

HCB 510 Literature, Compassion, and Health Care
Stony Brook Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care and Bioethics, Fall 2025
3 Credits

Class Meetings: Thursdays, 6 PM, from Aug 28, 2025 through Dec 11, 2025.

Instructor: Maria Basile, MD, MBA
E-mail: Maria.Basile@stonybrookMedicine.edu

Instructor: Richard Bronson, MD
E-mail: Richard.Bronson@stonybrookMedicine.edu

Instructor: Jack Coulehan, MD, MPH
E-mail: John.Coulehan@stonybrookMedicine.edu

OVERVIEW

How does literature help us understand the nature of human illness and suffering? Can written works of art, classic and contemporary, that depict moments of compassion and compassionate acts lay bare the moral, spiritual, psychological, and physical reality of suffering? There is a long association between literature and Medicine, from the viewpoint of physician-writers, such as Anton Chekhov, William Carlos Williams, and Richard Seltzer whose literary skills have eclipsed their medical backgrounds. Understanding how compassion and other human qualities are portrayed in personal essays, literature, theater, film, such as in Anatole Broyard's "Doctor, Talk to Me" and the 2011 film, *Contagion*, can help us explore the relationship between patient and doctor, between doctor and society, and the nature of healing. What is your role in healing, and how does reading and reflection help you in this role? In this full semester course, we will study these relationships through the reading of poetry, drama, fiction, memoir, and essay and reflect on the nature of suffering, the intrinsic human need for compassion, and the implications for health and healing.

Educational objectives: Students who successfully complete this course will be able to

1. Discuss and demonstrate the use of literature as one method of enhancing empathy, imaginative identification, and the moral imagination.
2. Explain literary, cultural, and religious attempts to find meaning in human suffering.

3. Demonstrate enhanced skills of “reading” patients and clinical situations through close reading of literary texts.
4. Describe how the arts and humanities provide insight into the human condition, suffering, and compassion, and can contribute to the professional identity formation of physicians, other clinicians, health care leaders, and caregivers.
5. Demonstrate an understanding of clinicians’ responsibilities to patients, colleagues, and themselves.

READINGS

Required Texts:

- Lisa See, *Lady Tan’s Circle of Women*, Scribner 2023.
- Richard Reynolds, MD & John Stone, MD (Eds.) *On Doctoring (New, Revised and Expanded Third Edition)*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2001.
- Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Picador, 1989.
- Additional poems, stories, excerpts and articles will be distributed as a pdf if required.

Reading Assignments:

The main text for this course is *On Doctoring (New, Revised and Expanded Third Edition)*, Richard Reynolds, MD & John Stone, MD (Eds.), New York, Simon & Schuster, 2001. You should be able to find a used copy online, but please make sure you order the *New, Revised and Expanded Third Edition* from 2001. Same with Susan Sontag’s essay collection, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* and the Lisa See novel, *Lady Tan’s Circle of Women*, which should both be available through Amazon or other discount booksellers.

The required readings average about 50 pages per week, although they vary dramatically from zero (the poetry workshop) to several hundred (*Lady Tan’s Circle of Women*).

It’s always a good idea to start reading the longer works early in the semester. We also encourage you to read additional material from *On Doctoring* if you have the time and interest. Most of the topics are interrelated and align with themes mentioned in our objectives and syllabus. The more you read the more you can practice “close reading” and “reflection.”

Most classes will begin with an open discussion of the reading assignments and the authors. This discussion will be

driven by the elements of close reading outlined here:

The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University Reading Guide for Reflective Practice

Observation

Signs of perceiving--seeing, hearing, smelling, touching. Details, descriptions, sensory aspects of the scenes.

Perspective

Were multiple perspectives represented, explored, guessed at? How were these perspectives conveyed?

Form

What is the genre--story, poem, play, screenplay, parable, cautionary tale, ghost story, black comedy? Notice any use of Metaphor or imagery. Describe the temporal structure of the text—are events told in chronological order, in reverse, in chaotic sequence? Are there allusions to other stories or texts? Are there inserted texts (like quotations, letters, sub-stories)? What is the diction--formal, breezy, bureaucratic, scientific?

Voice

Whose voice tells the story? Is the narrative told in a first-person, second-person, or third-person voice? Is the teller near or far, intimate or remote? Can you feel the teller's presence as you read? Is the telling self-aware? Reliable?

Mood

What is the mood of the text? What mood does reading it leave you in?

Motion

What does the story do? Does the teller seem to move from the beginning to the end? Does the story bring you somewhere in its course?

Further reflection, beyond these basic elements of close reading, has us considering different connections we can make with what is being told in each story, poem, essay or dramatic scene. What resonates with you? What troubles you? Are there characters, thoughts, feelings you can relate to? Do you find relevance in the pieces chosen? Does anything seem dated or unrelatable? Can you describe why (the piece seems dated, or irrelevant to our society? Can you separate yourself enough from the poem, play or short story to identify any internal biases? Any systemic/ contextual factors

contributing to patient interaction or care should be identified and explored. Do you agree or disagree with any opinions expressed in the essays?

Creative writing sessions:

During most of our classes, the close reading and reflection discussion will be followed by time to write, engage in personal reflection, and share with our group. The prompts will be introduced in class, and 10-15 minutes will be taken to privately reflect and respond in short form writing. The prompts will be related to the readings for that week, often more than one, and designed to elicit creative responses based on the elements listed above.

CLASS CALENDAR

Date	Topic	Readings
Aug 28, 2025 Week 1	Introduction to Course	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Film: <i>Healing Words: Poetry and Medicine</i>.2. Course Syllabus (handout)3. Presentation: Close Reading and the Uses of Literature in Medicine.4. Poems for discussion (handout)
Sept 4 Week 2	Healer-Patient Relationship	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. <i>On Doctoring (Stories)</i>: William Carlos Williams, “Girl with the Pimple Face”; Susan Mates, “Laundry,” Abraham Verghese, excerpt from <i>My Own Country</i>2. <i>On Doctoring (Poems)</i>: Dannie Abse, “Case History”; Rafael Campo, “What the Body Told”; Raymond Carver, “What the Doctor Said.”3. Frank Huyler, “Sugar” (short story, pdf)4. Jack Coulehan, “Take Off Your Clothes” (pdf)5. Richard Bronson, “I Shall be Your Vasari” (pdf)

Sept 11 Week 3	Experience of illness and suffering	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>On Doctoring (Stories)</i>: Anatole Broyard, “Doctor, Talk to Me”; Zora Neale Hurston, “My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience”; Arno Bontemps, “A Summer Tragedy.” 2. <i>On Doctoring (Poems)</i>: James Dickey, “Diabetes” and “The Cancer Match”; Mary Oliver, “University Hospital, Boston” 3. Audre Lorde, “Never to Dream of Spiders” (poem, pdf) 4. Maria Basile, “Oatmeal Love” (poem, pdf) 5. Jack Coulehan, “Heart Blockages” (poem, pdf) 6. Richard Bronson “Another Country” (poem, pdf)
Sept 18 Week 4	Tyranny of the Normal	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Poems: Jack Coulehan, “The Six Hundred Pound Man”; Patricia Goedicke, “Weight Bearing”; Sharon Olds, “The Pull”; Marilyn Davis, “Song for My Son”; and Miller Williams, “The Ones That Are Thrown Out” 2. Andre Dubos, “The Fat Girl” (short story, pdf) 3. Raymond Carver, “Fat.” (short story, pdf)
Sept 25 Week 5	The Healer’s Vulnerability (Less Than Perfect)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>On Doctoring</i> (stories): David Hilfiker, “Mistakes”; Mikhail Bulgakov, “Baptism by Rotation” 2. Susan Mates, “The Good Doctor”(pdf) 3. Jack Coulehan, “The Silk Robe” (pdf) 4. Sylvia Plath “<i>The Surgeon at 2a.m.</i>” (pdf) 5. Maria Basile “To Sylvia” (pdf)
Oct 2 Week 6	Mental Health	<p>Pdfs:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gabrielle Roy, “Alicia,” (1957) 2. Tim O’Brien, “The Things They Carried,” (1990) 3. Walther Moseley, “Between Storms,” (2020)

Oct 9 Week 7	Poetry Workshop STUDENT POEMS DUE	Student poems
Oct 17 Week 8	Death and Dying	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>On Doctoring</i> (Poems): Emily Dickinson poems; Dylan Thomas, “Do Not Go Gentle”; Pablo Neruda, “Larynx”; Maya Angelou, “The Last Decision.” 2. Ethan Canin, “We Are Nighttime Travelers” (short story, <i>On Doctoring</i>) 3. Frank Huyler, “The Dead Lake” (short story, pdf) 4. Richard Selzer, “Tom and Lily,” (short story, pdf)
Oct 23 Week 9	On Aging	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>On Doctoring</i> (Poem): Alice Walker, “Medicine” 2. Ruth Praver Jhabvala, “The Man With His Dog.” (short story, pdf) 3. Maurice Gee, “Glorious Morning, Comrade.” (short story, pdf) 4. Alice Munro, “The Bear Came Over The Mountain.” (short story, pdf) 5. Ernest Hemingway, “A Clean, Well-lighted Place.” (short story, pdf)
Oct 30 Week 10	Medicine and Society	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Essay: Susan Sontag, “AIDS And Its Metaphors,” Chapters 1-4, pp. 93 – 131. 2. Film: <i>Philadelphia</i> (1993) – will be watched together, in class.
Nov 6 Week 11	Public Health	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Essay: Susan Sontag, “AIDS And Its Metaphors,” Chapters 5 – 8, pp. 132 – 183. 2. Film: <i>Contagion</i> (2011) – will be watched together, in class.

Nov 13 Week 12	Women's Health and Women in Medicine	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>On Doctoring (Memoir and Poems)</i>: Elspeth Cameron Ritchie, "HOSPITAL SKETCHBOOK: Life on the Ward Through an Intern's Eyes" 2. <i>On Doctoring (Poems)</i>: Linda Pastan, "Notes from the Delivery Room"; Sharon Olds, "Miscarriage" and "35/10"; Lucille Clifton, "the lost baby poem" and "poem to my uterus" 3. Maria Basile, "Goodnight, Womb," "Cracked Hands." (poems, pdf)
Nov 20 Week 13	Disability, Poetry and Society	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. John Lee Clark: "Disability Poetics and Classic Verse" (essay, pdf), available online, here, John Lee Clark: Disability Poetics and Classic Verse Academy of American Poets 2. Raymond Antrobus, "Echo," (pdf) and listen to the poet here, Echo The Poetry Foundation 3. Lateef McLeod, "Why Are You Scared of Me?" (pdf) or online, here Why Are You Scared of Me? The Poetry Foundation
	THANKSGIVING WEEK	THANKSGIVING WEEK
Dec 4 Week 14	Synthesis and Analysis FINAL PAPER DUE	<i>Lady Tan's Circle of Women</i> (novel)
Dec 11 – Week15	EXAM WEEK – NO CLASS	

HCB 510 Attendance Policy As with most courses for the Master's program in Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care and Bioethics, HCB 510 is held in-person and attendance is required. For students in the joint MD/MA program, exceptional clinical requirements may necessitate a remedial arrangement to attend two or

possibly three class sessions remotely, as discussed with the course instructor at the beginning of the semester. MD/MA students who are joining the class virtually will be expected to utilize a desktop, laptop, or tablet computer with audio, video, and screen sharing capabilities in a location that is distraction free. (Seminar sessions are not recorded). Absences must be remediated as the instructor designates and will include timely completion of all scheduled reading and written assignments as well as additional instructor-determined requirements. Any questions regarding this policy should be brought to the attention of the course instructor and, as necessary, to the MA Program Directors (Drs. Post and Basile).

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

In addition to reading and in-class writing and discussion, there are two written assignments in this course.

1. **Poetry Workshop** – choose a piece that you’ve written in class or write a new one that you’ll share with others in the workshop in an effort to improve the poem, its effectiveness, and its beauty. (10 % of Grade)
2. **Final essay.** The final assignment (due December 5) is a 3 to 5-page essay, in which you reflect on your close reading of Lisa See’s novel, Lady Tan’s Circle of Women. (20% of Grade) In this essay, you will demonstrate your mastery of the elements of close reading by selecting one of the following topics:
 - a. **Discuss and demonstrate the use of literature as one Method of enhancing empathy, imaginative identification, and the moral imagination.**
 - b. **Explain the literary, cultural, and religious attempts to find Meaning in human suffering.**
 - c. **Demonstrate enhanced skills of “reading” patients and clinical situations through close reading of literary texts.**
 - d. **Describe how the arts and humanities provide insight into the human condition, suffering, and compassion, and can contribute to the professional identity formation of physicians, other clinicians, health care leaders, and caregivers.**
 - e. **Demonstrate an understanding of clinicians’ responsibilities to patients, colleagues, and themselves.**

Feel free to cite other works from our class to further illustrate your points.

A note about Generative AI Use by Students taking HCB 510:

Students may use generative AI tools such as CoPilot, or Grammarly's generative AI features for the final essay ONLY. Such use must be documented and appropriately cited. It may be helpful to time-stamp versions of your paper, before AI use and after, so the specific use of AI is delineated and AI generated content is not misrepresented as the student's own, original work.

AI use for the generation of student reflections, poetry or other creative writing is not permitted in HCB 510.

Students remain responsible for the quality and integrity of all submitted work and research. Unauthorized use of generative AI to complete assignments for this course will be addressed between the instructors and student, and a pattern of this behavior may result in escalation for further investigation as an academic integrity violation.

Any questions or concerns about this policy may be directed to the attention of Dr Basile. Please consult the Graduate Bulletin for further institutional details.

GRADING POLICY

Your grade for the course will be based on 110 points:

1. Participation in class discussions (70 points, 75% of your grade). This aspect of the course may require some explanation since students often consider discussion grades to be subjective or arbitrary. We expect students to demonstrate that they have read the material by speaking up, offering their interpretations, by demonstrating elements of close reading, and defending their points of view. We are looking for quality of thinking and expression, intellectual curiosity and critical, contextualized use of close reading.
2. If you must miss a class, remediation is as follows:
 - a. First, you will be given a 500-word written assignment documenting close reading of your choice of two works from the assigned reading material. You must include in your essay a mention of the principles of

close reading of texts as well as some historical and personal context from the point of view of the author. This assignment will be due at the next scheduled Meeting (of our HCB510 course). This remediation is available for a maximum of two absences. Following three, or more absences, letter grades may be adjusted as follows:

- i. 3 absences (with max remediation) → Grade is reduced to A-
 - ii. 4 absences (with max remediation) → Grade is reduced to a B.
 - iii. Absence from more than 4 classes → Final grade is F.
2. The poem (and your workshop participation) = 15 points.
 3. Final paper = 25 points. Failure to submit a final paper will result in a final grade of F for the course.
 4. Scoring system:

POINTS	GRADE
92 – 110	A
85 – 91	A -
72 – 84	B
65 – 71	C
Absence from more than 4 classes (with or without remediation), or Failure to submit a final paper, meeting the above criteria.	F

5. Students will be notified at midsemester if faculty observes signs of struggling with the content, workload, or seminar participation. Students are also encouraged to reach Dr Basile if they have similar concerns for themselves or their classmates.

Student Success Resources: How to Be a Successful Student in This Course

There are multiple resources, university offices, and help desks that are available to assist you with everything from advising, tutoring, accessibility and much more.

Review some [Academic Success Strategies](#) and visit the [Student Resources](#) page for links to resources on campus.

Wellness & Support Statement

Stony Brook values student well-being, including Mental health, and recognizes that a variety of factors can impact emotional wellness and academic success including stress, anxiety, depression, substance use, sexual violence, family or relationship concerns, and political conflict. [Resources are available](#) if you experience challenges or wellness concerns that affect your ability to be successful in class, and you are encouraged to reach out for help when you need it.

Technical Requirements and Assistance

[D2L Brightspace](#) is Stony Brook University's digital learning environment. It is used for the facilitation of communications between faculty and students, submission of assignments, and secure posting of grades and feedback in your courses. To [access Brightspace](#), go to mycourses.stonybrook.edu and use your SBU NetID and password. If you are unsure of your NetID, visit [Finding Your NetID and Password](#) for more information.

Sometimes submitting coursework via a tablet and/or mobile device can be challenging. Computers equipped with the appropriate software are available for use at the various [SINC site computer labs](#). Both physical and virtual labs are available. You can also borrow a computer through [SBU's Laptop Loan Program](#).

Visit the [Technical Requirements page](#) for additional information regarding hardware and software options.

Please use the following information if you need technical assistance at any time during the course or to report a problem with Brightspace:

Brightspace Support via SUNY Helpdesk

- Phone: 1-844-673-6786
- Submit a [ticket or chat online](#)

Stony Brook University: Academic Technology Services

- Phone: 631-632-9800
- Email: AcademicTechnologies@stonybrook.edu

Privacy Policies

This course utilizes various educational technologies to enhance the learning experience. You can access links to the [privacy policies](#) of the tools and platforms used at Stony Brook University on the Syllabus Addendum webpage.

University Policies

Student Accessibility Support Center Statement

If you have a physical, psychological, Medical, or learning disability that may impact your course work, please contact the Student Accessibility Support Center, Stony Brook Union Suite 107, (631) 632-6748, or at sasc@stonybrook.edu. They will determine with you what accommodation is necessary and appropriate. All information and documentation is confidential.

Students who require assistance during emergency evacuation are encouraged to discuss their needs with their professors and the Student Accessibility Support Center. For procedures and information go to the following website: <https://ehs.stonybrook.edu//programs/fire-safety/eMergency-evacuation/evacuation-guide-disabilities> and search Fire Safety and Evacuation and Disabilities.

Academic Integrity Statement

Each student must pursue his or her academic goals honestly and be personally accountable for all submitted work. Representing another person's work as your own is always wrong. Faculty is required to report any suspected instances of academic dishonesty to the Academic Judiciary. Faculty in the Health Sciences Center (School of Health Professions, Nursing, Social Welfare, Dental Medicine) and School of Medicine are required to follow their school-specific procedures. For more comprehensive information on academic integrity, including categories of academic dishonesty please refer to the academic judiciary website at http://www.stonybrook.edu/commcms/academic_integrity/index.html

Critical Incident Management

Stony Brook University expects students to respect the rights, privileges, and property of other people. Faculty are required to report to the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards any disruptive behavior that interrupts their ability to teach, compromises the safety of the learning environment, or inhibits students' ability to learn. Faculty in the HSC Schools and the School of Medicine are required to follow their school-specific procedures. Further information about most academic matters can be found in the Undergraduate Bulletin, the Undergraduate Class Schedule, and the Faculty-Employee Handbook.

Understand When You May Drop This Course

If you need to drop or withdraw from the course, it is your responsibility to be aware of the tuition liability deadlines listed on the registrar's [Academic Calendar](#). Before making the decision to drop/withdraw you may want to [contact Me or] refer to the University's policies:

- [Undergraduate Course Load and Course Withdrawal Policy](#)
- [Graduate Course Changes Policy](#)

Incomplete Policy

Under emergency/special circumstances, students may petition for an incomplete grade. Circumstances must be documented and significant enough to Merit an incomplete. If you need to request an incomplete for this course, contact Dr Basile for approval as far in advance as possible. You should also read the University's policies that apply to you:

[Undergraduate Bulletin](#)

[Graduate Bulletin](#)

Course Materials and Copyright Statement

Course material accessed from Brightspace, Zoom, Echo 360, VoiceThread, etc. is for the exclusive use of students who are currently enrolled in the course. Content from these systems cannot be reused or distributed without written permission of the instructor and/or the copyright holder. Duplication of materials protected by copyright, without permission of the copyright holder is a violation of the Federal copyright law, as well as a violation of Stony Brook's Academic Integrity Policy.