Course overview

Fiction editing is a profession of little theory and lengthy practice. This course is meant to offer students a short but intensive encounter with both. It will give students an opportunity to study, share and discuss strategies for editing and exercise critical thinking on writing and editing fiction under guidance of a leading professional editor of Israeli fiction. The course will introduce, in English translation, the writings of three leading Israeli contemporary writers whose work the instructor has edited. The course will include video or live online chats with one or more of these authors.

Writing and editing will be done both in and out of class. Class sessions will begin with a short lecture or a group discussion on an assigned topic, then go on to focus on assignments designed to improve writing and editing skills.

Requirements and Grading

During the course you will be asked to complete 7 home exercises and 2 major in-class exercises, as well as a number of shorter ones. Each of the home exercises and the major in-class exercises accounts for 8 points of the final grade. The remaining 28 points are based on the quality of your proactive participation in both parts of each session (discussion and workshop) and in the short in-class exercises. I strongly encourage and welcome open communication with students both in class and in my office hours. If you feel the need for an extended meeting, please let me know in advance.
Required Reading:

**Fiction**

Etgar Keret / *Missing Kissinger* – The stories "Braking the Pig", "A Hole in the Wall", "clean shave" and "Abram Kadabram"

Etgar Keret / *The Nimrod Flipout* – The story "For Only 9.99 (Inc. Tax and Postage)"

Amir Gutfreund / *Our Holocaust* (assigned excerpts)

Eshkol Nevo / *Homesick* (assigned excerpts)

**Background reading:**

**Essays**

Zadie Smith: "Fail better"

David Foster Wallace: "What words really mean: David Foster Wallace's dictionary"

T.S. Eliot: "Tradition and the individual talent"

Susan Sontag: "On Style"

George Orwell: "Why I Write"

Joan Didion: "Why I Write"

Joan Didion: "On Keeping a Notebook"
Course plan

Session 1:

What does an editor do?
In this session we'll discuss the basic stages of macro and micro editing (definitely, editors might actually move things around, and no, they are not really there for the typos) and other tasks of an editor within the publishing house (finding/selecting manuscripts; mediating between the author and the publishing house). We'll also discuss approaches to editing (the editor who shows you how vs. the editor who does it for you) and analyze the dilemma of when the editor should enter the scene.

Exercise 1: Students will be asked to bring to class (by Session 6) an example of a published piece they had read that made their "editor's instincts" kick-in (for example: This story should not have ended this way… This character should not have done this or that… This dialogue is off-tune… etc.). Students will be asked to prepare a 5-10 minute presentation and make a case for their editing comments on the piece of their choice. Written-down main points for the presentations should be handed in by Session 6. Presentations will take place starting Session 7.

Session 2:

Does every writer need an editor?
In this session we'll discuss the limitations of self-editing ("I gave it to some friends and they had some really good comments, so do I still need an editor?") We'll also discuss the difference between fiction and non-fiction editing and address the following question: How to hook on to someone else's voice?

Exercise 2: Rewriting a monologue, from 1st to 3rd person, based on an excerpt from Eshkol Nevo's novel Homesick. When finished, students will exchange papers with their peers. We'll take a few minutes for quiet reading and then discuss advantages and disadvantages of the 3rd person. Papers are to be handed in at the end of the session.

Session 3:

Writers and their editors: the odd couples.
This session will focus on how the writer-editor collaboration is profoundly different from other artistic partnerships (composer/performer; director/actors/film editor; painter/curator). We'll discuss some famous writer-editor relationships, the emotional sides of the editing process and the etiquette of giving feedback.
Exercise 3: Continuation of Exercise 2.

Session 4:

So, what *is* good writing? And are there rules for it?
Writing is the "football" of the arts: it is accessible to all, but only a few will shine at it. So how can you improve your chances for mastering this art? And is taking writing advice from other writers always such a good idea?
In this session we'll also discuss different writing habits of different authors (X words a day? X hours a day? What do you mean *everywhere*? And yes, what *about* inspiration?)

Exercise 4: Write a short family dinner scene (approximately 2 pages) in which one participant is holding on to a secret. Exchange papers with peers. Home assignment: Rewrite the scene you were handed, this time the secret being revealed right at the beginning of the dinner.

Session 5:

On writing as a form of seduction.
Should you write as if no one will read it, or is it the other way around?

Exercise 5: Drawing on Exercise 4, students will be asked to give the revised scenes back to the original writers. We'll take a few minutes for quiet reading and then discuss the editing insights obtained during this exercise.

Session 6:

On making your reader forget that he's reading.
"The difference between fiction and reality? Fiction has to make sense."
— Tom Clancy.
Reality exceeds imagination and it also enjoys better credibility. So where does that leave the fiction writer? This session will focus on the two-way mechanism of the reading process: the willing suspension of disbelief vs. the persistent instinct of doubting. We'll also discuss the notion that all literary fiction is autobiographical to an extent and the weight or lack thereof of the argument so often addressed at editors: "But that really did happen!"

Exercise 6: Continuation of Exercise 5.
Session 7:

Why do extreme characters demand extreme literary "control"?
This session will be dedicated to the difficulty of portraying madness and other dire mental states in words.

Exercise 7: Presentation of Exercise 1 (3 students). A new home exercise will be assigned – The character pre-study: Students will be asked to answer a character study questionnaire regarding a character of their choice from one of the Etgar Keret stories listed for the course.

Session 8:

On recurring weaknesses in first-time manuscripts: The Thesauruscripts and other dinosaurs.
In this session we'll discuss some of the notions I have gathered after reading hundreds of manuscripts. We'll also discuss the importance of literary incubation and how to avoid literary soufflés.

Exercise 8: Presentation of Exercise 1 (3 students).

Session 9:

On making informed "mistakes"
After an examination of this session's topic, we'll consider the importance of the editor's first reading, discuss techniques of defamiliarizing a text in order to enable "re-seeing" it and go over specific editing examples.

Exercise 9: Presentation of Exercise 1 (3 students).

Session 10:

On editing translations: choice making in an art of endless choices.
If translating is like "kissing through a handkerchief, how can the editor aim for a more direct contact? In this session we'll talk about major issues in translating and translation editing (who's in charge of the spirit of the work?) and bring attention to
more aspects of the slippery world of words. Finally, we'll look at some neat translation solutions as well as some fantastic translation mishaps.

**Exercise 10:** The Google Translate experiment: we'll drop a few English sentences into Google Translate, translate them into Hebrew and then retranslate the outcome to English. Then we'll discuss the two versions.

**Session 11:**

**Midterm open session:** Students will be invited to ask me anything they didn't get a chance to ask so far and clarify anything that remains puzzling as we approach the exam on Session 12.

**Exercise 11:** Presentation of Exercise 1 (all remaining students). Handing in the exercise assigned in Session 7.

**Session 12:**

**Mid term exercise**

**Session 13:**

On how to know what not to tell: from the Cain and Abel story onwards.

This session (inspired by an article by the Israeli writer Aaron Megged) will deal with the importance of using silence in our writings.

**Exercise 13:** Drawing on one or two of the papers submitted in Session 11, we'll discuss editing ideas which surfaced during Exercise 7.

**Session 14:**

"I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have the time." — Blaise Pascal

This is a session on trying too hard: how not to dress-up your vocabulary and phrasing and how to keep at a safe distance from the thesaurus (the thesaurus – friend or foe?).

**Exercise 14:** Please see previous exercise.
"The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-ninth of it being above water." — Ernest Hemingway
A session focused on how to control your research in your final draft.

**Exercise 15:** Please see Exercise 13. Home assignment: Students will be given a short story and asked to delete what they perceive to be unnecessary.

**Session 16:**

**On film adaptation as a form of editing.**
Film screening in class of "$9.99," a film written by Etgar Keret and Tatia Rosenthal, based on Keret’s stories.

Home exercise: Write a scene involving two people using the point of view of only one of the two characters. Now switch.

**Session 17:**

**Discussion of the film "$9.99" in relation to Keret’s stories, focusing on the editorial choices made in the writing of the screenplay.**

**Exercise 17:** In class: Based on an excerpt from Amir Gutfreund’s novel *Our Holocaust*, write a word-by-word telephone conversation between two characters. At home: Rewrite the conversation, this time not using any direct quotes.

**Session 18:**

**How to know when you are done: On fixing the problems of your current book in your next one...**

**Exercise 18:** Drawing on Exercise 17, we'll present some of the papers in class and discuss the ways students used various techniques of expressing thoughts and feelings. Handing in of exercise 16.

**Session 19:**

**Final exercise**