

GVPT 449K, "Politics Through Popular Fiction and Short Stories," Spring 2015

Professor Alford, 1151 Tydings. Office Hrs, Tu, 6:45-7:30pm, Thur 3:30-5pm, and by appointment. Call x54169 and leave a message. Email works even better: calford@umd.edu. Come visit; too few students do. Also, feel free to email me with comments, suggestions, gripes. I need the feedback. I often meet with graduate students, and occasionally have committee meetings during office hours (it can't be helped), **so please make an appointment**. Feel free to drop by, but understand I might be meeting with another student, or in an unavoidable meeting.

The course is not organized around ELMS, but around the seminar. Nevertheless, the discussion section on ELMS plays an important role in the course, as you will see. It is also a good way to reach other students in the course. Be sure and check your .umd email, or have a good repeater/email forwarding.

Basics

Course meets: Tue, 4-6:30pm

ELMS website for this course: www.elms.umd.edu

Communication: It is probably best to contact me by email directly, but you can also do so through the course website. I will do the same, especially if we miss a class due to snow, instructor illness etc. This is especially important for a course that meets only once a week.

Main Idea of the Course

I have chosen books and short stories that are "popular" rather than "literary," though many are both. None are terribly long, and all are quite accessible to undergraduates. You probably have read some already.

In one way or another, all the books and short stories in this course are all about outsiders. Some are outsiders by choice, most not. Each is an outsider in a different way. Pecola, the protagonist of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, a young black girl finally driven mad, only wants to be white. Ben, of Doris Lessing's *Ben in the World*, only wants to find somewhere he belongs. Albert Camus' Meursault does not understand his own difference, a misrecognition that will kill him.

Politics may be defined as the power to put some people on the outside in order to remain on the inside. Some people, but not all (not Pecola, for example) choose to remain on the outside. Why this is the case, and what this means, we will consider. From one perspective, one might simply say that this is the position from which the writer finds it most comfortable to write.

We are reading literature, but we will not, for the most part, take a literary approach, emphasizing symbolism, and so forth. Sometimes, however, a literary approach will prove helpful, such as looking for absent voices. Generally, however, we will read these novels and short stories in a

relatively straightforward way, asking what they have to say about life today. Not every novel or short story is contemporary, but most are. Three are science fiction, but not of the usual variety. All speak to contemporary themes, such as alienation, exclusion, sexism, racism, and loss. These are political themes. We will see parts of a couple of videos.

Principles of Course Organization

1. Each week each student will make a comment on ELMS on the reading for the week. The comments will be open to all the students in the course. The comments will be due on Monday at 6pm, so that everyone has a chance to read and digest the comments by class on Tuesday. The comments will be open to all, and you may politely comment on others' comments, but make sure to contribute your own "added value" from the book. I imagine the comment should be about 1-2 paragraphs long. It is not a summary, but your informed reaction to what you have read, your reaction to a classmate's reaction based on your reading of the book, or both. We will discuss the comments in class.

Because this is not always easy, I have provided "prompts," or selected points to comment on in the syllabus. I may provide more on ELMS.

Please note that because we will be meeting only once a week, this aspect of the course is vital, lest the continuity of the class be lost. If I find your comments lacking, I will speak to you privately. Any responses by me on ELMS will be simple, and designed to further the discussion.

2. We will usually spend one class per book (or triplet of short stories), sometimes two. The student presentation should take about an hour, and will generally be at the beginning of class. The goal is for the presenters to lead a discussion of the book. Presentations will be in groups of 2-3 students. Each student may make more than one presentation. No power-points, please. You may present a little background material, but your principle task is to have a series of questions prepared for the class, and be prepared to step-in and discuss between yourselves if necessary.

3. Speaking of power-points. This class will meet in seminar format. Please do *not* use your computer. If for some reason you must use your computer, please talk to me about it, and I will put you on a list of users. Obviously, no little screens or devices please. If you are reading the book in e-book format, and need the reader in class, tell me.

4. I expect many of you to disagree with me, and with each other. That's fine, that's what this course is about. Part of tolerating, even celebrating difference, is learning how to disagree with others openly and civilly. The course is about that too.

Assignments and Grading

A. Two short 5 page papers are assigned, the first following part one, the second at the end of classes. Each paper is worth 25% of your final grade, for a total of 50%. The topics of the papers are given in the syllabus.

B. Presentations are worth 15% of your final grade. You will receive an individual grade, even as you present in a group. Fifteen percent is the total of all your presentations.

C. Informed and thoughtful participation, which includes contributions to the ELMS discussion, contributes 35% of your final grade. That's a lot. **I will pay particular attention to your weekly contributions on ELMS, which will be discussed in class.** And remember, you can't participate if you are not in class, or don't contribute thoughtfully to the ELMS discussion.

The Course

Generally we will read a book a week. For the longer books we will spend two weeks. Two-week books are noted in the syllabus. I present a general discussion question for each section. It is a guideline for discussion: class discussion and ELMS discussion.

Ps, if the reading load proves too heavy, or light, it can be rearranged a little.

I. When middle- class goes wild

Doris Lessing, *The Fifth Child* [1 week]

Doris Lessing, *Ben in the World* [1 week]

Two questions:

A. One of the most difficult things about both books is that they offer no sense of redemption. Is that how it works in real life. What's redemption (in a secular context)?

B. Who is Ben?

II. Outsiders

Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2 weeks)

There is a pretty good movie based on this book (same title). Rent it. We will see a selection in class.

Who plays the role or performs the function of these "students" in our world?

Camus, *The Stranger* (1 week)

Is Meursault incredibly honest, incredibly alienated, or just weird? Or all three?

Paper 1. All these books are about outsiders. None seem to have much choice. What does one learn as an outsider that one cannot learn on the inside (that is, by being a normal everyday person)? What does it cost to be on the inside? You may consider the books separately or together or both.

IV. Three Short Stories, first selection (one week)

Note: all short stories (with the exception of Lahiri) are from the collection ordered for this course, *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*, ed. Updike. It's a big, fat book, and you can rent it for \$8.95 for the semester.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Key*
 Donald Barthelme, *A City of Churches*
 Rosellen Brown, *How to Win*

What connects these stories? What disconnects them? How are they political?

V. Familiar Outsiders & and Immigrant Experience

Jhumpa Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* (collected stories) (2 weeks) **[NOTE: Book omitted from official book order. Buy it yourself. (\$9.99 kindle, \$2.95 and up used. Try Amazon.com)]**

To me the characters in Lahiri's book are more familiar, and that brings a sense of comfort. Do you share that experience? Perhaps the comfortable familiarity is misleading?

VI. Three short stories, second selection (one week)

Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*
 Cynthia Ozick, *The Shawl*
 Thom Jones, *I Want to Live*

Same question as before: What connects these stories? What disconnects them? How are they political?

VII. To Be Cast Aside to Die

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (2 weeks)

The novel is horrifying, and yet the people in it retain their humanity, even the worst ones. Is that how it works. Could one imagine this novel not being about African-Americans, or would that destroy it? Morrison has said her books are about love. How can that be?

VIII. Three short stories, third selection (1 week)

Lorrie Moore, *You're Ugly, Too*

Gish Jen, *Birthmates*

Pam Houston, *The Best Girlfriend You Never Had*

Compare and contrast one or more of these stories to one or more of the stories by Jhumpa Lahiri.

IX. Class Discussion: what makes these stories political?

Address this question in your post for the week.

Final paper: Discuss the novels and stories that meant the most to you (2 or 3 are enough). State why, and then discuss whether there are any similarities among the stories. There need not be.

Other Class Matters

Absences: if you miss one course due to illness, notify me before class if at all possible. When you return, sign a note to documenting your own illness. I remind you that doing so falls under the student honor code. The same goes for the grave illness of a parent, and so forth. Your own signed documentation will suffice the first time. If you miss class due to a university sanctioned activity, bring a note.

If you miss a class on which you have a presentation due, or you fail to hand in a paper on time due to illness, I will require a medical excuse.

If you miss a series of classes due to a serious illness, keep in contact with me, and provide medical documentation when you return

If you observe religious holidays not officially recognized by the University, let me know and I will make every effort to accommodate you. But, please let me know at the beginning of the semester.

If you have a learning disability or other problem that needs my attention, let me know and I will make every effort to accommodate you.

Please review the Code of Academic Integrity at UMCP. <http://www.shc.umd.edu>.

Required Books

Doris Lessing, *The Fifth Child*

Doris Lessing, *Ben in the World*

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*

Albert Camus, *The Stranger*

The Best American Short Stories of the Century, ed. Updike.

Jhumpa Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* [**NOTE: not on official book order. Buy it.** \$9.99 on Kindle, less used.]

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*