

Syllabus:

On Moral Fiction

Fenton Johnson

Graduate fiction craft class 596h, Autumn 2006, University of Arizona
Fenton Johnson, Instructor Office: MLNG 334 Hours: Th 3-5 pm,
Fri 12-1 pm and by appt. 621-7392 / email: fjohnson@u.arizona.edu

Chekhov famously tells us that “the writer should be as objective as a chemist,” at the same time that he became famous for the unblinking humanism that informs every word of his work. Flannery O’Connor writes, “Your beliefs will be the light by which you see, but they will not be what you see.” This course is an exploration of the intersection between systems of morality and the art of writing fiction. How does one write from a position of strong moral belief without becoming didactic?

How do writers work from outrage
and still keep readers turning the page?

We’ll begin by reading a couple of foundational works: the book of Genesis, Luke’s Gospel, and Augustine’s *Confessions*, one of the seminal (and most creative) works in the Western canon. Then we’ll move to classic and contemporary fiction, considering novels and close analysis of selected short fiction in alternate weeks (to lighten the reading load). We will supplement our readings in fiction with works by writers writing on writing, e.g., Flannery O’Connor’s *Mystery and Manners* and John Gardner’s *On Moral Fiction*.

You will also be required to formulate a plan (not to be graded) for making a spiritual discipline of some practice in a way that enhances the ways in which it complements or fulfills their writing. I define “discipline” broadly – some examples might be: raising a child; working in a soup kitchen; meditation; prayer; reading; caring for an elderly parent; teaching; political canvassing. In each case I ask that the student consider how life is like water: It takes the shape of the vessel into which it’s poured; remove the vessel and it’s lost. The goal of this course is to encourage the writer to contemplate the nature and shape of the vessel that carries his/her work, and to commence or continue its shaping.

Students are also required to team up with one other student to make a short presentation to introduce each author.

I will hand out the selections from the Bible, but all writers should have the New Oxford Annotated edition as a reference work on their bookshelves.

Reading list:

Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (Harvest/Harcourt)

The Book of Genesis (handout)

The Gospel according to Luke (all Biblical handouts taken from the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*)

St. Augustine, *Confessions* (Penguin Classics, translated by Pine-Coffin)

9/14

Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (Anchor)

9/21

Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (Harper Perennial)

9/28

Above, cont.

10/5

Jim Crace, *Quarantine* (Picador)

10/12

Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (Penguin)

10/19

J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (Penguin)

10/26

Graham Greene, *Our Man in Havana* (Penguin)

11/2

Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (HarperCollins)

11/9

Jeannette Winterson, *Weight*; begin discussion of James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*

11/16

James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* and Matthew Stadler, *Allan Stein* (Grove); intro to *Brothers Karamazov*

11/23 Thanksgiving break

11/30 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov* (Norton Critical)

12/7

Brothers Karamazov, cont.

Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*

Also required: Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Stories* (FSG)

Nonfiction: Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (FSG)

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