

# ENG 211: Young Adult Literature

Fall 2019

English Department  
St. John Fisher College

Dr. Scott O'Neil

**Office:** Kearney 321

**Office Hours:** Monday and Wednesday, 4:00 to 5:00pm

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**Class Information:** Tuesday/Thursday, 4:40 to 6:00 pm, Pioch Hall 121

## **Required Texts:**

*The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier

*Holes* by Louis Sachar

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie

*Among the Hidden* (Shadow Children #1) by Margaret Peterson Haddix

*The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas

*The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky

*The Only Living Boy Omnibus* by David Gallaher and Steve Ellis

*Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli

## **Course Description:**<sup>1</sup>

Young Adult Literature (also called Adolescent Literature) often is sometimes thought of as either lowbrow fluff not worthy of critical attention, or as offensive, inflammatory material not suitable for young people. Kay Vandergrift writes, **“Young adult literature is often thought of as a great abyss between the wonderfully exciting and engaging materials for children and those for adults. There is, however, a wealth of fiction created especially for teens/young adults that deals with the possibilities and problems of contemporary life as experienced by these age groups.”** In fact, many Young Adult Literature (YAL) texts increasingly have gained critical attention from literary and cultural critics.

Young Adult Literature generally explores the history, characteristics, benefits, and problems surrounding this ambiguously defined genre. Many experts disagree about how to define Young Adult Literature, how to distinguish it from children's literature and adult literature (for example, where do the Harry Potter books fit when they are read and enjoyed by members of all three age groups---children, teens & adults)? There is even disagreement about what to call the literature (juvenile or adolescent or young adult).

Furthermore, how do we define the adolescent, and how do our definitions of young people (what we believe them to be or what we believe they should become) affect the literature written for them? Who defines the genre --- scholars, teachers, publishers, readers? And what is at stake in the various definitions? For example, some scholars claim that adolescent literature as a genre—and even the use of the terms *adolescent* or *teenager* to refer to a distinctly separate stage of life—is a recent invention tied to contemporary capitalism and the notion of young people as consumers. In its mass-marketed forms YAL often is quite conventional, but the better works are **often sites of experimentation with subject matter and literary form that blur borders between genres [and audiences]**. For example, graphic novels/memoirs, especially Japanese Manga, are currently very popular with American teenagers, as are novels in verse and with hypertexts. Which texts are chosen for young people by teachers, parents, and librarians, and which texts do young adults choose for

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<sup>1</sup> This course description was written by Dr. Arlette Miller Smith

themselves? What tools can we use to better understand these texts, their benefits, their drawbacks, and their influence? How, when, and why should these texts be taught to young people? This course provides a forum for intense reading, discussion, and exploration of the texts and the multiple issues associated with this hybrid genre.

### **Course Goals:**

Discussion topics will include, but not be limited to, the following:

- Do YAL novels accurately portray the complex challenges of teenage life, or do they simply commodify these challenges?
- To what extent do representations of teens in literature affect how teens see themselves and how others see them?
- To what extent does imaginative narrative literature affect identity development?
- How do gender, age, sexual orientation, and social class affect how YAL narratives influence teens?
- What does it mean for a book to “age well”? “Age poorly”?

### **P-1 Student Learning Goals:**

1. Students will discern how design or form influences meaning.
2. Students will be able to identify how cultural meanings inform works of art.
3. Students will be able to analyze works of art using methods, practices, and/or theories associated with the academic study of the art form.
  - a. Students will produce a creative project and be able to explain how the project is situated in the broader context of that artistic genre **OR**
  - b. Students will construct an argument about a work of art using evidence to draw conclusions and support a thesis.

### **Assignments/Grading:**

- 20% -Attendance/Participation (incl Blackboard Dynamic Notes)
- 10% -4 short responses
- 15% -Banned Books Defense
- 20% -Creative Project
- 10% -Paper pitches
- 25% -Paper
- Optional final

### *Attendance*

So much of any discussion-based class is reliant upon your presence. Please only miss class when absolutely necessary, and communicate with me when that happens.

### *Reading and Participation/Blackboard Dynamic Notes*

The reading for each day is listed below on the syllabus next to the appropriate dates; please read, annotate, and think about the reading far enough in advance to participate on or before the participation deadlines. I would encourage you to be as specific as possible in your participation (page numbers, external links, etc). You will also keep a running “dynamic notes” thread in the discussion board throughout the semester.

### *Short Responses*

Short responses should be about one full typed page in length. Responses might expand on a class discussion; they might branch off and consider questions we did not have time to consider in class; they might consider a key image or passage that shapes your view of the work as a whole. Each response should focus on specific passages (or in some cases, one work) read for the course.

Because these responses are fairly short, you are not expected to fully develop and defend a complex thesis. This is your chance to further explore something that confused you or intrigued you about the reading in question – in a focused way. A good short response will lead to an interesting discussion in class. You will write four of these short responses over the course of the semester. There are no set due dates for these responses, however you can only submit one short response in any given week. Over the course of the semester, you must respond to at least one primary and one secondary reading.

### *Banned Books Defense*

You will select an oft-banned book with which you are already familiar, research the most common reasons for that book's banning, and locate a recent situation wherein that book was banned. Using that information, you will write a business letter/letter to the editor (or school/library board) addressing the ban and defending the validity of your book. More information on this will be forthcoming.

### *Creative Project*

You will—either individually or as a group—construct a creative project that touches on the themes in this course in some way. This project has a VERY wide range of possibilities, so I will be asking you to pitch me whatever wild ideas pop into your head. I'll show some examples in week two.

### *Paper Pitches*

At about the mid-point of the semester, I will ask you to submit and then workshop two pitches for potential papers. More information on this assignment will be forthcoming.

### *Paper*

Successful papers will develop an argument driven by your interests and connected to the themes of the course. Where the earlier assignments are designed to get you “thinking out loud” about your ideas and reactions to these novels, the paper should be a polished argument where you construct a claim, situate that claim within the scholarship on the topic, and support that claim with an analysis of one or more texts.

**SJFC ADA Policy:** In compliance with St. John Fisher College policy and applicable laws, appropriate academic accommodations are available to students with disabilities. All requests for accommodations must be supported by appropriate documentation/diagnosis and determined reasonable by St. John Fisher College. Students with documented disabilities (physical, learning, psychological) who may need academic accommodations are advised to refer to the Student Accessibility Services Website (<https://www.sjfc.edu/student-life/student-accessibility-services/>). Questions should be directed to the Coordinator of Accessibility Services in the Accessibility Services Office and Test Center, Kearney 300 (585.385.5252). Late notification will delay requested accommodations.

**Statement on Academic Integrity:** All students, regardless of level or school, are responsible for following the St. John Fisher College Academic Integrity Policy in addition to any other individual school's or program's academic expectations and/or professional standards. Every student is expected to demonstrate academic integrity in all academic pursuits at all times. If a student suspects that another student has violated the Academic Integrity Policy, he or she should contact the instructor for that course and provide support for that suspicion. Any finding of responsibility and associated sanctions for a violation of the Academic Integrity Policy is retained per the College records policy. All students are expected to be familiar with the details of the Academic Integrity Policy (available via <https://www.sjfc.edu/policies/academic-integrity/>).

## Policies

### *Contacting Your Instructor*

I will be delighted to discuss your suggestions, ideas, and concerns about this course with you. You should feel free to drop by during my office hours. If those times are inconvenient, please e-mail me. I'm happy to make other arrangements. Please e-mail me in advance if you need to cancel an appointment.

The best way to contact me is via e-mail. **I will respond to all e-mails within 24 hours**, and I request that you show me the same courtesy. However, I am not permanently attached to my computer (and I have a flip phone. Seriously). **I do not generally check my e-mail between 10 PM and 10 AM.**<sup>2</sup> Please plan your electronic communications accordingly.

### *Written Work*

All writing assignments should be typed and double spaced with one-inch margins. Please use 12-point Times New Roman font. All writing will be handed in electronically via email; **All assignments must be in .doc or .docx format, or I will not be able to open them.**

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<sup>2</sup> This is a lie, but you shouldn't really expect a response that late at night. ☺

## Course Schedule

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- 9/3 **T:** Welcome, Syllabus
- 9/5 **R:** Read the NPR article on “100 Best-Ever Teen Novels” (on Blackboard) and respond to the questions in the Blackboard discussion board. Read “A brief history of young adult literature” on CNN (on Blackboard). Read “Young Adult Literature: Looking Backward” by Linda Bachelder et al (on Blackboard). Read “Ostriches and Adolescents” by Mary Kingsbury (on Blackboard). Read “The New Realism: Traditional Cultural Values in Recent Young-Adult Fiction” by Maia Pank Mertz. What is “Literature”? What is a “Young Adult”? What happens when we put the two terms together?
- 9/10 **T:** Please read Chapters 1-14 of Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War*.
- 9/12 **R:** Please read Chapters 15-24 of Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War*. Pay particular attention to elements that you think may contribute to the banning/challenging of such a book.
- 9/17 **T:** Please read Chapters 25-39 of Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War*. Did the story end the way you expected? Why/why not? How might the ending contribute to concerns about the book’s impact on younger readers?
- 9/19 **R:** Please read Chapters 1-28 (through page 123 to the section titled “Part Two: The Last Hole”) of Louis Sachar’s *Holes*. How was this book different from *The Chocolate War*? What parts of the plot seemed more geared towards kids? Tweens? Teens? Adults? Were any plot elements jarring because of these shifts in audience and tone?
- 9/24 **T:** Please read Chapters 29-50 (to the end of the book) of Louis Sachar’s *Holes*. Focus on the language used by Sachar. As you read, mark words and phrases that you would describe as being more “young adult” than kid friendly. Also mark words and phrases that seem more child-like than young adult. Please also read the excerpt from Sachar’s *Wayside School is Falling Down* (on Blackboard). This text is more clearly aimed at young children. What similarities and differences do you see in the language used in the two books?
- 9/26 **R:** Please read through page 113 in Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (stopping at the chapter “Rowdy Gives Me Advice About Love”). Artwork and Awards.
- 10/1 **T:** Please read through page 198 in Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (stopping at the chapter “Because Russian Guys Are Not Always Geniuses”). Please also read the Alexie stories, “The Toughest Indian in the World” and “Class” (both on Blackboard in the same PDF file).

10/3 **R:** Please read through the end of Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Reputation/infamy. **Banned Books Assignment is due by the start of this class meeting, and we will discuss them during class.**

10/8 **T:** Please read chapters 1-16 of *Among the Hidden*.

10/10: **R:** Please read chapters 17-30 of *Among the Hidden*.

10/15 **T:** Paper Pitches

10/17 **R:** Please read Chapters 1-9 of Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*.

10/22 **T:** Please read Chapters 10-15 of Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*.

10/24 **R:** Please read Chapters 16-19 of Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*.

10/29 **T:** Please read Chapters 20-26 of Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*.

10/31 **R:** Please read parts 1 and 2 (through page 96) of *the perks of being a wallflower*.

11/5 **T:** Please read parts 3 and 4 (and the epilogue) of *the perks of being a wallflower*.

11/7 **R:** Please read chapters 1-3 of *The Only Living Boy Omnibus*. Read also the Classics Illustrated edition of *Oliver Twist* (on Blackboard).

11/12 **T:** Please read chapters 4-6 of *The Only Living Boy Omnibus*.

11/14 **R:** Please read chapters 7-9 of *The Only Living Boy Omnibus*.

11/19 **T:** Please read chapters 10-12 of *The Only Living Boy Omnibus*. Read also chapter 1 of *Oliver* (on Blackboard).

11/21 **R:** Please read chapters 1-11 of *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*.

11/26 **T:** Please read chapters 12-24 of *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*.

11/28 **No Class. Thanksgiving Break**

12/3 **T:** Please read chapters 25-35 of *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*.

12/5 **R:** Creative Projects

**\*Last Day to hand in Short Responses\***

Exam TBD