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ENGL 265-04, British Historical Fiction, Fall 2013

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Rhodes College

Department of English

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Office Hours: M/W/F, 10:00-11:00 a.m.; and by appointment.

My administrative role as Dean of *British Studies At Oxford* means that I sometimes have to be out of my office unexpectedly. I shall try to keep my Office Hours, but for your own convenience I recommend that you phone ahead (3715) before climbing all those stairs.

English 265: Special Topics - British Historical Fiction. (F2, F4)

Class meets: Monday/Wednesday/Friday, 3:00-3:50 Palmer 210

Required Texts

Daniel Defoe	<i>A Journal of the Plague Year</i>	Penguin 9780140437850
Robert Louis Stevenson	<i>Kidnapped</i>	Penguin 9780143039402
Charles Dickens	<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>	Penguin 9780141439600
Rudyard Kipling	Stories, to be provided by tutor	
Hilary Mantel	<i>Wolf Hall</i>	Picador 9780312429980

Schedule and Course Document, Fall 2013

Course description:

*Many of the greatest writers of fiction have turned to earlier historical periods for the setting of their stories. Why is that? What do they find compelling about imagining conflicts and adventures set in the past? What opportunities do writers find and why have readers responded so powerfully? Historical fiction has been looked down upon in some quarters, but at the moment the writer winning all the prizes, not just the sales, is Hilary Mantel, for her two (of an eventual three) novels about early 16th-century England. In this course we read a sample of historical fiction over three centuries, asking questions about style, plot, theme, and topic. Texts are Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722); Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859); Robert Louis Stevenson, *Kidnapped* (1886); Rudyard Kipling, *short stories*; and ending with Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009).*

Two famous statements to consider by very different literary theorists:

“To the carrying out of the job [of cultural criticism] literature has a unique relevance . . . because literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity and difficulty”.

Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York 1950), p. xv.

“Knowledge is coarse, life is subtle, and literature matters to us because it corrects this distance”.

Roland Barthes, *Leçon* [Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France], Paris 1978.

Grading

The final grade recognizes the quality of your work over the whole course. It is awarded for a course of study successfully pursued, not simply for a few pieces of written work, and you are expected to be intellectually engaged at all times. Provided that I am confident that that is the case, the exact final grade is normally determined according to the scheme set out below. However, there are two thresholds you must cross successfully before I will award a grade above “D”.

First, this is an English course, and I expect any formal piece of work to be written with correct grammar and spellings. All students now have access to word processing programs with a spelling checker, so there is little excuse for handing in misspelled work. Grammar is fundamental to communication, and degree-level written work in English has to communicate accurately. Many WP programs also have a grammar checker, though these are of limited usefulness. If you have any doubts about the accuracy of your English usage, you should use the Writing Center to gain advice. Above all, I expect you to proof-read your work and spot errors before I do – if you present work to me that you could not be bothered to read over, you must expect me to feel that you are treating the task with contempt and grade accordingly.

Second, this course requires that you master some facts concerning the literary, cultural, and political history of the time during which these texts were being written. If I become concerned that you are not mastering the material or preparing adequately for class, I shall issue a series of unannounced tests, each based on factual material found in the texts, in any study-guides I have made available to you, and in our set readings. You must achieve at least a 60% average on these tests to get above “D”.

Once across these thresholds, the grade is determined as follows:

First paper:	25%
Second paper:	25%
Final paper:	30%
Participation:	20%

Everybody wants a top grade for all their courses, and – as Garrison Keillor slyly insinuates of the inhabitants of Lake Wobegon – we all think that we are above average. But life isn’t really like that. Before you complain of unfair grading, bear in mind that satisfactory performance in this College is rewarded with a grade of C. A grade of B recognizes performance well beyond the simply satisfactory. Grades of A for the course will be given to work that is genuinely and consistently outstanding, and that grade is rarely given. For your

information, the median grade I gave for my courses in Fall 2010 (the last time I made the calculation) was between B and B-.

Cheating

Those I catch cheating, I fail.

Requirements

Participation

Your assessment for this course includes a substantial component for participation and you should be in no doubt that I use the full range of grades. Participation is important because learning is a not a passive activity and one person's failure to be actively engaged in a class adversely affects the experience of others. Participation can take many forms. A student who is comparatively silent, but who is also obviously attentive and committed to the class, is making a contribution to the overall atmosphere. Conversely, students who attend but don't bring the text, are visibly bored, wear hats or caps, fall asleep, talk among themselves, or who are repeatedly late ... such students cannot expect to be rewarded for participation even if they make the occasional contribution to discussion. Indeed, they can expect me to be vindictive in grading.

Attendance

You are expected to attend all the sessions of the course and any absence will affect your grade. With the fourth such absence, I shall assume you have withdrawn, with an automatic F if your name continues to appear on the class roll. I will be tolerant of reasonable absences caused by illness, etc.; but recent experience of absences caused by non-curricular activities such as sports and athletics, musical commitments, and Mock Trial makes me emphasise that these must be secondary to your curricular commitment, and I will not excuse absences for these. If your coach objects, please refer him or her to me. But I emphasise: athletics etc. works around your academic role, which is after all why you are in a college.

You are also expected to be on time, to remain in the classroom throughout the class, and not bring food or drink into it.

NOTE WELL: Absences to either side of a College Recess will count double against you. Tell your parents, grandparents, long-lost uncles and any mythical family members as soon as possible not to make travel arrangements for you that conflict with the schedule – I am impervious to the argument that begins, “But my mother didn’t know and has already bought the ticket ...”. You are a legal adult and I hold you responsible for your attendance at this class.

Use of computers

In general I do not welcome computers in the classroom. If you want to use a computer, be prepared to justify it to me.

Papers

I do not accept papers in digital form (let's not blame the inadequacy of the email system for the non-appearance of required work).

Completion of all written work is required to pass the course; failure to do so is an automatic F. All papers must be submitted by the agreed date. If you encounter difficulties, you must contact me **before** the agreed deadline. I shall deduct 10% per day for late papers up to one week after the due date; thereafter, although the paper is still necessary for the completion of the course, I shall record a zero as the grade.

The format of papers

- Please use Times New Roman 12 point and number the pages.
- Use the spell-check tool, but do so with care: some of the great virtues of the computer derive from the machine's "stupidity" – it will do exactly what you say and not think about it. Make sure you check for appropriateness any corrections proposed by the machine.
- Use the grammar checker, but with even more attentiveness.
- When you have completed your paper, use the word-count tool and write the total number of words on the front page.

Length of Papers

After decades of teaching, I've come round to the idea that we need to require you to write with brevity, clarity, and vigour. So I'll set a maximum number of words for each paper. You will therefore want to work hard to make every word count.

Rewrites

I encourage rewrites, but these must be substantive: merely changing a few words I've queried or deleting things I've found challengeable will not do. Indeed, if I find that I have wasted my time reading a rewrite that is not substantive, expect my frustration to be made manifest in the overall grade for the course. Bear in mind that the difference between, for instance, a paper that receives a B and one that receives an A is not the occasional error or infelicity. The difference is in quality of thought. If you decide to rewrite a paper, you should expect to start almost from scratch, using your first version as the foundation for a complete rethinking of the topic and your approach. If you approach rewriting in this spirit, it can be one of the most powerful tools for your intellectual development.

For each of the first two papers one rewrite is permitted, and it should be presented within two weeks of the return of the original paper. The recorded grade will be the average of the first and second grades.

What are the characteristics of the different grades of performance?

Rhodes uses a 4 credit system, with the expectation that students will normally take four courses only per semester. More free time? Hardly. The purpose of this change is to get students to engage more deeply with the material they are studying. Students will be expected to read and write more carefully, more attentively, more thoughtfully ... and sometimes just more. For this course I will expect you to come to have spent several hours preparing for each class and to spend time after the class reconsidering and consolidating in response to our discussions.

How many hours do students spend preparing for a Biology or Mathematics course at Rhodes? A lot. So I expect you to have spent just as many hours preparing for our classes (same number of credits). A quick

once-through read of a novel will not be sufficient. You must come to the classes having read and reread, and having explored independently some features of the topic under discussion. (That big building over near the sports facilities? It's a library and this is what it's for.) I'll give you some suggested readings as we go along, but you will want to demonstrate to me that you can study independently.

Full description of what will lead to various grades is both impossible and unwise. Again, bear in mind that the satisfactory student should receive a C grade; a B recognizes performance well above satisfactory. A grade of A or A- is for outstanding work and is received rarely.

Here are some of the characteristics of the excellent and the poor student:

Excellent students attend the class without fail; they have always prepared for the class well; they are self-motivated learners, using the library and other resources to discover additional materials for the subject; they are curious and enquiring; and they constantly reflect on the relationship between subjects under immediate discussion and earlier discussions in the class. Their writing is ambitious and the subject of growing professional pride: they seek to grapple with substantial subjects, which they pursue with clarity, accuracy, determination, and rigour, and they reread and rewrite their work before submitting it. They seek to present their work with professionalism and proof-read it carefully before handing it in. These students are perceptive and make sophisticated, educated, and independent-minded enquiries concerning issues to do with literature, language, and culture more generally.

Poor students have poor attendance records. They have put little into preparation for class and they are visibly disengaged. In their written work they are more concerned with "set length" than with intellectual substance, and they fail to observe obvious professional standards (spelling, grammar, getting simple things like authors' names and quotations right). They produce no preliminary draft of papers and fail to read their work through to ensure its quality and accuracy. They seek simple answers to complex questions and do the bare minimum, rarely bringing to bear any reading or thinking not explicitly required by the professor.

Active Learning

Here is a good statement for you to consider, in relation to this and every course you take at Rhodes:

Let me speak to you purely as a professor for a moment. Here is a bedrock truth. We can inform you, we can expose you to things you never heard of before, we can explain things, we can sometimes entertain you, we can often bore the hell out of you, we can set up good learning environments (or not), we can test you, we can grade you and credential you, and you can like us or hate us. But however well or badly we do those things, there is one thing that we absolutely cannot do, even if we stand on our heads – and that is: educate you. That is because the educational part of an education requires a personal investment from you that is not in the contract. If you do not make that investment of yourself, you can get a college degree without coming close to an education. By personal investment, I mean a kind of active mental engagement that falls largely outside the routine of going to school.

Theodore D. Nordenburg (Mercer University) [October, 2002]

Schedule

There will surely be differences in the way we approach study of each of our novels, and we'll surely develop flexibility about the schedule. Nonetheless, there will be some key topics we'll need to address for all. Here are a few:

- the historical time in which the work is set
- the historical time in which it was written
- the style adopted
- the narrator
- the authorial voice

Session	Date	Introduction Assignment
1	Wednesday 21 August	Intro to the course
2	Friday 23 August	What is a novel? Can we create the specifications for one? What is a historical novel? Can we create the specifications for that?
3	Monday 26 August	continued
		Daniel Defoe, <i>A Journal of the Plague Year</i>
4	Wednesday 28 August	First responses to the book: is it a novel?
5	Friday 30 August	Defoe's style and the narrator's voice
6	Monday 2 September	LABOR DAY – NO CLASS
7	Wednesday 4 September	The Plague Year and England / London
8	Friday 6 September	continued
		Robert Louis Stevenson, <i>Kidnapped</i>
9	Monday 9 September	First responses to the novel
10	Wednesday 11 September	Scotland, national identity, and the '45

11	Friday 13 September	The voice of David Balfour
12	Monday 16 September	The novel's style and languages
13	Wednesday 18 September	continued
14	Friday 20 September	continued
15	Monday 23 September	continued
16	Wednesday 25 September	continued
17	Friday 27 September	continued
18	Monday 30 September	Charles Dickens, <i>A Tale of Two Cities</i> First responses to the novel 1st paper due
19	Wednesday 2 October	The French Revolution and Britain
20	Friday 4 October	The novel's style and the authorial voice
21	Monday 7 October	The novel
22	Wednesday 9 October	continued
23	Friday 11 October	continued
24	Monday 14 October	FALL BREAK – NO CLASS
25	Wednesday 16 October	continued
26	Friday 18 October	continued
27	Monday 21 October	Rudyard Kipling stories Stories

28	Wednesday 23 October	continued 2nd paper due
29	Friday 25 October	continued
30	Monday 28 October	continued
31	Wednesday 30 October	continued
32	Friday 1 November	continued
33	Monday 4 November	NO CLASS – MPL AWAY
34	Wednesday 6 November	NO CLASS – MPL AWAY
		Hilary Mantel, <i>Wolf Hall</i>
35	Friday 8 November	The state of the historical novel in the early 21 st century
36	Monday 11 November	First responses to the novel
37	Wednesday 13 November	The style of the novel and the narrator's voice
38	Friday 15 November	The novel
39	Monday 18 November	continued
40	Wednesday 20 November	continued
41	Friday 22 November	continued
42	Monday 25 November	continued
43	Wednesday 27 November	THANKSGIVING BREAK – NO CLASS
44	Friday 29 November	THANKSGIVING BREAK – NO CLASS
45	Monday 2 December	continued
46	Wednesday 4 December	The End! Final paper due