

# ENGL 273: Contemporary Literature

WVU Department of English, TR 1300-1415, 21 White Hall, Fall 2007

<http://www.clc.wvu.edu:8080/clc/Members/sbaldwin/courses/eng1273f07>

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The Center for Literary Computing / [www.clc.wvu.edu](http://www.clc.wvu.edu)

## Course Description

"Ideas evolve and de-evolve, and history is turned on end." - Don DeLillo

From the English Department Catalog: "ENGL 273: An examination of the significant literature written since 1960 in England and America, including poetry, drama, and fiction. Selections will vary depending on the instructor."

"Contemporary" means belonging to our time, up to date, and simultaneous with us. The contemporary is immediate and impinges on our lives. This course considers literature written since the turn of the millenium - 21st Century literature. And, necessarily, this literature is overshadowed by September 11 as the defining American event within this new century. These are works that turn around that day, even if they are not immediately concerned with 9/11. At least in the first part of the course, we will be directly concerned with how writers engage with and resist 9/11 and its aftermath. The "absent experience" of trauma is one approach, both for the writer and for the larger society. Globalization is another, re-situating our culture in a larger dynamic setting, with changes to notions of self, history, rights, and representations. With this comes a changed sense of the literary work, transforming its material and medial status. We will read novels, stories, poems, and graphic novels (comics); works from the USA and elsewhere in the world.

## Course Goals

- to be able to discuss and write about the language, design, structure, and method of contemporary literature;
- to be able to discuss and write about contemporary literature with an awareness of cultural and historical contexts;
- more specifically, to show an awareness in discussion and writing of how globalization, intermediality, materiality, trauma, and other approaches modelled in the course, shape our reading of contemporary literature and contemporary reality.

## Required Texts (available at the WVU Bookstore)

- Charles Bernstein, *Girly Man*
- William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*
- Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon, *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*
- Barry Lopez, *Resistance*
- Nathaniel Mackey, *Splay Anthem*
- Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*
- Alice Notley, *Alma or the Dead Women*
- Davy Rothbart, *Found: The Best Lost, Tossed, and Forgotten Items from Around the World*
- Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis*
- William Vollman, *Poor People*

## Requirements

- In-class presentation. All students will sign up for one in-class presentation. The presentation will last at least 10 minutes and open discussion of the text. The presenter is responsible for leading class discussion following the presentation. Presentations must include a supporting handout of at least one page. The format for the presentation is open: you may focus on specific passages in the text; you may perform the text in some way; you may supply background information and contextualization; etc. You may not simply summarize the text. You are encouraged to meet with me to discuss your presentation. 20%
- Three short essays. 3 pages minimum (1" margins, 12 point font) + Works Cited. Due by midnight on Sept 21, Nov 2 and Dec 11 via email to charles.baldwin at mail.wvu.edu. Write one essay each from the following genres, in any order, on one of the texts (book, poem, story) from the previous weeks of the course (up to the previous essay): 1) *close reading* of a passage, describing and analysing language and sense; 2) *thesis-driven essay* about the entire text, with supporting evidence; 3) *review* of two scholarly sources on the text, summarizing and evaluating the sources. 3x20=60%
- Participation. The class will be run in discussion rather than lecture format. There will be frequent in-class work with groups of other students and occasional in-class writing. As part of your participation, you must meet with me before mid-semester for a conference (you can meet for additional conferences, of course). We'll discuss your thoughts about the class and your progress at that point. It is your responsibility to meet with me. You can just appear during my office hours or make an appointment. 20%

## Attendance

A great deal happens during class and your presence contributes to the communal learning environment. Participation and attendance are crucial. Attendance will be taken regularly after the first week of classes. You are allowed two unexcused absences. Subsequent unexcused

absences will reduce your overall grade. I will determine what constitutes an excuse. All reading, writing, and other work is due on the date indicated on the schedule. Unexcused late work will receive no credit. I will determine what constitutes an excuse.

## Grade Descriptors

Adapted from standard grade descriptors for writing courses. These are intended to give general grading guidelines and may not apply in every case.

**A** Exemplary work that demonstrates originality and initiative. The content is mature, thorough, and well-suited for the audience; the style is clear, accurate, and forceful; the information is well-organized and formatted so that it is accessible and attractive; genre conventions are effectively used; mechanics and grammar are correct.

**B** Good work. The work generally succeed in meeting goals in terms of audience, purpose, and genre without the need for further major revisions. It may need some minor improvements in idea, content, presentation, or writing style/mechanics.

**C** Satisfactory. Work is adequate but requires some substantial revisions of idea, content, presentation, or writing style/mechanics; may require further work in more than one area.

**D** Work is unprofessional, requires extensive revisions of idea, content, presentation, writing style, and/or mechanics. The writer has encountered significant problems meeting goals of audience, purpose, and genre.

**F** Not enough information; inappropriate for the situation; and/or major and pervasive problems in terms of content, presentation, or writing style/mechanics that interfere with meaning. May be incomplete, or plagiarism may compromises the work on ethical grounds.

## Academic Integrity

West Virginia University expects that every member of its academic community shares the historic and traditional commitment to honesty, integrity, and the search for truth. Academic dishonesty includes plagiarism, cheating and dishonest practices; and forgery, misrepresentation, or fraud. Here is WVU's [Academic Dishonesty/Plagiarism Policy](#).

## Social Justice Statement

"West Virginia University is committed to social justice. I concur with that commitment and expect to maintain a positive learning environment based upon open communication, mutual respect, and nondiscrimination. Our University does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, age, disability, veteran status, religion, sexual orientation, color or national origin. Any suggestions as to how to further such a positive and open environment in this class will be appreciated and given serious consideration. If you are a person with a disability and anticipate

needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangement with Disability Services (293-6700)."

## Schedule

Aug 21

Introduction and Definitions

Aug 23

Don DeLillo, [In the Ruins of the Future](#), [Still Life](#)

Aug 28

*Girly Man*, "Let's Just Say", "Some of these Daze," "World on Fire". [EPC page on Girly Man](#)

Aug 30

*Girly Man*, "Warrant," "In Parts," "Likeness". Images for [Reading Red](#) and [Slap me five Cleo, Mark's history](#) and [The Millionaire](#). Recording of [Don't Get Me Wrong](#), [Likeness](#), and [Slap me five Cleo](#).

Sep 4

*Girly Man*, "Girly Man." Recording of [Girly Man](#), [Self Help](#)

Sep 6

*Pattern Recognition*, Chapters 1-16, [Coolhunting](#), [Trendhunting](#), [The Coolhunt](#)

- Event (9/11), singularity, history
- Commodities, naming
- Patterns, coolhunting, memes, apophenia
- Producing language / narrative of world
- Footage as future (ruins?) as open-ended narrative

Sep 11

*Pattern Recognition*, 17-27

- Genuine reproduction [Buzz Rickson's](#) jacket

Sep 13

*Pattern Recognition*, to the end

- Discuss Essay #1

Sept 18

*The 9/11 Report*, through Chap. 9. [Minjeung Joo Powerpoint](#)

- Ekphrasis
- Is this literature?
- What are advantages of medium? Disadvantages?

Sep 20

*The 9/11 Report*.

- Discuss Essay #1. (midnight via email)

Sep 21

Essay #1 Due

Sep 25

*Resistance*, through "Apocalypse"

Sep 27

*Resistance*, through "The Bear in the Woods"

Oct 2

*Resistance*, through end

Oct 4

*Persepolis* (Book 1 only). [Persepolis trailer](#)

Oct 9

*Persepolis* (Book 1 only)

What passage/event in the story stood out to you and is important for thinking about the novel?

How does the book make you think differently about Iran?

Do you identify with Marjane? Why or why not?

How does the book function as memoir or autobiography?

Why does she tell the story from a child's point of view? Does this over-simplify things?

Why did Satrapi use the graphic novel form? What advantages or limitations does this pose? Is this literature or "comic book"?

What do you think about the depiction of class relations? Is this primarily a story of privilege?

What do you think about the depiction of women in the novel? How are women treated in the novel? What is the fundamentalist argument for the veil, and what do you think of this argument?

Oct 11

*Splay Anthem*. [Mu. Coltrane](#)

- "Dissonance / (if you are interested) / leads to discovery" William Carlos Williams

- Cross-cultural American poetic epic, tied to trans-Atlantic and African vernacular and past

- Unbound musical reference: words in terms of music, where sense or meaning is not direct but glides, more like a tone or intonation; not refusing or moving away from meaning, but gesturing towards it through tone and echo

- "Cante Jondo" or "deep song" of Lorca: "presence and persistence of the otherwise excluded," "a longing without object," "a trouble in the voice"

Oct 16

*Splay Anthem*

Oct 18

*Alma*

Oct 23

*Alma*. "It is necessary to maintain a state of disobedience against...everything. One must remain somehow, though how, open to any subject or form in principle, open to the possibility of liking, open to the possibility of using." Alice Notley. [Ballad](#) reading

Oct 25

Oct 30 *Alma*

Nov 1 *The Road*

Nov 1 Class cancelled

Nov 2 Essay #2 Due (midnight via email)

Nov 6 *The Road*

Nov 8 *The Road*

Nov 13 *Poor People*  
- Textual hybrid: narrative, literary style, ethnography, documentary, photography, etc.  
- What is poor? Uncertain relation of this question to narrative and fiction.

Nov 15 *Poor People*

Nov 20 Thanksgiving

Nov 22 Thanksgiving

Nov 27 *Poor People*

Nov 29 *Found*. [Found Website](#)

Dec 4 *Found*

Dec 6 Workshop and Conclusions. **Bring a draft of your 3rd essay to class. Write a full, 3 page draft!!**

Dec 11 Essay #3 Due by midnight via email. You will get an email reply to indicate receipt of final essays.