

ENGLISH 436

American Fiction Since 1945 (Or Possibly 1966ish)

Summer 2011 - 271 Willard, 2:20-3:35pm MTWRF

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Office Hours: TW 3:45-5:15pm in Kern
and by appointment

Every syllabus is a fiction. The syllabus as a genre implicitly says the following: over the next fifteen weeks (or six, for us), the handful of texts you read will adequately encapsulate, summarize, or represent some genre, time period, theme, or phenomenon. It says: you will come out of this course knowing what you need to know about [x], where [x] is anything from 18th century British drama or the contemporary American immigrant novel to science fiction or avant-garde poetry (or, for that matter, Newtonian mechanics or cultural anthropology). The fiction is that any syllabus could (or should!) ever be complete, that it could be sufficiently representative or exemplary of its topic, rather than being a highly subjective, particular slice of that topic. The disclaimer, then: this is an incomplete, wildly idiosyncratic syllabus.

Our nominal topic is a particularly slippery one: *contemporary American fiction*. Not only is there no recognized "canon" of contemporary American fiction, it's difficult even to pin down any of the three words in that key phrase. Does what we recognize as "the contemporary" begin after World War II and Hiroshima? After the mid-'60s? After the end of the Cold War? After 9/11? Is American fiction that written in the United States? Written by authors who were born in the United States? Authors who emigrated to the United States? Is it fiction written *about* America or "from an American perspective" (whatever that could possibly mean)? Even "fiction" is suspect: most English courses in most English departments in this country have a mysterious allergy to film, television, and graphic novels—three mediums that, whatever their position in the academy, seem to be hugely significant bearers of the torch of "fiction" in recent decades.

We will likely spend much of the course wrestling with these questions, though almost certainly not answering them. We will cover novels, essays, graphic novels, short stories, poetry, memoir, drama, film, and television. We'll encounter low culture and high culture, as well as fiction about low culture and fiction about high culture. We'll see fiction about the past, fiction about the present, and fiction about the future. We'll read things that are as close to "canonical" as it gets and things that are not and will never be recognized as canonical.

In short: we'll get an interesting, provocative, and hopefully tasty slice of "contemporary" "American" "fiction."

Largely because of the heterogeneity of works we will read, our primary purpose is not to develop a clear narrative that connects disparate entities into some comprehensive unity. While affinities between these works exist and while each does interact (to varying degrees) with an artistic and cultural lineage, we'll want to consider each text on the terms in which it presents itself. What assumptions operate in its narrative? What does it expect of its readers? What are the governing axioms of this fictional world? How does it interact with the conventions of its genre, or does it resist classification entirely? What aspects of U.S. or literary culture seem relevant to the text's content? How do the formal qualities of the text shape our experience of reading, and how do these characteristics of form contribute to (or undermine) the work's trajectory? What is its cultural and rhetorical force? What is its philosophical use value? What does it provoke, dismantle, denaturalize, produce? What, in other words, does it *do*, and how does it do it?

Texts

Thomas Pynchon - *The Crying of Lot 49* (ISBN: [0060913076](https://www.isbn-international.org/product/0060913076))

Octavia Butler - *Kindred* (ISBN: [0807083690](https://www.isbn-international.org/product/0807083690))

Colson Whitehead - *The Intuitionist* (ISBN: [0385493002](https://www.isbn-international.org/product/0385493002))

Tony Kushner - *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* (ISBN: [1559360616](https://www.isbn-international.org/product/1559360616))

Alison Bechdel - *Fun Home* (ISBN: [0618871711](https://www.isbn-international.org/product/0618871711))

Mike Carey and Peter Gross - *The Unwritten Vol 1: Tommy Taylor and the Bogus Identity* (ISBN: [1401225659](https://www.isbn-international.org/product/1401225659))

Junot Díaz - *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (ISBN: [1594483299](https://www.isbn-international.org/product/1594483299))

William Gibson - *Pattern Recognition* (ISBN: [0425198685](https://www.isbn-international.org/product/0425198685))

Books available at the PSU bookstore, Amazon.com, etc. All other readings will be posted on ANGEL.

Grading

Participation:	20%	Papers 1 and 2:	15% each
ANGEL forum:	25%	Paper 3:	25%

Attendance: Regular attendance is **required**. Please come to every class, and please come on time. Your grade will be lowered if your attendance is poor, down to and including "F." This is University policy. Specifically, you are permitted **two (2!)** absences; after that, your grade begins to drop. Excused absences for illness or emergency are appropriate, but beyond that, let me repeat PSU policy (*Policies and Rules*, 42-27): a student whose absences are excessive "may run the risk of receiving a lower grade or a failing grade," whether or not some of those absences are "excused." In other words: *don't miss class, but if you really need to, let me know, preferably in advance.*

Participation: I want to hear from you, in whatever forms you're comfortable with. This is why participation is 20% of your course grade. What we're reading is not dry, stodgy, solitary literature. It should elicit responses from you—emotional, ethical, intellectual, or otherwise. I hope you'll feel comfortable weighing in during class discussions, and even if you're not normally inclined to talk in class, I'd encourage you to step outside your comfort zone in this class. Those who still don't feel comfortable speaking up very often should focus extra energy on participating in the ANGEL forum, above and beyond the required postings.

ANGEL Forum: Twice a week (not on the same day), you'll post responses to the reading/viewing on ANGEL. You may have questions or observations about one or more of the readings in terms of theme, character, plot, setting, and so on. Something interesting or noteworthy may have stood out to you. Or you might relate the reading to other readings we've covered, other conversations we've had in class, or broader philosophical/political/literary issues. Your response need only be a paragraph long (about five or so sentences—ideally more than "See Spot run. See Spot reflect on the post-war American condition. Reflect, Spot, reflect!"), but if you have more to say, by all means, let fly. These brief writings not only tell me that you're keeping up with the reading and thinking about the course material outside of class, they will also give me a better sense of the topics that interest and provoke you, so that our in-class discussions can be happier and more productive. (NOTE: If you want to make me really happy, start responding to and following up on each other's posts. This should be a conversation.)

Academic Freedom: In English classrooms, academic freedom most frequently comes up in two contexts: charges of "offensiveness" on the one hand, "brainwashing" or "indoctrination" on the other. While you have the right to be free of gratuitous insult, you do not have the right not to be offended. I mean something very specific by this: at a university, you do not have the right to be protected from words, ideas, values, or beliefs—whether conservative or liberal, religious or secular, putatively obscene, or any other category—that you find distasteful. A key part of any education is the careful scrutiny of received ideas.

By the same token, you should feel free to disagree, either verbally or in your written assignments, with any idea expressed in class, whether by me or by any student. Your grade will not be determined by how closely your thought agrees with mine or how aptly you mimic my own views in your papers; rather, it will be the product of the quality of both your thinking and your expression of that thinking. Every semester, I happily give "A" grades to students with whom I strongly disagree, because they write and speak with such clarity and grace.

Penn State Sexual Harassment Policy AD-41: Penn State is committed to an open, sensitive, understanding, and responsive campus environment, and as such, sexual harassment of faculty, staff, or students will not be tolerated. Penn State's sexual harassment policy is available in greater detail [online](#).

Penn State Accommodations Policy: It is Penn State's [policy](#) not to discriminate against qualified students with documented disabilities in its educational programs. If you have a disability-related need for modifications in this course, contact the Office for Disability Services at University Park (located in 116 Boucke Building) at 863-1807, preferably as early as possible, and please let me know as well.

Schedule

[Non-book readings will be posted on ANGEL.]

Date	Reading Due
5.16 (Monday)	Barth - "Lost in the Funhouse"; Wallace - "Forever Overhead"
5.17	Pynchon - <i>The Crying of Lot 49</i> p. 1-63 (ch. 1-3)
5.18	<i>The Crying of Lot 49</i> p. 64-119 (ch. 4-5)
5.19	<i>The Crying of Lot 49</i> p. 120-152 (ch. 6-end); Didion - "Los Angeles Notebook"
5.20	Wallace - "Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (VI)"; Carver - "Popular Mechanics"; Foer - "A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease"
5.23 (M)	TV: <i>Mad Men</i> episode (screening Sunday evening)
5.24	Butler - <i>Kindred</i> p. 9-107
5.25	<i>Kindred</i> p. 108-188
5.26	<i>Kindred</i> p. 189-264
5.27	Alexie - "What You Pawn I Will Redeem," "Because My Father...," "Unauthorized," "Comedy Is...," "Inappropriate," "Evolution"
5.30 (M)	* * * NO CLASS - Memorial Day * * *
5.31	Whitehead - <i>The Intuitionist</i> p. 1-65 (Down part 1); PAPER 1 DUE (by class time)
6.1	<i>The Intuitionist</i> p. 69-140 (Down part 2)
6.2	<i>The Intuitionist</i> p. 145-217 (Up part 1)
6.3	<i>The Intuitionist</i> p. 221-255 (Up part 2)
6.6 (M)	Kushner - <i>Angels in America part 1: Millennium Approaches</i>
6.7	Bechdel - <i>Fun Home</i> p. 1-120 (ch. 1-4)
6.8	<i>Fun Home</i> p. 121-232 (ch. 5-end)
6.9	Carey and Gross - <i>The Unwritten vol. 1: Tommy Taylor and the Bogus Identity</i>
6.10	Díaz - <i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i> p. 1-75
6.13 (M)	<i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i> p. 77-165; PAPER 2 DUE (by class time)
6.14	<i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i> p. 167-227
6.15	<i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i> p. 227-285
6.16	<i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i> p. 285-355
6.17	film: <i>Children of Men</i> (screening Thursday evening)
6.20 (M)	Gibson - <i>Pattern Recognition</i> p. 1-78 (ch. 1-8)
6.21	<i>Pattern Recognition</i> p. 79-145 (ch. 9-16)
6.22	<i>Pattern Recognition</i> p. 146-227 (ch. 17-27)
6.23	<i>Pattern Recognition</i> p. 228-291 (ch. 28-35)
6.24	<i>Pattern Recognition</i> p. 292-356 (ch. 36-end)

The **third and final paper** will be due on Monday, June 27th by midnight.