

Realisms: Old, New, Weird
ENG7/8394 // Modern American Literature // Spring 2023

Professor: Donal Harris (donal.harris@memphis.edu)
Time: Monday, 5:30-8:30pm

The status of realism, both as a mode of literary production and a scholarly practice, has witnessed a surge of interest recently. Certainly, generations of scholars have found 'realism' to be a central mode in the rise and popularization of the novel, but for most of the twentieth century to *write* realism has been looked down upon as either mindlessly regurgitating an outmoded nineteenth century style or acquiescing to the middlebrow's tastes and discomforts with modernist experimentation.

This course situates the 21st century revival of realism within a century-long debate over the genre's artistic viability and its place in literary culture, asking how one might see realism surviving in the background of modernism and postmodernism as a minor form before blossoming in new ways – dirty, weird, hysterical, peripheral, capitalist, speculative – in the twenty-first century. We'll sketch out a history of realism and its relationship to literary criticism (especially in the US) beginning with Henry James, stopping along the way in high modernism, the Harlem Renaissance, Depression-era fiction, Civil Rights-era literature, postmodernism, digital/post-print literature, and contemporary genre fiction. We'll cover classic theories of realism from Auerbach, Lukacs, Watt, Woolf, Adorno, and Barthes, and we'll survey a range of recent critical projects that dovetail with the aesthetic, economic, and philosophical goals of contemporary realism.

Possible authors include Henry James, Gertrude Stein, W.E.B. Du Bois, William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, Raymond Carver, James Baldwin, Salvador Plascencia, and Rachel Kushner.

Assignments mirror the standard professional genres: semi-regular response papers (3pp), an academic review (1-2,000 words), a project proposal (500 words) and abstract (4pp), and a conference-length paper (10pp).

Full reading list will be available by November 1.