

# English 4344

Online: Topics in American Literature (Violence and Redemption in Contemporary Literature)

## Contact Information

Instructor: John Wegner

Office: Academic 010C

Hours: M-Thurs 8:00-10:00 and by appointment; all appt. and conferences will take place in Dr. Wegner's Collaborate Office located in our BB course

Phone: 325-486-6165

“They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. . . They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. . . . Then they led him away to crucify him.” (Matthew 28-31)

". . . how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all." (Ian McEwan, *Atonement*)

“What is distinctively ‘American’ is not necessarily the amount or kind of violence that characterizes our history but the mythic significance we have assigned to the kinds of violence we have actually experienced, the forms of symbolic violence we imagine or invent and the political uses to which we put that symbolism.” (Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*)

“Madame, all stories, if continued far enough, end in death, and he is not true-story teller who would keep that from you.” (Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*)

Sticks and stone may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. (Playground taunt)

## Required texts:

McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*. New York: Vintage. (1985)--novel

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. (1987)--novel

Carver, Raymond. *Short Cuts*. New York: Vintage, (1993)—short stories

Herrera, Juan Felipe. *Border-Crosser with a Lamborghini Dream*, (1999)--poetry

Parks, Suzan-Lori. *Topdog/Underdog*. (2001)--play

Palahniuk, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York: Norton. (2005)--novel

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home*. (2006)—graphic novel

Diaz, Juno. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. (2007)--novel

Sachdeva, Anjali. *All the Names They Used for God*. (2018)—short stories

Whitehead, Colson. *Harlem Shuffle*. (2021)--novel

**A note about editions:** While it will help our class discussions if we all have the same edition, I fully recognize the cost of books. With the exception of Whitehead, all of the works above should be available in paperback. I'm hoping a paperback version of Whitehead's novel is in print prior to you buying the books.

### Purpose, Objectives, & Learning Outcomes:

Upon completing this course, students will be able to

1. read and analyze complex works of literature;
2. recognize the importance of detail and supporting evidence when positing ideas;
3. demonstrate the way novels exist within historical, cultural, and social spaces in time.

Other than those SLOs, my goal is that each of you gains a greater appreciation of contemporary American fiction, and we gain some insight into American authors' penchant for weaving violence and redemption into the fabric of literature. I've chosen ten works somewhat arbitrarily, but these works should offer us some insight into trends, both cultural and artistic, in American literature and, by extension, American culture. The ugly truth, though, is that if I made a list tomorrow, I would probably include different works. At the end of this syllabus, you'll see a longer list of other works I considered for this course. In your spare time, you should read some (or all) of them.

Please note: These are modern and contemporary works and they deal with contemporary issues. If you cannot stomach discussions about school shootings, rape, murder, abortion, homosexuality, religion, adultery, or other issues you see daily in the newspaper, you should not take this course. In addition, these works do contain some rough and language some of you might find reprehensible. Be prepared.

**Attendance:** There is a direct correlation between attendance and performance. In an online class, your attendance is marked by completion of blogs and quizzes. Our assignments for any given week are typically due Sunday at 11:59 pm.

### Grades:

Students will demonstrate progress on course objectives and learning outcomes via

Two reviews/Short Essays	30%
Mid-term exam	20%
Final exam	20%
Blogs/quizzes	10%
Research paper	20%

- 1) You will write two book reviews/short essays (500-1000 words). I will provide information about how to write a book review/short essay. Plagiarism will result in an F for the course. These essays are academic responses not personal responses.
- 2) The mid-term will be a timed essay exam in BB.
- 3) The final exam will be a timed essay and comprehensive.
- 4) Blog Posts/Quizzes: You will blog on all of our works, sometimes more than once. Those blogs are less formal than the books reviews and should give you a great

opportunity to try out ideas and take some chances as you discuss the works. Quizzes ask you to provide detailed answers to questions about our works.

5) The research paper will be 6-8 pages of text. You should use MLA formatting. Please note that some of our contemporary works will not have direct critical sources. We will discuss how to approach a contemporary text and research. More information during the semester.

### Title IX At ASU

The University prohibits discrimination based on sex, which includes pregnancy, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other types of Sexual Misconduct. Sexual Misconduct is a broad term encompassing all forms of gender-based harassment or discrimination including: sexual assault, sex-based discrimination, sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, public indecency, interpersonal violence (domestic violence and/or dating violence), and stalking. As a faculty member, I am a Responsible Employee, meaning I am obligated by law and ASU policy to report any allegations I am notified of to the Office of Title IX Compliance.

Students are encouraged to report any incidents of sexual misconduct directly to ASU's Office of Title IX Compliance and the Director of Title IX Compliance/Title IX Coordinator:

**Michelle Boone, J.D.**

*Director of Title IX Compliance/Title IX Coordinator*

Mayer Administration Building, Room 210

325-942-2022; [michelle.boone@angelo.edu](mailto:michelle.boone@angelo.edu)

You may also file a report online 24/7 at [www.angelo.edu/incident-form](http://www.angelo.edu/incident-form). If you wish to speak to someone about an incident in confidence, you may contact the *University Health Clinic and Counseling Center* at 325-942-2173 or the *ASU Crisis Helpline* at 325-486-6345.

For more information about Title IX in general, you may visit [www.angelo.edu/title-ix](http://www.angelo.edu/title-ix).

### Accommodation Statement

If you have a documented disability (or think you may have a disability) and, as a result, need a reasonable accommodation to participate in this class or complete course requirements, contact the Student Affairs Office as soon as possible at 325-942-2047 or [studentservices@angelo.edu](mailto:studentservices@angelo.edu). It is located in the Houston Harte University Center, Suite 112. To receive any academic accommodation, you must be appropriately registered with Student Affairs. Student Affairs works with students confidentially and does not disclose any disability-related information without their permission.

### Academic Integrity

Students are responsible for knowing and adhering to the Academic Integrity policy, which is outlined in the *ASU Student Handbook*. Plagiarism is a type of academic dishonesty. It occurs when writers deliberately use another person's language, ideas, or materials and present them as their own without properly acknowledging the source. Students who plagiarize will earn an F for the course.

### Observances of Religious Holidays

A student who intends to observe a religious holy day should make that intention known in writing to the instructor prior to the absence. A student who is absent from classes for the

observance of a religious holy day shall be allowed to take an examination or complete an assignment scheduled for that day within what the instructor deems a reasonable time after the absence.

Rough Calendar of Events: The dates and readings below are approximate. The actual course calendar, reading list, and assignments will be in the BB course.

Day/Module/Week	Assignment
Week 1 (January 17-23)	Syllabus; course intro; start <i>Blood Meridian</i>
Week 2 (1/24-1-30)	<i>Blood Meridian</i>
Week 3 (1/31-2/6)	<i>Beloved</i>
Week 4 (2/7-2/13)	<i>Short Cuts</i>
Week 5 (2/14-2/20)	<i>Border Crosser with a Lamborghini Dream</i>
Week 6 (2/21-2/27)	<i>Topdog/Underdog</i>
Week 7 (2/28-3/6)	Exam 1; Book Review
Week 8 (3/7-3/13)	<i>Fight Club</i>
Week 9 (3/14-3/20)	Spring Break
Week 10 (3/21-3/27)	<i>Fight Club</i>
Week 11 (3/28-4/3)	<i>Fun Home</i>
Week 12 (4/4-4/10)	<i>All the Names They Used for God</i> ; Discuss Research Paper; Conferences; Abstracts
Week 13 (4/11-4/17)	<i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Woo</i>
Week 14 (4/18-4/24)	<i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Woo</i>
Week 15 (4/25-5/1)	<i>Harlem Shuffle</i> ; review/short essay #2 due
Week 16 (5/2-5/8)	<i>Harlem Shuffle</i> ; Research paper due; review for final
Week 17 (5/9-5/13)	Final Exams

# Topics in American Literature: Violence & Redemption in Contemporary American Lit.

## Required texts for our course:

1. McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*. New York: Vintage. (1985)--novel
2. Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. (1987)--novel
3. Carver, Raymond. *Short Cuts*. New York: Vintage, (1993)—short stories
4. Herrera, Juan Felipe. *Border-Crosser with a Lamborghini Dream*, (1999)--poetry
5. Parks, Suzan-Lori. *Topdog/Underdog*. (2001)--play
6. Palahniuk, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York: Norton. (2005)--novel
7. Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home*. (2006)—graphic novel
8. Diaz, Juno. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. (2007)--novel
9. Sachdeva, Anjali. *All the Names They Used for God*. (2018)—short stories
10. Whitehead, Colson. *Harlem Shuffle*. (2021)--novel

## Texts I thought about and works you should all read.

*This list is not exhaustive nor is the list a compilation of great works. As I thought about violence and redemption, I made a list of works I've read by American authors published since 1985 that I liked. I have no doubt there are more works, and all these writers have more recent works.*

Alvarez, Julia. *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*. (1991)  
Banks, Russell. *Affliction* (1989)  
Beatty, Paul. *The Sellout* (2015)  
Bourdain, Anthony. *Medium Raw*. (2010) and *Kitchen Confidential* (2000)--essays  
Chabon, Michael. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*. (2000)  
Chavez, Denise. *Face of an Angel*. (1994)  
Clifton, Lucille. *Blessing the Boats* (2000)—poetry  
Collins, Max. *Road to Perdition*. (1998)—graphic novel  
Cunningham, Michael. *The Hours* (1998)  
Delillo, Don. *White Noise*. (1985), *Underworld* (1997)  
Didion, Joan. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. (2005)—essays/memoir; *Play It As It Lays* (1970) but one of the great novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century  
Dove, Rita. Any of her poetry books.  
Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. (2011)  
Eggers, Dave. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000).  
Erdrich, Louise. *Love Medicine*. (1984)—Her new novel is *The Night Watchman* (2020).  
Eugenides, Jeffrey. *Middlesex*. (2002)  
Flynn, Gillian. *Gone Girl* (2012)

Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. (2005)

Ford, Richard. *The Sportswriter*. (1986)

Fountain, Ben. *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk: A Novel*. (2012)

Franzen, Jonathan. *The Corrections*. (2001)

Gaddis, William. *A Frolic of His Own*. (1994)

Garcia, Cristina. *Dreaming in Cuban*. (1999)

Gellhorn, Martha. *The View from the Ground*. (1989). Gellhorn is considered one of the great war correspondents of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This collection of essays was rereleased recently.

Gran, Sarah. *Dope*. (2006)

Gruen, Sarah. *Water for Elephants*. (2006)

Haddon, Mark. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*. (2003)

Hamilton, Jane. *Map of the World*. (1994)

Harbach, Chad. *The Art of Fielding* (2011)

Harper, Michael. Any of his poetry books.

Hawke, Ethan. *A Bright Ray of Darkness*. (2021)—Yes. The actor Ethan Hawke.

Hayes, Terence—anything (poetry)

Hijuelos, Oscar. *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*. (1989)

hooks, bell. Read her essays.

Jin, Ha. *Waiting*. (1999)

Johnson, Denis. *Train Dreams* (2011)

Jones, Edward. *The Known World*. (2003)

Karr, Mary. *The Liar's Club*. (1995).--memoir

Klay, Phil. *Redeployment*. (2014)

Kushner, Tony. *Angels in America* (1993)--play

Letts, Tracy. *August: Osage County*. (2008)--play

Maguire, Gregory. *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*. (1995).

McBride, James. *The Good Lord Bird* (2013)

McMurtry, Larry. *Lonesome Dove* (1985) or anything else.

Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons. *Watchman*. (1986)—graphic novel

Nelson, Antonya. *Nobody's Girl*. (1998)—short stories

Oates, Joyce Carol. Anything. She's one of America's most prolific novelists.

O'Nan, Stewart. *Snow Angels* (1994) and *Last Night at the Lobster*. (2007).

Ozick, Cynthia. Read her essays.

Perrotta, Tom. *Election*. (1998), *The Abstinence Teacher* (2007), *Mrs. Fletcher* (2017)

Proulx, Annie. *Close Range*. (1999)—short stories, *The Shipping News* (1994), *Accordion Crimes* (1996)

Pynchon, Thomas. *Inherent Vice* (2009) but he's most famous for *Gravity's Rainbow* or *The Crying of Lot 49*.

Rich, Adrienne. Any of her poetry books.

Robinson, Marilynne. *Gilead*. (2004)

Roth, Philip. *The Plot Against America* (2004) or anything else.

Russo, Richard. *Empire Falls*. (2000) and everything else.

Song, Kathy. Any of her poetry books.

Smith, Zadie. *White Teeth*. (2000)—Her new novel is supposed to be really good.

Strout, Elizabeth. *Olivia Kittredge*. (2008)

Wagner, John. *A History of Violence*. (1997)—graphic novel  
Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. (1996)  
Ware, Chris. *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000)—graphic novel  
Wilson, August. *Fences* (1986). Play. Read anything by Wilson.  
Winslow, Don. *The Power of the Dog*. (2005)  
Wolf, Geoffrey. Any collection of essays.