

ENGLISH 238

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

Jeff Pence
Fall 2008
TTh, 11:00-12:15
King 239

Office: Rice 109
Of. Hrs.: T 1:30-3; W 2:30-4
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Texts

- Allison Bechdel, Fun Home
- Ethan Canin, America America
- Junot Diaz, The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao
- Louise Erdrich, A Plague of Doves
- Khaled Hosseini, A Thousand Splendid Suns
- Jhumpa Lahiri, The Interpreter of Maladies
- Cormac McCarthy, The Road
- George Pelecanos, The Night Gardener
- Donald Ray Pollack, Knockemstiff
- Gary Shteyngart, Absurdistan
- Colson Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt
- Jincy Willett, Winner of the National Book Award

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 larger contexts of social and historical life in the first decade of the 21st 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.

Naturally, **readings** are to be completed and considered before the class meeting for which they are assigned. I will tell you precise page requirements as we go along. Our reading load can be very heavy, as we will cover a book a week, and some books are much longer than others. In addition, I may assign very brief additional readings, although always with advanced warning.

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 9/30. Two essays of 1500-2000 words, one due 10/17 and the other due 11/21. 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. The groups are required to submit a

debriefing report, in which they review their plans, the actual turn of events, and what was learned. These are due the class after discussion leadership.

Grades

Your grade will be calculated as follows: the four formal essays account for 80% of your final; participation, including discussion and discussion leadership, equals 20% of your final.

Schedule

Week 1

9/2 Introductions and procedures

9/4 Erdrich, The Plague of Doves

Week 2

9/9 Erdrich, cont.

9/11 Lahiri, Interpreter of Maladies

Week 3

9/16 Lahiri, cont.
Discussion Group #1

9/18 McCarthy, The Road

Week 4

9/23 McCarthy, cont.
Discussion Group #2

9/25 Bechdel, Fun Home

9/26 **Essay #1 due**

Week 5

9/30 Bechdel, cont.
Discussion Group #3

10/2 Shteyngart, Absurdistan

Week 6

10/7 Shteyngart, cont.
Discussion Group #4

10/9 Yom Kippur, no class

Week 7

10/14 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt

10/16 Whitehead, cont.
Discussion Group #5

10/17 **Essay #2 due**

Week 8

FALL BREAK

Week 9

10/28 Canin, America America

10/30 Canin, cont.
Discussion Group #6

Week 10

11/4 Pollack, Knockemstiff

11/6 Pollack, cont.
Discussion Group #7

Week 11

11/11 Diaz, The Brief Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao

11/13 Diaz, cont.
Discussion Group #8

Week 12

11/18 Willett, Winner of the National Book Award

11/20 Willett, cont.
Discussion Group #9

11/21 **Essay #3 due**

Week 13

11/25 Hosseini, A Thousand Splendid Suns

11/27 Thanksgiving, no class

Week 14

12/2 Hosseini, cont.
Discussion Group #10

12/4 Pelecanos, The Night Gardener

Week 15

12/9 Pelacanos, cont.
Discussion Group #11 (if needed)

12/11 Final Project discussion; wrap-up

Exam Period: **Essay #4 Due**