

MURDER IN AMERICA

**Rutgers University
American Studies
Course: 01:050:301:B7**

Summer I, 2007

**Instructor: Dr. Bruce Chadwick
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Class meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 6-9:30 p.m., May 29 through July 5 at the Los Angeles Police Department, Homicide (Loree Hall, room 020).

Goals of the course: To study the cultural reasons why Americans are so fascinated with murder. We will study murder in literature, theater, film, television and in the media in an effort to determine how cultural approaches to murder have formed American society's view of homicide and why murder has worked so well as a genre for these medium. Throughout these studies, we will attempt to determine how murder literature and film reflected American society at the time of publication or production and what they say to contemporary audiences. The class will also analyze real life murder and its effect on society through studies of true crime in media.

A secondary goal of the course will be to finally solve the highly publicized 1922 murder of Hollywood film director William Desmond Taylor. The class will study the case and, at the end of the semester, convict the killer at a week long mock trial.

Texts: Novels: *The Big Sleep*, by Raymond Chandler; *Police Reporter's Notebook*.

Short Stories and play excerpts: *Othello* and *Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare; *The Speckled Band*, by Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Revolver*, by Emilia Bazan; *The Black Cat*, by Edgar Allan Poe, *A Candle for the Bag Lady*, by Lawrence Block; *A Matter of Principal*, by Max Allan Collins; *A Real Nice Guy*, by William Nolan, from *Pulp Fiction*.

Articles: Several news accounts concerning homicide.

Exams: None

Papers: There will be a term project, due at the end of the semester. There will be two types of term projects: 1) written, 2) trial.

Written: students may choose between several options: 1) write an 6-8 page murder fiction short story, 2) write a 6-8 page research paper on a real life murder (NOT the O.J. Simpson case) or a 5-6 page paper on how the media covered a murder (you may include the O.J. Simpson case here), or any paper on any aspect of real murders from an era.

Trial: Eight students may opt to participate in the mock trial in lieu of a term paper. We need two prosecutors, two defense lawyers and four suspects, plus about a dozen witnesses for the trial. Witnesses will also be required to complete a written term paper. The trial lawyers and suspects will not write term papers.

Papers in addition to term papers: each student will write a paper comparing at least two of the films on the schedule to each other *OR* two or more murder short stories to each other *OR* the novel or short story to a film or a short story to the novel (4 pages).

Throughout the semester, students may be asked to write a sample police report (two pages) and produce a **WANTED** poster.

THE INVESTIGATIONS

Week One: Tuesday -- Introduction and screening of *The Maltese Falcon*.

Thursday -- the early history of murder in novels and the short story; Shakespeare's plays, real murder in England and the U.S., 1609 to 1900, American murder short stories and the rise of the pulp crime magazines. Discussion: *Othello*, *Macbeth*.

Week Two: Tuesday: the murder novel. *The Big Sleep*, short story discussion; Sherlock Holmes. Radio play rehearsal during last hour / rest of class dismissed early.

WANTED POSTER DUE

Thursday -- *The Shadow*; radio murder plays, history of murder; murder literature. Discussions of *The Black Cat*, *The Revolver*, *Candle for a Bag Lady*, *A Matter of Principal*.

Week Three: Tuesday -- Murder in the movies. *Chinatown*.

Thursday -- Murder in the movies. *Psycho*. Episode of *Law and Order*, discussion of *Sleeping Dog, A Real Nice Guy*.

Week Four: Tuesday -- *Crime Scene Investigation* TV episode; murder on television.

Guest Speaker: Detective Mike Kelly, Jersey City Homicide Division

COMPARATIVE PAPER DUE

Thursday -- Murder on television; detective series TV series analysis.

Week Five: Tuesday: murder in the media, true crime, serial killers, *Ted Bundy* documentary,

Guest Speaker: Michael Conti, crime reporter for the Jersey Journal

Thursday: – Film: *Body Heat* / murder trial rehearsal

TERM PAPER DUE

Week Six: Tuesday – OFF (Fourth of July)

Thursday: William Desmond Taylor, mock trial (Los Angeles County Courthouse)

TERM PAPERS RETURNED

GRADING: 85% of the course grade will be based on the term paper / term project and other writing assignments with the term paper counting for 40% of the total writing grade; 10% of the overall grade will be determined by class participation.

ATTENDANCE: Attendance is mandatory.

WARNING: Detectives must carry their police notebooks and Metropolitan Police identification cards at all times.