

ENGLISH 4453: CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION
SPRING 2000 — MWF 1:30–2:20
DR. SHELLEY REID

Office & Hours

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M 3:00-4:30, W 9:30-11:00, Th 2:00-3:30

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Texts: *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros), *Beloved* (Morrison), *The Things They Carried* (O'Brien), *Dreamer* (Johnson), *The Bean Trees* (Kingsolver), *All The Pretty Horses* (McCarthy), *So Far From God* (Castillo). Short readings on reserve. Optional: *The Joy Luck Club* (Tan), *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (Alexie).

Reading Assignments in this class depend on *you* for their full effect, since one of our primary goals will be to investigate the interactions among authors, narrators, and readers. You will thus want to note and analyze your own reactions as you read—positive or negative, comprehending or confused—and know that we as a classroom community will value (if not always share) your views as a key part of our study. In addition, you may want to ask yourself and others questions about how the texts we're reading (and those we have excluded)

- represent or define a modern American literary tradition (or traditions)
- include or exclude voices & views: in particular, you might watch interplays among men and women, adults and children, powerful and powerless, immigrant (newcomer) and native-born (status-quo), dominant and minority ethnicities/cultures, realists and dreamers, individuals and communities.
- connect to one another, or to one of the starting motifs for this semester: relationships and journeys, and their links to national & personal identities.
- use language, syntax, & story powerfully—and very differently—to affect readers, and/or use metafictional techniques to comment upon their own storytelling.
- shed light on the “-isms” that we use to label artistic movements, and/or illuminate (or are illuminated by) one or more of the critical stances that we use to talk about literature in the late 1990s—from “New Criticism” to “psychoanalytic readings” to “feminism.”

Individuals in this class should also be asking their own questions, as they prepare to write about these texts, to teach some of them to their own students, to study them at further length in graduate school, or to continue reading in the literature of their own culture. Written assignments are purposefully left open so that you may respond to the texts in ways that best suit your own understanding of and future relationship to contemporary American literature.

Reading to Discuss: American literature, particularly in the modern era, is too diverse and complex to be well-represented by a few choice texts. The truth is, we will leave much unsaid about individual texts, in our attempt to build a framework to sustain your further reading in American literature. Discussion groups and writing assignments should help counteract this consequence. The premise of this particular class is that a solid conception of what is *possible* in modern American literature, and of how possibilities feed into and converse with one another, will provide a more useful foundation for a lifetime of reading than a "conclusive" vision of a few texts with the answers neatly penned inside the covers.

Indeed, participation in this class is crucial; readers' voices are often co-important with the authors' in creating the textual vision. Short quizzes should provide some encouragement to keep reading; ultimately, though, it's up to you to take up the texts' challenge and come to each class ready to add your own details to our larger picture. You should plan to read actively, taking notes to help stay afloat in dazzling waters and to help others chart their pathways, jotting down questions as well as connections, observations, and analyses. We'll use an e-mail forum to expand our conversations.

Writing assignments (70%) in this course are designed to develop a set of linked skills; to progress from short queries to longer investigations to more sophisticated readings of texts within the discipline's conversations; to take full advantage of opportunities for conversation, feedback, and revision; and to allow individual students to explore topics, texts, and approaches.

Discussion Starters: Four times during the semester, we will begin the class with small discussion-group meetings. Each group member should come to the meeting with photocopies (for their group) of 3–5 Discussion Starters: 2–4 *questions* about texts or topics under consideration, and 1–3 *claims* about texts or topics. At least one claim or question must draw a *connection* between texts (assigned for this class or read separately).

Questions may pose queries about words, phrases, characters, themes, meanings, conflicts, settings, plot twists, metaphors, implications, writing styles, socio-political issues, literary theories, questions of identity; they may also ask other students to offer their analyses or personal reactions. While you need not have an/the answer to your question, you should be able to envision the kinds of answers other group members might give. Powerful questions often (though not always) come in two or three parts, digging deeper as they follow-up.

Claims should be debatable, and you should be able to imagine an intelligent person in your group seriously disagreeing with or questioning the claim. You might think of a claim as a hypothesis about or answer to a tricky question; indeed, you may combine questions and claims to help start discussions. You need not fully believe the claim(s) you present, though you should be able to provide at least some support for the possibility. Feel free to take chances with claims, or to challenge a widely-held assumption.

Discussion Starters will be marked as plus, check, or minus (+/√/-), with most assignments receiving checks to record their general thoughtfulness and usefulness to the group. Occasional assignments which demonstrate unusual insight or provoke intense and productive discussion will receive pluses; any assignment that is incomplete or that poses only the most general, surface-level ideas will receive a minus. Checks will be counted as a reinforcement of whatever your overall class participation grade is; a plus or two will improve it; minuses will lower it. Discussion Starters — yours or those of other classmates — may certainly be developed into longer analyses or essays.

Point Analyses: Two times this semester you will turn in an informal but tightly focused analysis of a point or question that caught your imagination. Your approach may be personal, text-based, theoretical, comparative, evaluative, argumentative, expository, or any combination of the above. Your discussion may also start with (but should go beyond) a topic addressed in class, in a discussion group, or in a published article. Thoughtful reflection will be emphasized over mechanical perfection or stylistic conformity.

Because of the length limitations—analyses are to be **between 200 and 500 words** (no longer!)—and the additional requirement that you note at least two specific examples from the text(s) being considered, topic choice will be crucial. Avoid the temptation to cover your “overall impression” of a text or author, or to definitively explain a complex theme, or to simply describe (rather than analyzing) a feature of the text. If you’re interested in a broader question, use a PA assignment to explicate a single example or a minor thread as a way of getting started. PAs may be developed further into longer essays.

Three Point Analysis due dates have been specified on the syllabus. You will turn in a PA assignment on two of those dates, depending on the scheduling of your **Context Report** assignment (see below). That is, you will turn in a PA during a section of the semester in which you are *not* giving a context report. Your PA assignments will earn letter grades.

Context Reports: Once during the semester you will broaden your own research and synthesis skills—and broaden our class community’s knowledge base—by consulting off-syllabus texts, distilling that outside information into a relevant written analysis, and presenting that concentrated analysis to the class in a brief oral exposition.

Context reports should resemble one of the following:

- Authorial context report, based on biography, bibliography, and interviews or written statements giving the author's reflections on the arts of prose/fiction.
- Cultural context report, based on summary and analysis of the broader social, political, or artistic movements that clearly influenced the author/text under consideration.
- Textual context report, based on summary & analysis of another text(s) by the same author, or by another author who was a literary ancestor, contemporary, or follower.
- Critical context report, based on summary and response to a theoretical approach to or critical study of the author or text under class consideration.
- Pedagogical context report, based on reference to and application of specific, written principles for teaching literature in general or the class author/text under consideration.

Context reports must closely link the relevant information to the text(s) under consideration, and to the class discussions already in progress, and must provide an **analysis of that link** rather than just a summary of the outside information.

Context reports should have three parts:

- a written component (300-600 words, similar to a PA) with a formal bibliography
- a much briefer, supplementary one-page handout for the class
- an oral presentation (5-10 minutes) that is neither a direct reading of the written component nor a straight tour of the handout. Oral presentation skills—eye-contact, voice projection, audience engagement—will be a factor in the context report grade.

Scheduling: Two or three context reports may be given on a single author, as long as they don’t overlap in coverage. Only one “authorial” report may be given per author. Advanced students are invited to use this opportunity to dip into the discipline’s scholarly conversations.

Essays: You will write *two* formal essays, 5–8 pages each, on topics of your choosing. You should focus on one or more of the texts we are reading as a class; if you wish, you may (but aren't required to) include references to critical material, historical texts, and/or any other reading you've done beyond the syllabus that helps illumine or deepen your own arguments.

It is suggested but not required that at least one of your essays focus on issues of narration, either in a single text or in a broader survey. Also, while it may make sense for at least one of these essays to build upon skills and interests you bring with you into the class, you're invited to use one essay to try something new: try a survey of several authors or a close reading of a single thread in a single text; draw cultural or pedagogical contexts into your analysis; engage another literary critic's ideas or theories, either to agree or to disagree.

Formal essays must be typed, double-spaced, with 1–1.5 inch margins; one "page" is approximately equal to 250 words regardless of typefont or margin size. Essays should be titled (cover page not necessary). MLA citation style is expected. Hand all essays in in a folder, accompanied by your notes, rough drafts, Post Script (see About Essays page), and photocopies of any outside sources you rely on. Late papers may be penalized (see Space-Time Continuum sheet). Draft workshops will be scheduled for each essay; one revision will be allowed (see Revision Policy on About Essays page).

Class Participation (15%): Much of the success of this class depends upon consistent, wide-ranging participation. As a rule, I don't "call on" people who sit quietly making minimal eye-contact and taking notes; I do happily rely on volunteers, to avoid making anyone uncomfortable in the classroom. I understand that not everyone's conversational style runs at warp speed with bulldozer force—if you're one of the quiet considerers but know that your thinking is as good as anyone else's (better, even?), make good friends with your e-mail, and let me know how I can help clear you some space during class conversations.

Your participation grade will be tallied on a 50-point scale:

Quizzes show you're prepared to discuss: 8 quizzes @ 2 points each, max. 15 points

Full-class Discussion keeps the whole wheel spinning: up to 2 points each day, max 25 pts.

E-mail list postings extend our reach: up to 2 points per thoughtful post, max. 20 points (only 10 points available after week 8)

Since that adds up to 60 available points just for keeping up and speaking out, I expect a whole slew of "perfect 50s" by the end of the semester.

Final Exam (15%): The final take-home exam will be comprehensive in that it will require you to think synthetically about the texts we covered throughout the semester. (Having good notes will help!) The bulk of the final exam will be in essay format: Length requirements and question types will be discussed in detail in the latter part of the term.

Note #1: On "Difficulty" Certainly, the texts we are reading—and the pace we'll be keeping—will be challenging (though invigorating) even for upper division literature students. We'll see the standard "difficulties": plenty of pages, dense prose, complex narratives. In addition, readers are likely to encounter other difficulties: the emotional distress of coping with nightmare events, some intellectual stress over the texts' deliberate, post-modern elusiveness and lack of closure, and some cultural uncertainty as authors pull us into unfamiliar cultures—or make us aware of our outsider status. If

you're struggling, try to name and locate your difficulties specifically, so that they can become cause for further discussion.

Note #2: In general, improvement over the semester will work to your advantage; try not to be discouraged if your initial efforts are less successful than you had hoped. And if you're "not getting it," whatever "it" is, please don't wait until the last minute to ask for assistance. It's likely that you're not the only person having difficulties—we will be covering difficult material and keeping a tight schedule—so your concerns may help other people find their way out of the fog, too.

OSU Disability Policy: If any member of the class feels that he or she has a disability and needs special accommodation of any nature whatsoever, the instructor will work with him or her and the Office of Disabled Student Services (326 Student Union) to provide reasonable assistance to ensure a fair opportunity to perform in this class. Please advise the professor of such disability and the desired accommodation during the first week of class.

About Essays: English 4453

In grading formal essays, I usually base my evaluations on efforts in the following four categories:

Thesis/Focus: have you chosen and developed a strong, arguable (not merely descriptive) point, and set boundaries to limit your analysis? does your essay maintain its focus on this and/or other very closely related ideas? do you make an attempt to explain the usefulness/pertinence of your argument for your reader, and/or explain how your analysis contributes to an ongoing discussion within American literary studies? do you acknowledge, allow for, and/or debunk opposing views or multiple alternatives?

Evidence: do you provide specific evidence from the text(s) at hand, from your personal experience, or from other sources for *each* facet of your argument? do you balance quotations and summary/paraphrase, and work the evidence smoothly into your own sentences and arguments? do you clarify how each piece of evidence directly contributes to the support of your argument(s), and address possible readers' objections? with textual arguments, do you supply evidence from several different points, including those that are less-than-obvious? when using critical essay sources, do you accurately characterize the author's position(s), and fairly represent his/her argument's strengths and weaknesses?

Structures & Presentation: have you organized your thoughts into a logical sequence, and made that sequence clear to your audience/reader? do the intro and conclusion connect smoothly with your reader? do you subdivide complex arguments into manageable pieces that lead a reader along your thought-paths step by step? does your essay read easily from word to word, sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph? have you eliminated distracting mechanical errors and rewritten troublesome sentences?

Insight: does your essay reveal something—large or small—about the text(s) that increases a reader's understanding (of the story, of himself/herself, of cultural/historical issues, of traditions or assumptions important to the discipline)? do your analyses draw connections, reveal patterns, or highlight motives that weren't immediately visible to a casual reader? do you apply your own personal experience appropriately where necessary, and anticipate your reader's response to your arguments?

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Workshop Days: Twice during the semester, prior to the due dates for your formal essays, we will spend time during class providing initial feedback on your essay ideas. This is an opportunity rather than a hard-and-fast assignment, but you should take as full advantage of it as possible. Aim to have at least a partial draft of your essay ready for others to respond to. Provide as much information as possible: your planned arguments, insights you already have, examples you hope to use, and any questions you're still working on.

Essay Check List: Your essay folder should contain all early notes & drafts, your final copy, any peer comments on your draft, your post-script (below), and photocopies of any outside sources you've cited.

Post-Script: After you complete each final draft, answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper (typing not required):

- What was hardest about writing this essay? why? What was easiest? why?
- What is the strongest part of your essay? where are you still having problems?
- What changes have you made as you wrote and revised this essay?
- What have you learned from writing this essay?
- What is the main point that you want your reader to get from your essay? (did you *say* this?!)

Revision Policy: You may, if you choose, revise one of the two formal essays you write this semester to receive a higher grade. To receive credit for the revision, you must arrange a Revision Conference with me within one week after the essay has been handed back to you. At the Revision Conference, I will ask you to explain your detailed plan for changing and improving the essay; your planned alterations need to go beyond fixing surface errors to address underlying problems with structure, support, coherence, or analysis. (If you need to schedule an additional conference beforehand to ask questions about my comments or expectations, please do so.) You must complete the revision within two weeks of the essay's return to you. When you hand in the revised essay, your folder should also contain all previous notes and drafts, any comments, and a **new post-script**.

English 4453 and the Space–Time Continuum

SPACE: Your psychophysical presence is required in this class. When you listen to views not your own, write notes to yourself about topics you hadn't yet considered, and voice publicly your reactions and analyses for others to learn from, you increase your own depth and breadth of learning immeasurably.

Missing more than 4 class meetings will lower your final grade; each additional absence will invoke a 1% penalty. Missing 9 classes or more may result in your being dropped from the class. Absences due to **Uncontrollable Natural Disasters** (severe illness, family emergencies, alien abductions) will be "excused" but will be noted; excuses other than UNDs need not be recited. If you begin to accumulate absences of any sort, you should see me to make sure you're getting what you need to from the course.

Quizzes, as part of the class participation grade for which there is already a grade "cushion," may not be "made up" after an absence; you should devote your energies to other forms of participation.

TIME: Lateness is allowed for (since past and present and future are, of course, all occurring all the time) but as in most places in our unremittingly linear society, it will not be without consequences. There are three general types of late assignments, operating along a continuum of time cycles:

I. Lateness due to Uncontrollable Natural Disasters: Assignments which arrive late due to UNDs (illness, emergency, nation-wide computer crash) may receive full credit, provided that you contact me as soon as you know that your assignment will be late.

II. Lateness due to controllable factors, Accounted For In Advance: If normally controllable events manage to slip beyond your control and thus require you to turn an assignment in late, **and** you contact me before the beginning of class on the day the assignment is due to explain that your assignment will be late, your assignment will be given most of the credit due to it. (For example, an essay, late but A.F.I.A., which would usually be given a B+, would generally receive a B, B- or C+, depending on your response and circumstances.)

III. Lateness due to controllable factors, Left To Its Own Devices: Assignments which are completed late due to normally controllable events, and which are not discussed with me in advance, will receive 10% less credit each calendar day they go overdue. Thus an A- essay (L.T.I.O.D.) due Friday, turned in on Monday, will receive a D- (this is still better than not turning it in at all, which gets you 0 rather than 60%). If you're going to be late, face up to it early, and restructure your time cycles in advance.

Other latenesses will incur similar consequences, including late discussion group assignments and significantly incomplete workshop drafts. Penalties for late assignments cannot be erased by revision.

CONTINUUM: Special cases will receive special consideration. Overwork, as you know from your friends' experiences, is not a special case. Alien abduction is a special case. Between the two lie a range of cases that can be discussed. Don't panic—but do plan ahead when possible.

ENGLISH 62 — REID
 SPRING 1998
 SYLLABUS

Class	Reading due	Writing due
F3 §	Intros	Start-up questionnaires
F5	<i>Antonia</i> Narratives & -isms	<i>Antonia</i> : "Shimerdas"
F10 § §	<i>Antonia</i> , "Grapevine" speakers & stories	<i>Antonia</i> through "Lena" "Goophered Grapevine"
F12	<i>Antonia</i> authorial style	<i>Antonia</i> through "Cuzak's" <i>Maisie</i> : opening & ch. 1
F17 § §	<i>Maisie</i> orality, myth, commun'y	<i>Maisie</i> : Preface, ch. 2-10
F19	<u>Discussion Groups</u>	<i>Maisie</i> , ch. 11-16
F24 § §	<i>Maisie</i> realism, social structures	<i>Maisie</i> , ch. 17-25 "The Other Two"
F26	<i>Maisie</i> psych/stream of consc.	<i>Maisie</i> , ch. 26-31 <i>AILD</i> , pp. 3-15
M3 § §	<i>AILD</i> modernisms	<i>AILD</i> , pp. 16-119
M5	<i>AILD</i>	<i>AILD</i> , pp. 120-165
M10 § §	<u>Discussion Groups</u>	<i>AILD</i> , pp. 166-261
M12	<i>AILD</i> , Essay wkshp.	<i>WTRM</i> , pp. 16-17
* * * * SPRING BREAK * * * *		
M24 §	<i>WTRM</i> About Native Am. Narr.	<i>WTRM</i> , pp. 1-41

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M26 *WTRM* *WTRM*, pp. 44-89 **Essay #1**
 history/community

Class		Reading due	Writing due
M31 § §	<i>WTRM+WW</i> self/representations + truths	"Woman Warrior" selection	ConRepts: Momaday & Kingston
A2	<i>WTRM +WW</i> beyond narr. boundaries	<i>TBE</i> , pp. 1-12 "Fondly Fahrenheit" (TBA)	Point Analysis #2 (no WF/NSM/MHK rpts)
A7 § §	<i>TBE</i> adult children, call/resp.	<i>TBE</i> through "Winter" (p.93)	
A9	<u>Discussion Groups</u>	<i>TBE</i> , pp. 97-131	Discussion Starters
A14 § §	<i>TBE</i> "not a story to pass on"	<i>TBE</i> through "Afterword"	ConRepts: Morrison
A16	<i>TBE</i> powerful voices	<i>SFFG</i> : Front matter, TOC, & pp. 19-24	
A21 § §	<i>SFFG</i> narrative humor	<i>SFFG</i> , ch. 1-5 "Orientation"	
A23	<i>SFFG</i> individ./comm'ty, language	<i>SFFG</i> , ch. 6-8	ConRepts: Castillo (& Orozco?) Point Analysis #3 (no TM or AC reporters)
A28 §	<u>Discussion Groups</u>	<i>SFFG</i> , ch. 9-12	Discussion Starters
A30	<i>SFFG</i> + wkshp. stories not being told		Essay #2 thesis/notes
M5 § §	<i>SFFG</i> , clean-up	<i>SFFG</i> , ch. 13-16	Essay #2
M7	Exam prep, course evals		

FINAL EXAM:

Essay thesis/notes assignments are preparation for workshops. The clearer the idea you can give someone of your essay topic, the more valuable their assistance will be. You may of course change your mind between the workshop and the final draft.

Point Analyses will be collected on three dates. You are required to turn in a point analysis unless you have recently done (or are about to do) a Context Report. You will turn in two PAs total; they should address a text or texts not directly connected to your CR.