Liberal Studies 721: From the Ruins: Tracing, and Re-weaving Stories of the Second World War

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Seminar Description

Shortly after the Second World War ended, Heinrich Böll who later won the Nobel Prize for Literature famously declared that the task of German writers in the years ahead was to find redemption in the ruins. While it is true that the burden of history fell particularly hard on German writers, after the full extent of atrocities committed under the Nazi regime became public, the business of making sense of the war became a major preoccupation for writers and intellectuals from every discipline in every nation that was touched directly or indirectly by the war. Though it would be clearly impossible to cover the spectrum of material globally, it is possible and indeed feasible to look at some of the ways three nations—Germany, France and the United States have created the story of the war over the past half century. The emphasis is, of course, on ‘some,’ and the choice of texts does not represent an exhaustive list. In keeping with the emphasis and spirit of Liberal Studies, our focus will be inter-disciplinary in approach and will include representations from literature—fiction, memoirs, poetry—film, social histories, military history, as well as readings from philosophy, psychology and the theory of translation. The unifying factor will be the search for the evolution of these stories and for the threads that have shaped the larger tapestry.

In general, post-war literature shares the tendency to construct stories that represent a binary view of history—for example, a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ France where resisters are pitted against collaborators, Nazi Germany as a monolith of villains that was finally brought to trial at Nuremberg by the Allies as heroes. We will examine how writers from different disciplines—especially historians in the late sixties and early seventies—challenged the model of competing histories, and the implications that these confrontations with the past exercised on the telling of war stories.

This is how I envisage our class time:

Our class time will be roughly tri-partite in shape, with the three parts overlapping. We’ll begin with discussing responses to a short page of questions that I’ll prepare to facilitate conversation about the text we have read for the session. I would then like to provide a 40-45 minute overview each session that may fill in gaps of the text or subject under discussion. I would like each person to commit to an oral report each session from September 17 onwards until December 10. I have given suggestions for topics but they are not designed to be exhaustive.
Required Texts:
Course Packet—available at Panther Books on Downer
The following texts are available at UWM Bookstore:
The Silence of the Sea
Slaughter House Five
Armageddon
Man’s Search for Meaning
My Brother’s Keeper

Required Films
Au Revoir les Enfants
The Nasty Girl
Saving Private Ryan

First Week: September 3:
Introduction/s
What it means to remember—is there such a thing as a final chapter?
Readings in class from packet—1-8

Read for next session The Silence of the Sea

Second Week: September 10
Historiography and War: The French model—Resistance and Collaboration
Discussion of The Silence of the Sea

Read for next session The Excursion of the Dead Girls—course packet 9-22

Third Week: September 17
The Problem of Translation
Discussion of The Excursion of the Dead Girl
Read Uwe Timm’s *In My brother’s Shadow* for next session

**Fourth Week: September 24**

Overcoming the past

Discussion of Uwe Timm’s *In My Brother’s Shadow*

Read packet pages 23-48 for next session

**Fifth Week: October 1**

The role of interviews

Discussion of American memories: packet pages 23-48

**Sixth Week: October 8**

The American short story

Faulkner’s ‘Two Soldiers’—course packet 50-59

**Seventh Week: October 15**

Post-modern memory--Read course packet 61-69

Discussion of ‘Saving Private Ryan’

**Eighth Week: October 22**

The Normandy Landings/ memorializing the Dead

German graves in Normandy

**Ninth Week: October 30**

Still on French Soil: Remembering the French Internment Camps

Discussion of ‘Au Revoir les Enfants’

Read Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* for next session

**Tenth Week: November 5**

*Frankl’s Searching for Meaning*

Discussion of ‘The Nasty Girl’

**Eleventh Week: November 12**
But is it fiction?

*Slaughter House Five*

**Twelfth week: November 19**

How might Uwe Timm respond to Armageddon

**Thirteenth week: December 3**

The Texture of memory—read course packet 71-85

**Grade Requirements**

Since there is substantial reading in this seminar, my presumption is that your presence each week and your response to the readings will constitute the greatest percentage of the final grade. My other presumption is that you will engage with the issues these readings have raised and will enjoy sharing your observations with your colleagues. To this end I shall give you prepared questions that are designed to facilitate discussion for the week that follows. I would like you to prepare one oral report on a topic that interests you—I’ll provide suggestions. You may then write a final short paper either on that topic or on a broader one that interests you. This then is how I envisage a final grade:

Seminar participation/ 1-2 page weekly response to prepared questions:

Oral Report:

Final Short Paper

In the event of disruption of normal classroom activities due to an H1N1 swine flu outbreak, the format for this course may be modified to enable completion of the course. In that event, you will be provided an addendum to this syllabus that will supersede this version.