

## ENGLISH 238

### CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

Jeff Pence  
Fall 2007  
TTh, 9:35-10:50 a.m.  
Lewis Ctr 102

Office: Rice 109  
Of. Hrs.: M. 1-2:30; Th. 1-2:30  
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#### Texts

- Allison Bechdel, Fun Home
- Junot Diaz, The Brief, Wondrous Life of Os
- Louise Erdrich, The Painted Drum
- Jessica Hagedorn, Dream Jungle
- Frank Lentricchia & Thomas McLaughlin, eds., Critical Terms for Literary Study
- Jonathan Lethem, The Fortress of Solitude
- Cormac McCarthy, Blood Meridian
- Marilynne Robinson, Gilead
- Philip Roth, The Plot Against America
- George Saunders, Pastoralia
- Gary Shteyngart, Absurdistan
- Colson Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt

#### Course Aims

This class is intended to serve three functions. First, it is an introduction to recent American fiction. By looking at a selection of contemporary novels, we will begin to consider the texts individually and in relation to each other and the socio-historical context of the United States at the turn of the century. Second, the course serves as a preliminary briefing in the language and conceptual frames which contemporary literary scholars, critics and theorists use to make sense of these fictions. Reading, even “pleasure reading,” is always an activity; our critical reading ought to lead to a self-conscious experience of “doing something” with a given narrative. Third, the class is an opportunity for you to improve your reading, writing and speaking skills.

#### Course Policies & Requirements

Because we meet so few times over the course of a semester, I have a strict policy on **attendance**. I take attendance and your presence in class is mandatory. You may miss two classes without a viable excuse (official medical excuses and family emergencies are the only ones I have accepted). Beginning with the third unexcused absence, your grade will begin to decline. After five absences, you will fail the course. Also, consistent late arrivals are disruptive to the class and will adversely affect your grade.

I also require **participation**. I do this because oral communication in a group setting is an acquired skill, just like writing, and an important one, both in the context of this course and in general. Most people have to talk with other people in order to survive. Good participation isn't solely measured by the sheer quantity of words spoken. It also depends on developing one's ability to listen to others' statements, to incorporate their thinking into your own expressions, to ask questions, to clarify where a discussion has gone and how it could be improved, to make connections between others' statements. Feelings of reticence and discomfort speaking in a class are natural--but, then, so is writer's block. Neither are sufficient reasons for not working through the hesitancy and developing abilities and confidence in the required skills for this course. If you need help figuring out how to enter class discussion, come talk to me for some tips and strategies.

Naturally, **readings** are to be completed and considered before the class meeting for which they are assigned. Assume that 2/3 of each novel should be completed by the Tuesday of the week we begin discussion. (Week 1 is an exception.) Readings from Critical Terms must be completed by the day they appear on the syllabus. Our discussions will work best if you bring your texts to class. Annotate them--that is, write all over the books with your thoughts and responses--and you'll be a step ahead in the discussions and in writing your essays.

Likewise, **written assignments** are due at the beginning of the class for which they are assigned. Late work loses a third of a grade per day, beginning with that class. Documented excuses are permissible. I encourage you to visit the writing tutors on duty in Mudd for help thinking through paper ideas and revisions. In addition, you will be asked to meet in small groups of 3-4 to read over and respond to drafts of each other's essays. I no longer accept papers that are neither stapled nor clipped. As a rule, I will not accept email attachments in lieu of a hard copy.

### Assignments

Aside from the basic procedures outlined and assumed above, there are three types of assignments for this course. They are listed and described below:

**Essays:** One essay of 1000-1500 words, due 10/2. Two essays of 1500-2000 words, one due 10/20 and the other due 11/20. One essay of 2000-3000 words, due during Exam Period. Each essay will combine required elements and freedom of choice in topic.

**Discussion leadership:** You are required, as part of a group of 3, to initiate a Thursday discussion of one of the assigned novels. While each member of the group should be ready to speak for 3-5 minutes, raising issues particular to that text or to the course as a whole, you should meet beforehand to develop and coordinate your ideas as a group. The point of this enterprise is to spark productive discussion in the class. You should, therefore, gear your work toward exploring a subject about which you can articulate clear

and interesting questions. (“What do you think?” is neither.) A successful effort generally produces a successful discussion.

### Grades

Your grade will be calculated as follows: the three formal essays account for 60% of your final; participation, including discussion, prompts and responses, and discussion leadership, equals 40% of your final.

### Schedule

#### Week 1

- 9/4 Introductions and procedures
- 9/6 Lethem, The Fortress of Solitude  
Mitchell, “Representation” (CTLS)  
Greenblatt, “Culture” (CTLS)

#### Week 2

- 9/11 Lethem, cont.  
Johnson, “Writing” (CTLS)
- 9/13 Lethem, cont.  
Discussion Group #1

#### Week 3

- 9/18 Erdrich, The Painted Drum  
Miller, “Narrative” (CTLS)
- 9/20 Erdrich, cont.  
Discussion Group #2

#### Week 4

- 9/25 McCarthy, Blood Meridian  
Mailloux, “Interpretation” (CTLS)
- 9/27 McCarthy, cont.  
Discussion Group #3

Week 5

- 10/2 Bechdel, Fun Home  
Herrnstein Smith, "Value/Evaluation" (CTLS)  
**Essay #1 due**
- 10/4 Bechdel, cont.  
Discussion Group #4

Week 6

- 10/9 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt  
Appiah, "Race" (CTLS)
- 10/11 Whitehead, cont.  
Discussion Group #5

Week 7

- 10/16 Roth, The Plot Against America  
Sollers, "Ethnicity" (CTLS)
- 10/18 Roth, cont.  
Discussion Group #6
- 10/20 **Essay #2 due**

Week 8

FALL BREAK

Week 9

- 10/30 Diaz, Erdrich, The Brief, Wondrous Life of Os  
Fiske, "Popular Culture" (CTLS)
- 11/1 Diaz, cont.  
Discussion Group #7

Week 10

- 11/6 Hagedorn, Dream Jungle  
Deane, "Imperialism/Nationalism" (CTLS)

11/8 Hagedorn, cont.  
Discussion Group #8

Week 11

11/13 Robinson, Gilead  
Harpham, "Ethics" (CTLS)

11/15 Robinson, cont.  
Discussion Group #9

Week 12

11/20 **Essay #3 due**

11/22 Thanksgiving, no class

Week 13

11/27 Shteyngart, Absurdistan

11/29 Shteyngart, cont.  
Discussion Group #10

Week 14

12/4 Saunders, Pastoralia

12/6 Saunders, cont.

Week 15

12/11 Final Project discussion

12/13 Final Project discussion; wrap-up

Exam Period: **Essay #4 Due**