

The American Bestseller

Alison Shonkwiler
E-mail: a.shonkwiler@gmail.com
Office hrs: MTh 11:15-12:00
Office: RAB 017

050:261
Fall 2008
MTh 12:35-1:55
RAB 208

Course Description:

“The bestseller list...presents us with a kind of corrective reality. It tells us what we’re actually reading (or, at least, what we’re actually buying) as opposed to what we think we ought to be reading, or would like other people to believe we’re buying. Like stepping on the scales, it tells us the truth, however unflattering, and is therefore, taken over the long haul, a pretty good way of assessing our culture and of judging how, if any, we have changed.”

—Michael Korda, *Making the List* (2001)

The bestseller is a social phenomenon and, thus, a valuable window into American cultural history. We are reading a range of blockbuster novels from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, and we will pay specific attention to the ideology of success and reward, the construction of masculinity and femininity, and the ever-dominant themes of sexuality, marriage, violence, race, class envy, and money. In addition to the books below, we will also be watching one film, *Gone with the Wind*, from the book by Margaret Mitchell.

Required texts (available at the Coop bookstore. It is OK to use different editions):

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Penguin)
Susanna Rowson, *Charlotte Temple* (Penguin)
Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Da Capo)
Jacqueline Susann, *Valley of the Dolls* (Grove)
Philip Roth, *Portnoy’s Complaint* (Vintage)
Stephen King, *Carrie* (Pocket)
Terry McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale* (NAL Trade)

Course Requirements and Policies:

- Sign up for our course’s Sakai site. I will use it to post announcements, paper assignments, and occasional changes in the syllabus.
- All texts should be read in time for class discussion and brought with you to class. Regular reading quizzes will be given. Participate actively in class—it will count in your grade. (See below.)

- Having more than 4 absences—unless you have a dean’s excuse—will lower your final grade. These four absences include illnesses and emergencies of all kinds, including family crises, religious holidays, etc. Don’t risk using up your absences, especially if you know you will need to miss a class later in the semester.
- Papers are due at the beginning of class on the due date. Late papers will automatically lose a half a grade per class meeting, unless I have agreed *in advance* to give you an extension. Do not send me papers by e-mail, please; I can only accept hard copies.
- Please be sure you understand the definition of plagiarism. It is dangerous to err on the wrong side of it. All the work you submit in this course must have been written for this course and not for another, and must originate with you in form and content. Instances of plagiarism will be reported and, at a minimum, result in an F for the course.
- Feel free to drop in during my office hours or make an appointment if you have any questions about the course, the readings, or your writing. I can discuss paper questions or issues with you but I cannot read or critique paper drafts. I’m usually very accessible by e-mail, but do not assume that I will receive and be able to respond to a message on the same day you send it—or the night before a paper is due!

Grading:

Papers (2):	25% + 25%
Final exam:	25%
Participation:	25% (includes both quiz scores and speaking in class)

Papers:

You will write two 4-5 short papers in the semester. Topics and due dates will be announced. You will be able to choose which books to write about.

Final Exam:

The exam will include short-answer questions, reading-identification passages, and an essay.

Participation:

There will be regular but unannounced quizzes on each text/film, worth approximately 5 points each, which will then be calculated as part of an overall participation grade. Quizzes cannot be made up. They will not be tricky. If you have done the reading for the day, you’ll have no trouble with the questions.

Schedule

September		October	
	9/4 Introductions		10/2 <i>Gone With the Wind</i>
9/8 <i>Charlotte Temple</i>	9/11 <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> ch. 1-7	10/6 <i>Man in Gray Flannel</i> ch. 1-11	10/9 <i>Man in Gray Flannel</i> ch. 12-20
9/15 <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> ch. 8-14	9/18 <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> ch. 15-20	10/13 <i>Man in Gray Flannel</i> ch. 21-32	10/16 <i>Man in Gray Flannel</i> ch. 33-end
9/22 <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> ch. 21-31	9/25 <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> ch. 32-40	10/20 <i>Valley of the Dolls</i> pp. 1-91	10/23 <i>Valley of the Dolls</i> pp. 91-163
9/29 <i>Gone With the Wind</i> (screening time TBA)		10/27 <i>Valley of the Dolls</i> pp. 164-254	10/30 <i>Valley of the Dolls</i> pp. 255-337
November		December	
11/3 <i>Valley of the Dolls</i> pp. 338-442	11/6 <i>Portnoy's Complaint</i> pp. 1-78	12/1 <i>Waiting to Exhale</i> "Steam" to "Killing Time"	12/4 <i>Waiting to Exhale</i> "New Territory" to end
11/10 <i>Portnoy's Complaint</i> pp. 78-184	11/13 <i>Portnoy's Complaint</i> pp. 184-274	12/8 Concluding thoughts	
11/17 <i>Carrie</i> Part 1	11/20 <i>Carrie</i> Part 2		
11/24 <i>Waiting to Exhale</i> "Not Dick Clark" to "Fire"	11/25 (Tues class) <i>Waiting to Exhale</i> "Fat" to "Freedom of Expression"	**Final exam** 12/16 (Tuesday)—12 noon to 2 p.m.	