

History in Fiction and Fact
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May and June 2019

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Wise readers and good writers know that the best writing — whether historical writing or any other — comes from the right match of content — subject, sources, methods, questions, and problems—and form. There are times when an academic journal article is exactly the right form. And times when the subject, question, or problem calls for a long narrative, a short story, a play, a graphic novel or memoir, a documentary, a movie, or a poem. In this seminar we shall juxtapose a novel and a work of narrative history— both about race relations in the United States in the 20th-Century — in order to explore the relationship between the two forms and the difference that literary form makes more generally.

In each session our attention will be divided. On the one hand we will read for content, thinking about the past--about what happened and the meaning and significance of what happened. We will be reading a history of the Scottsboro Case, the court case and controversy that began in March 1931 when nine black teenagers were accused of the rape of two young white women on a freight train traveling through northern Alabama. And we will be reading a classic novel, an explosive coming of age story set in the same period and written not long after that explores history, migration, radicalism, identity, class, and race. On the other hand we will read for form, thinking about the relations between history and fiction; the similarities and differences between truth in history and truth in fiction; the ways in which historians and novelists use facts, sources, evidence, narrative, analysis, and imagination to arrive at historical understanding and truths; the things that happen to the content of our representations when they are transformed by genre and form; the literary dimensions of historical literature and the historical dimension of fiction. We will practice criticizing history as literature and fiction as history.

Teachers, creative writers, and thesis writers and other student writers (in history, American studies, and literature) interested in novels and other formal literary texts will get a sense of the variety of ways we can use (and the variety of ways that we can misuse) novels as primary sources for our teaching and our writing, for our narratives, analysis, and interpretation. Writers of non-fiction interested in experimenting with the form of their writing will get a sense of the approaches and techniques they might borrow from novelists and writers of imaginative non-fiction--and also a sense of the boundaries they might think twice about before crossing.

Required Reading

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Random House)
ISBN-10: 9780679732761
ISBN-13: 978-0679732761

James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (Pantheon Books, Vintage Books, 1994, 1995)
ISBN-10: 0679761594

Here is what I will expect of you:

- Come to every class. It should always go without saying. Some day, maybe soon, professors like me will be replaced by computers and many if not all classes will be online. Until that time, attendance is the single most important requirement of any course I teach. Most of what happens in this class will happen in class—and we have only seven of them.
- Do as much of the assigned reading as humanly possible before class.
- While you are reading, mark or copy out passages (sentences, paragraphs, exchanges in conversation) that you find essential to the point of the chapter or book or just interesting or puzzling, passages that get your attention and move you in one way or another. From time to time I'll ask each of you to share the passages that you've chosen and I'll have groups of you report on passages that you and I find worthy of note.

You will write and revise a series of very short essays — the literary form of which will often be up to you — taking off from key passages in the texts, some of which I will identify and some of which you will chose. We will talk more about these writing assignments in our first class.

Class and Reading Schedule

Week 1

Sunday May 12: Introduction: Facts and Fictions

Invisible Man, Prologue and Chapter 1 (about 30 pages)

Stories of Scottsboro, Preface and Chapters 1-3 (about 23 pages)

Tuesday May 14: Point of View, Points of View, in Literature and History

Invisible Man, Chapter 2-4 (about 74 pages)

Stories of Scottsboro, Chapters 4-6 (about 22 pages)

Week 2

Sunday May 17: Social Class and the Politics of Race

Invisible Man, Chapters 5-10 (120 pages)

Stories of Scottsboro, Chapters 7-10 (37 pages)

Tuesday May 19: Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story

Invisible Man, Chapters 11-14 (87 pages)

Stories of Scottsboro, Chapters 11-14 (24 pages)

Week 3

Sunday May 24: The Past in the Present

Invisible Man, Chapters 15-19 (104 pages)

Stories of Scottsboro, Chapters 15-22 (62 pages)

Tuesday May 26: Gender, Class, and Race in Fiction, in Fact

Invisible Man, Chapters 20-22 (55 pages)

Stories of Scottsboro, Chapters 23-26 (37 pages)

Week 4

Sunday June 2: The Past, History, and Identity in Fiction and Fact

“Who know but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”

Invisible Man, Chapter 23 to the end

Stories of Scottsboro, Chapters 27-30 (32 pages)