**ENGL 052B. Core Course: “U.S. Fiction, 1945 to the Present”**

Professor Peter Schmidt

TTh, 9:55-11:10am, LPAC 301

LPAC 206 office hours Spring 2015: TTh 1-2:30pm; and by appt.

**Introductory description of the course**: It’s an old American story: re-invent yourself on the run, without time to think about the consequences or even what you’re running from and why. And yet the past keeps turning up, like your own shadow. What then? Whom do you turn to?—for you can’t get where you’re going on your own. That’s where the real story begins.

We’ll look at major authors and emerging figures, with attention to innovations in the novel as a literary form and the ways in which writers engage with their historical context, both within the U.S. and globally.

Count the novels again: the reading load will be heavy, averaging a novel a week. But this will give you an intellectual feast; they’re moving, exhilarating, audacious. Plus there’s some really strong recent writing in the mix, as well texts by classic American authors such as Kerouac or Hemingway, or Robinson’s haunting *Housekeeping*. We’ll not read the novels in strict order of publication because it makes more sense to cluster novels from the last 2 decades thematically.

The class will be taught in a way suited to literature majors but accessible for non-majors. Prerequisite: completion of a Writing (W) course from any department on campus.

Note: Students will also have the *option* of joining an evening group to read and discuss the following other novels (you may opt for one, some, or all) that couldn’t make it on to the syllabus this year. See end of this document for more information on this option for English 52B.

**The primary reading list consists of the following books:**

Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*

Ernest Hemingway, *The Garden of Eden*

Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*

Nora Ephron, *Heartburn*

Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

Amistead Maupin, *Michael Tolliver Lives*

Sandra Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*

Chimamanda Adichie, *Americanah*

Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*

Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage*

Thomas Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*

Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story*

**More information on the books:**

Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (1957)

My favorite Kerouac novel, both because it contains both a more fascinating look at Kerouac’s interactions with other Beat figures and because it represents his richest exploration of Buddhism as an antidote to American materialism and self-centeredness. (In addition, it will be fascinating to compare Kerouac’s treatment of Buddhism with Johnson’s and Ozeki’s.)

Ernest Hemingway, *The Garden of Eden* (1986)

Out of a 1000+page manuscript that Hemingway couldn’t finish, editors after his death extracted this short and fascinating and turbulent work involving a sexual triangle involving a male writer and two women. We’ll discover why Hemingway may have been unsure how to finish the book or even publish it in the 1950s: it deals with gender switching and uncertainty, misogyny, a lesbian experiment, a boy’s disgust with his father’s elephant hunting, and other controversial subjects. Its themes feel preternaturally contemporary. If this manuscript had been published in the Eisenhower 1950s it might have wreaked havoc with the popular *Life* magazine myth of Hemingway as a macho womanizer and bloodthirsty hunter. Including the best self-portrait Hemingway ever did of his own writing methods, it may be his attempt to reimagine himself as a novelist and to escape the depression that eventually killed him.

Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (1979)

Roth at his most provocative and experimental, this is in my view the best of all Roth’s Zuckerman books. (Zuckerman is Roth’s fictional alter ego or ghost/double.) A sly inquiry into literary hero-worship and its opposite, the artist’s role as icon-smasher and gadfly, this text is both a novel of ideas in debate and a kind of time-bomb planted in readers’ expectations of what a “good” novel should do. The novel’s most daring exploration of doubles and parallel universes reimagines the fate of another Jewish author, Anne Frank: she escapes and comes to the United States in disguise. Nominated for a Pulitzer by novelists but vetoed by the Pulitzer governing board.

Nora Ephron, *Heartburn* (1983)

Is there great feminist fiction about how to survive a mid-life marriage coming apart? You bet: this is it. It’s based on Ephron’s own celebrity disaster of a marriage to the Watergate reporter Carl Bernstein. Ephron created a brilliant career as a journalist, essayist, playwright, and screenwriter (*Silkwood*, *When Harry Met Sally*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Julie and Julia*), but she should be also known as a fine novelist working in the most difficult genre of all, comedy. Students will purchase a print or digital copy, but we’ll also be able to hear excerpts of the audiobook read by the fabulous Meryl Streep!

Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (1980)

Orphaned daughters are raised by a succession of strange caregivers in remote Fingerbone, Idaho. “I wrote much of the book in a darkened room,” Robinson remembers. “I chose the name Ruth [for the heroine] because it means compassion, gentleness. It was a statement to myself about the method of the narrative.” A haunting, even nightmarish book of abandonment, transience, and dissolution, it also is full of visionary moments of light and hope.

Armistead Maupin, *Michael Tolliver Lives* (2007)

A recent installment in Maupin’s famous *Tales of the City* sequence, it also works well as a stand-alone novel because unlike the earlier *Tales* novels, this one focuses primarily on one character, the post-AIDS survivor Michael Tolliver (“Mouse”). A gritty love letter to San Francisco, the novel celebrates queer relationships (and “logical” rather than “biological” families) before marriage was legal, during the period when gays endured the Bush years and post-9/11. But the book is also about what makes any relationship, queer or straight, a strong one. Told with wit and compassion, featuring Maupin’s signature economy, humor, and narrative grace.

Sandra Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991)

Cisneros is most known for her Young Adult classic, *The House on Mango Street*, and for her poems and her epic coming-of-age novel *Caramelo* set in Mexico, Texas, and Chicago. But this superb collection of short stories shouldn’t be neglected, for it forms a novel of sorts made out of an informal cycle of stories featuring diverse and moving female characters.

Chimamanda Adichie, *Americanah* (2013)

The future of the novel in English will include books tracing the transnational connections and crossings of global citizenship—both its opportunities and its difficult tensions. This novel is one of the finest examples of the possibilities of the new transnational novel in recent years. It has great characters, powerful drama, witty exploration of varied narrative forms (including blogs), and a breadth and generosity of vision that is inspiring. Not to be missed as well: Adichie’s famous TED talk, “The Danger of a Single Story.”

Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013)

Who can resist a novel that has both an unforgettable teenager and a 104-year old Buddhist nun as two of its heroines? Set in Japan and the Pacific Northwest, this novel is profoundly experimental, exploring the implications for narrative form of Buddhism, quantum physics (especially concepts of “entanglement”), and global warming. But it’s primarily character-driven. Ruth Ozeki will visit Swarthmore in April to meet our class and to give a public event celebrating her emergence as one of the U.S.’s most profound novelists.

Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (1990)

So, you’re a freed slave in New Orleans in 1830 and you’ve done some things that mean you need to get out of town quickly. You stow away on a ship. Bad decision: it’s a slaver bound for Africa for new cargo. Not only is the captain an Ahab-like tyrant able to defend colonialism and slavery using Western philosophy; he captures an African god of magical powers and stows him in a cage in the hull along with hundreds of slaves. A slave rebellion ensues: which side will our rogue of a protagonist join? A satiric look at why the Enlightenment invented both the idea of freedom and the practice of race-based slavery, inspired by the author’s Buddhism as well as his study of African religious traditions. It’s a suspense story, a satire, and a profound novel of ideas with prose so audacious you’ll ask “why haven’t I heard of Charles Johnson?” National Book Award 1990.

Thomas Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* (2009)

Pynchon’s our most eccentric and funny novelist of genius. This is his tribute to the detective genre, with his “gumsandal” hero, one Doc Sportello, wandering through a stoner noir tragicomedy set in LA in 1970, the year after the Manson murders. The novel comes with its own R&B, jazz, and surfer soundtrack. A filmed version by Paul Thomas Anderson will be released in late 2014, which may mean we’ll get a mash-up of *Boogie Nights*, *L.A. Confidential*, *The Big Lebowski*, and David Lynch films: who isn’t intrigued by that? The global Pynchon fanbase has created a Wiki for *Inherent Vice* (as well as for all of Pynchon’s other novels); we use it to accompany at least some of our reading.

Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story* (2011)

“Looking good is the new smart.” For some reason, in this time of our national insanity satire is a thriving genre! This is the third satire we’ll read to end the course, after Johnson and Pynchon. Set in New York City just slightly in the future, when the U.S. dollar is now pegged to China’s currency, it features Eunice Park and Lenny Abramov, GlobalTeen texting and Jewish comic pessimism—a super sad true love fiasco from our greatest contemporary satirist, an American Gogol for our end-of-empire iPhone era.

***Optional* additional readings** **for English 52B:**

For students who would like to read even more great fiction (!), we’ll meet separately several times as an evening seminar to discuss **one or more** of the selections below. If 5 or more students sign up for some of these books, we can have an “extra” evening discussion session or two on those texts. Students may be join sessions on one, some, or all of the extra books chosen. The only requirement to join is that you do the reading and come prepared to share your ideas about the book.

These sessions will be smaller and more informal than a regular “class.” But they should be fun. And if you decide you’d like to do one of your papers on one of these “extra” books, you can do so. (The other paper must be on a text on the syllabus.)

Once class begins and I find who wants to read what, we’ll set up a schedule. (We’ll probably meet for an hour or so in the evening 1-2 meetings per book.) Many of the novels listed below have been on the English 52B syllabus before, and/or will be on it again in the future: for good reason they’ve proven popular with students,.

**Choices:**

Patricia Highsmith, *The Price of Salt* (1952). You won’t believe this could get published, even pseudonymously, in the early 1950s. L-word noir suspense. You won’t be able to put it down, but it’s also a brilliant coming-of-age and coming-out novel.

James Agee, *A Death in the Family* (1957). “We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the time that I lived there [in the 1930s] so successfully disguised to myself as a child….” An American classic, one of the saddest yet strangely healing and uplifting books ever written, with a narrator uncannily able to enter the thoughts and feelings of a wide range of characters in a time of crisis. Inspires comparisons to Woolf and Chekhov and perhaps also Faulkner. Yet ultimately this novel is incomparable.

Lorrie Moore, *Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?* (1994). Don’t be fooled by the kooky title—teenage friendship and coming-of-age in upstate NY, deep and sad and funny. The two female protagonists are unforgettable.

Justin Torres, *We the Animals* (2011). I can’t summarize it better than this reviewer, Matilda Sycamore: “Narrated by the youngest of the three boys, six years old at the beginning of the book, [*We the Animals*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0547576722/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=artandlies-20&linkCode=as2&camp=217145&creative=399373&creativeASIN=0547576722) conveys the raw honesty of a child trying to figure everything out: hunger, love, loneliness, injustice, sex, the weather, desire, poverty, vulnerability, brutality, abandonment, loyalty, brokenness, yearning, fear, and, maybe, hope. Each chapter is a tiny, carefully crafted vignette, a story both elegant and raw, vibrant and incomplete. Rarely has a writer developed the child's-eye view with such intimate vulnerability and emphatic restraint.”

Neil Gaiman, *American Gods* (2001). Gaiman may be best known as a graphic novelist and master of the Twitterverse, but he’s also a first-rate print novelist—never better demonstrated than in this moving tribute to Ray Bradbury’s *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. But *American Gods* surpasses its predecessor in ambition, vision, mystery, and sheer gorgeous prose. What if the new gods of technology decided it was time to vanquish the old gods of all the world’s religions? You are recruited to fight—but on which side? And why is it that all gods seem to require blood sacrifice? Perhaps I should also mention that it’s also very funny.

Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (2001). Family—can’t live with them, can’t live without them. If Tolstoy understood the suburbs and the boom stock market of the 1990s, he might have written a book like this. Fair and unrelenting towards both parents and children, in the end it’s about healing, at least for some of the characters. You won’t know whether to laugh or cry, so prepare to do both. We can also hunt down the Swarthmore references: Franzen is a Swarthmore grad, class of 1981.

Jennifer Egan, *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2010). That’s what Time does to you and yours, including your memory. It’s not pretty. Except the writing is super, the ironies moving as well as merciless, the characters as fascinating as watching a car wreck, and some of us just have to love a novel about the ‘60s and the present whose structure (sort of) pays homage to vinyl LPs.

Rachel Kushner, *The Flamethrowers* (2013). The heroine’s into fast motorcycles and other risky crushes, like the New York East Village art scene or Italian revolutionaries in the 1970s. “I feel the need for speed,” says a famous movie character. Why do we need speed? What are we fleeing from, or careening toward? What is left after our addictions consume us like flames? A novel whose silent soundtrack would be by Lou Reed.

Nominate a post-World War II novel of your choice to discuss with your friends from class (a minimum of 5 students must be part of this group). I can’t guarantee I’ll have read the novel or will have time to read it, but I can certainly help moderate the discussion. If you’d like this option, please consult with friends early in the semester and nominate a book.