

American Studies 401
Literature and Culture
Summer 2009
TR 6:00-9:30 pm
University Hall 203

John Ibson
Office: UH 419
Office hours: TR 3:30-4:30
Voice mail: 657.278.3345
email: jibson@fullerton.edu

The seminar will examine literature as a cultural document, exploring the ways in which imaginative writing is produced and received, and how that production and reception are grounded in a particular cultural moment. Our historical focus will be the period since the end of the Second World War. The approach taken in the seminar rests on the assumption—an assumption that you must strive to understand, but will not be required to accept—that a society’s literature does not simply “happen,” and that judgments about which literature is “better” are part of a cultural process.

We will pay attention to the creators of literature, to who does and does not write, and how the background of a writer affects what she or he writes. We will pay particular attention to literary audiences, both professional critics as well as the general reading public, trying to understand why some works find more of an audience than do others; who would be likely and who unlikely to appreciate a certain work; and especially why certain works of literature become controversial, even notorious.

Required Reading:

J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*
Pamela Hunt Steinle, *In Cold Fear: The Catcher in the Rye Censorship Controversies and Postwar American Character*
Annie Proulx, Larry McMurtry, and Diana Ossana, *Brokeback Mountain: Story to Screenplay*
Jim Stacey, editor, *Reading Brokeback Mountain: Essays on the Story and the Film*

Books are available at The Little Professor Book Center, southeast of campus. Used copies, sometimes at a dramatic savings, are available on amazon.com and half.com.

Between the fourth and the fifth week of the session, you must watch *Brokeback Mountain* outside of class, even if you have seen the film previously.

Course Requirements:

Attendance in this seminar is required. If you are unable to attend a particular session, I expect to be notified why, preferably ahead of time, in person or in an email.

We will initially devote our class sessions to discussions of the reading that all of us will do, from the four required books. You must read those books as assigned on the Course

Outline. For **every class in which a portion of one of those books will be discussed**, you must come with **two written questions** that you believe would be good for us to talk about. In addition to posing questions of my own, I may ask you to pose one or both of your questions to the class. After that, I will collect your questions, perhaps pose some of the unasked ones to the class, and later make written comments and suggestions on your questions that I'll return to you at the next class meeting. The goal of this assignment is to make you a better questioner, and hence a better critical thinker.

As befits a seminar, there will be no instructor's monologues and no exams. In addition to reading, posing questions about, and discussing the four required books, you must prepare **a work of independent research** about either one of the "notorious novels" listed at the end of this syllabus or of another work that you select on your own and that I approve. This research must result in a paper of at least 10 pages for undergraduates or 15 pages for graduate students. In this paper you should address the questions mentioned in the first two paragraphs of this syllabus. The paper is due at our last class meeting, **Thursday, July 2**. As noted on the Course Outline, we will devote our final two meetings to reports on your research.

You must notify me in writing of the novel you'll be studying no later than **Thursday, June 18**. Your paper may use any format for research papers with which you're familiar and comfortable, except that I want either footnotes or endnotes, not notes within the body of the text. Your paper must have a Bibliography that lists every source you have consulted, whether or not it was actually cited in your paper. There's no need for a separate "Works Cited" listing. As in every offering of AMST 401, whatever its particular topic, the goal of the research paper is to improve your ability to think independently, by having you interpret primary materials on your own, not by relying solely on the interpretations of others.

Grading:

I use the University's **plus/minus grading** system.

Your **participation** in the seminar—attendance, participation in discussions, and written discussion questions—will constitute **50%** of your course grade.

Your **research paper**—the paper itself, as well as your report to the class on it—will constitute the other **50%** of your grade in the course. In determining your grade, I will use the following criteria:

- The appropriateness of the paper for this class, the degree to which you analyze literature in its cultural context.
- The extent of your research.
- The creativity of your interpretations.
- The clarity, but not necessarily the beauty, of your writing.
- The "teacherly" quality of your report to the class.

COURSE OUTLINE

Tu 6/2 Introduction to the Seminar: Literature in Culture, Culture in Literature

I. The “Cultural Work” of Literature: *The Catcher in the Rye* as a Case Study

Th 6/4 Salinger, pp. 1-98.

Tu 6/9 Salinger, pp. 98-214.

Th 6/11 Steinle, Introduction, Chapter 1, *The Catcher in the Rye* as Postwar American Fable,” Chapter 2, “The Question of Innocence,” Chapter 3, “The Critical Perspective,” pp. 1-66.

Tu 6/16 Steinle, Chapter 4, “Interpretive Communities,” Chapter 5, “The *Catcher* Controversies as Cultural Debate,” Chapter 6, “Conflict and Character,” pp. 67-160.

Th 6/18 Steinle, Afterword, “*In Cold Fear*,” pp. 161-181.

Research Paper Topics Due**II. More Recently: The “Brokeback Phenomenon and Contemporary American Culture**

Tu 6/23 Proulx, “Brokeback Mountain,” in Proulx *et al.*, pp. 1-28; McMurtry and Ossana, “Brokeback Mountain: A Screenplay,” entire, in Proulx *et al.*

Th 6/25 Proulx, “Getting Movied,” in Proulx *et al.*, pp. 129-138; McMurtry, “Adapting Brokeback Mountain,” in Proulx *et al.*, 139-142; Diana Ossana, “Climbing Brokeback Mountain,” in Proulx *et al.*, pp. 143-151.

Between Thursday’s and Tuesday’s classes, you must watch *Brokeback Mountain*, even if you’ve seen the film previously.

Tu 6/30 Chapters 1-8 in Stacy, pp. 5-117.

Th 7/2 Chapters 9-15 in Stacy, pp. 118-220.

III. “Notorious Novels” and Postwar American Culture: Student Research Reports

Tu 7/7 Student Reports

Th 7/9 Student Reports

Research Papers Due

Some “Notorious Novels” of the Post WWII Period

For additional inspiration, you might Google the American Library Association’s list of the “100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990-2000,” as well as lists of best sellers of the past few decades, listings such as “Best Works of American Fiction,” etc.

With works made into movies, you should include the film and its reviews in your study of the story’s cultural work.

Laura Z. Hobson, *Gentlemen’s Agreement* 1947. In the aftermath of the defeat of Nazism, a story of anti-Semitism in the United States.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* 1955. Critically-acclaimed story of an older man’s infatuation with a teenaged girl.

Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* 1955. Very popular story of life in corporate culture.

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* 1957. Arguably the definitive novel of the beat generation, it still has fervent admirers.

Grace Metalious, *Peyton Place* 1959. Best-selling exposé of small-town affairs.

John Knowles, *A Separate Peace* 1960. A novel of young males’ troubled attachments, one of the most assigned works in American high schools.

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 1960. Never-out-of-print story of racial prejudice and tolerance. A favorite novel of many Americans.

S.E. Hinton, *The Outsiders* 1967. A popular choice of high school English teachers, and a popular target of parents.

William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* 1967. A celebrated white author’s frank story about a rebellious slave.

Phillip Roth, *Portnoy’s Complaint* 1969. Highly representative of the new candor in American writing of the 1960s, a raucous story of one man’s sexual obsessions.

Rita Mae Brown, *Rubyfruit Jungle* 1973. Beginning Brown’s very successful career, a story of a feisty young lesbian.

Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* 1973. Widely viewed as *the* novel of women’s liberation, a somewhat frantic story of a woman’s breakaway from the repression of conventional sexual morality.

Patricia Nell Warren, *The Front Runner* 1974. Written by a straight woman, the first “crossover” novel about love between gay males.

John Cheever, *Falconer* 1977. One of America’s most respected novelists, previously known for his wry looks at the conceits of the middle and upper class, makes his own late-blooming homosexuality a primary theme.

Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* 1985. One of the many novels heralded as a “voice” of a generation. Ellis’s debut, a story of bored and seemingly amoral LA rich kids.

Toni Morrison, *Beloved* 1987. The widely celebrated story of an African-American woman’s struggles and strength.

Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 1989. The most popular novel up to its time by and about a Chinese-American woman.

Douglas Coupland, *Generation X* 1991. The same generation gets another voice in this funny, very popular work.

Robert James Waller, *The Bridges of Madison County* 1992. On the *New York Times* best seller list for nearly three years, story of a middle aged woman’s passionate romance. Dismissed by “serious” critics.

Nicholas Sparks, *The Notebook* 1996. Another hugely popular romance novel, written by a man, loved by many female readers.

Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* 2003. A mystery story with passionate fans and detractors.