

UNIVERSITY OF LETHBRIDGE
Department of New Media

NMED 2560A – POPULAR NARRATIVE
Fall 2013

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Classes: Mondays 3 – 6PM (W731)
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Course Description

What makes a narrative popular? The designation “popular” is not simply a euphemism for mass art; it also alludes to certain narratological patterns, types of audiences and assumptions about quality. Various cultural custodians – critics, scholars, historians and artists – attempt to draw and police distinctions between the popular and the refined, the high and the low, the good, the bad and the ugly. This course will investigate the cultural politics of taste, revealing the stakes involved in separating “serious” (or “literary”) from “mass” (or “paraliterary”) fiction.

Our primary tasks are to understand how these distinctions are formulated, to test their validity and to investigate potential points of intersection. Through close examinations of various novels, television programs, video games, films and comics, we will also observe the ways in which narrative form operates in different media. Ultimately, we will come to a more comprehensive understanding of the means by which narrative art is subject to the whimsical logic and logical whimsy of fashion.

Learning Outcomes

- 1) You will become acquainted with **narratological patterns** across media.
 - What are some of these patterns? How might they differ according to both media & genre?
 - Are there narrative elements common to all popular forms?
 - Why do these patterns recur? Why are they of enduring appeal?
- 2) You will familiarize yourself with the concept of **“mass audiences.”**
 - Who engages with popular narratives? For what reasons?
 - Do mass audiences truly crave “escapism?” What does the term actually mean?
 - Is mass art fundamentally geared toward prurient tastes? Is that a “bad” thing?
- 3) You will understand the presumptions behind **evaluative claims & taste cultures.**
 - What are the distinctions between high & low? Are they real or imagined?
 - Why are such distinctions established in the first place?
 - Are there places in which high culture and mass culture meet?

Evaluation

Participation	25%
Mid-term exam (Oct 28)	20%
Annotated Bibliography (Nov 18)	5%
2000 word essay (Dec 6)	30%
Final exam (Dec 17)	20%

* All tests, exams and assignments **must** be completed in order to complete the course. Failure to attend an exam or to complete an assignment will result in a final grade of **0%** for the course.

Required Texts

- 1) David Glover & Scott McCracken, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- 2) Jasper Fforde. *The Eyre Affair* (London: Penguin, 2003).
- 3) Thomas Harris, *The Silence of the Lambs* (New York: St. Martin's Paperbacks, 1991).
- 4) Alan Moore & Kevin O'Neil, *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (New York: DC Comics, 2002).
- 5) Neil Gaiman & Andy Kubert, *Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader?* (New York: DC Comics, 2009).
- 6) Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore, *The Walking Dead, Vol. 1: Days Gone By* (Berkeley: Image Comics, 2006).

Prerequisite

A minimum of 30.0 credit hours (Second-year standing)

Attendance

Regular attendance is absolutely mandatory. It is imperative that you attend all of the lecture hours, and sign in for each class. If you are unable to attend a session, it is your responsibility to contact me to explain your circumstances. Should you have more than two unexcused absences, I reserve the right to drop your mark by a letter grade. If you are absent for more than five sessions, you will immediately receive a grade of 0% for the course. There are no exceptions to this policy, nor can accommodations be made as chronic absenteeism will prevent you from acquiring the knowledge necessary to pass the tests and complete the written assignments.

Late Policy

Late assignments will be penalized at **10% per day** and will not receive written comments. Assignments that are more than one week late **will not** be accepted. If you foresee difficulties in meeting a deadline, please let me know at least one week before the due date. Otherwise, extensions will not be granted, nor will make-up tests be allowed without the following documentation: **(a)** a letter from a medical doctor indicating that you were physically unable to complete an assignment or attend a test on a specific date; or **(b)** an official request made on your behalf via [Counselling Services](#). Please be aware that all accommodations are at my discretion, and that I am not authorized to make any adjustments to the scheduling of a final exam.

Note on Academic Misconduct

Because academic integrity is vital to the well-being of the university community, the University of Lethbridge takes academic misconduct very seriously. Academic misconduct includes plagiarism, which involves presenting the words and ideas of another person as if they were your own, and other forms of cheating, such as using crib notes during a test, fabricating data or secondary sources for an assignment, or submitting the same piece of work in more than one course. The penalties for academic misconduct can be very severe. A grade of zero may be given for the assignment or even for the course, and a second offence may result in suspension from the University. Students are urged to read the section of the Undergraduate Calendar that pertains to academic offences ([pp. 78-80](#)). Students are also reminded that the [Writing Centre](#) (room L1012 in the library) offers free workshops on writing and study skills, and on avoiding plagiarism.

Definition of Plagiarism

“No student shall represent the words, ideas, images, or data of another person as his or her own. This regulation will affect any academic assignment or other component of any course or program of study, whether the plagiarized material constitutes a part or the entirety of the work submitted” (**University of Lethbridge Undergraduate Calendar, [pg. 78](#)**).

Mandatory Electronic Assignment Submissions

You must submit electronic copies of your sequence analysis and research essay to the appropriate NMED 2560 Moodle Assignment dropboxes. Ensure that you keep electronic and hard copies of all submitted work.

Re-examination Policy

If you feel your work has been unfairly graded, you may submit it for re-examination. However, your grade will not increase by more than 5% and I reserve the right to drop it further.

Note on Evaluation

Assignments and tests will be given a numerical grade. Translation to the standard letter grades are as follows:

PERCENTAGE	LETTER GRADE	GRADE POINTS
90 – 100	A+	4.0
85 – 89	A	4.0
80 – 84	A-	3.7
77 – 79	B+	3.3
73 – 76	B	3.0
70 – 72	B-	2.7
67 – 69	C+	2.3
63 – 66	C	2.0
60 – 62	C-	1.7
55 – 59	D+	1.3
50 – 54	D	1.0
0 – 49	F	0

Note on Screenings

The assigned films and television episodes are required texts and a core part of your participation grade for the course. Therefore, it is your responsibility to watch **all** assigned screenings. Required films must be viewed before class. Optional films are recommended for supplementary viewing and can be referred to in various class assignments.

Required course films are held on four-hour reserve in the Library, and can be obtained from the circulation desk. The exceptions are those films currently in theatrical release.

SCHEDULE

Session 1: Sept 9

WHAT IS A NARRATIVE?

Readings:

David Glover & Scott McCracken 1-14 (Introduction)
David Glover 15-32 (“Publishing, history, genre”)

***** Begin watching *Doctor Who* and *Walking Dead* episodes**

Session 2: Sept 16

HIGH VS. LOW

Text:

The Eyre Affair

Reading:

Scott McCracken 103-121 (“Reading time: popular fiction and the everyday”)

Session 3: Sept 23

POPCORN MOVIES

Screening:

Kick-Ass 2 (Jeff Wadlow, dir. USA/UK: Universal Pictures, 2013). 103 min.

Reading:

Nicholas Daly 33-49 (“Fiction, theatre and early cinema”)

Session 4: Sept 30

THE BOOB TUBE

Screening:

24 (Episode 1: “12:00AM to 1:00 AM”). Stephen Hopkins, dir. Fox, 2001.

Reading:

John Caughie 50-67 (“Television and serial fictions”)

Session 5: Oct 7

DRUGSTORE FICTION

Text:

The Silence of the Lambs

Reading:

Fred Botting 159-174 (“Bestselling fiction: machinery, economy, excess”)

***** Begin researching and reading secondary sources for your annotated bibliography!**

Session 6: Oct 21

FUNNYBOOKS

Text:

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen

Reading:

Chute & Dekoven 175-195 (“Comic books & graphic novels”)

Session 7: Oct 28

***** Mid-term exam: 3 – 4:30PM**

Session 8: Nov 4

GAMEPLAY & CUTSCENES

Screening:

Various video games – in class

Reading:

Brenda R. Silver 196-213 (“Popular fiction in the digital age”)

- Session 9: Nov 18** **SERIALS, SEQUELS & SEQUENTIAL NARRATIVE** *
- Screening:** *The Walking Dead* (Season 1, Episodes 1-5). Frank Darabont, et al., dir. AMC, 2010.
- Text:** *The Walking Dead, Vol. 1: Days Gone By*
- Reading:** Roger Luckhurst 68-85 (“The public sphere...and the zombie apocalypse”)

*** Annotated bibliographies due

- Session 10: Nov 25** **CULT FICTION** †
- Screening:** *Doctor Who* (Series 5, Episodes 1-5). Adam Smith, et al., dir. BBC One, 2010.
- Reading:** Nicola Humble 86-102 (“The reader of popular fiction”)

- Session 11: Dec 2** **POPULAR BODIES**
- Text:** *Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader?*
- Readings:** Erin A. Smith 141-158 (“Pulp sensations”)

- Session 12: Dec 4** **ESCAPISM: ROMANCE & AUDIENCES**
- Screening:** *Twilight* (Catherine Hardwicke, dir. USA: Summit Entertainment, 2008). 122 min.
- Readings:** Kaye Mitchell 122-140 (“Gender and sexuality in popular fiction”)

*** Essays due Friday, December 6, 2013

EXAMINATION FORMAT

- The exams are each worth 20% of your final grade. The mid-term will be written on **Monday, October 89 at 3PM**, and the final exam will be written on **Tuesday, December 17 at 9am**. Failure to attend either exam will result in a grade of **0%** for the course.
- The format for the examinations consists of a multiple-choice (10%), fill-in-the-blank (10%), true and false (20%), and short answer section (60%).
- The questions in sections one to three will test your familiarity with some of the key concepts we will have discussed in class up to that point. The ten true and false questions are worth 2%, while the ten questions in each remaining section are worth 1% each.
- In section four of the exams, you will be required to provide a concise, illustrated answer for approximately four conceptual questions (worth 15% each).

* You must have watched at least five episodes of *The Walking Dead* (Season 1) by session nine.

† You must have watched at least five episodes of *Doctor Who* (Season Five) by session nine.

PARTICIPATION

ATTENDANCE & IN-CLASS/MOODLE CONTRIBUTIONS

- **5%** for your final grade will go toward your attendance. Should you miss **more than three** classes, **5%** will automatically be deducted from your final grade. If you are absent for **more than five** classes, **you will receive a grade of 0% for the course.**
- **5%** of your final grade will go toward your in-class contributions. You will be assessed on both the **quantity and quality** of your participation each day according to the following scale:
 - 0 – No contributions
 - 1 – Fair response to a direct question
 - 2 – Good response to direct questions or opinions voluntarily provided
 - 3 – Excellent responses, voluntary opinions, or initiative taken in leading fruitful discussion
- Please note that posting or replying to weekly **Moodle forums** qualifies for participation grades.

READING RESPONSES

- **15%** of your final grade will go toward critical responses to any **five** assigned **textbook readings** of your choice, each worth **3%** of your final grade. These responses should be **350 to 400 words** each. Be ready to use this material during discussion.
- Your responses **must not** be exclusively summative; they must demonstrate an interrogative familiarity with the readings. Such familiarity could be demonstrated as follows:
 - (1) attempt to **apply** the reading to the assigned material each week
 - (2) **offer your own position** on one of the author’s principal arguments, and ensure that you provide **evidence and reasons** for your position
 - (3) prepare a **discussion question** that includes **your own opinion**.
- Please remember to **cite** appropriate page numbers!
- Use **your last name**, **assignment number**, and the **last name of the author** as the name of each file. For example if my second response was on “TV & Serial Fictions,” my file name would be Taylor 2 - Caughie.docx). Also, **please follow the formatting instructions** on page 8.
- Because these reading responses are designed to ensure your in-class participation, each response must be submitted online to the appropriate Moodle assignment dropbox by **3PM of the day of your chosen assigned reading** (e.g., a response to the reading for session three – John Caughie’s essay, “Television and serial fictions”– would be due on Sept 30 at 3PM).
- **TIP:** Don’t write a response that covers multiple topics or ideas within the reading; ask **one question** about the assigned essay, and give **one detailed answer** to that question!
- **IMPORTANT:** As all assigned work must be completed, you must hand in **all five** responses. Failure to submit a response will result in a grade of **0% for the course.**

- The effort and ingenuity of your responses will be assessed according to the following scale:
 - 0 – Failure to engage with the correct reading
 - 1 – Misapprehension of or fatuous response to article
 - 2 – Basic comprehension and/or summary of ideas presented in article
 - 3 – Reasonable understanding of material or insightful discussion question generated
 - 4 – Good critical response to general thrust of the article & application to work
 - 5 – Penetrating criticism of the authors' ideas

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- The annotated bibliography is due in class on **Monday, November 18** and is worth 5% of your final grade. Submission of a **completed** bibliography by November 18 will automatically receive a grade of 100%. However, should you submit the assignment after November 18 it will automatically receive a grade of 0%. Whether or not you meet the deadline, the assignment is mandatory and **must** be submitted, or a final grade of **0%** will be assigned for the course.
- Your bibliography is an exercise that is designed to help you develop research skills and focus your essay. Its aim is to ensure that you have adequately researched your topic of choice and that you begin work on your chosen assignment well in advance of the due date.
- A completed assignment will include the following:
 - 1) A paragraph of **no more than 300 words** indicating your prospective thesis, including the primary object upon which you will focus.
 - 2) A list of **4-5** secondary sources (ideally in **MLA format**).
 - 3) Include **two to three** sentences for each bibliographic entry indicating the secondary source's **argument** and **direct relevance** to your essay. ***** Your bibliography must include these annotations, or else it will be considered incomplete.**
 - 4) You must include **(1)** an actual, physical book (or e-book), **(2)** a journal article, and **(3)** a professionally produced/academic online publication (see Moodle for links). Please note that if you are drawing on an essay published within an anthology, you must identify the specific essay and not just the title of the anthology itself.
- Please note that while you are free to use course readings as secondary sources, **they will not count** towards the four to five sources listed in your completed assignment.
- You must submit an electronic copy of your bibliography to the NMED 2560A assignment drop box on Moodle.

***** IMPORTANT:** You will be expected to have **read** your listed secondary sources, so begin researching and reading relevant material well before the deadline – certainly no later than **session 8 (November 4)**. A grade of 0% will be assigned for **(1)** arbitrarily chosen sources and/or **(2)** secondary sources that clearly have not been read ahead of time.

RESEARCH ESSAY

- The 2000 word paper is a research essay that is designed to showcase your understanding of one or more of the course's core areas:
 - (1) narrative structure,
 - (2) mass audiences and/or
 - (3) the grounds of evaluating the quality of popular narrative
- Therefore, your essay must address a question pertaining to one of these areas, and posit a specific answer to this question. Please see pages 9-10 for topic suggestions.
- The essay is due on **Friday, December 6** and will be worth **30%** of your grade. Failure to submit an essay will result in a grade of **0%** assigned for the course.

ASSIGNMENT FORMATTING INSTRUCTIONS

- The length of the essay is set at a **strict 2000 words** (**not including** your Works Cited list) and so, you must structure your argument carefully. **Do not** exceed the word limit by more than 300 words (roughly a page). I will stop reading your assignment if it runs over a page longer than the word limit. Conversely, **10%** will be deducted per every **200 words** under the required limit.
- All assignments **must** be written in 12 point Times New Roman, your margins **must** be set at 1". **Double space** and **paginate** your assignments. **Do not** leave spaces between paragraphs.
- All assignments **must** be submitted to Moodle as **Microsoft Word files** (preferably a **.docx** file). If you do not own the software, free access to Microsoft Word is available on campus, or you may wish to make use of OpenOffice, a free, Word-compatible open source application suite at <http://www.openoffice.org/>. Because I will be grading your assignments electronically, **other formats will not be accepted.**
- Use **your name** (last name first) as the name of your essay file (e.g., Taylor, Aaron.docx). Include your name, date, and course number on the first page of all assignments as well.
- **You must check** with me if you wish to write on material that is not on the course. An essay submitted on material that has not been authorised **will receive a grade of 0%**.

CITATION INSTRUCTIONS

- References must be from reputable sources, and must include **(1)** an actual, physical book (or e-book), **(2)** a journal article, and **(3)** a professionally produced/academic online publication (see Moodle for links). Please note that assigned readings **do not** count as sources.
- While it is recommended that you use MLA format to reference your sources, you are free to use other acceptable styles of scholarly quotation **provided you cite your sources properly**. A guide to a number of citation styles is available at *Research and Documentation Online* (<http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/resdoc5e/>).

- In order to ensure that your research is explicitly incorporated within your essay, all citations must be **direct quotations** from the sources in question. Failure to comply with this requirement may result in a **failing grade**. Paraphrasing is acceptable, but you still **must** include a corresponding quotation. For example:

David Bordwell asserts that Hollywood filmmaking is often classical in its approach to style. This is due to the industry's reliance on "notions of formal harmony, respect for tradition, mimesis, self-effacing craftsmanship, and cool control of the perceiver's response" (Bordwell 4).

- *** **IMPORTANT**: At least 10% of your grade may be deducted for
 - deviating from the stylistic formatting outlined above
 - improper citation style
 - including a citation without an actual quotation from the source used
- Criteria for the assessment of essays are as follows:
 - clarity and cogency of expression and argument
 - clear structuring in terms of introduction, conclusion and signposting
 - the ability to adduce appropriate evidence in support of the argument
 - competent and correct use of grammatical, scholarly and research conventions
 - demonstration of a clear understanding of the key concepts taught on the course
 - the originality, inventiveness and insightfulness of the argument put forward

ESSAY TOPICS

- Please note that these are **suggested** areas of focus only and are designed to prompt your *own* thoughts on each subject. In this light, they should be regarded as points of departure, rather than definitive questions with prescribed answers. Therefore, you need not follow the topics exactly, nor should you attempt to answer all of the questions asked under each heading; your essay will be much stronger if you focus on **one question only!**
- You are encouraged to write on a topic of your own, but please note that you **must** submit it to me in written form as part of your annotated bibliography. Particular consideration will be given to novel topics and the creative expression of ideas, so be sure to choose an area of significant interest as it will heavily shape the project you undertake.
- Finally, I encourage you to **meet with me** during my office hours to discuss your topic **well before** you begin to write so that you are sure to embark upon the right course.

1) Fidelity – What is really at stake when an individual asserts that “the book was better than the movie?” Is there any merit in placing stock in one text’s “faithfulness” to its source material? Investigate the issue of fidelity by indicating whether you believe such arguments are ultimately about power, the privileging of narrative over image, or something else entirely.

2) Narration & narrative voice – Works in different media possess their own respective narrative discourses that approach storytelling in their own unique manner. Choosing two similar texts, offer comparative readings of their authors’ rhetorical strategies. Ideally, you should focus on a single narratological issue, including: representations of subjectivity, description, the narrator, plot construction, temporal and spatial manipulations, etc.

3) Taste & cultural hierarchies – The relationship between literature and “popular” texts has long been marked by a kind of cultural rivalry in which both have oscillated between positions of popularity and disfavour. Characterize the motivations that lead certain cultural critics to denigrate one medium in favour of another. Alternatively, you may wish to consider how taste informs the reception of particular genres, both “popular” and “literary.”

4) Comics – Consider the specificities of comics as a medium by focussing on one of the following: spatial/temporal relations; montage versus panelling; word-image relationships; reading/viewing processes; or, your own area of differentiation. You might also wish to consider how a recent film adaptation of a comic book has contended with the differences between media.

5) Genre – How might one of the standard popular genres reflect and negotiate contemporary social tensions? What are some of the ideological “deep structures” underlying the work’s generic conventions? You may write on any of the genres discussed.

6) High vs. Low Culture – Do you find Hollywood style to be a predominantly commercial one? How does corporate American cinema compare with the “B film,” “cheapie” or “exploitation” product in its style, narrative content, and approach to marketing? Is it fair to exclude American product from a larger, global canon of “art” cinema? You may also wish to consider similar concerns in television or literature.

7) Violence, Sexuality, and Morality – Sex and violence have always been the bread and butter of most popular narrative forms. How then, do representations of transgression fit into the dominant moral framework that rigorously attempts to limit such “immoral” depictions? What differentiates the representation of sexuality, violence and/or transgressive behaviour in “prurient” texts from similar representations in works of high art?

8) Blockbusters – Evaluate the potential merits of the blockbuster. Are Hollywood’s high concept productions just “dumb movies for dumb people?” Can you make a case for the aesthetics of such films or are they simply examples of artless spectacles for the masses? Consider the cultural judgements implicit in critiques of Hollywood “schlock” by analysing a blockbuster, or alternatively, you may make a case for other comparable forms of “high concept” fictions.

9) Games – Familiar narrative logic is both utilized and departed from in video gaming. Through close analysis of a game of your choice, describe the ways in which the producers have made use of and work against the typical pleasures of narrative form. You may also wish to consider how authors working in other media adapt gaming logic to their own narrative works.