

Refracting Culture: Superheroes and America

English Comp. 101 (Section 02)

Instructor: Peter R. Bryant

Office:

Hours: Mondays 11am-12pm

Wednesday 11am-12pm

Fridays 11am-12pm

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Course Objectives

This course will deal with the literary and cultural concerns of a uniquely American art-form: comic books. When most people think of comic books, they think of brightly colored capes and masks, ridiculous catch-phrases and less than interesting subject matter. However, we are going to investigate comic books for their adult themes as well as their influence on and reflection of American culture. We will deal primarily with the way that the American superhero has evolved and changed throughout the history of comic books. We will investigate the political, cultural and social dimensions that comic books deal with or ignore in their portrait of contemporary American culture. While we will investigate the historical and political changes in American culture as represented and reflected by the comic book hero, we will also investigate the division between “high” culture and “pop” culture, and how the writers/artists we are reading have subverted these concepts in their re-definition of the superhero. Finally, we will explore what it has meant and what it continues to mean to be a “hero” in contemporary America.

Ultimately the objective of this class is two-fold. We will be exploring a number of questions regarding the place of comic books in the literary, cultural and political landscape of America. We will also be using these investigations to form your own explorations of your writing style. The papers you write and the questions we ask will be employed in the learning how to organize your thought-patterns into literate and coherent college level papers.

Course Materials

Chocolat by Joanne Harris

Comic Book Nation: The transformation of Youth Culture in America by Brad Wright
Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003: ISBN-10: 0801874505

Ultimate X-Men Vol 1: The Tomorrow People by Mark Millar
Marvel Comics, 2002: ISBN-10: 0785107886

Watchmen by Alan Moore
DC Comics, 1995: ISBN-10: 0930289234

Dark Knight Returns 10th Anniversary Edition by Frank Miller
DC Comics, 1997: ISBN-10: 1563893428

Superman: Red Son by Mark Millar
DC Comics, 2004: ISBN-10: 1401201911

X-Force Vol. 1: New Beginnings by Peter Milligan
Marvel Comics, 2001: ISBN-10: 078510819X

Batman: Arkham Asylum: 15th Anniversary Edition by Grant Morrison
DC Comics, 2005: ISBN-10: 1401204252

Preacher Vol 1: Gone From Texas by Garth Ennis
Vertigo, 1996: ISBN-10: 1563892618

Preacher Vol. 2: Until the End of the World by Garth Ennis
Vertigo, 1997: ISBN-10: 1563893126

Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud
Harper Paperbacks, 1994: ISBN-10: 006097625X

The Brief Penguin Handbook by Lester Faigley ISBN 0321245318 (BUY THIS AT BOOKSTORE! NO EXCEPTIONS!!!!!!!!!!!!)

Policies

Grading Policies: This course will be determined by TWO (2) 5-7 page papers (15% apiece), ONE (1) 6-8 page paper (30%), a FINAL PORTFOLIO (20%), in-class reading quizzes/homework/response papers/in-class writing (10%) and class participation (10%)

A Note on Class Participation: Class participation takes into account attendance; if you are not in class, you cannot participate. However, it is much more than just being in class. It requires that you are actively engaged, prepared and organized. Thus, just making it to class is not even half the battle.

Attendance Policy: Students are allowed FOUR (4) absences. If a student has any absence above and beyond FOUR (4), that student will be penalized with a lower grade. Students with absences beyond the fourth will receive 5 points off their final grade for every excessive absence. So, if you have a 90, and five absences, you will receive an 85 for the class. If you have a 70 and seven absences, you will receive a 55 for the class. Please remember that all absences count, even those accompanied by a doctor's note. Any work missed must be made up immediately or will receive a failing grade. Late essays will be penalized by one grade per class period. If you have a paper due Monday that is a B level paper, and you turn it in Wednesday, you will receive a C. If you know that you will be missing class due to illness or another reasonable excuse, please email me your essay prior to that class meeting.

Lateness Policy: Please do not be late to class. It disrupts the class, the teacher and your fellow students. Also, as we will be having random pop quizzes in the first five minutes of class, if you are late you will miss the quiz. Any quizzes missed due to lateness or absences CANNOT be made up. Also, every THREE late appearances will count as ONE full absence. Finally, if you are late to class, it is your responsibility to make sure that I mark you as there; if you come in ten minutes late, you will be marked as absent, unless you make sure to see me after class and remind me to mark you as attending.

Paper Format: All papers must be accompanied by the outline used to conceive of the paper. That will be your cover page. The outline must be single-spaced with your name, date and course number in the upper left-hand corner. The essay itself must be double-spaced or I WILL NOT ACCEPT IT!

Tentative Schedule

Week 1: Welcome To Comp 1

Sept. 5: Intro to course, syllabus, brief discussion
Sept. 7th: *Chocolat* (1-58)

Week 2: Chocolat

Sept. 10: *Chocolat* (59-100)
Sept. 12: *Chocolat* (101-145)
Sept. 14: *Chocolat* (146-197)

Week 3: Chocolat con't

Sept. 17: *Chocolat* (198-251)
Sept. 19: *Chocolat* (252-306)
Sept. 21: Finish discussion on *Chocolat*
Response Paper for *Chocolat* due.
Comic Book Nation (Intro)

Week 4: So You Want to Be a Hero? Comic's Humble Beginnings

Sept. 24: *Comic Book Nation* (Chapter 1)
Sept. 26: *Understanding Comics* (First Half)
Sept. 28: *Understanding Comics* (Second Half)
First Draft Due

Week 5: So You Want to Be a Hero? Con't

Oct. 1: *Comic Book Nation* (Ch. 2)
Oct. 3: *Ultimate X-Men* (Ch 1-3)
Oct. 5: *Ultimate X-Men* (Ch 4-6)
Response Paper Due

Week 6: Soviet Superman? Big Government and Comic Subversion

Oct. 8: *Comic Book Nation* (Ch. 5)
Oct. 10: *Superman: Red Son* (First Half)
Oct. 12: *Superman: Red Son* (Second Half)

FIRST PAPER DUE

Week 7: Who Watches the Watchmen? Superheroes and Vigilantism

Oct. 15: *Comic Book Nation* (Ch. 7)

Oct. 17: *Watchmen* (Ch. 1-3)

Oct. 19: *Watchmen* (Ch. 4-6)

Week 8: Who Watches the Watchmen? con't

Oct. 22: *Watchmen* (Ch. 7-9)

Oct. 24: *Watchmen* (Ch. 10-12)

Oct. 26: *Dark Knight Returns* (Ch. 1-2)
Response Paper Due

Week 9: Who Watches the Watchmen? Con't

Oct. 29: *Dark Knight Returns* (Ch. 3-4)
Comic Book Nation (Ch. 8)

Oct. 31: View *Batman Begins* in class
First Draft Due

Nov. 2: Finish *Batman Begins* in class
Response Paper Due

Week 10: American Super-Hero with Simon Cowell? Superheroes in the Real World

Nov. 5: *Comic Book Nation* (Ch. 5)

Nov. 7: *X-Force* (First Half)

Nov. 9: *X-Force* (Second Half)

SECOND PAPER DUE

Week 11: So a Priest and A Vampire Walk Into A Bar... Comics Take On God

Nov. 12: *Preacher* Vol. 1 (First half)

Nov. 14: *Preacher* Vol. 1 (Second half)

Nov. 16: Subverting Genre: Watch *Dead Man* in class
Response Paper Due

Week 12: So a Priest and a Vampire... con't

Nov. 19: Finish *Dead Man*

Nov. 21: *Preacher* Vol. 2 (First Half)

Nov. 23: No Class

Week 13: Breaking Down The Wall: Comic Vs. High Art

Nov. 26: *Preacher* Vol. 2 (Second Half)

Nov. 28: *Comic Book Nation* (Ch. 9)

Nov. 30: *Arkham Asylum*

Response Paper Due

Week 14 Where Do We Go From Here? Superheroes in a Post-911 World

Dec. 3: *Arkham Asylum (Script in Back)*

Dec. 5: *Comic Book Nation (Spiderman at Ground Zero)*

Dec. 7: Workshop in Class for Final Paper

Draft Due at end of Class

Week 15: Re-Examining the Past: Classic Superheroes and What They Mean Today

Dec. 10: Review Portfolio Requirements

Workshop

Dec. 12: Reflect on the Course

FINAL PAPER DUE

A Note on Readings: Some days and weeks I will be handing out discussion questions for you to think about with your readings. Other days, I will be asking you to read supplementary materials. But on all days that readings are due, I expect everyone to come up with at least 3 discussion questions about the material in question. This is mandatory homework, and I will be calling on people to share their questions and their thoughts at random.