

# Institutions of American Literature

English 40683: Studies in Twentieth-Century American Literature | Fall 2018

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## Course Overview

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In 1946, Flannery O'Connor, twenty-one years old, entered the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the first creative writing program in the United States. "What first stuns the young writer emerging from college is that there is no clear-cut road for him to travel on," she mused at the time. Graduate school was at least better, she concluded, than "the poor house" or "the mad house." In 1967, Raymond Carver, then working for a textbook publisher in Palo Alto, met his future editor Gordon Lish, who would cut his manuscripts down to the bone, revealing the "minimalism" for which Carver later became known. In 1987, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, though hailed as an instant classic, did not win the National Book Award, setting off a fight over race and the institutions that confer cultural distinction (the #OscarsSoWhite of the 1980s). In 1998, Dave Eggers founded *McSweeney's*, launching a new era of "indie" publishing, as well as his own career.

No writer is an island. Authors write their own books, of course, but they write them in and through institutions: the creative writing program, the editor and publishing house, the book award, the independent press. This course is about the creative, collaborative, and sometimes bureaucratic art of making capital-L literature in the United States. How did the Iowa Writers' Workshop change O'Connor's writing? What influence did Carver's editor have on his? How did not winning the National Book Award (and later winning the Pulitzer Prize and Nobel) alter the course of Morrison's career? How did independent publishing facilitate Eggers's? This course asks how literature gets made and read, including in an English department class like this one.

## Required Texts

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Carver, Raymond. *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*. 1981. Vintage, 1989.

Eggers, Dave. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. 2000. Vintage, 2001.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987. Vintage, 2004.

O'Connor, Flannery. *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*. 1955. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977.

## Readings on Course Website

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Als, Hilton. "Ghosts in the House." *New Yorker*, 27 Oct. 2003,

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/10/27/ghosts-in-the-house>.

- Armitage, Simon. "Rough Crossings." *New Yorker*, 24 Dec. 2007, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/12/24/rough-crossings>.
- "Black Writers in Praise of Toni Morrison." *New York Times*, 24 Jan. 1988, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/01/24/books/1-black-writers-in-praise-of-toni-morrison-293988.html>.
- Carver, Raymond. "Beginners." *New Yorker*, 24 Dec. 2007, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/12/24/beginners>.
- . "Cathedral." 1983. *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*, Library of America, 2009, pp. 514–29.
- . "On Writing." 1983. *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*, Library of America, 2009, pp. 728–33.
- Díaz, Junot. "MFA vs. POC." *New Yorker*, 30 Apr. 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mfa-vs-poc>.
- English, James. "Introduction: Prizes and the Study of Culture." *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Literary Value*, Harvard UP, 2005, pp. 1–14.
- . "Prize Frenzy." *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Literary Value*, Harvard UP, 2005, pp. 17–27.
- Gessen, Keith. "The Book on Publishing." *Vanity Fair*, Oct. 2011, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2011/10/how-to-publish-fielding-keith-gessen>.
- Hitchens, Christopher. "These Glittering Prizes." *Vanity Fair*, Dec. 1992, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/1992/12/glittering-prizes-199212>.
- Hungerford, Amy. "McSweeney's and the School of Life." *Making Literature Now*, Stanford UP, 2016, pp. 41–69.
- Lish, Gordon. "The Art of Editing No. 2." Interview by Christian Lorentzen. *Paris Review*, Winter 2015, 195–217.
- Max, D. T. "The Carver Chronicles." *New York Times Magazine*, 9 Aug. 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/08/09/magazine/the-carver-chronicles.html>.
- McGurl, Mark. Preface. *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, Harvard UP, 2009, pp. ix–xii.
- . "Understanding Iowa: The Religion of Institutionalization." *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, Harvard UP, 2009, pp. 127–79.
- Wall, Cheryl A. "Toni Morrison, Editor and Teacher." *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, edited by Justine Tally, Cambridge UP, 2007, pp. 139–48.
- Warren, Kenneth W. "You Tell Me It's the Institution: Creative Writing and Literary History." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 13 Sept. 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/you-tell-me-its-the-institution-creative-writing-and-literary-history/>.

## Assignments and Grading

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### Assignments:

Reading Quizzes	15%
Participation and Preparedness	15%

Presentation	20%
Midterm Paper	25%
Final Paper	25%

Grading Scale:

A	93–100%	C	73–76%
A-	90–92%	C-	70–72%
B+	87–89%	D+	67–69%
B	83–86%	D	63–66%
B-	80–82%	D-	60–62%
C+	77–79%	F	0–59%

**Reading Schedule and Deadlines**

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Date	Readings	Deadlines
<b>Week 1</b>	<b>The Genius of the System</b>	
Tuesday, August 21	Syllabus	
Thursday, August 23	Gessen, “The Book on Publishing”	Presentation assigned
<b>Week 2</b>	<b>The Creative Writing Program</b>	
Tuesday, August 28	McGurl, Preface to <i>The Program Era</i> and “Understanding Iowa”	
Thursday, August 30	O’Connor, <i>A Good Man Is Hard to Find</i> (“A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” “The River”)	
<b>Week 3</b>		
Tuesday, September 4	O’Connor, <i>A Good Man Is Hard to Find</i> (“The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” “A Stroke of Good Fortune”)	
Thursday, September 6	O’Connor, <i>A Good Man Is Hard to Find</i> (“A Circle in the Fire,” “A Late Encounter with the Enemy”)	
<b>Week 4</b>		
Tuesday, September 11	O’Connor, <i>A Good Man Is Hard to Find</i> (“Good Country People,” “The Displaced Person”)	
Thursday, September 13	Díaz, “MFA vs. POC” Warren, “You Tell Me It’s the Institution”	
<b>Week 5</b>	<b>The Editor</b>	

Tuesday, September 18	Max, "The Carver Chronicles"	Midterm paper assigned
Thursday, September 20	Armitage, "Rough Crossings" Carver, "Beginners" (website) Carver, <i>What We Talk about When We Talk about Love</i> ("What We Talk about When We Talk about Love")	Midterm paper proposal due Sunday, September 23 at 5 p.m.
<b>Week 6</b>		
Tuesday, September 25	Conferences	
Thursday, September 27	Conferences	
<b>Week 7</b>		
Tuesday, October 2	Carver, <i>What We Talk about When We Talk about Love</i> ("Why Don't You Dance," "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit")	
Thursday, October 4	Carver, "Cathedral" and "On Writing"	
<b>Week 8</b>		
Tuesday, October 9	Carver, <i>What We Talk about When We Talk about Love</i> ("A Serious Talk," "One More Thing")	
Thursday, October 11	Lish, "The Art of Editing No. 2"	Midterm paper due Friday, October 12 at 5 p.m.
<b>Week 9</b>	<b>The Book Award</b>	
Tuesday, October 16	No class (fall break)	
Thursday, October 18	English, Introduction and "Prize Frenzy"	
<b>Week 10</b>		
Tuesday, October 23	"Black Writers in Praise of Toni Morrison" Hitchens, "These Glittering Prizes"	
Thursday, October 25	Morrison, <i>Beloved</i> 3–67	
<b>Week 11</b>		
Tuesday, October 30	Morrison, <i>Beloved</i> 68–156	
Thursday, November 1	Als, "Ghosts in the House" Wall, "Toni Morrison, Editor and Teacher"	
<b>Week 12</b>		
Tuesday, November 6	Morrison <i>Beloved</i> 157–247	
Thursday, November 8	Morrison, <i>Beloved</i> (248–324)	
<b>Week 13</b>	<b>The Independent Press</b>	
Tuesday, November 13	Hungerford, "McSweeney's and the	

	School of Life”	
Thursday, November 15	Eggers, <i>A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius</i> (“Rules and Suggestions for Enjoyment of This Book,” “Incomplete Guide to Symbols and Metaphors,” parts 1 and 2)	
<b>Week 14</b>		
Tuesday, November 20	Eggers, <i>A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius</i> (parts 3, 4, and 5)	Final paper assigned
Thursday, November 22	No class (Thanksgiving break)	
<b>Week 15</b>		
Tuesday, November 27	Eggers, <i>A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius</i> (parts 6, 7, and 8)	
Thursday, November 29	Eggers, <i>A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius</i> (parts 9, 10, and 11) SPOTs	
<b>Week 16</b>		
Tuesday, December 4	Wrap-up conversation	
Thursday, December 6	No class (study day)	Final paper due Sunday, December 9 at 5 p.m.