

AAAH! MURDER, MYSTERY, THRILLERS IN RACE FICTION

Course: 4382 Race in American Literature
Class Meetings: MWF 9- 9:50 in Irby Hall 310
Instructor: Dr. Isiah Lavender, III
Office: 401 Irby Hall
Office Hours: M-F 2 – 4 p.m. and by appointment
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Books: Available at UCA Bookstore

The Big Sleep—Raymond Chandler; *The Poet*—Michael Connolly; *Postmortem*—Patricia Cornwell; *The Maltese Falcon*—Dashiell Hammett; *Strangers on a Train*—Patricia Highsmith; *Sacred Clowns*—Tony Hillerman; *A Rage in Harlem*—Chester Himes; *Killshot*—Elmore Leonard; and *A Red Death*—Walter Mosley

Course Description: People of Color in the United States always pay strict attention to at least two sets of rules – those of the white world and those of various colored communities. Written and unwritten laws expose a great deal about America. This course will investigate how we respond to racism coupled with law-breaking, where tough talking, street-wise detectives hunt down human monsters as readers consider what it means to be afraid of the darker elements of humanity. In fact, the tense, exciting and often sensational plotting of the thriller provides swift action and continual suspense as such stories delve into the seedy side of American life—dead bodies, drugs and booze, prostitution, etc. Such gripping stories often say more about racism in America than mainstream “race” novels. Without doubt, crime fiction addresses serious issues of race and racism from the danger of inner cities and hostile police to the power of stereotypes and prejudices that simply must be inspected at close range.

Expectations: My expectations are very high, and you should demand the same from me, and especially from one another: if you come to class prepared to fully engage with the material, you should expect the same from everyone in the room. Every absence or withheld participation is palpable; I therefore expect regular attendance, consistent preparation, and active participation. Finally, I expect all of us to have fun because learning should be and can be fun. For my part, I will try to cultivate a lively discussion for each class.

Attendance Policy: Unfortunately, experience has taught me that an attendance policy is necessary for all students. Three class periods equals one week of class. You may miss no more than **four** classes without penalty. Each absence after **four** absences lowers your final grade for the class by ten points. Use your absences wisely. Any rare exceptions to this policy will be determined on a case-by-case basis; it is your responsibility to contact me immediately to inquire about an exception if such a situation occurs. If you have **four** consecutive absences, you will be dropped from the class.

Responsibilities and Behavior: It should be understood that respect for the instructor, fellow students, and the material itself is required. This means, **DO NOT COME TO CLASS LATE. DO NOT LEAVE CLASS EARLY. TURN ALL CELL PHONES, BEEPERS, OR ANY OTHER GADGETS THAT MAKE NOISE ‘OFF’ AT THE DOOR.** Do not work on other assignments for other classes. Do not converse with others randomly during the lecture. Do not sleep (this is not nap-time). Do not **CHEAT**. **ANY BEHAVIOR** that inhibits the ability of students to learn **WILL NOT BE TOLERATED** and could result in **BEING DISMISSED FROM THE CLASS—PERMANENTLY**. Disruptive Behavior should not be a part of the classroom environment.

Late work: Outside work is due at the start of the specified period; I **DO NOT ACCEPT** late work.

I am not interested in excuses. Only a *death* in your immediate family or an *emergency room visit* documented by a health official allows for a time extension on your work. It is your responsibility to inform me immediately when such a situation occurs and to provide physical proof such as a funeral program.

Academic Misconduct (page 36 in your student handbook): Avoid even the appearance of possible impropriety during an exam or quiz; leave books and notebooks closed and out of sight; do not let your eyes stray to another's paper, do not leave the room while the exam is in progress; speak only to the instructor or the exam proctor. A grade of zero will be assigned to any quiz or exam the integrity of which has been opened to question in any way; serious cases will be referred to the university authorities for discipline, which may include expulsion from the university.

GRADING: Course requirements include active participation in discussion, daily questions, 5 reader responses, Team Teaching, 1 essay, and a final exam. All formal writing assignments must be typed in a **12 point Times New Roman font and also be double-spaced with 1-inch margins**. In addition, **all essays and responses must have titles**. Any assignment that does not meet these specific requirements **in addition to length obligations** will receive an X grade and no feedback; an X grade garners zero credit at the end of the semester unless you redo it to my satisfaction. You and you alone are responsible for the condition and submission of your assignments. **DO NOT** rely on spell check alone. **PROOFREAD** your papers and save them. However, I encourage you to seek me out and discuss your ideas or lack thereof and to bring drafts to me. Keep all graded assignments easily available for consultation until after the final grade has been recorded, both so that you may compute your average at any point in the semester, and so that any dispute over the final grade's computation may be efficiently resolved. There are **100 points** for the semester.

Participation – This class is discussion oriented which makes your energetic participation essential in having a successful and productive semester. Thus, it is your obligation to read and prepare the assigned readings for class. I strongly encourage you to express your pleasure in as well as your frustration with the readings because this will stimulate and inspire discussion in the classroom. Attendance is crucial. Another avenue of earning participation points for students who are afraid of speaking in class is by making your opinion known to me via email exchange where you and I will have an electronic exchange of ideas and thoughts. Silent people receive zero points for each class that they are silent (live or internet). (**½ a point per class meeting**)

Daily Questions – Each student is responsible for supplying at least one question on a daily basis for the class to consider about our reading whether I use them or not. Questions may concern whatever fascinates, arouses, disturbs, or confuses you about a text, character, situation, cultural moment, or something else entirely. Questions may be submitted in legible handwriting at the beginning of class or via email the night before class. Handing a question in during the middle of class or at the end of the period will disqualify you for the weekly point. Questions which display an honest, thoughtful attempt to gain insight into a text will make you eligible for the weekly point. Superficial questions will net you a zero at the end of the week. Failing to turn in a question every class period for a given week will result in a zero at the end of the week. No questions are due on our series screenings. (**1 point a week**)

Quizzes – I reserve the right to quiz you during the class period at any time in any form I see fit from group and individual oral quizzes to silent discussions (**BEWARE**) and anything in between including traditional formats of the announced variety. Quizzes greatly depend on your participation.

Reader Responses – Ideally, these response papers will be a kind of diary where you contemplate issues, ideas, questions raised by the assigned readings and discussion. This affords me an opportunity to eavesdrop on “HOW” you are processing and engaging the material. Likewise, these response papers serve as a way for you to organize your developing thoughts, and recognize relationships between texts

and ideas that you have about texts. Keep in mind that reading only succeeds if you gain “meaning,” and the meaning(s) that you gain are transmitted in your interpretations. One possible way to do this assignment would be to provide an answer to one of your daily questions. You can write on any material covered in class, whether it is a response to another person’s expressed view or your own reading of a text or texts. For example, you could explain how and why a particular passage or line provokes a response from you or why the reading assignment is torturous to complete. What you cannot do is turn in a response on a particular text after we are finished with it. This means any response written on a particular text must be turned in on the last day it is listed on the class schedule. Each response should be **no less than two full pages**. You are responsible for 5 responses. **(5 points each)**

Team Teaching – You will pick a partner today and choose a text to teach. The purpose of this assignment is to begin and lead class discussions, presumably on topics of your particular interest or previous knowledge regarding detective work in the fictive world. While the assigned readings determine the basic ground for our discussions, I also hope that our “teachers” will move the class in directions I have not planned or anticipated. In effect, your team will serve as teacher, lecturer, or facilitator during one of the class sessions. I will be glad to meet with teachers prior to the class session they will lead if desired. **(12 points)** At the next class meeting, each “teacher” in the group will present a minimum one page journal documenting their experience leading the class and the pressures of teaching. **(3 points)**

Essay – There is only one essay for this class. You will choose one novel that particularly appeals to you from our reading; you will research it; and you will answer the “simple” questions: WHY DO MYSTERIES CAPTIVATE US? Alas, there are many ways to answer this question beginning with the course description. I consider this essay to be the most formal assignment. As such, it will be evaluated on the quality of your engagement with the text or idea, focus and organization, writing mechanics, and creativity. The length requirement for this assignment is **no less than eight full pages and no more than twelve**. Any paper that does not meet the minimum length requirement will be docked a letter grade or worse. **Due Date: Monday, November 23, 2009. (20 points)**

Plagiarism -- the act of passing off the ideas or words of another as your own without crediting the source -- is not acceptable and will be severely penalized, meaning an F for the course. Of course, you can use outside sources in as long as you cite them properly using MLA style. Please do not hesitate to ask whether something should be cited if you are unsure

Final – The final exam format will be announced. **(10 points)**

Grade Scale: A 90 and Above; B 89-80; C 79-70; D 69-60; F 59 and Below

Participation – 20 points
Daily Questions – 10 points
Reader Responses (5) – 25 points
Team Teaching – 15 points
Essay – 20 points
Final – 10 points

UNIVERSITY POLICIES: If you have questions about the university’s academic policies, guidelines regarding sexual harassment, or any other matters, please consult the relevant sections of the UCA Student Handbook. UCA adheres to the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act. If you need an accommodation under this act due to a disability, contact the UCA Office of Disability Services at 450-3135.

THIS SYLLABUS IS A TENTATIVE OUTLINE—IT IS SUBJECT TO CHANGE

CLASS SCHEDULE:

F 8/21: Course Intro; Personal Intro; Pick Partners

M 8/24: *The Maltese Falcon* pp. 1-72

W 8/26: *The Maltese Falcon* pp. 73-139

F 8/28: *The Maltese Falcon* pp. 140-217; **RR due**

M 8/31: *The Big Sleep* pp. 1-103

W 9/2: *The Big Sleep* pp. 104-180

F 9/4: *The Big Sleep* pp. 180-231; **RR due**

M 9/7: **No Class Labor Day**

W 9/9: *The Wire*; no questions due

F 9/11: *The Wire*; no questions due

M 9/14: *Strangers on a Train* pp. 1-115; **Team Teaching #1**

W 9/16: *Strangers on a Train* pp.115-201

F 9/18: *Strangers on a Train* pp. 202-281; **RR due**

M 9/21: *A Rage in Harlem* pp. 1-86

W 9/23: *A Rage in Harlem* pp.86-159; **RR due**

F 9/25: *The Wire*

M 9/28: *Killshot* pp. 1-134; **Team Teaching #2**

W 9/30: *Killshot* pp. 134-263

F 10/2: *Killshot* pp. 264-385; **RR due**

M 10/5: *PostMortem* pp. 1-143; **Team Teaching #3**

W 10/7: *PostMortem* pp. 144-262

F 10/9: *PostMortem* pp. 263-342; **RR due**

M 10/12: *The Wire*; no questions due

W 10/14: *The Wire*; no questions due

F 10/16: No Class Fall Break

M 10/19: *A Red Death* pp. 39-164; **Team Teaching #4**

W 10/21: *A Red Death* pp. 165-239

F 10/23: *A Red Death* pp. 240-312; **RR due**

M 10/26: *Sacred Clowns* pp. 1-174; **Team Teaching #5**

W 10/28: *Sacred Clowns* pp. 174-262

F 10/30: *Sacred Clowns* pp. 263-354; **RR due**

M 11/2: *The Wire*; no questions due

W 11/4: *The Wire*; no questions due

F 11/6: *The Wire*; no questions due

M 11/9: *The Poet* pp. 1-101; **Team Teaching #6**

W 11/11: *The Poet* pp. 102-198

F 11/13: *The Poet* pp. 199-298

M 11/16: *The Poet* pp. 299-397

W 11/18: *The Poet* pp. 398-496

F 11/20: *The Poet* pp. 497-598; **RR due**

M 11/23: *The Wire*; no questions due; **Term paper due**

11/25 & 11/27: NO CLASS THANKSGIVING BREAK

M 11/30: *The Wire*; Bonus RR on *The Wire* due; no questions due

W 12/2: *The Wire*; Last Day of Class!!! Party!!!

Finals Week: 12/7 through 12/11; Final Exam Date, Time, and Location: **TBA**