

## ENGL/PCUL 2P59 VALUING CONTEMPORARY FICTION

### Course Syllabus Autumn 2008

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This course has a Sakai web site.

#### Course Goals:

This will be a course in which we study literature much as folks in other courses do - examining the way in which literary texts create complex and compelling meanings within particular literary conventions, and within a historical, social and cultural context. We will however be doing such study with a particular focus. The focus of the course is the value of current fiction. This includes the value to individuals and to society, the social processes of valuing, the nature and function of intrinsic or aesthetic value, and the ways in which we can speak and write of the grounds of values and valuing.

#### Texts (in reading order):

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Half of a Yellow Sun – 2007 Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction [Vintage]  
 Junot Diaz, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao – 2007 National Book Critic's Award [Riverhead Press (Penguin Group)] This book has also won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for fiction.  
 Anne Enright, The Gathering – 2007 Man Booker Prize [Black Cat (Grove/Atlantic)]  
 Cormac McCarthy, The Road – 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, 2007 James Tait Black Prize [Vintage]  
 Michael Ondaatje, Divisadero – 2007 Governor General's Award for Fiction [Vintage]  
 Per Petterson, Out Stealing Horses – 2006 Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, 2007 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Translated from the Norwegian by Anne Born [Vintage]

There will be additional readings posted on the Sakai web site.

#### Composition of course grade:

Seminar participation	<b>15%</b>
Seminar facilitation	<b>10%</b>
Course Essay Stage 1	<b>20%</b>
Course Essay Stage 2	<b>20%</b>
Course Essay Stage 3	<b>35%</b>

Please see sections below for penalties which may reduce your grade.

#### Class attendance:

University regulations state that "students are expected to attend all lectures, discussion groups, seminars and laboratory periods of the courses in which they are registered." Students who miss more than four of the twelve seminars without medical or other exemption will receive 0% on the seminar participation component of their final grade. Students who do not attend at least two-thirds of the lectures previous to any essay due date will not receive commentary on their essay.

#### Medical Exemption Policy

Students are responsible for knowing Brock's Medical Exemption Policy, available at <http://www.brocku.ca/healthservices/exemption.php>. Students must submit a medical certificate, downloadable from the policy site, as required in the policy; the form must be dated before the date of the class missed or assignment due. Students who attend class only in the evening may submit the form to the course instructor instead of to the Administrative Assistant of the Department.

**Last day to withdraw without Academic Penalty:** Friday, October 31. Students will receive a minimum of 15% of their grade by Friday, October 24.

**Academic Misconduct:**

Students are advised to consult the section on Academic Misconduct in the University Undergraduate Calendar. In particular they are cautioned against plagiarism, which is defined as "presenting work done (in whole or in part) by someone else as if it were one's own" (Brock University Undergraduate Calendar, 2008). Please be sure to document your debts to others accurately and appropriately: quote and attribute direct transcription of others' words, and attribute borrowed ideas and examples. For proper MLA documentation form see an MLA Style Guide such as are available in handbooks on academic writing, in the Library, and on-line at sites such as <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>. The University's Academic Integrity Policy states that members of the University community are obliged to report occurrences of, and assist in the investigation of alleged instances of, academic misconduct. See 6.4 of the Policy for the full statement on responsibilities. The Policy is available at [www.brocku.ca/academicintegrity/](http://www.brocku.ca/academicintegrity/).

**Turnitin.com and Essay Submission:**

Students are required to submit their essays (Stages 1, 2 and 3) to the phrase matching web facility Turnitin. Students who have a principled objection to using this on-line phrase matching program must discuss this with the instructor at least a week before the essay is due, and will be required to submit an early draft of the essay with the final draft. Details on Turnitin will be on the essay assignment page on Sakai. Essays must also be submitted in electronic form on the Sakai web site, and in hard copy in class on the due dates and times. Essays not submitted to all three venues will not be graded, with any exceptions as in the second sentence above. TAs may not receive essays. Essays may be graded in hard copy or electronic versions.

**Late Essay Policy:**

Extensions on essays will be given only for documented illness and bereavement, and may be granted only by the course instructor. Late essays will be penalized 5% for the first day late and 3% per work day thereafter. Essays submitted more than two weeks late may not be accepted, and will not be accepted without an interview with the instructor. Late essays must be deposited in the Essay Deposit box outside the English Department main office or handed to the instructor in class.

**Seminar Facilitations:**

Students will be assigned a seminar facilitation, normally with another student. The facilitators are responsible for posting discussion questions on Sakai at least 48 hours before the seminar. There will be no facilitators for the first seminar, on September 10, but there will be a seminar. Disputes among co-facilitators must be brought to the course instructor.

**Seminar Response Hand-ins:**

Every student must hand in at the beginning of the seminar a response to one or more of the posted discussion items for each but the first seminar. Students who do not submit a hand-in will lose 4 marks out of 10 for that seminar. The last eleven seminars will be graded; the best ten will count toward the total seminar grade.

**Appeals of Grades:**

Students must discuss any grade with which they are dissatisfied with the grader of the assignment in the first instance. Please see the Department policy on the Department web page.

**"The Vote":**

Students are required to vote, at the end of the course, for the novel which in their judgment is the best on the reading list. The vote will be held on the course Sakai site. Students not voting will lose 2% of their final grade. Other votes taken during the course on Sakai are voluntary.

## ENGL/PCUL 2P59 Course Reading Schedule By Week

For each week there will be brief assigned readings on the web facility Sakai in addition to the novel. These will be theoretical pieces, reviews of the novels, and discussion of book prize competitions. Look for these on Sakai. See the next page for a list of some major theoretical considerations that will be addressed. The theoretical focus for the week may alter as circumstances dictate, and there will be much cross-referencing.

- SEPT 10 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Half of a Yellow Sun to the end of Part One: The Early Sixties (page 147)  
THEORETICAL FOCUS for the week: reading fiction, introduction to values and valuing
- SEPT 17 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Half of a Yellow Sun complete  
THEORETICAL FOCUS for the week: the social & historical work of fiction; ethnography
- SEPT 24 Junot Diaz, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao to the end of Section Three (page 165)  
THEORETICAL FOCUS for the week: ideas of use value; reading formations
- OCT 1 Junot Diaz, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao complete  
THEORETICAL FOCUS for the week: aesthetic value
- OCT 8 Anne Enright, The Gathering to the end of Ch 16 (page 110)  
THEORETICAL FOCUS for the week: symbolic value and cultural capital
- ESSAY STAGE 1 DUE OCT 8 IN LECTURE (8:00 pm)**
- OCT 15 Anne Enright, The Gathering complete  
THEORETICAL FOCUS for the week: contingent and aesthetic value
- OCT 22 Cormac McCarthy, The Road to the top of page 129  
THEORETICAL FOCUS for the week: ideology and the political unconscious
- OCT 29 Cormac McCarthy, The Road complete  
THEORETICAL FOCUS for the week: genre; the role of fiction in social discourse
- NOV 5 Michael Ondaatje, Divisadero to the end of the section "La Manouche" (page 95)  
THEORETICAL FOCUS for the week: heuristic value and use value
- ESSAY STAGE 2 DUE NOV 5 IN LECTURE (8:00 pm)**
- NOV 12 Michael Ondaatje, Divisadero complete  
THEORETICAL FOCUS for the week: formative value and aesthetic value
- NOV 19 Per Petterson, Out Stealing Horses to the end of Section I (page 133)  
THEORETICAL FOCUS for the week: the uses of fiction
- NOV 26 Per Petterson, Out Stealing Horses complete  
THEORETICAL FOCUS for the week: aesthetic, moral and ethical value
- ESSAY STAGE 3 DUE DEC 8 AT INSTRUCTOR'S OFFICE between 4:00 and 7:30 pm (see note p. 6)**
- DEC 15 "THE VOTE": Students will vote on Sakai for the best novel (see Note 2). The winner will be announced on Sakai and the instructor will inform the author of the honour.

**NOTE 1:** For the first week on a novel (see assigned portions) the focus will be on the areas of experience addressed by the book, the style, the voice and point of view, all the information about how the novel is making its meanings and engaging the reader that are developed as the novel establishes itself. For the second week the focus will be on the entirety of the novel including the structure, the interpretative possibilities of the novel, and the ways we can discuss its value.

**NOTE 2:** This course and the valuing we are doing *is not about whether you like or do not like the novel*. It is time to get out of the little box of ME. It is about what, all things considered and some value issues thought more pressing than others, is the value of each novel, and which novel ultimately has the greatest value, i.e. is "the best" novel.

## **ENGL/PCUL 2P59 THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS PAGE**

### **Some Major Concepts Regarding the Valuing of Fiction**

- 1 aesthetic value and the value of aesthetic value (the use value, the exchange value, the cognitive value, the social value, the moral value)
- 2 contingent value - value as for particular people for particular purposes in particular contexts
- 3 use value – how the fiction may be put into practice in individual lives, in social discourse, in action
- 4 symbolic value & cultural capital – the social standing that the status of “author” and prizes and fame can bestow; the social authority of serious art and by extension of those who study and practice it
- 5 heuristic value - what fiction "tells" one, on purpose or inadvertently, about society and its values, standards, assumptions and concerns, about the ideology of society and what it may mask
- 6 formative value - the work that fiction does on or for readers (reconciling public and private selves, forming ideals, providing consolation, increasing perception, providing language through which to articulate experience, creating empathy, and so forth)

### **Some Issues to be Addressed**

- The uses of fiction, including the appropriation of works of fiction by interest and identity groups; the use of literature in sociality, social learning; concepts of the psychoanalytic and therapeutic uses of contemporary fiction.
- The moral or ethical value and valuing of fiction
- The ideological functions of fiction and of the assignment of value to fiction
- The place of modern or current fiction in social discourse
- Various processes of social and cultural (and consequently economic and symbolic) valuing, including the book review, the book prize, the book club (and 30% off at Chapters!)
- The concept of "genre" fiction and how it is (de)valued.
- The cultural authority of (some) 'recognized' authors
- The concept of ethnographic study, or how one finds out what something "means" to various readers - means interpretively, but also emotionally, symbolically, in terms of self-identity and social relations.

### **Some Further Concepts** (there may well be more to come)

- ✓ ideology; also hegemony and ideolects [Althusser, Gramsci, Bakhtin, Foucault]
- ✓ the political unconscious [major theorist: Frederic Jameson]
- ✓ reading formations [major theorists: Raymond Williams, Tony Bennett]
- ✓ reader-response theories
- ✓ reading position (e.g. gendered reading; political or 'interested' reading; identity group affiliation; reading purpose; )
- ✓ representational modality and period style (e.g. realism, modernism, postmodernism)
- ✓ the problematics of representation (is there a 'real world', and how could we tell?)

## Seminars

### Topics

For each week except Week 1 and 2 the seminars will be facilitated by students. Student facilitators should identify any theoretical concepts that they would like students to address and provide a set of discussion questions or issues. These may concentrate on certain pages or passages or on certain incidents, issues or characters. Students should be alerted to any such refinements, and time should be left in the seminar for any other concerns or ideas students may have. Seminar leaders may invite students to post issues or ideas they would like to see addressed in the seminar. Seminar facilitators for the first week on a novel must be aware that while some students (one hopes, them included) will have read the entire novel, students are responsible only for the amount of the novel indicated in the Reading Schedule. Seminar facilitators may assume that the students have read any additional material available on Sakai and listed as required for that week, and may address issues raised in those readings.

### Evaluation of participation

Students will be evaluated by the seminar leader (the TA or course instructor) on the basis of the following:

1. Evidence that the student has read the assigned readings
2. Evidence that the student has learned and reflected on the theoretical considerations raised in the course
3. Evidence that the student is listening to and responding to the comments of other students
4. The extent to which the student supports the efforts of the facilitators to run a productive seminar
5. Evidence that the student has read and is responding to questions and issues
6. The relevance of the student's comments and questions in seminar
7. The quality of the student's contributions (comments and questions) in seminar, and on Sakai previous to the seminar
8. The willingness of the student to encourage others to participate productively in the seminar
9. discussion.

Please remember that your grade also depends on your submitting your hand-in at the beginning of the seminar.

### The Seminar Hand-in

- The hand-in will not be graded; it is an honest of your preparation.
- The hand-in need not be typed and need not be in essay form: point form, diagrams, lists are acceptable as long as they are addressing the issues raised for the seminar by the facilitators or issues you have raised that you would like to see addressed (realizing that there may not be time for everything)
- The hand-in must be submitted to the seminar leader (the TA or course instructor) at the beginning of the seminar hour. If your leader forgets to ask for them, remind him

### Seminar Facilitation

Seminars will be facilitated by students for the third through the final (twelfth) seminar. The last twenty minutes of seminar for October 22 will be dedicated to a stock-taking exercise.

Facilitators are responsible for and will be graded on the following:

- Normally, working cooperatively with another student
- Posting questions and discussion issues on Sakai by at least 48 hours before the seminar
- Responding to posts of student members as possible
- Leading discussion in the seminar, including encouraging the participation of all, allowing room for alternate views, following up on issues raised, and not dominating the discussion.

## The Essay

The course essay will proceed in three Stages. In each of the first two stages, students are required to comparatively assess the value of the two novels covered for that Stage on as broad a range of value-considerations as is possible and as is warranted by the novel, its subject, its reception and its possibilities. The third Stage will be more developed: it will include an introduction, the text of the first two stages, which may be re-written, the inclusion of a discussion of the last two novels which includes comparison with all of the previous novels, and a conclusion in which the student defends her or his choice of novels as "the best," that is, having the greatest value, and explains the grounds of the judgment.

The length of each of Stage 1 and Stage 2 should be about 10 double-spaced pages, or 2500 words: that's maybe four pages for each novel, plus a discussion of various grounds of value applied, and the defense of a comparative judgment. The last Stage should be about 12 pages, or 3000 words.

The essay is to follow MLA form, and is to be submitted to [turnitin.com](http://turnitin.com) and to the Sakai web site, in electronic form, before the lecture in which it is due. The hard copy, accompanied by a turnitin receipt, is due at the beginning of the second hour of lecture for Stage 1 and 2 and at the instructor's office between 4:00 pm and 7:30 pm for Stage 3. Please note that MLA form does not require a cover page, and no cover page is required for this course. See the formatting information at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/557/01/> -- include your seminar section and the name of your TA.

### The due dates are as follows:

**Stage 1**      Wednesday, October 8 on Half of a Yellow Sun and The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

**Stage 2**      Wednesday, November 5 on The Gathering and The Road

**Stage 3**      Monday, December 8 on Divisadero and Out Stealing Horses

**Note:** a change in the due date for Stage 3 may be negotiated if the student has an examination on that or the following day. Email the instructor with the relevant information or come in to discuss this with him. Students who attempt to mislead the instructor as to when they have examinations will receive a grade of 0% on the Stage.

For late penalties see page 2.

### Further Notes

- 1 Students will be informed on Sakai as to which office the instructor will be in and when.
- 2 Please observe the difference between an opinion and a judgment. An opinion is a statement of a personal position which requires no defense. A judgment is a statement of a communally-sustainable position, the grounds of which must be articulated and defended. A judgment is based on facts, experience, reason and principles.