

Literature and the Contemporary: Contemporary British Fiction

ENGLIT 0365 28100

Dr. Ann Rea: Fall 2013

TTH TTh 3:30 – 4:50: Biddle 211

Syllabus and Course Description

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Office hours: 12:30-2:00 and by appointment

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Contemporary British fiction has an energy and vitality that makes it exciting to read and study. The books we will read for this class are accessible and enjoyable to read, and also allow us to understand an evolving culture. As many critics have commented, a defining characteristic of fiction in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries is that it expresses ideas about **hybridity** in one form or another. This can reflect the cultural and racial hybrids of many of the communities living in Britain, and can reflect the literary forms that writers use, or their relationship to the past. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, for example, we will read about Karim who grew up in London with an Indian father and an English mother. In many ways the massive wave of immigration from the former British colonies that took place in the 1940s and 1950s has led to a hybrid culture that includes people of a variety of races and mixed races who make an important impact on British culture. *The Buddha of Suburbia* is a very funny novel with so many references to the current music scene in London that it almost seems to have a soundtrack, and it also makes many serious observations about the cultural hybridity that Karim experiences. Two of the novels on our list depict Britain's **history** in important ways that show the deep impact that both the First and Second World Wars had on the people. Historical fiction is also an important hybrid form in fiction of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, and has moved beyond the popular fiction of the early years of the last century. As you will see, both Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and Pat Barker's *Regeneration* have bibliographies that show that the authors researched the history of the periods that they depict. That each of them also depicts world war is another aspect of British culture that we will discuss. In a different version of hybridity, Graham Swift's *The Light of Day* and William Boyd's *Restless* make use of popular forms of literature to produce highly literary texts. Swift's novel recalls the detective novel and Boyd's is a spy novel, but each has depth and complexity that takes it much further. Typical of the period too is a thinking about identity that we would describe as "postmodern," which sees identity as more complex and fluid than at other periods, and in some of the novels we will read the exploration of identity entails an exploration of sexual orientation. Jeannette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* shows this exploration in an autobiography, and we will examine how the complexities of identity overlap with the complexities of the narrative form.

This class requires your **active** participation in a way in which your other classes may not. You must prepare for class by reading the assigned literature thoughtfully and completing the journal assignment for that day. This may take more time than you would at first anticipate. Outside class you will spend a lot of time on the reading so if reading

is not for you, you may need to take another class! **There will be frequent in-class quizzes to test your reading, many of them surprises.** These will also help you to develop your thinking about the texts we read, and provide a chance for me to work with you on your writing. You should also be aware of the time that reading the novels will take; you still need to read beyond the plot and think about the significance of what you are reading so you can come to class prepared to be involved in active discussion of the reading. This is not a lecture class, but one where you will engage with ideas and conversation. This can be lots of fun, but for it to function we need everyone to make the effort to be reflective about his or her part in it. If you tend to talk a lot you might need to check that you do not dominate the discussion. If you are shy and tend to leave the talking to others you might need to push yourself to speak. It is extremely important that we behave respectfully towards others in the discussions.

Class participation and in-class quizzes will constitute 25% of your grade.

Policies and Rules

Please ensure that your cell phone is turned OFF before class. That means that you will not check for “text” messages. I will ask you to leave if I see you “texting.”

Attendance is required. More than three absences and you risk having your grade lowered. If you need to schedule appointments make sure that they do not take place during class time. Be punctual at the beginning of class, and do not make plans to leave before class ends: to do otherwise will result in an absence being recorded.

Plagiarism is an extremely serious offense and will not be excused. Be sure that you see the distinction between peer revision in which you help each other to revise your work, and the kind of help with writing which involves someone else doing work for you. To present the language or ideas of others as if they are your own is plagiarism.

If you have a disability for which you need to request accommodation you should contact the Learning Resource Center, G16, Owen Library, (814)269-7109 as early as possible in the semester. The coordinator will verify your disability and define the necessary accommodation to be made.

Required Texts

Jeannette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*

Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

Pat Barker, *Regeneration*

Graham Swift, *The Light of Day*

William Boyd, *Restless*

August

Tuesday, 27th

Introduction

Thursday, 29th

Read Ian McEwan, *Atonement*, to the end of Chapter Four, page 50.

September

Tuesday, 3rd

Read Ian McEwan, *Atonement*, to the end of Chapter Nine, page 105

Thursday 5th

Read Ian McEwan, *Atonement*, to the end of Chapter 13, page 161

Tuesday 10th until 14th CLASSES CANCELLED

But follow the instructions I give.

Read Ian McEwan, *Atonement*, to page 309

Complete short writing assignment

Tuesday 17th

Finish *Atonement*

Thursday 19th

Read Pat Barker, *Regeneration* to the end of Chapter 4, page 40

Tuesday 24th

Read Pat Barker, *Regeneration* to the end of Chapter 9, page 108

Thursday 26th

Read Pat Barker, *Regeneration* to the end of Part Two, page 148

October

Tuesday 1st

Read Pat Barker, *Regeneration* to the end of Chapter 17, page 206

Thursday 3rd

Finish *Regeneration*

Tuesday 8th

Read Jeannette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* to the end of the "Exodus" section, page 52.

Thursday 10th

Jeannette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* to the end of "Numbers" page 93.

Tuesday 15th - No Class - Pitt observing Monday classes today

Thursday 17th

Finish *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

Tuesday 22nd

Paper One due in class

Read Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* to the end of Chapter 4, page 61

Thursday 24th

Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* to the end of Chapter 8, page 121

Tuesday 29th

Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* to the end of Chapter 11, page 181

Thursday 31st

Mid-Term Exam

November

Tuesday 5th

Finish *The Buddha of Suburbia*

Thursday 7th

Read Graham Swift, *The Light of Day* to the end of Chapter 10, page 51

Tuesday 12th

Graham Swift, *The Light of Day* to the end of Chapter 24, page 132

Thursday 14th

Graham Swift, *The Light of Day* to the end of Chapter 36, page 181

Tuesday 19th

Graham Swift, *The Light of Day* to the end of Chapter 52, page 261

Thursday 21st

Finish *The Light of Day*

Tuesday 26th

Film: Mike Leigh's film *Kiss of Death*

Read William Boyd, *Restless* to the end of Chapter 1, page 27

Thursday 28th - No Class - Thanksgiving Break

December

Tuesday 3rd

Read William Boyd, *Restless* to the end of Chapter 6, "A Girl from Germany, page 140

Thursday 5th

Read William Boyd, *Restless* to the end of Chapter 8, page 190

Tuesday 10th

Read William Boyd, *Restless* to the end of Chapter 10, page 253

Thursday 12th

Finish William Boyd, *Restless*

Paper Two due in class

Final examination at scheduled time