

Realisms: Old, New, Weird
ENG7/8394 // Modern American Literature // Fall 2016

Professor: Donal Harris (donal.harris@memphis.edu)
Time: Thursday, 1–4pm

Modernism, in its various guises, is the signal art movement of the twentieth century. It is characterized by aggressive formal experimentation, an investment in non-normative lives and desires, and the rejection of liberal humanism, all of which, according to scholars, mark a radical and self-conscious break from the aesthetics and politics of nineteenth-century realism. This class questions the severity of that break and asks how one might see realism surviving into the twentieth century as a minor form, operating in the background of canonical twentieth-century texts, informing the methods and theories of reading developed within literary studies, and re-emerging as a central preoccupation for twenty-first century artists and scholars.

We'll sketch out a history of twentieth-century realism in the United States from Henry James's late short stories and prefaces through several self-consciously realist contemporary novels, stopping along the way to comment on high modernism (Stein, Faulkner), the Harlem Renaissance (Du Bois), Depression-era fiction (Kromer, Petry), Civil Rights-era literature (Baldwin), postmodernism (Carver, Adler), digital/post-print literature (Plascencia), and contemporary genre fiction (McCarthy, Spiotta, Cole). Secondary readings include classic essays on realism from Auerbach, Lukacs, Watt, Woolf, Adorno, and Barthes, along with examples of recent attempts to reclaim the term for twenty-first century art and politics (Jameson, Moretti, Cleary, Fischer, Harman, Goldsmith).

Course requirements include semi-regular response papers (3pp), an academic review (5pp), and either a polished conference-length paper (10pp) or the first draft of an article-length paper (~7000 words).

Full reading list will be available by May 1.