American Studies 050:332                  Spring, 2010
Jewish Studies 563:332                      Hours: Thursdays 10-12 & by arrangement
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THE AMERICAN JEWISH EXPERIENCE IN LITERATURE

“There are times when success is a tragedy”
Abraham Cahan, The Rise of David Levinsky

The theme of this course is the struggle of American Jews, as revealed in their literature, to find that vital center between alienation (separateness) and assimilation (belonging)

READINGS

A word on my selection of texts: first, I have sought to include the great novelists of American Jewish literature who are available in paperback editions. This not being a survey course that gives you a little of this, a little of that, the course does not include theatre and poetry. Rather, I am trying to give you big doses of important writers who represent the vital themes in American Jewish writing and American Jewish life. You will note the omission of some major American Jewish writers. Norman Mailer comes to mind. Usually, when I have not included a writer it is because his/her works do not easily lend themselves to discussion of the ethnic questions that concern us. We are interested in writers who not only illuminate the American Jewish experience but also American ethnic experience in general. Thus, while this course is about Jews in particular, it is also about America in general.

I should add that our last book will be my recently published short novel Stones. Though I am certainly not among the major American Jewish writers, I thought it might be fun for you to have the author of one of our books in class to grill and that the inclusion of Stones might be fun for you and for me. All of our books, except mine, will be available in the Douglass bookstore at the corner of Nichol Avenue and Lipman Drive. I didn’t want you to have to pay retail for my book. It will be provided to you at my cost. As a further savings of money, you may wish to purchase whichever of our books are available used and on line. There are several sources: Amazon, Alibris, Abe Books comes to mind. It is of little significance which edition any of the books you secure. Any will do.

We will also see four feature films in class, and a piece of a film of my own, so as to vary the course content a bit and keep the reading more manageable. Films have been spaced so as to allow you to better keep up with the reading.

I should add that while I will lecture the first few sessions of the course, we will proceed much more by discussion thenceforth and function more like a seminar than a lecture course. Luckily, the class will be small enough to do so. So I hope you will very much keep up with the reading and be prepared for full blown discussions beginning with the Mary Antin book.
SYLLABUS

Tuesday, January 19     Introduction: The Melting Pot vs. The Salad Bowl

Thursday, January 21    Introduction (continued): Did the Fiddler Make a Goof?  
plus Ellis Island footage from my P.B.S. film Three Days on Big City Waters

Tuesday, January 26      The Jews of New Jersey: A Pictorial History  
A slide show of excerpts from the book by that name by Patricia Ard and myself

Thursday, January 28      Mary Antin: The Promised Land

Tuesday, February 2       The Promised Land (concluded)

Thursday, February 4      film in class: Hester Street

Tuesday, February 9       Conclusion of Hester Street and discussion

Thursday, February 11     Abraham Cahan, The Rise of David Levinsky

Tuesday, February 16     The Rise of David Levinsky (concluded)

Thursday, February 18     film in class: The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz

Tuesday, February 23     Conclusion of Duddy Kravitz and discussion

Thursday, February 25     Bernard Malamud, The Assistant

Tuesday, March 2          The Assistant (concluded)

Thursday, March 4         film in class: The Pawnbroker

For anyone interested, I will be doing a program on my novel, Stones, at the Bildner Center for Jewish Studies on the College Avenue Campus at 7:30 the evening of March 4. Of course, we will be doing Stones as well in class as our last book. Attendance is not required the evening of March 4, but extra credit will be given to those who do attend.

Tuesday March 9           The Pawnbroker (concluded)

Also on this day we will have a brief midterm quiz on the material up through and including The Pawnbroker

Thursday, March 11        I.B. Singer, Enemies, A Love Story  
Also, some discussion of The Pawnbroker
Tuesday, March 23  
*Enemies, A Love Story* (concluded)

**Also on this day you are to hand in précis of your term paper (see Ground Rules)**

Thursday, March 25  
film in class: *Sophie’s Choice*

Tuesday, March 30  
*Sophie’s Choice* (concluded)

Thursday, April 1  
Chaim Potok, *My Name is Asher Lev*  
Also, discussion of *Sophie’s Choice*

Tuesday, April 6  
*My Name is Asher Lev* (concluded)

Thursday, April 8  
Philip Roth, *Goodbye Columbus*

Tuesday, April 13  
Two of the stories accompanying *Goodbye Columbus*  
“Defender of the Faith”  
“Eli, the Fanatic”  
Note: you are welcome to read the other three stories but you are responsible only for the two named above.

Thursday, April 15  
Saul Bellow, *Herzog*

Tuesday, April 20  
*Herzog* (concluded)

Thursday, April 22  
Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying*

Tuesday, April 27  
*Fear of Flying* (concluded)  
And initial discussion of Michael Aaron Rockland’s *Stones*

Thursday, April 29  
*Stones* (concluded)

**Note: Final examination is on Friday, May 7, 12-3**

**COURSE GROUND RULES**

First, I hope this course is going to be fun. My, perhaps hedonistic, theory of education is that, if it isn’t fun, you probably aren’t learning much.

I hope you will find the reading interesting. There is a lot of it. Please stay on schedule with your reading. I also feel strongly about attendance and will be taking attendance. I give two objective quizzes, one at the middle of the term (March 9), up through and including the film *The Pawnbroker*, another along with the final on the second half of the course (May 7), though the final will consist mainly of essay questions based on the whole course. If you attend regularly and do all the reading you should have little or no
difficulty with the quizzes. I give them simply to make sure you have indeed been doing your work. I should add that there is no makeup for the midterm quiz or the final exam. On Tuesday, March 23, you must hand in your précis for the term paper, in duplicate, typed on regular sized paper, the original and copy stapled in the upper left hand corner. The précis should be a one paragraph, one page maximum, description of your term paper project, the thesis you expect to argue in it, and your working title.

I require a term paper précis from my students early because I mean a term paper to be a term paper—something you work on all semester. So you should begin to think now about what you wish to do. By the time you’ve handed in the précis you will have done much of the work on the project—decided what it’s about, what you will argue, etc. In writing that is always the most difficult part. To hand in a decent précis on March 23 you will have had to have given considerable thought to the project before that date.

Term papers themselves are due without fail in class on Tuesday, April 20 (I do not accept papers as e-mail attachments). My plan will be to return the papers to you at the final on May 7 having had the opportunity to carefully read them.

As for the topic: I want you to write on an American Jewish writer. There are many, of course, and in all genres and for all brows. They should be writers, however, who wrestle with their ethnicity not those who just happen to be Jewish. It will also be possible to write about non-Jewish writers who have written about Jews. John Updike (his Bech series) comes to mind as does William Styron. I’d like you to confine yourself to fiction—though theatre, poetry, short stories, etc. are certainly permissible even though we have all but ignored these forms in our course. It will also be fine wish to discuss both literature and film adapted from that literature. You may write on an author we have done in class—going into greater depth, considering at least another novel or two—or seek out someone we have not considered. You may also decide to do a comparative study of two writers. Feel free to check out your ideas with me before or after writing your précis, during my regular office hours or immediately after a class meeting.

A word about plagiarism. This is a most serious academic crime. It is stealing the work of others. Quoting properly and referencing those quotes is simply good manners. Paraphrasing the ideas of others should also be referenced. In the main, referencing the work of others is simply a way of saying “Thank you.” Utilizing the work of others in proper fashion does not detract from the originality of your work; it adds to it. It shows that you have considered the best ideas of others, even when you choose to disagree with them. Plagiarism of any kind will mean, at the very least, an “F” in your term paper, a likely failure in the course, or, in the most egregious cases, can lead to dismissal from the university. So don’t do it, in this course or any other. And never use the services on line where you purchase a paper written for you. Faculty now have resources to detect all forms of plagiarism.

Your term project will be the most important component in your final grade. The other items contributing to it will be 1) attendance 2) class participation 3) the grades in the two quizzes and 4) the essays on the final exam.
Finally, I should say a word about what this course will endeavor to provide and demand of you. Clearly, it will require a good deal of reading, but, hopefully, you will find it pleasant and will constitute books you have, perhaps, always wanted to read anyway. Second, it will require a great deal of class participation. Our small numbers will facilitate this. Third, while we will explore the particular aspects of American Jewish ethnicity (can one say that any other American group is to the same degree both a people and a religion?) it will provide a window into American ethnicity in general. Finally, the course will endeavor to sharpen your writing skills, so important whatever profession you decide to pursue.