing assignment with your partner: Develop a creative activity for “How Much Land Does a Man Need?”
- Read documents, “Meeting Plan” and “Team Self-Evaluation”
- Review the document on “Core Ideas” and Edmundson on “Final Narratives”
- Review and bring the passage you selected from *Ivan*

#### Topics to explore in class:

- Core ideas in literature / core ideas question about *Ivan*
- Exercise: sharing of intriguing activities
- Introducing the post meeting team self-evaluation
- Final preparations for first meeting at Murray

### WEEK 5

#### **Monday, Sept 18 (at Murray): Murray Meeting 1: Leo Tolstoy, “How Much Land Does a Man Need?”**

#### To prepare for class:

- Reread “How Much Land Does a Man Need?”
- Review your notes and the biographical material about Tolstoy
- Create the meeting plan for “HMLDMN” discussion with your partner

Topics to explore in class: to be determined by UVa students and Murray students

### **Wed, Sept 20 (at UVa):**

#### **To prepare for class:**

#### **Topics to explore in class:**

- Meeting debrief: reactions, insights, critical moments, self–assessment and next steps

Lecture/Discussion on Ivan Turgenev, “Living Relic” ???

## WEEK 6

**Monday, Sept 25 (at Murray):** *Murray Meeting 2: Ivan Turgenev “Living Relic”*

To prepare for class:

- Reread “Living Relic”
- Review your notes and the biographical material about Turgenev
- Create the meeting plan for “Living Relic” discussion with your partner

To explore in class: to be determined by UVa students and Murray students

**Wed, Sep 27 (at UVa):**

To prepare for class:

- Reread all of your work in the class up to this point
- Short writing assignment: Note patterns in your thinking, themes in your journey, salient ideas coming up for you

Topics to explore in class:

- Meeting debrief
- Discussion: What does self-reflection mean to you, and why do we engage in it?
- Discussion of mid-semester self-evaluation, due the following week
- Exercise: Reflecting on the reflective journal  
[NOTES TO SELF: OPPORTUNITY TO SPEND MORE TIME THINKING ABOUT REFLECTION ESSAY AND WHAT MAKES FOR GOOD ESSAY]

***Hand in course journals***

## WEEK 7

**Monday, Oct 2: NO CLASS—READING DAY**

**Wed, Oct 4 (at UVa): Is authentic love possible?**

To prepare for class:

- Read Fyodor Dostoevsky, *White Nights*
- Read biographical material on Dostoevsky
- View three brief online videos about *White Nights*:
  - [White Nights - by Fyodor Dostoevsky](#)
  - [White nights by Dostoyevsky Nastenka's monologue Lyudmyla Honcharova](#)

➤ [Class Presentation ENGL 338: Dostoevsky's "White Nights"](#)

Topics to explore in class:

- Lecture/Discussion: Fyodor Dostoevsky, *White Nights*
- Creative exercise: More than words on the page: Communicating how a piece of literature moves you in another medium

**NOTE TO SELF: HOMEWORK: As part of meeting plan, explore with Murray students how you would communicate your reaction to *White Nights* into another medium**

**Friday, October 6: Midsemester self-reflection essay due**

WEEK 8

**Monday, Oct 9 (at Murray): Murray Meeting 3: Fyodor Dostoevsky, *White Nights***

Topics to explore in class: to be determined by UVa students and Murray students

**Wed, Oct 11 (at UVa):**

Topics to explore in class:

Shortened meeting debrief

Skills building for final collaborative project (

WEEK 9

**Monday, Oct 16 (at Murray): Murray Meeting 4**

**Wed, Oct 18 (at UVa)**

WEEK 10

**Monday, Oct 23 (at Murray): Murray Meeting 5:**

**Wed, Oct 25 (at UVa)**

WEEK 11

**Monday Oct 30 (at Murray): Murray Meeting 6**

**Wed November 1 (at UVa)**

WEEK 12

**Monday, Nov 6 (at UVa)**

(No class at Murray): Perfect time to start thinking about creative project; creative expression of what the experience has meant; how to collaborate with Murray students; what forms creative meaning-making might take.

**Wed, Nov 8 (at UVa)**

WEEK 13

**Monday, Nov 13 (at Murray): Murray Meeting 7**

**Wed, Nov 15 (at UVa)**

WEEK 14

**Monday, Nov 20 (Murray) : *Murray Meeting 8***

**Wednesday, Nov 22:** No class, Thanksgiving

WEEK 15

**Monday, Nov 27 (at Murray): *Murray Meeting 9***

Wednesday, Nov 29 (TBD)

WEEK 16

**Monday, Dec 4,** Last day of class (at UVa)

**Wednesday, Dec 6, 11:00-12:50:** Final celebration at Jefferson Madison Regional Library, 11-12:50

