

## ENGLISH 238

### CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

Jeff Pence  
Spring 2003  
TTh, 1:30-2:45  
King 227

Office: Rice 109  
Of. Hrs.: Wed. 3-4:30 or by appt.  
Phone: x8653  
Email: jeffrey.pence

#### Texts

- Sherman Alexie, Indian Killer
- Paul Auster, The New York Trilogy
- Gabriel Brownstein, The Curious Case of Benjamin Button, Apt. 3-W
- Michael Chabon, The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Klay
- Jay Clayton, The Pleasures of Babel: Contemporary American Literature and Theory
- E.L. Doctorow, Ragtime
- Charles Johnson, Middle Passage
- Ha Jin, Waiting
- Toni Morrison, Beloved
- Marilynne Robinson, Housekeeping
- George Saunders, CivilWarLand in Bad Decline

#### 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 and writing 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 “No Entry” 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. Readings from Clayton 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.

Early in the semester, you'll be assigned to a **small group**. This is the group you will meet with for peer review of your writing, as well as the group you will make your presentation with.

### 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 3/13. One essay of 1500-2000 words, due 4/10. One essay of 2000-2500 words, due during Exam Period. Each essay will combine required elements and freedom of choice in topic.

**Prep Papers:** These are brief (400-500 word), informal responses to the readings of a particular week in the unfolding context of the course. They are intended as places for you to speculate on issues in the texts, or connections between texts, or questions of interpretation in general that have arisen. Use them to further your thinking process, without getting bogged down in fears of the perfection of the product (which would imply the end of thinking, in this case). You are required to do four of these before

Break, and four after; you are free to choose the weeks according to your own schedule and interests. They are due on Tuesdays.

**Oral Presentations:** 1) You are required, as part of a group of 3-4, 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. 2) You are required, at course's end, to give a brief presentation of your final essay project.

### Grades

Your grade will be calculated as follows: the three formal essays account for 2/3 of your final; participation, including discussion, prep papers and presentations, equals 1/3 of your final.

### Schedule

#### Week 1

- 2/4 Introductions and procedures
- 2/6 Clayton, "Culture/Narrative/Power"

#### Week 2

- 2/11 Auster, City of Glass
- 2/13 Auster, cont.; Clayton, "The Story of Deconstruction"  
Presentation Group #1

#### Week 3

- 2/18 Brownstein, The Curious Case of Benjamin Button, Apt. 3-W
- 2/20 Brownstein, cont.  
Presentation Group #2

#### Week 4

- 2/25 Jin, Waiting
- 2/27 Jin, cont.; Clayton, "Theories of Desire"  
Presentation Group #3

Week 5

3/4 Saunders, CivilWarLand in Bad Decline

3/6 Saunders, cont.  
Presentation Group #4

Week 6

3/11 Peer Review in class

3/13 **Essay #1 Due**

Week 7

3/18 Johnson, Middle Passage

3/20 Johnson, cont.; Clayton, "The Narrative Turn in Minority Writing"  
Presentation Group #5

Week 8

SPRING BREAK

Week 9

4/1 Alexie, Indian Killer

4/3 Momaday, cont.; Clayton, "Rituals of Change: Ethnography on  
the  
Border"  
Presentation Group #6

Week 10

4/8 Doctorow, Ragtime

4/10 Doctorow, cont.

4/11 **Essay #2 Due**

Week 11

4/15 Robinson, Housekeeping

4/17 Robinson, cont.; Clayton, "Feminism and the Politics of  
Community"  
Presentation Group #7

Week 12

4/22 Morrison, Beloved

4/24 Morrison, cont.  
Presentation Group #8

Week 13

4/29 Chabon, The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Klay

5/1 Chabon, cont.; Clayton, "Literature Without Masterpieces"  
Presentation Group #9

Week 14

5/6 Presentations

5/8 Presentations, cont.; Final discussion

Exam Period: **Essay #3 Due**