English 52B, “U.S. Fiction, 1945 to the Present”

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**Final Exam**

This is an open-book and -notes exam, and you may download and use it as a study guide long before your write your essay. I recommend a minimum of 3 hours outlining your essay, finding quotations to use, and then writing it. You can take longer and you can break up your prep and writing sessions as you prefer.

You MUST write on at least 3 authors, 2 of which MUST be on books not discussed in your previous papers. You may discuss more than 3 authors, but 3 is the minimum. If you discuss a book on which you’ve written a paper, do not overly repeat points you’ve already made. These are multifaceted books; give me new ideas and new examples.

Choose ONE of the 5 topics below. Regardless of which topic you choose, I’d like your essay ALSO to ponder what you’ve learned from this course about reading fiction that is most valuable to you, and why—and also what you’ve learned that’s most valuable to you for understanding post-World War II U.S. fiction. Don’t worry about page length, but please double-space your essays. It’s important that the essays have a strong thesis, are well organized, and use evidence to support your major points. **Upload to the English 52B Moodle site as a .docx file by 5pm, Saturday, May 16.**

A) Many of the texts we’ve read not only reference Buddhism, but also have characters exploring Buddhist ways of living in the world, debating Buddhism, etc. These texts also investigate what are the implications for *narrative* of Buddhist insights about the sacred and profane, time, interconnectedness, and the purpose of human life. Evaluate how several texts we’ve read depict Buddhism and perhaps also embody Buddhist principles and/or practice in the experiences they create for readers. You need not be an expert on Buddhism to choose this question: focus on how Buddhist concepts come alive in the texts.

B) Many characters in the fiction we read have most absent fathers or mothers, or parental figures (like Dr. Park in *Super Sad True Love Story*) who are dangerously present in their lives, or some mix of both. These characters also often seek alternative mentors, “families” or social networks, etc., and have either good or bad results. Examine how at least 3 fictions we’ve read explore issues of family responsibilities and, in the process, perhaps revise our notions of what a “family” is or may be. Family histories have long been the primary focus of social fiction: why in your opinion is it important for fiction to help us re-imagine “family” at this point in history?

Note: The meaning of this question’s central term can be radically different depending on which texts you focus on: consider how different “family” is in Hemingway, Roth, Ephron, Maupin, and Cisneros, for instance (just to pick titles from the first half of the semester). **[more topics on next page]**

C) Intertextual form: many if not all of the texts we’ve read involve intersecting story-worlds, code-switching and multiple languages, the absorption of many different kinds or genres of writing, etc. The stories are deeply interested in the heterogeneous rather than homogenous nature of narratives, and the ways in which writing is a *process* or a “time being” that occurs in time, not something that exists outside of history. In fact, the number of books that include characters who write in a wide variety of formats is quite astonishing, beginning with Kerouac and Hemingway and continuing through Ephron and Cisneros, Adichie, Ozeki, Johnson (the ship’s log), and Shteyngart. (This is not an exhaustive list.)

(A side note: Doc Sportello may be the comic exception here: he can barely type or write a few words even when directly interviewing people, though he possesses [thanks, PynchonWiki] a copy of the *exact* kind of Olivetti typewriter on which Pynchon, when living in Manhattan Beach near LA in the late 60s and early 70s, wrote *Gravity’s Rainbow*! But could “writing,” loosely defined, be important, even crucial, to *Inherent Vice* in other ways?)

This pattern of fiction-filled-with-writers is arguably not due just to your professor’s nerdy taste, but may be of central importance for U.S. fiction authors at this moment in cultural history when the “future of the book” is very much uncertain and unknown. Our writers are very interested in the history of writing, the ways it circulates, the good or bad functions it performs, and what the future of texts and reading may be in the reign of multimedia. Further, our authors often directly took on issues involving representation and its consequences, including “the danger of a single story” and how to combat that danger. Acts of reading and interpretation were also often prominently figured in the books we read.

Choose at least 3 fictions and set them in dialogue with each other. In what ways can the linguistic *texture* of these texts provide one key to their larger themes and concerns? In what ways are the *consequences* of acts of reading and interpretation, broadly defined, explored as well?

D) Endings: discuss at least 3 endings to the texts we read. What happens in these endings? What questions would you ask about them? In what ways does each ending encourage us to revise the meaning of all that came before, and why is this important to do? How are these endings appropriate (or not) to the fictions to which they belong?

E) Choose your own topic and use it to write your comparative essay covering at least three authors. Define key terms in your topic and include some discussion about why you think this topic is important to explore.