

Fall 2007
MW 2:30-3:50
Office hours: M 11:00-1:00; F 9:00-10:00 and by app't.

Prof. Janet G. Casey
PMH 332

AMERICAN BESTSELLERS & POPULAR CULTURE

Description: American bestsellers have much to tell us about the social, political, and commercial preoccupations of our society. In this course, we will read examples of popular American novels from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a means of studying both the publishing industry and popular culture. In addition to the texts themselves, we will consider illustrations and critical receptions, and watch one or two related films. Supplementary readings will focus on such topics as bestseller lists, “middlebrow” genres, and the role of the Book-of-the-Month Club.

Required Texts:

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1862)
Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward* (1888)
Edna Ferber, *So Big* (1924)
Raymond Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely* (1942)
Lillian Smith, *Strange Fruit* (1944)
Grace Metalious, *Peyton Place* (1956)
Mario Puzo, *The Godfather* (1969)

Shorter texts will also be distributed or will be read online.

Requirements:

1. Regular attendance and active, informed participation. Missing more than two sessions may constitute grounds for failure. This course will depend upon lively discussion, and each student is expected to join in on a daily basis. You will receive a grade for class participation.
2. Four short writing assignments of 2-3 pages. You may write on the books you wish, and the goal will be to read a portion of text closely and develop ideas and questions about it. Further directions on last page.
4. Mid-term and final examinations. The final exam will be cumulative.

Notes:

- Assigned readings should be completed in their entirety for the day listed on the discussion schedule.
- All written work must be typed, double-spaced, in a 12-point font, and is due at the beginning of the class session. No submissions by e-mail.
- I make liberal use of e-mail to contact students, both individually and as a class. Make sure to check your Skidmore e-mail account daily.

Discussion Schedule:

Sept.	5	Introduction, discussion of requirements, etc.
	10	Boss, “The Greatest Mystery: Making a Bestseller” [handout]; <i>Rave Reviews: Bestselling Fiction in America</i> (read through entire site): < http://www.lib.virginia.edu/small/exhibits/rave_reviews/introduction.html >

	12	Stowe, <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> , chapters I-XV
	17	<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> , chapters XVI-XXX
	19*	<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> , chapters XXXI-XLV
	24	Bestsellers for Children. From <i>McGuffey's First Eclectic Reader</i> [handout]; <i>Ragged Dick</i> , chapters 1-3: < http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/AlgRagg.html >
	26	Bestsellers for Children continued.
Oct.	1	Bellamy, <i>Looking Backward</i> , chapters 1-14
	3	<i>Looking Backward</i> , chapters 15-28
	8*	<i>Looking Backward</i>
	10	Magazines and popular fiction. Radway, from <i>A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire</i> [handout].
	15	Ferber, <i>So Big</i>
	17	<i>So Big</i>
	22*	<i>So Big</i>
	24	MIDTERM
	29	Chandler, <i>Farewell, My Lovely</i>
	31	<i>Farewell, My Lovely</i>
Nov.	5*	<i>Farewell, My Lovely</i>
	7	Lillian Smith, <i>Strange Fruit</i>
	12	<i>Strange Fruit</i>
	14*	<i>Strange Fruit</i>
	19	Metaliou, <i>Peyton Place</i>
***** THANKSGIVING RECESS *****		
	26	<i>Peyton Place</i>
	28*	<i>Peyton Place</i>

Dec.	3	Puzo, <i>The Godfather</i>
	5	<i>The Godfather</i>
	10*	<i>The Godfather</i>
	12	Questions, comments, discussion of final exam.

FINAL EXAM: Wednesday, Dec. 19th, 6:00-9:00 p.m.

GRADE BREAKDOWN:

Written briefs	40% (averaged)
Mid-term exam	20%
Final Exam	30%
Participation/Preparation	10%

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Short briefs (1-2 pages). On four different occasions throughout the course of the semester, you will write a short brief in which you identify a provocative portion of the text, explain what is especially intriguing about it, and use it to generate further questions for class discussion. Your chosen section should be quite short (no more than a page), which will allow you to consider its various dimensions in very close detail. Consider the following questions:

1. Why is this an especially important (or confusing, or rich, or disturbing) portion of the text?
2. What details (on the level of word choice, imagery, metaphor) are particularly compelling, and why?
3. What further questions—about the text as a whole, about a particular character, about a certain theme—might this section raise?

Of course, it would not be a good idea to simply answer these three questions directly; rather, like all good pieces of writing, your paper must revolve around a thesis. The assigned length will be strictly enforced and offers the most cogent clue as to the analytical specificity required: choose a thesis that can be adequately demonstrated (including, of course, appropriate textual evidence) within an absolute maximum of three full pages (double-spaced, 12-point font).

Due dates are marked in the discussion schedule with an asterisk (*). There will be no extensions; if you miss a date, simply move on to another brief. You may choose your dates, keeping in mind that two of the briefs must be submitted by Nov. 5th. Please note that consulting outside sources of *any* kind is strictly prohibited.

EXPECTATIONS FOR PAPERS

Your work should reflect a high level of care and thoughtfulness. In all cases, you are required to evince a strong, argumentative thesis; to argue your thesis with reference to specific details in the text under discussion; to integrate quotations gracefully and grammatically; and to do your own work. I am happy to read and comment on drafts, provided they are submitted at least five full days before the due date (to provide time to get them back to you). Feel free, too, to check in with me as you develop ideas.

An A-level paper will be free of mechanical errors and will argue an original point in a thoughtful and graceful manner. A B-level paper may have one or two mechanical errors (provided they are not distracting) and will offer a solid idea that is argued reasonably well. A C or below will be assigned to papers that fail to offer a thesis, repeat class discussion, and/or are unclear or confusing. If you know that you have writing problems—especially grammatical ones—then you are expected to do something about that *in advance* of submitting your work. Visit the Writing Center, commit yourself to the submission of drafts, find a tutor-friend who can help—do whatever it takes. “Clean” writing will be a minimum expectation for a grade of B- or above.