

ENGLISH 329: CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION—SPRING, 2010

PROF. J. ZORNADO

Office Hours: Mon 10-11, Wed 10-11, Thurs 2-4 and by appointment

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TEXTS FOR THE COURSE

(available in the RIC campus bookstore)

The Crying of Lot 49 by Thomas Pynchon

Slaughterhouse-5 by Kurt Vonnegut

Tracks by Louise Erdrich

Middle Passage by Charles Johnson

Cathedral by Raymond Carver

Maus I & II by Art Spiegelman

The Armies of the Night by Norman Mailer

In Cold Blood by Truman Capote

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Two 5-7 page essays: 60%

Mid-Term: 20%

Participation and Reading Quizzes: 25%

Please come to class on time, and please come to class prepared. Ask questions, offer insights, participate in discussion. Informal WebCT postings are a part of your class participation. Please check into the WebCT site at least once a week and respond to the prompts and/or posts. Participation includes attendance and I cannot stress enough how important regular attendance is. Make sure to attend every class and demonstrate your engagement with the reading. We meet once a week, so you may miss one week of class, no questions asked. Two absences—two weeks of missed class--begins to affect your grade negatively, and more than two—three weeks of missed class or more--will significantly impact your final grade for the worse and may result in no-credit for the course. Please do your best to be on time. Please turn off digital equipment unless otherwise cleared with me.

Contemporary American Context

On December 10th, 1950 William Faulkner accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was the first American to win the prize since World War II, and though usually shy about giving speeches, he felt it his responsibility as a human being to travel to Stockholm, to accept the prize and to say what he had to say given such a rare opportunity. In his acceptance speech he addressed himself to young writers living in an age of uncertainty to the extreme. He boiled the concerns of his age down to one question: “When will I get blown up?”

Remember that by 1950 the nuclear-age had begun in earnest and had brought about the possibility for sudden and absolute forms of violence heretofore unknown. Faulkner, faithful to the last, entreated the young writers: “don’t give in to fear,” he told them. Humanity, he said, “would yet prevail.”

Almost sixty years have passed, the Cold War has given way to a new age of anxiety at least as unsettling as the last. Has humanity prevailed? Has the literary artist given in to fear? What has happened to American fiction since 1950? Is the novel, like rock and roll, dead? We will keep these questions in mind as we read while keeping a close eye on the cultural and historical context from which our readings emerged.

What we mean when we say “modern” and “post-modern” in relation to Contemporary American Fiction will be kept closely in mind, and how these concepts reflect and represent the historical moment from which they emerged will serve as the foundation for most of our discussions. It follows then that we will pay some attention to literary theory and its practical application in your development as theoretically-informed readers, writers and thinkers.

Course Calendar

Week 1: Introduction: History, Ideology, Culture and Theory.
Backgrounds to Contemporary American Literature,
Modernism and Post-Modernism
The Atomic Cafe

Week 2: *The Crying of Lot 49*

Week 3: *The Crying of Lot 49*

Week 4: *Slaughterhouse-5*

Week 5: *Slaughterhouse-5*

Week 6: *In Cold Blood* **Essay One Due**

Week 7: *In Cold Blood* **Mid-Term Exam**

SPRING BREAK

Week: 8 *The Armies of the Night*

Week 9: *Middle Passage*

Week 10: *Middle Passage*

Week 11: *Maus I & 2*

Week 12: *Tracks*

Week 13: *Tracks*

Week 14: *Cathedral*: "Feathers."
Cathedra: "A Small Good Thing."

Week 15: *Cathedral*: "Where I'm Calling From" and "Cathedral."
Conclusions

Final Essay due Monday, May 10th by Noon.