

ENG 400 Descriptions

Summer I 2020

“Lives in Fiction and Nonfiction: Race, Gender, Ethnicity, and Language” Dr. Bill Lalicker

ENG400 in its manifestation as “Lives in Fiction and Nonfiction: Race, Gender, Ethnicity, and Language” focuses on your analysis of two books: the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, by Junot Diaz; and the biography and social investigation *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, by Rebecca Skloot. Each is an outstanding example of its genre, and each features close attention to intersections of race, gender, ethnicity, and language. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (and numerous other awards), is the funny and harrowing story of a Dominican-American college student nerd whose adventures in love and popular culture meet heartbreaking consequences when they intersect with the fraught politics of his ancestral land and a curse originating in the interaction of his indigenous culture with colonialism. Diaz’s first-person narrators observe cousin Oscar’s life (and multiple cultural positions on race and gender) in a sometimes-maniac but beautifully expressive mix of languages and dialects, with frequent historical lessons framed in academic discourse. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010), winner of the National Academies Best Book Award, the Wellcome Trust Prize, and other awards, was also a Frederick Douglass Institute One Book WCU book selection. Skloot’s nonfiction work investigates the history of race and medicine in America through the life of an African American woman named Henrietta Lacks—and traces the apparently infinite life of the cells taken from her without her permission, cells that after her 1951 cancer death were reproduced, traded, and sold to create the cell lines establishing most of the life-saving cancer research of the past six decades, without the knowledge or remuneration of her family. Skloot writes a riveting and sensitive first-person account of her search for the facts, and of her interactions with the Skloot family—interactions framed by struggles of trust in the context of differences of race, class, and dialect, but struggles that reach a resolution bending toward truth and justice. Our goal will be to explore how each book—one fiction, one nonfiction—uses language powerfully to illuminate matters of culture on topics of race, gender, and ethnicity.

This specific instance of ENG400 serves B.A. or B.S.Ed. students, and Literatures track or Writings track students, alike; the breadth of applicability for all students is enhanced by the course’s attention to both fictive and nonfictive powers of language.

Summer II 2020

‘What a Long, Strange Trip’: The Literary, Rhetorical, and Cultural Dimensions of the Grateful Dead Dr. Tim Ray

The Grateful Dead were, and in many ways still are, one of the most iconic American rock and roll bands of all time. Known for their constant touring, their four-hour concerts filled with extended jams, their tie-dyed and devoted “Deadhead” fans willing to travel hundreds of miles “on tour” with the band from city to city, their incorporation of all forms of American music (from folk to rock to

bluegrass to gospel to jazz to blues to ragtime to country and western to psychedelia), their association with the “psychedelic ’60s” and the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, their role in establishing the “jam band” and music festival scene of today, their pioneering efforts in recording and concert technology, their willingness to allow their fans to tape their shows for posterity’s sake, and their iconic “leader,” Jerry Garcia, the Grateful Dead epitomized “hippie” counterculture that sprung from San Francisco in the 1960s and created a multifaceted legacy. In addition, their literary influence is considerable—ranging from their long association with writer Ken Kesey (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, Sometimes a Great Notion*), to their prominence in Thomas Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, to their involvement with and influence from Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady (the thinly-veiled main characters in Kerouac’s countercultural classic, *On the Road*), to the impact that Theodore Sturgeon’s 1950s sci-fi classic *More than Human* had on the band, to their own literary contributions through their songwriting, to their role in inspiring Dead-related literature. Academically, the Grateful Dead are the focus of an annual gathering of the Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus at the SW P/ACA conference in Albuquerque, NM, representing 30+ disciplines, and have been the topic of a couple of stand-alone academic conferences as well. The Grateful Dead forged a “long, strange trip” and an enduring legacy that will be explored thoroughly and rigorously in this course.

NB: Owing to the breadth and depth of material to be covered in such a limited time frame, this course is recommended for students who are already somewhat familiar with the course subject.

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