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JUDS 0050A

First-Year Seminar

Believers, Agnostics, and Atheists in Contemporary Fiction

Fall, 2014

Professor David C. Jacobson

Program in Judaic Studies

163 George Street

Tel. 401-863-3908

[David\_Jacobson@Brown.edu](mailto:David_Jacobson@Brown.edu)

Office Hour: Monday, 2:00-3:00 pm, or by appointment.

Contemporary society is divided over issues of religious faith. In recent decades there has been a resurgence of religious faith, while at the same time many have been skeptical and even hostile to religious belief and practice. Others are just not sure what to believe. In this seminar, we will read and discuss contemporary short stories and brief selections from novels and memoirs that explore the ways that these ongoing differences over spiritual matters affect people. The readings will be organized according to different contexts in which religion plays a role: education, faith and doubt, prayer, interpersonal relations, families, the lives of members of the clergy, and society as a whole. Writers of both Christian and Jewish backgrounds will be studied.

Course Goals:

* The experience of reading a wide range of works of fiction that explore the issues of religious faith and practice.
* The development of a greater understanding of the process in which personal religious experiences and a variety of responses to institutional religion are transformed into works of fiction and memoirs.
* An appreciation of what one can learn about the nature of religion and religiosity from reading works of fiction and memoirs.
* An opportunity to share your responses to the works of fiction and memoirs and the issues they raise with the class.

We will read literary selections from the following books (available for purchase at Brown University Bookstore and on reserve at Rockefeller Library):

C. Michael Curtis, editor, *God: Stories* (Houghton Mifflin)

C. Michael Curtis, editor, *Faith: Stories* (Houghton Mifflin)

There will also be readings available in OCRA. **The course password is: faith.**

Course Requirements:

* Attendance, Preparation, and Participation (20%)

Attendance is required. Each student is expected to complete the assigned reading for each class session. Be sure to bring the texts of each selection to class. If they are available only in OCRA, you should either download and print them or bring them downloaded on your laptop, tablet, iPad. You are expected to be prepared to present at least three (3) passages per story to the class with comments or questions for class discussion. See “Methodology of the Course.”

* 4 Brief Papers (**2 pages, single-spaced**) on the portrait of religion in a unit (40%).
* Term Paper (**10 pages, double-spaced**) on what one can learn about religion from works of fiction and memoirs (40%).

Due: Thursday, Dec. 18.

9/3

Introduction

Alice Walker, “The Welcome Table” *Faith*, 254-258

9/5

Education

Emmanuel Winters, “God’s Agents Have Beards” OCRA

Brendan Gill, “The Knife” *God*, 78-82

Elizabeth Spencer, “A Christian Education” *God*, 322-326

9/8

## Education

Elizabeth Cox, “Saved” *Faith*, 1-12

Mendele Mocher Sforim, “The Calf” OCRA

S.Y. Agnon, “The Kerchief” OCRA

9/10

Catholic Education

Richard Rodriguez, “Credo” OCRA

Patricia Hample, “Chapter Six from *Virgin Time*” OCRA

Frank O’Connor, “First Confession” OCRA

9/12

Protestant Education

John Ashby Porter. “Roof Work” *God*, 267-280

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Saved” OCRA

John Updike, “Pigeon Feathers” OCRA

9/15

## Jewish Education

Isaac Bashevis Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” OCRA

Shapiro, “Eating Days” OCRA

Tovah Reich, “The Lost Girl” OCRA

9/17

**Essay #1 due**

9/19

Faith and Doubt

Marjorie Kemper, “God’s Goodness” *Faith*, 51-66

John L’Heureux, “The Expert on God” OCRA

John Gardner, “Redemption” *God,* 65-77

9/22

Faith and Doubt

Isaac Bashevis Singer, “The Spinoza of Market Street” OCRA

Jacob Needleman, “My Father’s God” OCRA

John Updike, “Varieties of Religious Experience” OCRA

9/24

Faith and Doubt

Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown” *Faith*, 38-50

James A. Michener, “Voyage Four: 1661” *Faith*, 90-98

Philip Roth, “Eli the Fanatic” OCRA

9/26

**NO CLASS**

9/29

Faith and Doubt

Dov Elbaum, “Keter” OCRA

10/1

Faith and Doubt

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, “A Very Old Man with

Enormous Wings” *Faith*, 13-19

Peter S. Beagle, “Uncle Chaim and Aunt Rifke

and the Angel” OCRA

Bernard Malamud, “Angel Levine” OCRA

10/3

Prayer

Tess Gallagher, “The Woman Who Prayed” OCRA

Leslie Marmon Silko, “The Man to Send Rain Clouds” OCRA

William Hoffman, “The Question of Rain” *God*, 95-107

10/6

Prayer

Tillie Olsen, “O Yes” OCRA

Allegra Goodman, “And Also Much Cattle” OCRA

Gil Ben Aych, “The Chant of Being” OCRA

10/8

**Essay #2 due**

10/10

**NO CLASS**

10/13

**FALL WEEKEND—NO CLASS**

10/15

Interpersonal Relations

Mary Ward Brown, “A New Life” *God*, 22-34

Doris Betts, “The Ugliest Pilgrim” OCRA

Bernard Malamud, “Idiots First” *God*, 128-136

10/17

**NO CLASS**

10/20

Interpersonal Relations

Isaac Bashevis Singer, “A Piece of Advice” OCRA

Flanner O’Connor, “Revelation” OCRA

Allen Hoffman, “Building Blocks” OCRA

10/22

Families

Flannery O’Connor, “Parker’s Back” *God*, 167-185

John Updike, “Made in Heaven” *God*, 344-356

Jessamyn West, “Music on the Muscatatuck” *Faith*, 277-289

10/24

Families

James Baldwin, “Exodus” *God*, 1-7

Peris Knobbe, “Here I Am” OCRA

Robert Olen Butler, “Mr. Green” OCRA

10/27

Families

James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son” OCRA

Rebecca Goldstein, “Rabbinical Eyes” OCRA

Savion Liebrecht, “Apples from the Desert” OCRA

10/29

Families

Max Apple, “The Jew of Home Depot” OCRA

Suzanne Rivecca, “Very Special Victims” OCRA

Mohammed Naseehu Ali, “The Manhood Test” OCRA

10/31

Families

Allegra Goodman, “The Family Markowitz” OCRA

André Aciman, “The Last Seder” OCRA

Caroly Bly, “After the Baptism” OCRA

11/3

Families

Anne Tyler, “Saint Maybe”OCRA

Hanif Kureishi, “My Son the Fanatic” *Faith*, 67-76

Tova Reich, “The Third Generation” *Faith*, 169-188

11/5

Families

Marsha Lee Berkman, “Deeds of Love and Rage” OCRA

Mira Magen, “Gerba Daisies at Half-Price OCRA

Bernard Malamud, “The Silver Crown” OCRA

11/7

B. Wongar, “Babaru, The Family” OCRA

Mark Mirsky, “Memory Candle” OCRA

Frederick Buechner, “The Dwarves in the Stable” OCRA

11/10

Families

Andre Dubus, “A Father’s Story” *God*, 35-54

Oscar Hijuelos, “Christmas 1967” OCRA

Cynthia Ozick, “Rosa” *God*, 186-221

11/12

**Essay #3 due**

11/14

Clergy

Richard Bausch, “Design” *God*, 8-21

Isaac Bashevis Singer, “Something Is There” OCRA

Isaac Bashevis Singer, “I Place My Reliance on No Man” OCRA

11/17

Clergy

Tobias Wolff, “The Missing Person” *God*, 369-394

Mary Gordon, “The Deacon” *Faith*, 20-37

Edna O’Brien, “Sister Imelda” *Faith*, 131-149

11/19

Clergy

J.F. Powers, “Zeal” *God*, 281-293

Remy Rougeau, “Cello” *Faith*, 189-206

James Joyce, “Grace” *God*, 108-127

11/21

Clergy

Bernard Malamud, “The Magic Barrel” OCRA

Melvin Bukiet , “The Devil and the Dutchman” OCRA

Max Apple, “Stabbing an Elephant” OCRA

11/24

Clergy

Gail Godwin, “An Intermediate Stop” OCRA

John L’Heureux, “Clothing” OCRA

Eileen Pollack, “The Rabbi in the Attic” *God*, 236-266

**Thanksgiving Vacation**

12/1

Clergy

Angela Pneuman, “All Saints Day” OCRA

John Hersey, “God’s Typhoon” *God*, 83-94

Philip Roth, “The Conversion of the Jews” OCRA

12/3

Clergy

Bobbie Ann Mason, “The Retreat” *God*, 137-150

Peggy Payne, “The Pure in Heart” *God*, 222-235

Sue Miller, “While I Was Gone” OCRA

12/5

Clergy

Miguel de Unamuno, “Saint Manuel Bueno, Martyr” OCRA

12/8

Clergy

Karen Armstrong, “Oxford;” “Through the Narrow Gate” OCRA

12/10

**Essay #4 due**

12/11 (Thursday)

Discussion: What can we learn about religion from fiction and memoirs?

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METHODOLOGY OF THE COURSE

A basic assumption of this course is that one can learn about the nature of religion and the role that it plays in society and in the lives of individuals by reading works of fiction and memoirs that tell stories about believers, agnostics, and atheists. Many writers of fiction construct stories that reveal to us truths about the ways that religiosity and religious institutions can be inspiring, confusing, problematic, and even destructive.

Participation in this course is open to all students, regardless of the relationship they have had to religion when growing up. Some students may identify as atheists. Others may have been brought up in a particular religious tradition but are currently rethinking their relationship to it. There may also be students who currently have a religious faith and practice a religious tradition. All of us will hopefully gain significant insights into what religion is. These insights may confirm and may challenge our own attitudes toward religion.

When preparing each story for class, consider the following questions, when relevant to the story. You are also encouraged to add your own questions.

1. How does the story portray the observance of religion?

2. What role does religion play in the lives of characters in the story, in terms of observance and/or faith?

3. What is the nature of the practice of religion in the society portrayed in the story?

4. How are religious institutions (houses of worships, members of the clergy, etc.) portrayed?

5. On balance, in what ways is religion presented as a positive or a negative force in the psychology of individual characters and/or in the society portrayed in the story?

6. How does the way the story is told have an impact on you as a reader?

7. As you read stories from different religious traditions, do you discern certain issues that frequently emerge in each particular religious tradition? What issues are common to more than one religious tradition?

8. What changes occur in a character’s relationship to religion in the course of the story and why do these changes occur?

9. Is the author’s attitude toward religion essentially positive, negative, or mixed? What is the author saying about religion?

10. How do you react to the portrayal of religion in the story? Does it conform with your own view of religion (which may be positive, negative, or mixed)? Does it challenge your own view of religion?

11. What can one learn from the story about the nature of religiosity, religious institutions, skepticism, denial of the value of religion, etc?