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Office hours: Wednesdays 1-3 pm and by appointment

### **English 4561: Studies in Fictional and Nonfictional Narrative (Tales of the Suburbs)**

This course will explore a fascinating, sometimes hilarious, sometimes heartbreaking set of stories set in the U.S. suburbs over the last half century in order to get a better sense of two issues central to any attempt to grasp how narrative works: the “stickiness” of generic conventions and what it means to “set” a story somewhere. We’ll investigate the former in an attempt to understand why the same basic stories should keep on being told again and again, despite the many changes undergone by the suburbs in the past half century (and the fact that they were never as homogeneous and monolithic as the stories would suggest). We’ll think about the latter in order to understand how space and place can be every bit as central to storytelling as (the far more familiar category of) time.

A word about my teaching style seems in order. I regard all of the questions driving this course as both important and open to debate. I have certainly thought about them extensively, but my primary role in the classroom is not to convince you to accept the provisional answers I have come up with, but rather to facilitate the development of your own answers. When I offer up a theory, I will ask you immediately to assess its strengths and weaknesses, what it illuminates and what it fails to explain. Similarly, when you proffer your own ideas, they will be subject to the same scrutiny, both from your colleagues and from me. We will no doubt frequently find ourselves torn between multiple persuasive, but seemingly incompatible arguments. If so, that will be a sign of our success, for it will mean that we are doing justice to the complexity of reading and viewing. That is to say, there will be no absolute right answers in this course, only more or less persuasive explanations (please note, though, that this does not mean that all answers are equally valid, only that the most compelling answers will vary depending on the particular questions being asked, and evidence being considered). If this sort of explanatory pragmatism appeals to you, I will endeavor to create a stimulating and engaging space for you to consider ideas and their consequences. If, on the other hand, you are troubled by doubt and paradox and wish to learn the authoritative last word on these novels or this genre more generally, then this is probably not the class for you (and the humanities in general may not be very congenial territory). I should also note that so long as you meet me halfway, I will lavish you with pedagogic attention, and take you and your ideas very seriously. If you are unwilling or unable to meet me halfway, however, my interest in your success is likely to drop off rather dramatically.

Your grade for the course will be comprised of your grades on two 4-6 pp. essays (22.5% each), a 6-8 pp. essay (35%), and your active participation in our discussions (20%). You may revise either or both of your shorter essays, although in each case the revision must be thorough and substantive in order to count. All written work which is late without prior arrangement will be marked down one letter grade per class meeting late. If you anticipate a problem with turning in your work on time, please talk to me in advance to arrange for an extension. Similarly, attendance and preparation are mandatory. Our discussions will not work without you present, prepared, and ready to participate (which includes having a copy

of the reading at hand). I will send around a sign-up sheet for each session, so that your attendance can be documented. If you miss more than three class meetings without a valid medical excuse, or are repeatedly and visibly unprepared (or distracted by your electronics), I reserve the right to reduce your grade for the course by one step per additional absence or conspicuous lack of preparation (so three unexcused absences or lamenesses or distractednesses could turn a B into a B-, regardless of the quality of your written work). Please consider this fair warning.

In the unlikely event that I need to cancel a class meeting, I will contact you by email and request that a note be placed on the classroom door. In addition, I will contact you as soon as possible following the cancellation in order to let you know what will be expected of you for the next session.

In order to ensure that our discussions are as useful and straightforward as possible, I will be posting study questions to the news section of Carmen prior to each session. Those questions will then serve as a rough agenda for that session. I encourage you to pose your own questions for our agenda, either through email to the class or by sending them to me to post to the Carmen news section. Such question posing will serve as another means through which to demonstrate (and get credit for) your participation in the course.

I hope that this goes without saying, but you must complete all of the work for the course in order to pass the course. Doing eighty percent of the work required, no matter how well you do it, does not give you an eighty-percent average. It gives you an E.

One further warning which should go without saying: university rules forbid “submitting plagiarized work for an academic requirement. Plagiarism is the representation of another’s work or ideas as one’s own; it includes the unacknowledged word-for-word use and/or paraphrase of another person’s work, and/or the inappropriate unacknowledged use of another person’s ideas.” The key word here is “unacknowledged.” All scholarly inquiry builds upon what has gone before it; the important thing is to distinguish between what you have borrowed and what you are contributing to the discussion. All cases of suspected plagiarism will be reported to the Committee on Academic Misconduct. Penalties for plagiarism can range from failing the course in question to expulsion from the university. If you have any questions concerning plagiarism or proper citation, please do not hesitate to consult with me.

Any student who feels that he or she may need an accommodation based upon the impact of a disability should contact me privately to discuss his or her specific needs. Please contact the Office for Disability Services at 292-3307 (or go to 150 Pomerene Hall) to coordinate reasonable accommodations for documented disabilities.

Finally, Ohio State has one of the finest writing centers in the country, which offers a range of services to all levels of writers. I encourage you to take advantage of their offerings. Their web address is <http://cstw.osu.edu/writingcenter/>

I’ve ordered six books for the course, which should be available through the campus area bookstores (though you’re welcome to get them any way you’d like). A copy of each will also be on reserve in Thompson Library. There will also be two stories by John Cheever (available through Carmen), and four films (which you’ll need to watch on your own). Here are the book details:

Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (Vintage, 1961)

Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides* (Picador, 1993)

Rick Moody, *The Ice Storm* (Little, Brown, 1994)

Tom Perrotta, *Little Children* (St. Martin's, 2004)

Alison Espach, *The Adults* (Scribner, 2011)

A. M. Holmes, *May We Be Forgiven* (Viking, 2012)

- Jan. 8            Introduction
- Jan. 10          please read John Cheever, "The Country Husband" and "The Swimmer"  
[available on Carmen]
- Jan. 15          please read as far as you can in Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (at least  
through Part One/p. 122)
- Jan. 17          please read as far as you can in *Revolutionary Road* (at least through Part  
Two/p. 222)
- Jan. 22          please finish *Revolutionary Road*, if you haven't already done so
- Jan. 24          please watch *American Beauty* [available in the drm.osu.edu Media Library]
- Jan. 29          we'll continue our discussion of *American Beauty*
- Jan. 31          please read as far as you can in Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides* (at least  
through Chapter Three/p. 135)
- Feb. 5            please finish *The Virgin Suicides*, if you haven't already done so
- Feb. 7            please watch *Heathers* [currently available streaming on Netflix]
- FRIDAY, FEB 8: Essay #1 (4-6 pp. on a suburban trope) due by 5 pm
- Feb. 12          we'll continue our discussion of *Heathers*
- Feb. 14          please read as far as you can in Rick Moody, *The Ice Storm* (at least through  
Part I/p. 102)
- Feb. 19          please read as far as you can in *The Ice Storm* (at least through Part II/p. 202)
- Feb. 21          please finish *The Ice Storm*, if you haven't already done so
- Feb. 26          please watch *Chasing Amy*

Feb. 28 please read as far as you can in Tom Perrotta, *Little Children* (at least through Part One/p. 105); our discussion of *Chasing Amy* may spill over into this session

March 5 please read as far as you can in *Little Children* (at least through Part Two/p. 208)

March 7 please finish *Little Children*, if you haven't already done so

March 12 NO CLASS (SPRING BREAK)

March 14 NO CLASS (SPRING BREAK)

March 19 please watch *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist*

March 21 we'll continue our discussion of *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist*

FRIDAY, MARCH 22: Essay #2 (4-6 pp. on a suburban place) due by 5 pm

March 26 please read as far as you can in Alison Espach, *The Adults* (at least through Chapter 14/p. 106)

March 28 please read as far as you can in *The Adults* (at least through Chapter 25/p. 211)

April 2 please finish *The Adults*, if you haven't already done so

April 4 NO CLASS (I'M OUT OF TOWN)

April 9 please read as far as you can in A. M. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven* (at least through p. 120)

April 11 please read as far as you can in *May We Be Forgiven* (at least through the middle of p. 244)

April 16 please read as far as you can in *May We Be Forgiven* (at least through the top of p. 364)

April 18 please finish *May We Be Forgiven*, if you haven't already done so; Retrospect

FRIDAY, APRIL 26: Essay #3 (6-8 pp) due by 5 pm