

ENGLISH 467/567—AMERICAN LITERATURE 1900 TO THE PRESENT

Instructor: Mary Wood  
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445 PLC  
Office hours: T 11:30 a.m.-  
1:00 p.m./W 1:00-2:30 p.m.

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:** This course examines American literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with a focus on the diversity of voices that have made American literature what it is during this period of modernist and post-modernist writing. Looking at a range of genres (novel, drama, short story, essay, poetry, memoir, autobiography, graphic novel), we will consider the ways that American writers have engaged with both history and everyday life as they move towards a future that they imagine, from their varying perspectives, as promising, baffling, terrifying, inviting, impossible, or filled with possibility. Writers include James Baldwin, D’Arcy McNickle, Philip Roth, Grace Paley, Alison Bechdel, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Naomi Shihab Nye.

**TEXTS:**

D’Arcy McNickle, *The Surrounded*

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*

Quiara Alegria Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*

Books available at the Duckstore or online through outlet of your choice.

Shorter works by Grace Paley, Jhumpa Lahiri, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Cathy Song available on Canvas course site.

**WORK REQUIREMENTS:**

**1)Read!!** Please have each work read by the day it’s listed on the syllabus. For longer works, you may divide them up by the number of class days. Be sure to finish each work by the last day it’s listed on the syllabus.

**2)Post and Comment**—Please post on Canvas a 250- word comment on the upcoming readings for the week **every Monday by midnight**. Also write a 1-2-sentence comment on another student’s post by this same time. For example, on Monday, Jan. 16<sup>th</sup>, you should post an entry and comment on the essays by Baldwin and Coates. Please comment on each reading for the week, though you may choose to focus primarily on one. This means reading ahead a little, or at least reading one text ahead and skimming the others.

**3)Group interactive presentation**—These will be presented to the class the last week of the term. They should be creative projects that engage the class in thinking about one or two texts read during the term. I’ll give you a longer handout on the

projects during the second week and we'll also create the groups (ideally 4 people per group) at that time. An example might be assigning one student to be an interviewer and others in the group to be characters in a novel. The interviewer would ask the characters questions about their roles in the novel. Other students in the class could also be invited to ask the characters questions, such as "Do you think the author gave you a believable role in the story or are you just a literary device?" or "Do you feel that your point of view was given enough air time?" These projects are intended to be a fun and interesting way to analyze the texts as a community of readers. As part of this assignment, write up a paragraph telling me your role in the project. You will receive both an individual grade and a group grade (I'll average the two).

**4) 2-page Book Review, Written Twice**—Please choose a text from the class and write a review intended less to judge the work than to summarize and interpret it for people who might be interested in reading the book but aren't sure yet whether they want to commit. You'll write this review twice—once for an audience of ninth-graders and once for an audience of recent college graduates who like to read.

**5) Annotated Bibliography**—Choose two articles to read for your final essay (see below) and write a paragraph summarizing each. The articles should be 1) from scholarly journals found through the MLA Bibliography database available on the Knight Libraries website and 2) written in 2010 or after.

**6) Final essay (6-8 pages)**—Please write an essay on a topic of your choice, focused on one or two texts read in class. Include reference to the two articles that appear on your bibliography. I will ask everyone to email me your thesis statement at least a week before the essay is due.

#### READING SCHEDULE:

#### **Week One—What is the Relationship between Literature, Life, and History?**

Tues., Jan. 10<sup>th</sup>—Introductions.

Thur., Jan. 12—Jhumpa Lahiri, "Interpreter of Maladies," and Grace Paley, "Conversations with my Father," available on Canvas. Start reading Baldwin.

#### **Week Two—How do Race and History appear in American Autobiography?**

Tues., Jan. 17<sup>th</sup>—Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook," from *The Fire Next Time*, and excerpt from *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates (Canvas).

Thurs., Jan. 19<sup>th</sup>—Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," from *The Fire Next Time*.

#### **Week Three—How Does the Novel Form Engage with Indigenous History?**

Tues., Jan. 24<sup>th</sup>—Baldwin continued. Start reading McNickle.

Thurs., Jan 26<sup>th</sup>—McNickle, *The Surrounded*.

#### **Week Four—McNickle continued.**

Tues., Jan. 31<sup>st</sup>—McNickle.

Thurs., Feb. 2<sup>nd</sup>—McNickle.

**Week Five—How Can Reimagining History lead us Reflect on the Present?**

Tues., Feb. 7<sup>th</sup>—Roth, *The Plot Against America*.

Thurs., Feb. 9<sup>th</sup>—Roth.

**Week Six—Roth continued**

Tues., Feb. 14<sup>th</sup>—Roth

Thurs., Feb. 16<sup>th</sup>—Roth.

**Week Seven—How Do the Genres of Graphic Novel and Memoir Intersect in the Writing of Queer History?**

Tues., Feb. 21<sup>st</sup>—Bechdel, *Fun Home*.

Thurs., Feb. 23<sup>rd</sup>—Bechdel.

**Book Review Due on Canvas by noon on Saturday, Feb. 25<sup>th</sup>.**

**Week Eight—How Can Dramatic Dissonance Convey the Truths of Past, Present, and Future?**

Tues., Feb. 28<sup>th</sup>—Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*

Thurs., March 2<sup>nd</sup>—Hudes.

**Week Nine—How Can Poetry Recount History and Bridge Worlds? Or Can It?**

Tues., March 7<sup>th</sup>—Poems by Naomi Shihab Nye (Canvas)

Thurs., March 9<sup>th</sup>—Poems by Cathy Song (Canvas)

**Annotated bibliography due on Canvas by noon on Saturday, March 11<sup>th</sup>.**

**Week Ten—Student Projects**

Tues., March 14<sup>th</sup>—Student projects presented

Thurs., March 16<sup>th</sup>—Student projects presented.

**Email me your thesis statement by midnight on Wed., March 15<sup>th</sup>.**

**Final essay due on Canvas by midnight on Wed., March 22<sup>nd</sup>.**