

## **English 429C: Contemporary American Fiction**

**Value:** 1.5 Units

**Duration:** Jan.-April 2019

**Class Meetings:** T/W/F 12:30-1:20, CLE A202

**Office Hours:** T/F 2:30-3:30

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### **Course Description:**

This course surveys American fiction from 1980 to the present, a literary period that is perhaps best characterized by a proliferation of critical categories: while some scholars see the current situation in US letters as witnessing the manifestation of full-blown ‘postmodernism,’ others emphasize the continuities with earlier literary periods and invent terms such as ‘metamodernism’ or ‘metafictive realism.’ Yet other critics intuit a decisive break from prior modes of literary production and name the rupture ‘postpostmodernism.’ Notably, then, the situation facing writers today is one of competing demands, issuing from the past and the future, which determine the way fiction is written. The novelist David Foster Wallace, a key figure in this survey, summarized these manifold allegiances and traditions in 1996 as follows:

The good old modernists [...] elevated aesthetics to the level of ethics—maybe even metaphysics—and Serious Novels after Joyce tend to be valued and studied mainly for their formal ingenuity. Such is the modernist legacy that we now presume as a matter of course that ‘serious’ literature will be aesthetically distanced from real lived life. Add to this the requirement of textual self-consciousness imposed by postmodernism and literary theory.

We will follow up on Wallace’s assessment by investigating how a select group of canonized novels and short stories written after 1980 negotiate these relationships with the past as they strive to open up new possibilities for the representation of life at the turn of the millennium—a moment in time that seems to be chiefly determined by revolutions in mass communication and a globalized market economy. As such, specific emphasis in this course is given to themes such as mediation and communication, irony and sincerity, the representability of trauma and history, and the role of fiction in structuring and/or challenging hegemonic concepts of ontology and temporality in a neoliberal world.

The category of ‘contemporary fiction’ will serve us as a useful periodizing term in this pursuit. Indeed, the concept is ambiguous enough to avoid a premature commitment to gestures of transcendence or subservience with regard to prior literary formations. At the same time, it also raises critical questions we will not sidestep but rather highlight in our discussions: How do you even define ‘the contemporary’—are we not still immersed in our current literary moment and therefore lack the necessary critical distance to avoid misreadings? In turn, what is the significance of what Wallace calls ‘aesthetic distance’ in today’s fiction, and how does affect come into play here? Finally, what is at stake in periodizing at all—can the impulse to periodize be seen as a neoliberal demand to make literary output manageable and marketable? And how is it possible for us, as critics and participants in the literary field, to resist this imposition of capital?

**Required Texts:**

- Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Vintage), 9781400033416
- Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (Penguin), 9780140077025
- Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (Vintage), 9780679781493
- David Foster Wallace, *The David Foster Wallace Reader* (Back Bay), 9780316182409
- Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being* (Penguin), 9780143187424

All books are available in the University Bookstore. The two short stories we will read, Toni Morrison’s “Recitatif” and Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral,” can be found in various anthologies as well as online. The optional background readings that are not contained in the *DFW Reader* are put on reserve in the McPherson Library Reserve Room.

**Assignments and Evaluation**

\*Over the term, each student will write 2 personal responses to major texts being discussed in class. The primary purpose of these is to ensure that students are reading texts before coming to class and thinking about what they are reading. This might also facilitate more class discussion. The responses must be typed and about 250 words in length (1 double-spaced page). This is “free writing” and will not be graded for grammar and spelling – instead I will look at the extent to which the response reflects earnest engagement with and knowledge of the text at hand. These are due in class on the day any given text is to be read (for novels, that is the first day of discussion). Students may choose any two texts from the reading schedule, but one response has to be handed in during the first half of the term (i.e., before Reading Break), while the second response has to be about a text discussed during the second half (i.e., after Reading Break). All in all, the personal responses *add up to 20% of your final grade*.

\*Every student will write two short essays of literary criticism, each comprising 1250-1700 words (5-7 double-spaced pages). The essays will be graded both for form and content, and *each will be worth 25% of the final grade*. Topic prompts for the first essay, which is due after Reading Break, will be given out early in the term. Students may choose any topic for the second essay, which is due at the end of the term; however, the two essays must focus on different texts.

\*Each student will write a final exam based on the entire course content; it will be worth *30% of the grade*.

\*For the purpose of arriving at the final exam grade and computing the final grade, I will be using the Department of English’s numerical scale, which is as follows:

A+ 90-100	B+ 77-79	C+ 65-69	F 0-49
A 85-89	B 73-76	C 60-64	
A- 80-84	B- 70-72	D 50-59	

## Important Policies

**Policy on Late Papers:** Late essays will receive a 2% penalty per day, including weekends. You may email me a copy of the essay to stop the clock, but be sure to submit a paper copy of the exact version the next day. Late essays should be handed to me, or left in my English Department mailbox, and will not receive any comments or feedback. Do not leave late papers on or under my office door.

**Policy on Missing Papers/Assignments:** Students will not automatically fail or receive an “N” grade for missing a particular component of the course; however, neglecting to turn in the critical essays or write the final examination will seriously jeopardize a student’s chance of passing.

Papers are due in class and should be handed directly to the instructor. Students who choose to leave their assignments in the instructor’s mailbox or give it to a friend to hand in do so at their own risk! Students are responsible for keeping copies of all assignments! No electronic submissions.

**Policy on Returning Assignments:** For each assignment, I will hand back the hard copy of your paper with my marginal notes, inline corrections, and a grade for the paper. In addition, I will provide you with spoken summative feedback by using the PoodLL recording function through the university’s educational learning platform Coursespaces; so please familiarize yourself with these online tools as soon as possible.

**Policy on Plagiarism:** Plagiarism is recognized by the university as a serious offense. You are guilty of plagiarism if you are presenting work done by somebody else as though it is your own. For a more detailed definition, consult the University Calendar, p. 33. Students guilty of plagiarism will be given a “0” grade on the assignment in question.

**Policy on Classroom Community:** Over the course of the term, we will work together to create an environment that promotes collaborative learning and effective, thoughtful discussion. This entails respecting the rights and dignity of others as we engage in class discussion, particularly when the topic might be provocative and challenging, as may sometimes be the case in this class. Please practice self-awareness and give all students the opportunity to express themselves. Flippan, aggressive remarks, personal attacks, and false generalizations will not be tolerated. Though beliefs may occasionally be questioned or challenged, they should always be heard respectfully.

**Policy on Accommodations:** If you require any accommodations, please approach me and/or the Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL, <https://www.uvic.ca/services/cal/>) as soon as possible. CAL staff members are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals, and arrange appropriate accommodations. The sooner you let us know your needs, the more quickly we can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this and other courses.

## How to Do Well in this Course<sup>1</sup>

*\*Read the books before we discuss them.* Otherwise, you will not be able to follow lectures or conversations in class. Plus, demonstrating you've read the book means you'll likely do well on the final exam.

*\*Write while you read.* For me, this means annotating a text as I read it. You can annotate print and digital texts. (See me if you need ideas or resources.)

*\*Come to class with ideas and questions.* Be curious. Seek connections not only between texts but also between this course and other courses you're taking.

*\*Take notes during class meetings.* A part of the final exam will cover what we talk about in class. Students who take notes not only understand but also retain the material better. This may help when sitting down to compose the essays, too.

*\*Let me know when you don't follow what I'm saying.* I find this stuff fascinating, but I will not always know what you want to investigate or learn more about. If you have questions, then please don't hesitate to ask them.

*\*Persuasive writing takes time.* Before you submit an assignment, consider circulating drafts to friends or peers. Come chat with me during office hours. Consider how your writing can extend and even complicate our class discussions. Also, avoid writing that is primarily descriptive. Push your work into an analysis of the assumptions and ambiguities at work in literature. Further, think about how fiction reflects our culture and, at times, even intervenes in it.

*\*Your writing for the essays should address a significant problem.* Be explicit about the problem. Try to figure something out. Your essay should perform intellectual labor. If you can't tell after reading it what work it has done, it is not finished.

*\*During class and in writing, be concrete when you comment on anyone's work* (including the fiction we're discussing). Quote it. Speak to specific gestures. And then respond with your own interpretations. When the work is by a peer, affirm their ideas (e.g., "I like how you...").

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a syllabus by Christopher Douglas.

## ENGL 429C: Schedule of Readings

**Week 1:** Jan. 8: Introduction, Syllabus, David Foster Wallace, “This is Water” [excerpt]  
Jan. 9, 11: Toni Morrison: “Recitatif”

**Week 2:** Jan. 15, 16, 18: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

**Week 3:** Jan. 22, 23, 25: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

- Optional background reading: Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Ch. 1 & Ch. 7

**Week 4:** Jan. 29, 30, Feb. 1: Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

**Week 5:** Feb. 5, 6, 8: Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

- Optional background reading: David Foster Wallace: “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” *DFW Reader* 656-707

**Week 6:** Feb. 12: David Foster Wallace, “My Appearance,” *DFW Reader*, 100-121

Feb. 13, 15: David Foster Wallace, “Little Expressionless Animals” *DFW Reader* 65-97

**Week 7: Reading Break: No classes Feb. 19-22**

**Week 8:** Feb. 26: Raymond Carver, “Cathedral”  
Essay #1 due in class, Tuesday, Feb. 26

Feb. 27, March 1: Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero*

**Week 9:** March 5: David Foster Wallace, “11/c” [Excerpt from: *The Broom of the System*], *DFW Reader* 49-62

- Optional background reading: David Foster Wallace: “Some Remarks on Kafka’s Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed,” *DFW Reader* 849-854

March 6: David Foster Wallace, “11 November” [Excerpt from: *Infinite Jest*], *DFW Reader* 317-338

March 8: David Foster Wallace, “Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment,” [Excerpt from: *Infinite Jest*], *DFW Reader* 138-148; “And re Ennet House...” [Excerpt from: *Infinite Jest*], *DFW Reader* 296-302

**Week 10:** March 12: David Foster Wallace, “8 November” [Excerpt from: *Infinite Jest*], *DFW Reader* 223-249; “If, by the virtue of charity...” [Excerpt from: *Infinite Jest*], *DFW Reader* 194-207

- March 13, 15: David Foster Wallace, "Forever Overhead," *DFW Reader* 387-394
- Optional background reading: Zadie Smith, "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace"

**Week 11:** March 19, 20, 22: Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*

**Week 12:** March 26, 27, 29: Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*

- Optional background reading: Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Part One

**Week 12:** April 2, 3: David Foster Wallace, "Good Old Neon," *DFW Reader* 418-451

April 5: Review & Exam Prep

Essay #2 due in class, Friday, April 5

**Final Exam:** TBA

**Territorial Acknowledgement:** We acknowledge and respect the Songhees, Esquimalt, and Lekwungen-speaking peoples on whose traditional territories the University of Victoria stands and whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.