

American Postmodernism 16200/4353
Fall 2010 16207/5353
MWF 10-10:50
Irby 313

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Office Hours: MWF 11-12; TTh 1:30-2:30 or
by appointment

Texts:

Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (Penguin) 1985
Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Vintage) 1987
Art Spiegelman, *Maus I, A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (Pantheon) 1986
Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (Vintage) 1981
Louise Erdrich, *The Beet Queen*, (HarperCollins) 1986
Paula Voegel, *How I Learned to Drive* (Dramatists Play Service) 1997
Suzan-Lori Parks, *Top Dog/Underdog* (Dramatists Play Service) 2001
Louise Gluck, *The First Four Books of Poems* (HarperCollins) 1995
Billy Collins, *Sailing Alone Around the Room* (Random House) 2004

Welcome to American Postmodernism! This is one of my very favorite classes to teach at UCA, a class that I have instructed at least a half-dozen times previously, but also a course that never fails to fascinate me because of the excellent, engaged students who unfailingly manage to convene to take the class, and the stimulating and insightful responses that I always receive from these students. I know this class will be no different and the new, improved, and audacious syllabus which I have assembled before you will prove interesting and challenging. Hopefully, these works will expand your emotions as well as your intellectual consciousness. We begin with two of the premiere novels of critical and readership concern in the field of American Postmodernism, DeLillo's *White Noise* and Morrison's *Beloved*. Lauded, analyzed, and deconstructed, these novels, one about black slavery and American History, the other about the empire of signs, semiology, and advertising, the "waves and radiation" that engulfs an American family in "an airborne toxic event", are the most critically acclaimed and published about American novels of the last half of the twentieth century. In their concern with language, history, and human consciousness' ability to create and/or erode the future, both books represent one essence of the concept of postmodernism. Next, we read carefully a cartoon, a graphic novel, a what-the-hey story, with sketchily drawn pictures, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which created first a hailstorm, then a wave of respect and admiration when it was compiled as a book in 1986. By presenting an event of the enormity and horror of the Holocaust as a series of pen-and-ink drawings with vermin mice as the central characters, critical consensus eventually became that Spiegelman had imaginatively recreated the horror of Nazism with the feeling, depth, and anguish that much high art had grappled with, and failed. The next work is the most perfected example of postmodernism in the American short story form that the last half of twentieth century produced: Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. These are indelibly beautiful, superbly crafted short stories with a frequently shocking postmodern kick. Louise Erdrich's *The Beet Queen* follows. At first glance, the book seems like a sturdy, somewhat old-fashioned, multi-generational novel about life on the Midwestern plains and in Midwestern cities told by many characters representing diverse perspectives of family, community, and culture. A careful, second glance at this novel reveals a fragmented collage-like structure with a shifting, Rashomon-like vision of reality and an expert use of a kind of American magical realism. The two plays in this course, Paula Voegel's

How I Learned to Drive and Suzan-Lori Parks' Topdog/Underdog, both recipients of the Pulitzer Prize for American Drama by accomplished women playwrights, visualize and understand marginal figures living under the oppression of either race and history or that of sexual victimization. The course concludes with the work of two dexterous, agile, and readable modernist/ postmodernist poets and American poet laureates: Louise Gluck, a writer of feminist sensibility and great care in linguistic precision; and Billy Collins, an easy-to-read, accessible, and sensual writer who makes poems about loneliness, daydreaming, and his careful observation of deceptively simple natural phenomena.

Course Objectives:

- To read carefully, objectively, and with sophisticated, interpretive understanding several postmodern works in three literary genres.
- To achieve a basic overview of the literary and the meta-literary, the philosophic, linguistic, phenomenological premises and suppositions of postmodern as a school of literary expression, philosophical discourse, and rhetorical analysis, notably as it relates to the three novels, one collection of short stories, one graphic novel, two plays, and the work of the two poets considered on this syllabus.
- To apprehend how each of the nine authors in this course makes a formal break with the tenets and the vision of modernism, only to realize 'there is nothing new under the sun,' i. e. that these postmodern works incorporate qualities of the authority, control, belief in culture and the ruins of culture, reliance on history and the end of history, certitude in language and realization of the mutability of language; and to be able to effectively, authoritatively discriminate and define elements of modernism and postmodernism in all nine works.
- To write a careful, analytical, and original term paper, founded on the student's distinctive, creative thesis regarding one of the works, but incorporating secondary sources that acknowledge, interpret and use postmodern critical theory and analysis.

Course Requirements:

- Two examinations, one oral presentation/ teaching day before the class, and a final very important term paper, originally driven but documented with secondary criticism on one of the works in the course
- An open mind, a willingness to relish what might at first seem strange, provocative, or 'other.' The desire not to be daunted by the weird and uncanny, the contradictory or allusive, the unresolved, fragmented or aleatory, that is, the seemingly random or accidental nature of some postmodern literature.
- Excellent attendance, minimal tardiness, close reading of the works in front of you. Parking cell-phones, i-phones, lap tops, blackberries, and any other electronic mediation at the door.
- Intellectual curiosity about what Postmodernism might be. (Hint: No one knows for sure.) A desire to think for yourself. Recognition that this instructor teaches to learn from his students. Hence, he sometimes calls on students, never to embarrass them or make them feel insufficient, but rather to insure they are active participants in the classroom.

Your grade in this course will come from five sources: (1) a mid-semester and a final examination; (2) a grade on each student's oral presentation on an issue, topic, or passage from one of the texts the class is currently exploring; (3) an occasionally administered quiz over a current reading assignment, or a graded evaluation of collected homework; (4) a very important final paper which enables you to develop your own original thesis about any one of the works and the writers we have been reading and discussing throughout the semester, as well as allowing you to ask the proverbial question, "just how postmodern is it?"; and (5), a class participation evaluation in which I assess just how diligent, responsive, and consistent each of you has been in attending, reading, and engaging with the sometimes difficult works on the syllabus.

I take the roll daily, religiously. I am heavily invested in your daily, regular attendance in this classroom and your contribution to what I hope will be a fairly interactive classroom environment. Missing more than five (5) classes will result in being dropped from this class roster, and you will receive a WF in this course.

This has always been an exciting and invigorating course for me to teach. I know if we all get off to a good start you will be fascinated with many of the nine writers we are exploring and their uses for and/or disdain of the concept of Postmodernism. Furthermore, you will know and understand more about Postmodern writers and writing by December than you ever dreamed possible in these dog days of August.

The University of Central Arkansas affirms its commitment to academic integrity and expects all members of the university community to accept shared responsibility for maintaining academic integrity. Students in this course are subject to the provisions of the university's Academic Integrity Policy, approved by the Board of Trustees as Board Policy No. 709 on February 10, 2010, and published in the Student Handbook. Penalties for academic misconduct in this course may include a failing grade on an assignment, a failing grade in the course, or any other course-related sanction the instructor determines to be appropriate. Continued enrollment in this course affirms a student's acceptance of this university policy.

The University of Central Arkansas adheres to the requirement of the Americans with Disabilities Act. If you need an accommodation under this Act due to a disability, please contact the UCA office of Disability Services, 450-3613.

This instructor advises all students to familiarize themselves with all policies in the Student Handbook, particularly those relating to University Sexual Harassment Policy and all Academic Policies.