CORE 200: LIBERAL ARTS READING SALON

Professor Trisha Tucker, Thematic Option Honors Program

Lecture   T   4-5:50 pm   63568D

Read This, Not That!: Masterpieces, Best Sellers, and Other Books to Read Before You Die

All book lovers wrestle with the same fundamental dilemma: so many books, so little time. Many of us start pondering what we should read next even before we've finished our current book. The "what's next?" question can be a daunting one. With so many choices out there, how can we be confident we're reading the best books—the most beautiful, the most powerful, the most memorable, the most important? Sure, we can collect recommendations from friends and advisors, stalk the aisles of our favorite bookstore, and make endless reading lists for summer vacation, but that feels so haphazard. Isn't there a better way to ensure we're not missing the world's most wonderful books?

Some people think that there is. In fact, experts have created a variety of handy lists to help us determine which books are "can't miss" and which aren't worth our time. The most famous list is probably the Modern Library's Top 100, but *Le Monde*, *Time*, NPR, and the *Guardian* have all created "best of" lists of their own. Many readers welcome such guides, but lists like these also raise a lot of questions. Who are the "experts" behind them and what criteria are they using? How can one expert's top-ranked masterpiece fail to make another's top 100? And why are the authors on these lists usually so white, so Western, so male? As readers, would we be better off turning to specialized lists (like *HuffPo*'s "30 Books You Should Read Before You're 30") to get curated recommendations? Should we trust the judges of the big literary competitions and stock our reading lists with important prizewinning novels? Or should we ignore the literary establishment altogether, trust the taste of the masses, and read more best sellers?

In this Reading Salon, we'll tackle the book lover's dilemma together. We'll explore "best of" lists created by critics, journalists, prize committees, scholars, and readers like you. After starting with the books listed below, the class will collectively create a reading list for the second half of the course. We'll read both widely admired masterpieces and contested classics, and investigate what it means to have "good taste." Whether you love the literary establishment or loathe it, you're guaranteed to leave this class with a whole new take on the question "what should I read next?"

CORE 200 lasts for twelve weeks (instead of the usual fifteen) and meets once each week for two hours in a seminar setting. The Salon encourages the sharing of ideas and thoughts and highlights common themes and interdisciplinary connections as they emerge from discussion. Discussions that grow out of reading groups can become the starting point for future research. The two-unit Salon is an integral part of the Thematic Approaches to Humanities and Society minor. A special feature of the Reading Salon is that some of the books to be read by the participants will be selected by the students. The course is graded Credit/No Credit.

Proposed Readings (final list to be determined by class)
Agatha Christie. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd.*
Ben Fountain. *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk.*
Harper Lee. *To Kill a Mockingbird.*
Ian McEwan. *Atonement.*
Ann Patchett. *Bel Canto.*