

ENGLISH 262

Not Even Past: Weird History and the Possibilities of Postmodern Historical Fiction

Fall 2011 - 205 Henderson South, 12:20-1:10pm MWF

Adam Haley
44 Burrowes / adamhaley@psu.edu / noendofneon.net

Office Hours: TBA/by appointment

In the era of "winning the future," we seem to spend a noteworthy amount of time and cultural energy adjudicating and reworking the past. Political and cultural struggles present themselves as fights over historical interpretation; historical analogies become increasingly the only vehicle through which we can understand contemporary situations, such that we think Iraq through Vietnam or the recession through the Depression. We're as obsessed with history as we are haunted by it; we find it both impossible and imperative to grasp, both buried under our present experience and looming over it, both utterly distinct from our contemporary moment and crucial to understanding it. If lists of bestsellers and award-winners are to be believed, consumers and critics alike gravitate towards novels, shows, and films that live in one past or another. Whether eliciting nostalgia for golden ages past or the finger-wagging moral superiority of the present, history and the project of remembering, representing, and deploying it clearly occupy a central place in our collective imaginary.

On some level, this has always been the case ("The Song of Roland" was *Braveheart* long before *Braveheart* was *Braveheart*, and really, what is a creation myth but a historical fiction to end—or begin—all historical fictions?), but there's reason to think that both the nature of history and our relationship to it have changed in recent decades. On the former count, the pace of historical change increased *dramatically* during the last century. For perspective: my grandmother is 102 years old. She was born in 1909. She was a child during World War I; she grew up during the Roaring Twenties; she lived through the Depression and World War II; she raised children and grandchildren during the Eisenhower '50s and the countercultural '60s; with the rest of the world, she watched the Vietnam War, the Kennedy assassination, the Iran hostage crisis, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Gulf War(s), the Oklahoma City bombing, the destruction of the World Trade Center. She was born mere months after the Wright brothers' first public flight demonstrations and lived to see Project Mercury, the moon landing, the Challenger explosion, and what might turn out to be the entire history of this country's manned space flight program. She was an infant when the first Model T rolled off the assembly line; she's a centenarian in the age of the Prius. You can imagine her astonishment at the iPad.

When the vicissitudes of history become visible within the timescale of individual existence—when one lifetime can encompass such an enormous swathe of human history—it would be difficult for our relationship to history to remain the same. As history becomes more mercurial, more difficult to hold on to, so does it become more central to our experience of the fleeting present. Though the past may be irretrievably lost, it also seems to be what must be found. (And re-found. And tweaked. And played with. And re-found again.)

Faulkner tells us that not only is the past not dead, it's not even past; this course will ask how, why, and to what effects the past is present (and I mean this both chronologically—present as *now*—and spatially—present as *here*). How, in particular, do fictional engagements with history fit into this spectral presence of the past? How is historical fiction different from, say, academic history? What's the difference between encountering history in a textbook or a documentary and encountering it in a short story or a graphic novel? What happens when historical fiction gets, for lack of a better word, *weird*? What's the difference between straightforward period drama and something like alternate history or time travel or historical haunting? How do these weirder versions of historical fiction change our understanding of history, and how does their prevalence reflect broader changes in our relationship to history? What can historical fiction *do*, and how? Most pressingly: what is, or should be, the relation between the "historical" part and the "fiction" part?

Texts

(Books available at the PSU bookstore, Amazon.com, etc. Other readings will be posted on ANGEL.)

Philip K. Dick - *The Man in the High Castle* (ISBN: [0679740678](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0679740678))
Octavia Butler - *Kindred* (ISBN: [0807083690](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0807083690))
Ishmael Reed - *Mumbo Jumbo* (ISBN: [0684824779](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0684824779))
Paul Auster - *Mr. Vertigo* (ISBN: [0140231908](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0140231908))
Sesshu Foster - *Atomik Aztex* (ISBN: [0872864405](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0872864405))
Art Spiegelman - *Maus I, A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (ISBN: [0394747232](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0394747232))
Jeremy Love - *Bayou* volumes 1 and 2 (ISBNs: [1401223823](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1401223823) and [1401225841](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1401225841))
Marjane Satrapi - *Persepolis [1]: The Story of a Childhood* (ISBN: [037571457X](http://www.amazon.com/dp/037571457X))
Neil Gaiman and Andy Kubert - *Marvel 1602* (ISBN: [0785141340](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0785141340))
Josh Neufeld - *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge* (ISBN: [037571488X](http://www.amazon.com/dp/037571488X))
Art Spiegelman - *In the Shadow of No Towers* (ISBN: [0375423079](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0375423079))

Grading Breakdown

Participation:	15%	Papers 1 and 2:	15% each
ANGEL forum:	25%	Paper 3:	30%

If you feel that your assignment was graded unfairly, see me during office hours. There we will settle the matter using the ancient Germanic law method of trial by combat. You may pick your weapon of choice from the bottom left drawer of my desk, but the broadsword is mine. We will align ourselves perpendicular to the sun so neither party has an advantage, in a quarterstave sixty feet square (somewhere behind the HUB, I think), as standardized during the Great Schwabenspiegel Grade Dispute of 1275.

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 **three (3!)** 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 in advance.** Don't be That Student™.

Participation: I want to hear from you, in whatever forms you're comfortable with. This is why participation is a major chunk of your 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. We won't bite. 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: Every week (by **11:00am Friday**, at the *latest*), you'll post on ANGEL a response to some of the week's reading/viewing. 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 (at least five sentences—ideally more than "See Spot run. See Spot ruminates on the strangeness of historical reimagining. Ruminates, Spot, ruminates!"), 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. In my ideal world, the forum would produce a *conversation*. Utopian, I know.)

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. On the first count: 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, however unpalatable their content or expression.

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 admirable 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

Date	Reading/Viewing Due
8.22 (M)	<i>Star Trek: "City on the Edge of Forever"</i> (linked on ANGEL)
8.24 (W)	Art Spiegelman - <i>Maus</i> chapters 1-4
8.26 (F)	<i>Maus</i> chapters 5-6
8.29 (M)	<i>Inglourious Basterds</i> (dir. Quentin Tarantino)
8.31	<i>Inglourious Basterds</i>
9.2	Philip K. Dick - <i>The Man in the High Castle</i> p. 3-75
9.5 (M)	* * * NO CLASS - Labor Day * * *
9.7	<i>The Man in the High Castle</i> p. 76-184
9.9	<i>The Man in the High Castle</i> p. 185-259
9.12 (M)	<i>CSA</i> (dir. Kevin Willmott); Kim Stanley Robinson - "A Sensitive Dependence on Initial Conditions" (on ANGEL)
9.14	Octavia Butler - <i>Kindred</i> p. 9-51
9.16	<i>Kindred</i> p. 52-107
9.19 (M)	<i>Kindred</i> p. 108-188
9.21	<i>Kindred</i> p. 189-264
9.23	Jeremy Love - <i>Bayou</i> vol. 1
9.26 (M)	<i>Bayou</i> vol. 2; Ishmael Reed - <i>Mumbo Jumbo</i> p. 3-30
9.28	<i>Mumbo Jumbo</i> p. 30-96
9.30	<i>Mumbo Jumbo</i> p. 96-140; PAPER 1 DUE
10.3 (M)	<i>Mumbo Jumbo</i> p. 140-218
10.5	Paul Auster - <i>Mr. Vertigo</i> p. 3-96
10.7	<i>Mr. Vertigo</i> p. 99-145
10.10 (M)	<i>Mr. Vertigo</i> p. 146-221
10.12	<i>Mr. Vertigo</i> p. 225-293
10.14	<i>O Brother, Where Art Thou?</i> (dir. Joel Coen)
10.17 (M)	<i>Good Night, and Good Luck</i> (dir. George Clooney)
10.19	<i>Mad Men</i> : "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes"
10.21	<i>Mad Men</i> : "Nixon vs. Kennedy"
10.24 (M)	<i>Forrest Gump</i> (dir. Robert Zemeckis)
10.26	Tim O'Brien - from <i>The Things They Carried</i> (on ANGEL)
10.28	<i>Ararat</i> (dir. Atom Egoyan)
10.31 (M)	Marjane Satrapi - <i>Persepolis</i> p. 1-79 (intro through "The Trip")
11.2	<i>Persepolis</i> p. 80-153 ("The F-14s" through end); PAPER 2 DUE
11.4	<i>Deadwood</i> : "Deadwood"
11.7 (M)	<i>Deadwood</i> : "Deep Water"; play <i>Oregon Trail</i>
11.9	Neil Gaiman - <i>Marvel 1602</i> foreword through part 4
11.11	<i>Marvel 1602</i> part 5 through end
11.14 (M)	Sesshu Foster - <i>Atomik Aztex</i> p. 1-73
11.16	<i>Atomik Aztex</i> p. 74-137
11.18	<i>Atomik Aztex</i> p. 138-203
11.21-11.25	* * * NO CLASS - Thanksgiving! * * *
11.28 (M)	Art Spiegelman - <i>In the Shadow of No Towers</i> ; PAPER 3 PROPOSAL DUE
11.30	<i>In the Shadow of No Towers</i> ; Francis Fukuyama, from <i>The End of History</i> (ANGEL)
12.2	John Vanderslice's <i>Emerald City</i> (music); Sherman Alexie - from <i>Ten Indians</i> (ANGEL)
12.5 (M)	<i>Treme</i> - "Do You Know What It Means"
12.7	<i>Treme</i> - "Meet De Boys on the Battlefield"; Josh Neufeld - <i>A.D.</i> p. 1-79
12.9	<i>A.D.</i> p. 81-193

The **third and final paper** will be due on Thursday, December **15th** by midnight.