

USC Dornsife  
College  
Department of  
English

**English 298g: Introduction to the Genre of Fiction  
(32663) Units: 4/Fall 2024  
M/W 2-3:20 pm in THH 102**

**Dr. Chris Freeman (cferema@usc.edu; office  
THH 410, M/W 10-11:30 am & by appt.)**

**Section Leaders: TBD**

“That's what fiction is for. It's for getting at the truth  
when the truth isn't sufficient.”—Tim O'Brien

“Reading is the finest teacher of how to write.”—Annie Proulx

“Reading fiction is and always was practice in empathy.”—Jane Smiley

“In prose, you make the paragraph. Every paragraph is a poem.”—Jack Kerouac

**ABOUT THE COURSE**

What can we learn **from** fiction as we learn **about** it? And what can fiction teach us about our lives and our world? Those will be some of the motivating questions of this course. In this era of allegedly short attention spans and Tweet-length communication, we have the privilege and pleasure of savoring fiction, contemplating it, discovering it anew.

This class will be an ongoing conversation about fiction, reading, and writing—how they work, how they matter, and how forms and concerns have changed and remained the same. In lecture, we will cover important writers, movements, forms, theories, and larger questions about fiction's relevance, its connections to and comments about the world. Our job is to get you more interested in what fiction is and how it does what it does; your job, in the words of the contemporary American writer Mary Oliver, is “to pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.” I will ask for your engagement; you need to read our material, to think about it, and to come to lecture and section prepared to discuss it, to read it out loud, and to try to interpret it. We don't “read into” fiction; we read out from it.

In your discussion sections, your instructors will elaborate on lecture material, and they will also pursue some of their own passions about literature. Essentially, the sections are “advanced” fiction, while the lecture is “introduction and intermediate” fiction; the simultaneity of these experiences should keep you challenged and inspired from day one.

We are going to do deep dives on several authors and some of their best work: the short story collection *In the Not Quite Dark* (2016) by Dana Johnson, who teaches at USC; the 2019 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Overstory* by Richard Powers; and an award-winning novel set in Los Angeles in the early 1990s and in 2019, *Your*

*House Will Pay* by Steph Cha. We will also read the modernist classic *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) by Virginia Woolf and a Pulitzer Prize-winning “sequel” to it, *The Hours* (1999) by Michael Cunningham. An Oscar-winning film by Stephen Daldry made that novel famous.

**You are expected to attend and to engage with the lectures and the discussion sections fully. This is not a drop-in class. If you don’t want to come to class, please drop.** Literature is beautiful; it can be disturbing; it is almost always instructive. This course will help you understand it more fully and with more depth and, maybe, passion.

**Active Participation:** What does it mean to participate actively in the course? You do that by reading, commenting, and asking questions. You will of course do a reasonable amount of writing. Your assignments/responsibilities will include writing short to medium length essays about fiction (analysis); doing some creative writing and reflection; completing a final exam assignment. It is of utmost importance that you do your part to participate in discussion, both in section and in lecture.

**Hot Seat:** At the beginning of class each day starting on week three, one section will be designated as the “hot seat.” Your job in hot seat is to help get the first 15-20 minutes of class going. You will ask questions; you will be the first responders to questions; you will volunteer to read passages aloud. Everyone in the hot seat is on the spot; everyone else may also participate, but they get recognized AFTER the hot seat students have their turn/say. This structure will facilitate the atmosphere of a seminar, instead of a large lecture course. **Your TA will take roll of the hot seat section; if you miss TWICE, you forfeit all 5% of your lecture participation.**

#### **ASSIGNMENTS AND DUE DATES/GRADING**

Short response paper/introduce yourself exercise (750 words; week three): 10%

Essay One (1000-1200 words; due week seven or eight): 25%

Essay Two (1200-1500 words; due week twelve or thirteen): 25%

Final Exam (1200-1500 words), due Friday, December 13 by 4pm PT: 25%

Participation and Attendance: 15% (5% lecture; 10% section: if you miss TWO ‘hot seat’ days, you forfeit lecture percentage; if you miss more than two section meetings, you forfeit that percentage)

**Literary Event:** we will encourage you to attend a literary event and submit a 500-word response one week later; if you do so, you will be exempt from part of the final exam assignment; turn in write up to your TA before Thanksgiving.

Pass-No Pass: you must maintain C-level work or above to achieve “Pass”

Grading: A: 93-100; A-: 92-89; B+: 88-86; B: 85-83; B-: 82-79; C+: 78-73, etc.

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**TEXTS:** Books/readings for lecture (see the syllabus from your TA for your section; you’ll most likely be reading a collection of short stories or a short novel in section)

For Lecture:

Dana Johnson, *In the Not Quite Dark: Stories* (Counterpoint, 2016)

Steph Cha, *Your House Will Pay* (Ecco, 2019)

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (prefer Norton Critical Edition)

Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (any edition)

Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (Norton, 2018; note: we will probably not finish this book; we will read as much as we have time for and you can finish it on your own)

## **SCHEDULE (subject to revision as pacing of the course necessitates)**

### **Part One: Los Angeles Stories—Johnson and Cha**

“Los Angeles, this was supposed to be it. The end of the frontier, land of sunshine, promised land. Last stop for the immigrant, the refugee, the fugitive, the pioneer.”—Cha

Week One (8/26 & 28): introduction to course; meet our authors and our TAs; Understanding Fiction and some of the elements of fiction; W: Elements of Fiction: Plot; Johnson, “Rogues” and “Sunshine”

Week Two (no class 9/2 & 9/4): W: Character: Johnson, “Now, in the Not Quite Dark” and “Because that’s Just Easier”; **introduce yourself essay assigned in section**

Week Three (9/9 & 11): M: Setting; Johnson, “No Blaming the Harvard Boys” and “Art is Always and Everywhere the Secret Confession”; W: history and fiction: Cha (part one, 1-44); hot seat starts today: HOT SEAT: xxx; 9/13: **Last day for P/NP and end of drop/add**

Week Four (9/16 & 18): M: Cha, 45-120; *Love Song for LaTasha* on Netflix (short film); HOT SEAT: ; W: Cha, 120-180; HOT SEAT ; **self-introduction paper (750 words, due to your TA this week)**

Week Five (9/23 & 25): M: continue in Cha; HOT SEAT: W: continue Cha; Hot Seat: ; **discuss prompts for essay one in section**; HOT SEAT:

Week Six (9/30 & 10/2): M: wrap Cha; W: Johnson: : Style/Tone/Language/Description & history/fiction: “She Deserves Everything She Gets” and “The Story of Biddy Mason” (Possible visit from Dana Johnson this week); HOT SEAT:

### **Part Two: London 1920s/LA 1950s/NYC 1990s—Woolf & Cunningham**

“She had a perpetual sense . . . of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she also had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day.”—Woolf

Week Seven (10/7 & 9): M: **TA Craft Talk; Essay One due (1000-1200 words, to your TA this week or next)**; W: begin *Mrs. Dalloway*; HOT SEAT:

Week Eight (10/9 & 11): M: continue in Woolf; HOT SEAT: ; W: **TA Craft Talk; 10/11 is last W day**

Week Nine (10/14 & 16): M: continue in Woolf; HOT SEAT: ; W: **Last TA craft talk; prompts for essay two in section**

Week Ten (10/21 & 23): M: continue in Woolf; HOT SEAT: ; W: finish Woolf and begin Cunningham; HOT SEAT:

Week Eleven (10/28 & 10/30): M: continue in Cunningham; HOT SEAT: ; W: finish/wrap up Cunningham and Woolf; HOT SEAT:

### **Part Three: The Forest and the Trees—Richard Powers, *The Overstory***

“We've become a danger to ourselves. We're caught in a cycle, caught in the cutting edge of our own ax, taking down things infinitely greater and older than ourselves.”—Powers

Week Twelve (11/4 & 6): M: finish Woolf and Cunningham if needed; “Nicholas Hoel” and “Roots”; HOT SEAT: ; W: “Roots”; HOT SEAT: ; **essay due this week or next (1200-1500 words) to your TA**

Week Thirteen (11/11 & 13): M: Veterans' Day—no class; W: “Trunk”; HOT SEAT: ;

Week Fourteen (11/18 & 20) M: continue in Powers; HOT SEAT: ; **literary event write up due to your TA before Thanksgiving; final exam prompts given this week in section**

Week Fifteen (12/2 & 12/4): M: continue in Powers; HOT SEAT: ; W: wrap up Powers and have a concluding discussion; online evaluations during lecture Wed.

### **Final exam due to your TA by Friday, 12/13 at 4pm PT**

#### **Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems**

##### ***Academic Conduct***

Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” <https://policy.usc.edu/student/scampus/part-b>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, stalking, and harassment are prohibited by the university. You are encouraged to report all incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity/Title IX Office* <http://equity.usc.edu> and/or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://dps.usc.edu>. This is important for the health and safety of the whole USC community. Faculty and staff must report any information regarding an incident to the Title IX Coordinator who will provide

outreach and information to the affected party. The sexual assault resource center webpage <http://sarc.usc.edu> fully describes reporting options. Relationship and Sexual Violence Services <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp> provides 24/7 confidential support.

### Support Systems

A number of USC's schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://ali.usc.edu>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* <http://dsp.usc.edu> provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

Dornsife provides a full range of mental health resources, which can be found at <https://studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling/>

**COVID Safety: Students are expected to comply with all aspects of USC's COVID-19 policy. Failure to do so may result in removal from the class and referral to Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards.**

### Support Systems:

- *Student Counseling Services (SCS)* – (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call  
Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. [engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling)
- *National Suicide Prevention Lifeline* – 1 (800) 273-8255  
Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)
- *Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP)* – (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call  
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. [engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp)
- *Sexual Assault Resource Center*  
For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: [sarc.usc.edu](http://sarc.usc.edu)
- *Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance* – (213) 740-5086  
Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. [equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu)
- *Bias Assessment Response and Support*  
Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. [studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support)
- *The Office of Disability Services and Programs*  
Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. [dsp.usc.edu](http://dsp.usc.edu)

- *Student Support and Advocacy – (213) 821-4710*  
Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. [studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa)
- *Diversity at USC*  
Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. [diversity.usc.edu](http://diversity.usc.edu)
- *USC Emergency Information*  
Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible. [emergency.usc.edu](http://emergency.usc.edu)
- *USC Department of Public Safety – UPC: (213) 740-4321 – HSC: (323) 442-1000*  
24-hour emergency or to report a crime. Provides overall safety to USC community. [dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu)

### **Definition of Excellence in Teaching USC Department of English**

All writing is creative, and all civic engagement requires a sophisticated understanding of discourse and interpretation. The USC Department of English is committed to the power of the story, the word, and the image. We analyze and organize complex ideas, evaluate qualitative information, anticipate how real audiences respond to language, and study behaviors of complex characters leading uncertain lives with competing values. We develop critical abilities for a successful life, but our stories tell us why life is worth living.

Excellence in teaching is an active engagement with these commitments, perspectives, and values. A student with a major in **English** should graduate with an appreciation for (1) the relations between representation and the human soul, and (2) the relations between words and ideas. Teachers will encourage this appreciation through their knowledge and conveyance of the subject, the appropriateness of instructional materials, and the quality of their students' responses. We expect our students to:

- understand the major representations in English discourse from earliest beginnings to the current moment; all literatures exist in conversation with earlier literatures;
- organize and interpret evidence;
- feel the experiences of others, both by engaging in literatures and by their own efforts to create new literatures;
- understand how periods, cultural intentions, and literary genres differ;
- grasp the skills and theories of interpretation, and the history of our own discipline;
- see how interpretive interests shift with time and place;
- attend to linguistic details of semantics, phrasing, and structure;
- assume there are reasonable alternative understandings of a text;
- adjudicate differences through reasoned arguments that honestly engage counter-arguments.

Our students will have lives in very different arenas, but all calling for skills in discourse, empathy, civil argument, and civic engagement. We cannot and should not say what those careers will be; we train students for jobs that have not yet been invented.

English Department students should expect instruction that inculcates an appreciation for all of the above, and coordinates with definitions of teaching excellence in USC's corresponding departments.

The Department of English adheres to the modalities of instruction published in the "USC Definition of Excellence in Teaching."

Approved September 18, 2018, Undergraduate Studies Committee, Department of English