

Literature and Medicine

Syllabus, 2016-2017

Other Worlds

Session I

9/20/2016 SW 107 7:30-9pm

The Short Story Edition

Adam Johnson *Fortune Smiles*

We open the 2016 season with another slam-dunk by Adam Johnson. After following him on the journey to North Korea last year, we will observe his exploration of the human condition in this National Book Award winning collection of six short-stories. “Nirvana,” the first story in the book, explores an eerily familiar future in which virtual reality has insidiously crept into our lives. Pokemon Go anyone?

Session II

10/18/2016 SW 107 7:30-9pm

The Spy Edition

Viet Thanh Nguyen *The Sympathizers*

The pedigree of debut novel Pulitzer winners—*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *A Confederacy of Dunces*—is now joined by *The Sympathizers*. Written by a Vietnamese-American immigrant, this novel tells the story of a half-French, half-Vietnamese communist spy living a double life in LA.... Need I say more?

Session III

11/15/16 SW107 7:30-9pm

The Vegan Edition

Han Kang *The Vegetarian*

Han Kang’s opening to her debut novel—“Before my wife turned vegetarian, I thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way”—does little to prepare us for the pages that follow. This short novel calls into question societal norms and personal boundaries, and questions the way in which we choose which transgression can be pardoned and which cannot.

Session IV

12/20/16 SW107 7:30-9pm

The Ahistorical Edition

Ben H Winters *Underground Airlines*

Imagine a world in which the civil war never took place, in which slavery were still a part of American life. Though Winters' new novel is undoubtedly a part of the "alternate history" genre, it stands apart from many similar works (think *The Plot Against America*, "The Man in the High Castle," "Inglorious Bastards"). As Maureen Corrigan, the NPR book critic, points out: "*Underground Airlines* by Ben H. Winters jolts readers to a heightened awareness, making us see just how much of the nightmare of what could have been is part of the all-too-familiar reality of what is." We will read Winters' new novel against Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*.

*class led by Caitlin Ingraham

Session V

1/17/17 SW107 7:30-9pm

The New Beginnings Edition

Jesse Ball *A Cure for Suicide*

This is a chair. This is a fork. The protagonist of Jesse Ball's new novel has to start over and relearn the world around him after recovering from a near-death experience. But in a world filled with dreams and memories, can he ever truly start from the beginning?

Session VI

2/21/17 SW107 7:30-9pm

The Fishy Edition

Chigozie Obioma *The Fishermen*

Set in 1990s Nigeria, this breakout novel by Chigozie Obioma, nominated for the 2015 Man Booker Prize, is told from the point of view of a 9-year-old boy, the youngest of 4 brothers. One day, walking home from fishing, the brothers stumble upon a madman who prophesizes that the oldest will die at the hand of one of his brothers. Quickly, the weight of the prophecy and some bad luck unravels the family.

The Fishermen is a story of families, countries and continents, torn apart at the hands of men, both good and mad.

Session VII

3/21/17 SW107 7:30-9pm

The Meditative Edition

Per Petterson *Out Stealing Horses*

First translated from Norwegian into English in 2005 and the winner of multiple awards including the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, Peterson's *Out Stealing Horses* tells the story of a Norwegian retiree who must confront his past even as he withdraws from his surroundings. "If you consider it," says Petterson, "What you say has less importance in your life compared to what you think. The words you say are also outnumbered by your thoughts." In contemplating the workings of memory and self-reflection, we will also likely revisit some of the works we discussed last year, such as Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* and Paul Harding's *Tinkers*.

*class led by Sam Mcaleese

Session VIII

4/11/17 SW107 7:30-9pm

The Giant Edition

Kazuo Ishiguro *The Buried Giant*

Last year, our discussion of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* led us to explore the frightening aspects of human nature. We will close out this year by considering Ishiguro's more positive view of humanity. Set in England circa 450 AD, *The Buried Giant* tells the story of an elderly couple who sets out on a strange and arduous journey in order to visit their estranged son.

* class led by Nathan Praschan