

English 140: Introduction to Fiction
Syllabus, Fall 2016
Callum Angus

English 140: Introduction to Fiction

M, W, F 1:25 - 2:15

“For there is often a struggle, and sometimes, even more interestingly, a collusion between the powers of pathology and creation.”

— Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*

We have all fallen "sick" at one point in time. Maybe we've nursed someone back to health or "called in sick" to work. But what is sickness, really? Is it influenza, autism, and schizophrenia? Or is it a deviation from the status quo? Does all literature in some way wrestle with a "sickness"? And is it relevant that slang has reclaimed the word "sick" to mean its exact opposite: awesome & cool? In this course we'll read works of fiction, both long and short, while paying special attention to character, style, and language, to explore how different writers have embraced, rejected, or wrestled with the label of sickness. In the process we'll question those who label us as deficient, ill, unwell, or otherwise not normal. We'll ask how fiction functions as an outlet for those of us who are "different" and/or "sick". We'll consider what forces are at play behind the "struggle" and "collusion" between pathology and creation, as Dr. Sacks puts it. At times we'll even pause to ponder what sorts of "stories" fiction has to offer medicine, the sciences, and our everyday life.

We will approach our semester in three parts: **Sickness of the Body, Sickness of the Mind, and Sickness of Society**. It's important to note that although we begin with the body, we will not leave it behind entirely as we continue on. Its presence will always be lurking in our reading experience. After all, we read with our bodies. Our eyes move across the page (or the screen). Our hands hold the book while our fingers turn the pages. Our brain processes words and draws connections to global and local events. But how often do we see our bodies reflected back to us from a book? And when we do see our breathing, spitting, thinking, crapping, gloriously human bodies on the page, what is our reaction? These questions will become constant companions for you this semester as we attempt to engage a more embodied practice of reading.

Required Texts

These books will form the backbone of our reading and discussions. You will find them (both new and used copies) at Amherst Books, 8 Main Street in downtown Amherst. You may also find copies at the library or on Amazon, but please consider how an independent bookstore like contributes to the livelihood of authors, and thus allows them to write more fiction for us to read:

Jeannette Winterson, *Written on the Body*
Lidia Yuknavitch, *Dora: A Headcase*
Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*
Nella Larsen, *Passing*

Stephen Graham Jones, *Mongrels*

Additional short stories and essay readings will be photocopied and passed out by me in class or posted on Moodle. If in your own reading outside of this class you happen upon something wondrous or even just a little relevant, you are highly encouraged to share with the class.

Goals & Learning Objectives

The primary objective of this course is that you become a stronger reader of fiction. And by proxy, a stronger writer, or at least one who recognizes a little more of what it is they want to read and write in the world, and why they want to read and write it. Too many people go through their lives without knowing concretely the answer to those two things; don't let yourself become one of them.

This course also takes as its main focus the following General Education & Learning Objectives:

Content: 1) approach fiction and poetry primarily from a creative standpoint, generate useful questions, terms, and concepts for discussion, and cultivate diverse methods of analysis; 2) gain a sense of the tradition of fictional and poetic composition as well as current trends; 3) reflect on the relation that fiction and poetry bear to individuals and societies; 4) develop an inside-out understanding of and appreciation for writing.

Critical Thinking: 1) evaluate fiction and poetry as human productions; 2) make sophisticated assessments of writerly technique; 3) explore the potential of imagination to remake the self and the world; 4) bring multiple perspectives to bear on creative and critical practice.

Communication: 1) improve self-expression through regular writing practice and in-class discussion; 2) collaborate on a group presentation to demonstrate in-depth knowledge of the content and context of a specific book of fiction or poetry.

Connections: 1) leverage other disciplines for valuable background information and interpretive models; 2) consider how creative writing functions within the culture at large.

Grading Breakdown & Course Requirements

30%	Class participation (speaking, listening, online Moodle discussions)
30%	Presentation on one reading for the class, including facilitation of discussion
20%	Final project with creative option

10%	Two 4-page essays featuring a close reading of an assigned text
10%	Attend one literary event on campus or in the 5 college area, and report back to class

Participation: Speaking, Listening, and Online Discussion

The nature of this class means that participation makes up a large portion of your final grade. There are three “modes” of participation that you will be evaluated on. Some might be very enthusiastic about speaking, while others might excel at listening and posting in online discussion. It is possible to excel in this class as either type, or as the “all ‘rounder”.

Speaking

Because this class is about reading and studying fiction, you will be expected to speak frequently about the works we’re reading. Discussions in class will take many forms: large group, small groups, partners, presentations etc. Discussions will sometimes stall out, and that’s okay; if it becomes a regular thing, I will ask you to come to class with prepared questions about the readings for your classmates.

Listening

Sometimes we forget that in order to have a discussion, we must also listen intently to our colleagues and consider seriously what they are saying. You are expected to listen with respect, and to really *hear* their ideas, their questions, and respond. Everyone is expected to listen, but please note that it is possible to go above and beyond in listening. Sometimes the quiet person who’s listened to their classmates speak about a book all week can leave us with the most insightful, lingering question to ponder over the weekend.

Listening does not mean spacing out in the back of the classroom while others talk. It means being attentive, taking notes on discussion, referencing discussions in Moodle posts or presentations, and yes, sometimes chiming in. Fortunately, it is quite easy to tell who is listening and who isn’t.

Online Discussions

Each week you’ll find a set of questions posted on Moodle addressing the readings and weekly themes. You are required to post in this forum at least once a week (see instructions on Moodle), but you may post more. These discussions are meant to stimulate in-class discussions, but it also lets me know how you’re responding to the readings, and shows me that you’ve done them.

Co-Facilitation of Discussion

Each student is responsible for presenting on one reading and co-facilitating class discussion with a partner. General guidelines are as follows:

- With a partner, deliver a short presentation (15 min max) in class on the reading assigned for that day.

- Presentation content is up to you, but should include your thoughts on the themes and content of the work, as well as carefully considered questions to launch the day's discussion. You should also address how the reading follows or resists the "sickness" framework we've established.
- Presentations should involve a visual component (i.e. Powerpoint, plot diagram, handout, short interactive skit etc.)
- Presentation grades will be based on effort and enthusiasm of presenters, *not* on how "successful" your efforts are at discussion stimulation. Your classmates will also be required to come prepared with questions for you about the readings as well.

Further guidelines will be addressed in class.

Final Essay with Creative Option

For your final paper in this class, you may choose from the options listed below. At the end of the semester we will have a final class open mic, where **those who choose options two and three will read from their work**. Academic paper writers may be able to read some of their own creative work if desired, but only if time allows.

Option 1: The Academic Paper

Write a 10-15 page academic paper on one or more of the readings we discussed over the course of the semester. You might choose to analyze more deeply a theme we didn't cover very in depth, or compare two works to one another in their treatment of a scenario or character type. 10-15 pages, double-spaced, MLA style with a works cited.

Option 2: The Short Story

We will be reading many short stories in this course, and we will at times complete short creative writing prompts in-class or online. While these won't be graded, you may choose to extend one of these exercises into a short piece of fiction, nonfiction, or other creative work. 8-12 pages, double-spaced, **and** a 2-page reflection on your writing process and inspirations from the semester's readings.

Close-Readings

We will spend a lot of time on learning how to perform close-readings on a text, and how to apply our findings to determining the theme of a novel or story. Over the course of the semester, you will be asked to write two short essays (4 pages each, double-spaced) that perform a close-reading of one of our assigned texts. Your close-reading must be on a passage not covered in class, and should include an analysis of how your reading relates to the overall theme of the book/story.

Conferences

You will conference with me at least once this semester. This is a chance for you to ask more specific questions about our readings, to address any outlying concerns, and to talk about your plans for the final paper. I am always available for additional conferences arranged by appointment, and during my office hours.

Literary Events

We are fortunate to be in an area with a wealth of literary events, readings, and author visits scheduled throughout the semester. As readers of fiction, we will be invested in supporting and contributing to our local literary community. You are asked to attend at least one literary event and report back to the class on what you found interesting or exciting. As further proof, you are **required** to take a selfie of yourself at said event and send it to me or post it to one of your social media accounts.

Attendance

Attendance is crucial for us to foster a community of inquiry from which we can grow our shared literary knowledge in this class. I allow one free absence, no questions asked. After your one free absence, each additional **unexcused** absence will detract .20 (one fifth of a point) from your final grade. Absences that are excused include illnesses with a doctor's note, a scheduled athletic event (please provide a list of your games/meets at the beginning of the semester), observance of a religious holiday, and other personal or family emergencies if you let me know as soon as possible.

If you do miss a class, you are responsible for checking on Moodle and finding out from your peers what was covered that day in class. If you are scheduled to present and an unexpected emergency arises, please contact me and your partner immediately.

Do not be late. These are short, 50-minute classes. If you walk in late, we will not stop our discussion to catch you up, and as such, your opportunities for participating in the day's discussion are limited. If you are more than 15 minutes late, this will count as an unexcused absence.