ENGLISH 347: TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

Spring 2026 T/Th 3:30-4:45

Professor Deborah Mix RB 385
dmmix@bsu.edu Office hours T/Th 2:00-3:00 & by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

> "She was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments—no ego. For that reason she felt no compulsion to verify herself—be consistent with herself."
>
> —Toni Morrison, *Sula* (119)

This course is designed to give you a working knowledge of twentieth-century American literature. Of course, this field is tremendously vast and complex, so we'll only be able to take a small sampling of its diversity. To that end, I've organized our course around the theme of "Liars, Tricksters, and Truth-Tellers." Each of the texts we'll read—novels, short stories, plays, and poems—consider the relationship between truth and lying in some way. As we'll see, people misrepresent the truth for a wide variety of reasons, from self-aggrandizement to self-preservation, for reasons benign, subversive, and cruel.

The natures of tricksterism, truth-telling, and lying are not the only ones we'll consider this semester, of course. We'll also be interested in the work of the texts more broadly as well as in the relationship between individual texts and their literary and cultural contexts. The reasons that a Chinese immigrant might have for telling a "talk-story" to her American-born children are different than the reasons an eccentric white billionaire might have for playing an elaborate joke on his ex-girlfriend. We'll consider what individual characters and plotlines might reveal about authors, about certain moments in American history, and about literary movements. We'll take our discussion in directions that interest all of us throughout the semester.

This is a discussion and writing-intensive course. Neither you nor the course can succeed without your regular and substantive preparation and participation. Regular reading quizzes, writing assignments, and a research project will be major features of this course as will your own contributions to small-group and class-wide discussions. If you are uncomfortable working collaboratively with your peers and your instructor, this is not the class for you.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Erdrich, Louise. *Tracks*. Harper Perennial.
Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Scribner.
Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. Vintage.
Larsen, Nella. *Passing*. Penguin.
Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. Vintage.
Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. Harper Perennial.
Additional readings as assigned.
You'll also need a pack of 3x5 notecards for quizzes.

You must *bring copies* of any assigned readings to class with you *every day*. I expect that you will have *read, annotated, and thought about* those readings prior to coming to class. If you are renting your books or using PDFs or Kindle editions, please develop a system—sticky notes, photocopies, detailed note-taking, to ensure that you are reading actively and attending to important details as you go.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Research Project: Choose one of the book-length texts (Fitzgerald, Larsen, Pynchon, Morrison, Kingston, or Erdrich) assigned for the semester. You will be asked to complete a series of assignments on that text, including research on the text's reception and its critical contexts. Eventually you will piece these assignments together to support a larger research paper. I will allow no more than 6 students to sign up for any particular text. RECEPTION HISTORY (75 POINTS) + CRITICAL CONTEXT (75 POINTS) + FINAL PAPER (300 POINTS) = 450 POINTS

Response Papers: You will write 5 short response papers over the course of the semester. Each paper will be focused on a particular text (you'll have options) and will foster your talents for close reading. 40 POINTS EACH = 200 POINTS

Reading Quizzes: I will give reading quizzes nearly every day. You will take these quizzes on 3x5 notecards, a supply of which you should purchase forthwith. There will be 5 fact-based questions on each quiz with occasional bonus questions, which will be provided upon polite request. You must be in class at the start of each quiz in order to be eligible to request repeats of questions. People who arrive after the quiz has been administered or who are absent will not be allowed to make the quiz up, though they may rest assured that the lowest 2 quiz grades will be dropped from the overall average. The student with the highest quiz average at the end of the semester will be crowned Quizmaster, with all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities thereunto pertaining. 100 POINTS

Final Exam: You will take a final exam designed to allow you to pull together the semester's work. It will include both short answer (quote discussion) and essay questions. It will be administered during the final exam period for this class. 150 POINTS

Class Participation: As noted above, this class will be a collaborative one, built around your ideas, interests, and interpretations. I will provide historical or cultural contexts via lecture from time to time, and I will certainly bring my own ideas, interests, and interpretations to bear on our class discussions. Your ability to participate is tied on your preparation for class, so please be sure to read, think, and even write about each day's assignment. Bring your best self to class: *respectful, curious, engaged*. 100 POINTS

OTHER IMPORTANT POLICIES

- We are committed to ensuring that all members of the community are welcome, through valuing the various experiences and worldviews represented at Ball State and among those we serve. We promote a culture of respect and civil discourse. For more information on Ball State's commitment to intellectual diversity and freedom of expression, please visit this page.
- If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment to discuss these issues with me as soon as possible. Ball State's Disability Services office coordinates services for students with disabilities; documentation of a disability needs to be on file in that office before any accommodations can be provided. Disability Services can be contacted at 765-285-5293 or dsd@bsu.edu.
- Please submit all assignments through Canvas as Word documents. It is your responsibility to ensure that your assignment is posted by the designated due date and time, and it is your duty to accept any late penalties with grace. Please follow MLA style for citation, documentation, and formatting.
- Late work: Extensions may be granted *if requested in advance* of the due date. Without prior arrangements, late work will be penalized by 5% per day, including weekends.

- I expect you to attend class. According to BSU policies, a student who misses more than 20% of class meetings should expect to fail the course based on attendance alone. Should you have an emergency of some kind, it is critical that you (or someone acting on your behalf) contact me early to discuss alternative arrangements.
- I expect you to adhere to the principles of academic honesty. BSU's Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities lays out your obligations quite clearly. If at any time you find yourself uncertain about how to use or credit sources, please contact me for clarification. Using AI without acknowledgement is a form a cheating and will be penalized as such. If you cheat, you will earn a failing grade, and I will file a report with the Provost's Office.
- I expect you to raise any concerns about the readings, discussions, and assignments with me as soon as possible. This class will work only if we collaborate.
- I expect you to treat me and your peers with respect and to be a positive presence in class. That means being thoroughly prepared, thoroughly polite, and thoroughly present. Take responsibility for yourself and look out for your classmates. Be on time, be engaged, be present in body and spirit.
- You can expect me to know both the literary material and its historical contexts, to treat you, your work, and your ideas with respect, and to collaborate with you to make this class a valuable learning experience for all of us.

A FEW WORDS TO THE WISE

- **This is a discussion-based class.** In order to have anything to discuss, you need to keep up with the reading and other assignments. Get organized now and feel good about that organization later.
- **Take notes**. Write down your ideas and questions as you read and as you participate in our conversations. Those notes will be resources for you as you write response papers, complete your research project, and prepare for and take the final examination for the class.
- Your best resource as an English major—no matter which track you're on—is to **connect with your peers**. Get to know each other. Find out how to get in touch with each other outside of class. Stay connected after this semester.
- There are **terrific resources available on campus**, and you should use them! The Writing Center is staffed by terrific writers, both graduate and undergraduate students. The Basic Needs Hub will connect you with a variety of campus supports.
- I have **office hours** every week and would love to see you to talk about our class, your thoughts about being an English major, and more. Can't make it to my office hours? Let's set up an appointment to meet!
- **You deserve to succeed in the class.** If something is hindering your ability to do so, please talk to me about it so that we can make a support plan.