

ENGLISH 280: INTRODUCTION TO COMICS STUDIES

FALL 2014

PROFESSOR BEN SAUNDERS

Office: 366 PLC

Hours: Wednesdays, 9:30 am – 12:30 pm

Phone: 346 0062

E-mail: ben@uoregon.edu

Course Description:

This class provides an introduction to the history and art of Anglo-American comics and to the methodologies of the new academic discipline known as Comics Studies. Students will be exposed to a spectrum of comic-art forms (the newspaper strip, the comic book, the graphic novel), and to recent examples of contemporary comics scholarship. We will read comics in a variety of genres, but many of our texts this term will be united by a focus on issues of gender, sexuality, and adolescence.

Required Texts (in reading order):

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|------------------------------------|--|
| Scott McCloud: | <i>Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art</i> |
| Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely: | <i>We 3</i> |
| George Herriman: | <i>Krazy and Ignatz, 1937-1938</i> |
| Charles Schulz: | <i>The Complete Peanuts, 1955-1956</i> |
| Jan Eliot: | <i>Stone Soup</i> |
| Various Creators: | <i>The Best of Archie</i> |
| Sarah Oleksyk: | <i>Ivy</i> |
| Nate Powell: | <i>Swallow Me Whole</i> |
| Jeff Lemire: | <i>Essex County</i> |
| Lynda Barry: | <i>One! Hundred! Demons!</i> |
| Kelly Sue Deconnick and Emma Rios: | <i>Pretty Deadly</i> |
| Matt Fraction and Chip Zdarsky: | <i>Sex Criminals</i> |

These texts are available for purchase **at a significant discount price** from Emerald City Comics, located at 770 East 13th in the Smith Family Building (i.e. across the street and a block and a half west of The Duck Store). Supplementary essays will also be supplied throughout the term in photocopied form or as PDFs on Blackboard.

Please be aware that due to the production costs associated with graphic novels your textbook bill will be higher than that for a typical English class. You should not enroll in this course if you are unable or unwilling to meet this expense (between \$150-170). Students who attend class without a copy of the required text will be counted as absent and sanctioned accordingly.

Method of Assessment

Grades will primarily be based on **three written assignments**, worth 25%, 30%, and 40% of your final grade, respectively. **See the attached descriptions for details and due dates.** An additional 5% of the final grade will be allotted for **class participation**. This does not mean that you will get points merely for talking. But students who demonstrate familiarity with the readings, who advance discussion by asking pertinent questions, and who ground their observations in specific details from the texts, will be rewarded for their contributions.

I will also set basic **reading comprehension pop-quizzes** throughout the semester. Students who answer **90%** or more quiz questions correctly will see their **grades boosted** by 1/3 of a letter grade (B- becomes B, etc). Students who get more than **50%** of these questions wrong will see their **grades lowered** by an equivalent amount. **No further warning will be given with regard to these quizzes.**

Anticipated Learning Outcomes

You should expect to put **at least** 8-10 hours per week into this course (on top of time spent in class), with that number rising to **at least** 12-14 hours during weeks when assignments are due. Assuming you are able to devote yourself fully to the readings and assignments, by the end of the class you should have acquired a deeper knowledge of: the origins and historical developments of American comics; the specific achievements of key comic strip and comic book creators; the economic and material conditions of comic book production; the range of comic forms (from newspaper strip to graphic novel). In addition, you will have gained experience and proficiency doing the following activities:

- Reading both comics and critical texts with a view to better understanding their conventions.
- Drawing on relevant information to situate these texts within their cultural, political, and historical contexts.
- Performing formal analyses of a narrative medium that combines visual and verbal elements in a unique way.
- Writing focused analytical essays in clear, grammatical prose.
- Employing creativity and interpretive skills to produce original, persuasive arguments.
- Employing a diversity of primary and secondary sources, with proper acknowledgment and citation, to generate a persuasive written argument.

Buyer Beware

- **Late papers will not be accepted** without a valid medical or dean's excuse.
- **Attendance is mandatory.** Unexcused absences will result in a **lowered grade** at the rate of 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g. from A to A-) for every unexcused absence. **No further warnings will be given.**
- **In the event of illness, an unanticipated family commitment, or other approved University business (such as participation in a sporting event), certain absences may be considered "excused."** Please let me know, either before or (in the event of an emergency) as soon as is reasonable after the class in question, if you think your absence should be excused. Bear in mind that in most cases I will require some form of official documentation (for example, a doctor's note, a letter from your coach, and so on). **If you do not contact me about an absence then I will assume it falls under the category of "unexcused" and lower your grade accordingly.**
- **There will be no "do-overs" or second-chances on written assignments.** You need to make it your best work the first time around. If you are concerned that you will underperform on a particular assignment, **you need to come and see me beforehand.** Afterwards is too late.
- **If you miss a quiz, you miss a quiz.** There will be no "make-up" assignments, except in the case of an excused absence.
- **Always bring a text to class. Students without a text will be marked as absent.** You can't even pretend to be interested if you don't have a book in front of you.
- You should be aware that many of the comics we will read this term deal with **adult themes** and subjects. Some of them are **violent**; others explore the range of **human sexuality**. Some are shockingly unconventional in their treatment of **political and religious** issues. You are not required to like everything you read — indeed, I hope for a more complicated response than that — but please be ready to meet the intellectual challenges of this material with an open mind if you choose to take this course.

Finally, if you have any questions about any of the above, feel free to ask. That is why I am here.

ENGLISH 280: INTRODUCTION TO COMICS STUDIES

FALL 2013

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

I: A Formal Analysis of Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely's *We 3*.

Length: 4 pages (minimum)

Due date: 5 p.m. Monday, October 14 (366 PLC)

Making use of the terminology, theories, and examples of different story-telling techniques laid out in Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, perform a close formal analysis of a 2-3 page sequence from Morrison and Quitely's *We 3*.

As the name suggests, a formal analysis gives priority to the *form* of an artwork (how it is made, laid-out, designed), and considers the ways in which those formal elements change our perception of the content (the plot, themes, or subject of the work).

Before you begin writing your essay, then, you should sit and look carefully at your two chosen pages for an extended period of time. While looking at your pages, make some notes, paying attention to every possible formal detail. Consider the page layout; panel size; the various "camera" angles; the panel-to-panel transitions; the uses of the gutter; the effects of word balloon size and shape; lettering techniques; color palette, etc. Ask yourself: How do these various elements work to generate meaning and shape my experience as a reader?

For example: How does the page layout affect your perception of the kinetic or temporal aspects of the scene? Do the transitions work to suggest movement or stillness? Do they convey a rapid sequence or the slow passage of time? How do the "camera" angles and perspectives position you in relation to the characters or objects you are seeing? When (and how) are you encouraged to view things dispassionately, to reflect upon them philosophically, or to see them in an unfamiliar way? When (and how) are you encouraged to identify with a particular object, viewpoint, or character? When (and how) do formal choices of this kind provoke strong emotional responses? Does your chosen sequence make use of any visual symbols? What about color symbolism? etc.

Refer back to McCloud's various accounts of these formal issues while you are making your notes. Can McCloud help us to understand Morrison and Quitely as formalists? Do they come up with any story-telling techniques that McCloud fails to consider?

In this context, you should also consider Quitely's specific artistic style. For example: Does he seem to employ a more "realistic" mode at certain points, and adopt a more abstract, distorted, or cartoony vision at others? What words describe his drawing technique? What are his individual artistic mannerisms? How might his style itself function meaningfully, shaping the way you look at the objects and people that he renders?

Once you have taken some detailed notes on your chosen pages, checking your thoughts against McCloud, write them up in the form of an essay (a minimum of 4 pages in length). There is no need to provide a windy introduction or conclusion; just state which pages you have chosen to discuss, and then analyze them, panel by panel. The process of analysis should generate sufficient interest without you needing to construct a larger argument.

When you have proofread and corrected your work, attach a copy of your chosen pages (a black and white printout is fine) and hand it in at my office by the due date above. (If I am not there, just slip it under the door.)

II: On Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*

Length: 6 pages (minimum)

Due date: 5 p.m. Friday, November 1, 366 PLC.

For your second paper, you are required to write about Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*.

You may consider a variety of questions and adopt a variety of approaches. For example:

- Building on your previous assignment, you can analyze the formal aspects of Schulz's work (taking into account the specific formal conventions of a daily newspaper strip which are, of course, very different from those of the monthly comic-book or graphic novel).
- You can reflect on the experience of reading two years worth of *Peanuts*, noting the ways Schulz makes use of the calendar and the seasons to develop his themes or to repeat certain gags and storylines.
- You can compare particular dates (E.G. February 14th) or repeated storylines (E.G. "Lucy-with-the-Football" or "The Great Pumpkin") across multiple years of the strip — we have more volumes of *Peanuts* in the Library that can be used for this purpose, and many more strips are available for comparison online. (In fact, the entire fifty-years worth of the strip can be searched by date, starting from the very first strip, at <http://www.gocomics.com/peanuts/1950/10/02>.)
- You can attempt to illuminate a particular strip or series of strips by locating it in its particular historical and cultural moment and context. (E.G. The Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, or any other aspect of 1950s American culture and society.)
- You can engage in dialog with one of the essayists on Schulz that we will read (Harvey, Hatfield, Michaelis), using your own readings of the strip to develop, extend, complicate, or qualify their key points.
- You can explore the ideology of *Peanuts*. While Schulz generally avoided explicitly ideological statements his work (like all works of art) inevitably expresses and embodies certain social and political assumptions. So, ask yourself: Is *Peanuts* a conservative comic strip or a radical one? Why might someone see it as one or the other? And if neither of those terms seems adequate to you, what *can* you say about the ideology of *Peanuts*?
- You can combine some of these ideas into a single essay. In fact, **the best essays will probably involve some combination of the above**. (Note: "combine" does not mean "take on each of these prompts one-at-a-time.")
- You can come up with your own essay topic, in consultation with me.

Whatever your topic, your essay should offer some formal analysis — a close reading of **at least** one strip from either the collection we are reading or the other forty-eight years of the comic — in the context of a broader discussion, claim, or argument about Schulz's *Peanuts*

III: Open Topic Essay

Length: 8-10 pages (minimum)

Due date: 5 p.m. Friday, December 6, 366 PLC.

For your final paper, you may write about any of the texts we have studied this term, with the exception of *Peanuts* or *We 3*. Choose a topic that you wish we could have spent more time discussing in class and use this essay as an opportunity to find out more about it, and to write your best thoughts about it. You are encouraged to consult additional critical resources (academic essays, online discussions, creator-interviews, etc.) to supplement your work, as long as they are properly cited (according to MLA or Chicago methods of academic citation).

Once again, these essays should combine formal analysis with a larger claim or argument.

I am more than willing to discuss your ideas for this final paper during office hours; but please do some thinking about your chosen subject first. It is much easier for me to be helpful if you have already considered a few ideas **before** you come to me.

Finally: A Warning About Plagiarism.

Plagiarism (presenting the research and insights of others as if they were your own) will result in automatic failure of the course. Loss of financial aid is a common additional consequence, and in certain cases (a second offense, for example) plagiarism can even result in dismissal from the university. **It is not worth the risk.**

You should be aware that **every term for the last thirteen years I have failed students** for not citing or for inadequately citing (that is, **plagiarizing**) online sources. **On one particularly unpleasant occasion I was forced to fail eight students in a class of forty.** (Yes, that's almost a quarter of the class; yes, I failed them all, outright; yes, at least one of those students lost her financial aid and was unable to complete her degree.) **Understand further: even if you re-write a source in your own words, if you do not cite that source in both your text and your bibliography you are still committing plagiarism (of the sneakiest, most dishonest kind).**

This is your **only warning** about this issue. Let's try and make this the first term that I don't have to fail anyone. If you are unsure how to cite sources, you have many options: for example, you can consult a style manual, a reference librarian, a writing instructor or a student-writing advisor. If you remain uncertain, you can ask me. But remember, **it is ultimately your responsibility to familiarize yourself with this basic requirement of scholarly writing.**

ENG 280: Introduction To Comics Studies

Fall 2014

Sequence of Readings

Week I: Questions of Form ...

- Sept. 30 Lecture: The Origins and Future of Comics
- Oct. 2 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (first five chapters).

Week II: Questions of Reception ...

- Oct. 7 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (to end).
Essays by Beaty and Wolk.
- Oct. 9 Morrison and Quitely: *We 3*.

Week III: Mad Love ...

- Oct. 13 First Assignment Due.
- Oct. 14 Lecture: *Krazy Kat* & The Early Newspaper Comic-Strip.
Herriman: *Krazy & Ignatz, 1937-1938*, pp. 11-63.
Essays by Harvey, Boxer, Wolk.
- Oct. 16 Herriman: *Krazy & Ignatz, 1937-1938*, pp. 64-117.
Essay by Heer.

Week IV: Losing All The Time ...

- Oct. 21 Schulz: *The Complete Peanuts, 1955-56*.
Essays by Michaelis, Harvey, and Hatfield.
- Oct. 23 Schulz: *The Complete Peanuts, 1955-56*.

Week V: Sex, Gender and the Newspaper Comic Strip

- Oct. 28 Alison Bechdel: *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (PDF scans)
- Oct. 30 Jan Eliot: *Seemed Like a Good Idea ...: Stone Soup Book 10*

Week VI: Teenage Wildlife Part One

- Nov. 4 Various Creators: *The Best of Archie*
- Nov. 6 Nate Powell: *Swallow Me Whole*

Week VII: Teenage Wildlife Part Two

- Nov. 11 Sarah Oleksyk: *Ivy*

Nov. 13 Class Visit By Sarah Oleksyk!

Week VIII: Teenage Wildlife Part Three

Nov. 18 Jeff Lemire: *Essex County*

Nov. 20 Jeff Lemire: *Essex County*

Week IX: Teenage Wildlife Part Four

Nov. 25 Lynda Barry: *One! Hundred! Demons!*

Nov. 27 No Class: Happy Thanksgiving!

Week X: Genre Busting Comics

Dec. 2 Kelly Sue DeConnick and Emma Rios: *Pretty Deadly*

Dec. 4 Matt Fraction and Chip Zdarsky: *Sex Criminals*

Dec. 5 Third Assignment Due. Campus Visit By Matt Fraction and Kelly Sue DeConnick!