

Department of English
English 205: World Jewish Literature

Class Time: TR, 1:40-2:55

Credit Hours: 3

Professor: Ranen Omer-Sherman

Office: 401 Ashe Building

Office Hours: Monday: 2:00-4:00; Tuesday: 3:00-4:00;

Wednesday: 2:00-4:00; and by appointment

Email: rosherman@miami.edu

Tel: (305) 284-4072

Texts (available in campus bookstore):

Yehudah Amichai. *The Selected Poetry of Yehudah Amichai*

Ida Fink. *A Scrap of Time*

Allegra Goodman. *Kaaterskill Falls*

Franz Kafka. *The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, and Other Stories*

Charles Reznikoff. *Poems 1918-1975: Complete Poems of Charles Reznikoff* (**note:** a few used copies of this are available; most of you will purchase it as a course packet later in the semester)

Philip Roth. *Goodbye Columbus*

A.B. Yehoshua. *The Lover*

And The Torah: Five Books of Moses

Note: additional material, as noted on daily calendar, is On Reserve in Richter

Recommended (optional):

Stephen J. Einstein and Lydia Kukoff. *Every Person's Guide to Judaism*.

A shipwrecked Jewish Robinson Crusoe was finally rescued after twenty years alone on his island. The rescuers were astonished to see a magnificent three-story construction of stone, palm, driftwood next to Robinson's humble hut. "What is that?" they asked.

"My shul," he proudly replied. The sailors were impressed. Rounding the island with him aboard they were surprised to see an identical three-story construction on the other side of the island. "What in the world is that?" asked the ship's captain.

"That," said the rescued man, "that is the shul I don't go to."

Course Description and Objectives: As this classical Jewish joke suggests, contemporary Jewish identity is made up as much of argument and interpretation as it is of continuity and tradition. In what may prove to be the most wide-ranging college course you will ever take, we will traverse the centuries and many different literary landscapes to examine the creative and enduring debates in Jewish literary culture that culminated in this fragmented identity. We will explore the Jewish literary response to catastrophe (including the Holocaust) as well as the everyday reality of the modern urban world. After our brief encounter with the Hebrew Bible we will briefly explore the vibrant and experimental lyrics of the Jews of Spain, who belonged to a relatively tolerant Arabic-speaking society that had a rejuvenating effect on Jewish artistic tastes and literary expression. A range of modern literary experiments awaits us in the middle portion of the semester, from Kafka's startling narratives of monstrous alienation to the riches of Jewish-American literature. We will also pause to examine the roles that longing, loss, dreaming, and reality play in the contemporary Israeli literary imagination, looking at the ethical response of fiction and poetry to the realities of Israeli society (Independence, war, immigration, the land, the Arab Other). Note: Students with little Jewish background are especially encouraged to read *Every Person's Guide to Judaism* throughout the semester, especially in the early weeks of the class.

This is a useful site for anyone interested in general information about Jewish religious beliefs and practices as well as culture, including contemporary literature:

<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/index.htm?source=jlists>

Note: Free tutoring for the crucial writing component of this course is available throughout the semester in the Writing Center, located at 5225 Ponce de Leon.

All cell phones and beepers **MUST BE TURNED OFF** during class.

Grading Policy:

Attendance, position papers, and participation 20%

Regular attendance and active participation in class discussion are essential to this course. Please note that, because of the unique nature of our course meetings, **no more than 2 unexcused absences will be allowed and more will be grounds for lowering your course grade.** After five, the student fails the course. Any questions about this policy should be raised with me as early as possible.

Position papers (3)

Come to class on the due date with a short paper (**2 pages**) addressing your impressions of the reading we are doing. Take an interpretive position on that week's readings. The papers need not involve outside research, but they should have a clear thesis statement supported by a logical argument and backed up with evidence from the texts under analysis. Position papers will be the basis of class discussion the week they are due, so extensions will be granted only under extraordinary circumstances.

Midterm Essay 30%

My Comments on Your Midterm Papers: You must be willing to take both the positive and negative reactions gracefully. Positive reactions don't make you a genius, and negative ones don't brand you a fool. All they do is point out how and why an essay managed to communicate or failed to communicate what you intended. All reactions teach you something, so try to learn from them. More information on grading criteria appears below.

ESSAYS AND POSITION PAPERS MUST BE TYPED.

Final exam: 30%

The comprehensive exam will be discussed in class.

Oral presentation: 20% There will be sign-ups for oral presentations. In order to prepare for your presentation, you should read introductory essays from library sources that I will suggest, well in advance of the class, meet with the other student(s) in order to discuss the material and formulate *questions* for class discussion. The goal of your oral presentation is to bring up critical issues about the works, and generate class *discussion*, as well as *briefly* present biographical background.

Class discussion: This class will meet twice a week in both discussion and lecture format. Most of that time will be devoted to discussing the assigned texts, occasionally in small groups. In these discussions, you will be asked to raise questions, pose problems, interpret material, and debate the possible implications of what we've read. You must learn to challenge each other and even, at times, to *challenge me*.

Paper Submission Guidelines:

- All assignments prepared outside of class must be typed.
- Please use a 12pt, readable font such as Times, Times New Roman, Courier, or Arial, using a font that makes your writing difficult to read is counterproductive.
- Title all essays, left-justify the text and use 1-inch margins.
- Number the pages.

Midterm Essay Grades: You should also be aware that I have high expectations for all members of this class. In my opinion, a “B” is a very respectable grade, and indicates work well done. I reserve “A”s for those who perform exceptionally well, in effort as well as achievement, in written as well as oral work. Following is a general outline of how I determine essay grades. Please note that this outline in no way serves as a contract. Midterm essay grades should be viewed as a continuum between the qualities listed in **A** and the deficiencies listed in **D**. The qualities in the **A** category are those which will pull an essay’s grade up; similarly, the deficiencies listed in the **D** category will pull the grade down. Thus the existence of intermediary grades **C** and **B**, + and -. Note that **C** is deemed the average grade.

A The truly excellent essay: shows unusual polish and style; presents a fresh, highly original approach to its subject; integrates and interprets quotations seamlessly to support assertions; avoids clichés; presents controversial or unorthodox ideas successfully; has an absence of mechanical and grammatical flaws; displays an adept use of language; has a strong opening which entices the reader to continue and a conclusion which leaves the reader in command of the essay's implications; is well structured; and displays a comfortable, readable, mature writing style. After reading, the reader feels that they have learned something and is ready to read the essay again.

B An above average essay presents an interesting point of view and shows attention to the use of language or to structuring the essay and contains a minimum of technical errors. Little is included to distract or disturb the reading process. Reading is a pleasure.

C The average essay meets the assignment and has a clear purpose (thesis) that is supported by the body of the essay. Some technical and/or structural flaws may be present. The paper is often too vague or general and does not use examples or quotations from the text adequately. The reader is not instructed and is not tempted to read the paper again.

D The below average essay fails to make its point, or the purpose of the essay is unclear. The essay may also contain a combination of the following deficiencies: failure to respond to constructive advice offered by instructor; highly clichéd writing; has incoherent structure; contains logical contradictions; does not meet minimum page length or other specific assignment requirements; preaches rather than persuades; does not provide adequate evidence (including quotation of text) to support its assertions.

F Failure results from an egregious combination of the errors listed in D above. Failure to turn assignment in. Disregard of assignment instructions.

Course Schedule:

This syllabus is only a close approximation of how the course will be structured. I reserve the right to reschedule readings, films, and activities, but for the most part we will follow the order mapped out here. Reading assignments are provided the date before the session they will be discussed.

Note: Remember that passionate class participation is mandatory.

Course Calendar

Jan 14 Introduction **Read** The Book of Genesis: Creation

Jan 16 Lecture on the Jewish People in Antiquity: the Nomadic Period until Roman Rule, Exile and Beyond. **Read** The Book of Genesis

Jan 21 The Book of Genesis **Oral Report Sign-Ups**

Jan 23 The Book of Genesis; **Read:** The Book of Exodus

Jan 28 The Book of Exodus

Jan 30 The Book of Exodus **Read** selections from “Medieval Jewish Poetry of Spain” **ON RESERVE**

Feb 4 Medieval Jewish Poetry of Spain **Read** assigned readings from *The Selected Poetry of Yehudah Amichai* (to be announced in class)

Feb 6 *The Selected Poetry of Yehudah Amichai* **Oral Reports**

Feb 11 Screening of *Yehudah Amichai*, a film of the poet reading from his works. **Read** A.B. Yehoshua’s *The Lover*

Feb 13 Israeli Identity and The Arab Other in *The Lover*

Feb 18 Israeli Identity and The Arab Other in *The Lover*

Feb 20 *The Lover* **Read** Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis, in the Penal Colony, and Other Stories*

Feb 25 *The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, and Other Stories* **Oral Reports**

Feb 27 *The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, and Other Stories*; **Take Home Midterm distributed: due March 18th**. Read essay: “Yiddish—the Longest Journey”; Sholom Aleichem, “Seventy-five Thousand (“A Pack of Tsores”); I.B. Singer “The Mirror” (All material **ON RESERVE**)

Mar 4 Sholom Aleichem, “Seventy-five Thousand (A Pack of Tsores); I.B. Singer “The Mirror” **Read** Charles Reznikoff *Complete Poems of Charles Reznikoff* **Research Abstracts due!**

March 8-16th: Spring Break

Mar 18 Midterms due beginning of class Charles Reznikoff’s poetics of exile **Oral Reports**

Mar 20 Charles Reznikoff’s poetry

Mar 25 Charles Reznikoff **Read** Ida Fink, *A Scrap of Time*

Mar 27 Ida Fink, *A Scrap of Time* **Oral Reports**

Apr 1 Screen: “America and the Holocaust” **Read** title story in Philip Roth’s *Goodbye Columbus* and Woody Allen’s American Jewish humor excerpts **ON RESERVE** Woody Allen excerpts and Roth’s “Goodbye Columbus”

Apr 3 Woody Allen and Philip Roth: case-studies in Jewish-American humor

Apr 8 “Goodbye Columbus”; “The Conversion of the Jews”; “Eli the Fanatic” **Oral Reports**

Apr 10 “The Conversion of the Jews”; “Eli the Fanatic”

Apr 15 *Kaaterskill Falls* **Oral Reports**

Apr 17 *Kaaterskill Falls*

Apr 22 *Kaaterskill Falls* **Term Paper due**

Apr 24 Last day: wrap up and review

