**THE OPRAH BOOK CLUB**

**AND AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE**

**ASRC 6517; ENGL 6740; AMST 6517**

**Fall 2011**

**T 4:30-7, Africana Center, Room 111**

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**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

The Oprah Winfrey Show, a hallmark of daytime and talk show television for 25 years, reached a milestone in its production when it introduced the Oprah Book Club in 1996, whose three periods of development have mirrored the various phases that can be identified in the production of the show itself. The internationally known Oprah Book Club has had an undeniably transformative impact on the publishing industry and has also increasingly emerged as a topic of interest in academia, as evidenced by the growing number of scholarly publications devoted to this topic. In addition to its impact on fiction and non-fiction authors in national and international contexts, the Oprah Book Club has strongly impacted African American literature in the course of its long history by highlighting a range of African American authors. Significantly, four works by Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison alone have been featured on the Oprah Book Club over the years. This course will examine the work of some of the African American, African and African diasporan authors who have been featured on the show, including Morrison, Edwidge Danticat, Lalita Tademy, Ernest J. Gaines, Maya Angelou, Sidney Poitier, Bill Cosby, Uwem Akpam and Pearl Cleage. It will draw on a range of critical and theoretical resources related to the Oprah Book Club archive, including its pedagogical outreach through technologies such as the internet, to discuss the impact of the Oprah Book Club on the genre of African American literature.

Over the years, Oprah Winfrey has been the subject of a range of biographies, which established important foundations for the critical exploration of her work in academia. Several book volumes and documentaries have been produced on the topic of Oprah and her vast production enterprises in recent years. Moreover, the Oprah Book Club in particular has surfaced as a topic of increasing interest in literary studies, notwithstanding reservations among some scholars about discussing this institution given the Book Club’s orientation for a popular audience. Some scholars, including those invested in writing and research on reading, such as Cecilia Konchar Farr, have noted its relevance to literacy, democracy and publishing and have helped to promote a more nuanced consideration in academia of its cultural impact, building a body of work that has increasingly constituted the emergent and truly exciting field of “Oprah studies.” Oprah Winfrey’s longstanding support of education as a philanthropist, her fundamental view of herself as a teacher, and her view of her talk show as a classroom indeed suggest the relevance of her media for for public education in national and global contexts. In general, from the time that she emerged as a public figure in the realm of talk television, Oprah has been a subject of interest and fascination in the media, including tabloids newspapers. The interest in Oprah has only grown as she has grained increasing salience and influence as a public figure and her vast media empire has expanded, which is grounded by her Harpo production company, which has also emerged as an important site of film and television production, including a range of talk shows, and expanded to encompass several institutions, from Oprah’s O magazine to the OWN television network.

In an era when book fairs and festivals have proliferated and become increasingly popular, the Oprah Book Club is one of the primary contexts in which reading has been promoted at a national level. Over the years, exposure through the Book Club has helped to popularize and expand the audience for the works of a range of familiar and unfamiliar authors as well as various literary genres. By featuring works by authors from William Faulkner to Ernest J. Gaines, it has impacted the field and expanded the possibilities for teaching Southern literature. Similarly, it has been instrumental in increasing the exposure of African American literature and African American authors in national and global contexts. Serious study of the Oprah Book Club is increasingly indispensable for fields from American to African American literature, media, and popular culture, particularly for researchers who are invested in topics related to the history of the novel, reading, literacy and technology, along with race and gender.

In this course, we will consider the impact of the Oprah Book Club on African American literature and some of the specific works that have been featured from this genre through the years with an emphasis on questions related to how popular audiences respond to this literature and how its study in relation to the context of television impacts a mainstream and predominately female audience and opens up additional possibilities for reading, teaching and research. The course will introduce some of the main concerns that have emerged in the discourses on the Oprah Winfrey Book Club and overview the history and current state of Oprah’s media empire. That the Book Club has incorporated technology in its media outreach and promoted digital devices for reading books such as the Kindle and the Ipad (technologies that have been distributed to Oprah’s audience through “My Favorite Things”), or featured works that have been adapted into films, only further underscores the importance of its study in a digital era as many debates unfold related to educational reform and uses of technology. For example, the Book Club’s “Summer of Faulkner” in 2005 made use of university professors who presented weekly lectures online and shared resources with the audience during the weeks that three novels by William Faulkner were featured on the Oprah Book Club, which demonstrated the tremendous benefits and advantages of using technology and strategies associated with distance learning for purposes of teaching.

Engagements of African American literature in the Book Club will reinforce skills in close reading and literary analysis, knowledge of African American literature and its contexts, and skills in research and writing on literature, media and culture. One added benefit of this course is that it will provide those who have been curious about Oprah’s Book Club but who have not had the opportunity to engage any of its selections with an opportunity to read and discuss them. Another benefit is that it will allow students to read books in contemporary literature and within several genres, including not only novels but also autobiographies and short stories; the course will reinforce skills for reading texts across this range of literary genres.

**Texts:**

Akpam, Uwem. Say You’re One of Them.

Angelou, Maya. The Heart of a Woman.

Clarke, Breena. River, Cross My Heart.

Cleage, Pearl. What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day.

Danticat, Edwidge. Breath, Eyes, Memory.

Gaines, Ernest J. A Lesson Before Dying.

Morrison, Toni. The Bluest Eye.

Morrison, Toni. Sula.

Poitier, Sidney. The Measure of a Man: A Spiritual Autobiography.

Stockett, Kathryn. The Help.

Tademy, Lalita. Cane River.

Oprah’s Book Club has engaged multiple selections by some of its authors, from Bill Cosby to Nobel Laureate William Faulkner. Of all guests, Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison has been the author most frequently invited. Morrison’s Song of Solomon was the very second selection, and her Paradise proved to be a most challenging selection for the Book Club in 1998. That Oprah also produced a film based on Morrison’s novel Beloved and played the character Sethe also made for a very organic connection between Oprah’s production enterprises and the author Toni Morrison. In this course, we will begin by reading Morrison’s two earliest novels, The Bluest Eye (OBC 2000) and Sula (OBC 2002), which were both featured on the Oprah Book Club in its early years. Given their focus on black female protagonists, both works are valuable not only for African American literary history, but also for feminist and women and gender studies. This segment will make up a mini-unit on Morrison embedded in the course.

The author Maya Angelou, who is best known as a poet who performed her work at President Clinton’s Inauguration in 1993, is a mentor and dear friend of Oprah Winfrey, a recurring guest on the Oprah Winfrey Show and an author whose work has been featured on the Oprah Book Club. The author of six autobiographies, Angelou has also been one of the most influential contributors to this genre in African American literary history. On a trajectory inaugurated by writers of multiple autobiographies that includes Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washingon, and W.E.B. DuBois, Angelou is one of the best known serial writers of autobiography. In this course, we will explore The Heart of a Woman (OBC 1997), the fourth in the repertoire of Maya Angelou’s six autobiographies, which focuses on Angelou’s years in New York, her time in Africa, and encounters with figures such as Billie Holliday, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, Abbey Lincoln, Max Roach, and Malcolm X. This is a work whose reading should be begun earlier because it is relatively long in comparison to some of the selections that we will be exploring this semester. In Angelou’s autobiography repertoire, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, which mainly recounts Angelou’s early years in Stamps Arkansas, is the autobiography by Angelou that is discussed most frequently and that is most familiar to her audiences.

Just as Faulkner recurrently set his work in the fictive Yoknapatawpha County of Mississippi, Ernest J. Gaines has often focused on the Cajun region of Louisiana. Gaines’s novel A Lesson Before Dying (OBC 1997) focuses on a young man named Jefferson who, in the 1940s is convicted for a crime for which he is innocent but sentenced to death. This is an ideal work for thinking about themes related to race and the prison system in the U.S. as well as masculinity.

While Kathryn Stockett’s novel The Help is not an official selection of the Oprah Book Club, the novel was reviewed in the O magazine in 2010. The film based on this novel was released this summer, was screened at the White House at an event organized by First Lady Michelle Obama and, like the novel, has been embraced by some critics and viewers, and sharply criticized by others. Some of the most compelling reviews have been written by authors such as Martha Southgate, Melissa Harris Lacewell, Valerie Boyd, Honorée Jeffers and Patricia A. Turner. That this novel and film have generated such passionate and vocal responses and its reception has been so uneven and ambivalent for its audiences make it an ideal work for us to think about in a setting such as this course.

Pearl Cleage first achieved widespread recognition for her 1990 book Mad at Miles, which examines her own experiences with domestic violence as it grapples with the implications of the admission by the famed and much admired jazz musician Miles Davis that he had engaged in domestic violence by beating his wife, the actress Cicely Tyson. In this course, we will read Cleage’s first novel, What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day(OBC 1998), which is set in Atlanta and examines the narrator Ava Johnson’s struggle with HIV. Breena Clarke’s River, Cross My Heart (OBC 1999) has been one of the most prominent selections of the Oprah Book Club and explores the impact on a Georgetown community around 1925 in the wake of the tragic loss of a young girl. Lalita Tademy’s Cane River (OBC 2001) is exciting in part because it was the first novel by a new and entirely unknown author, who had been vice-president at a Fortune 200 company, and yet achieved phenomenal success as a novelist. The novel, like Gaines’s, is set in Louisiana. It tells a story that begins in slavery and focuses on five generations of women within a family. It is a work that resonates with the genre of the neo-slave narrative in keeping with a range of works, from Margaret Walker’s Jubilee to Toni Morrison’s Beloved. This is a genre that we will consider as we explore this novel, which, given its length, would be useful to begin reading earlier and before we come to it on our schedule of readings. Haitian author Edwidge Danticat’s novel Breath, Eyes, Memory (OBC 1998) is set in Haiti and examines the sexual abuses of a mother and daughter and is one of the selections that we will be reading that focuses on the Caribbean. Our examination of Sidney Poitier will also shift our focus to the Caribbean as a context. Like Maya Angelou, Sidney Poitier, who was raised in Cat Island and Nassau, Bahamas, is a serial writer of autobiography. His second autobiography, The Measure of a Man (OBC 2007) reflects his typical eloquence as he recounts his childhood in the Caribbean, migration to Miami, and emergence as an actor in New York. Finally, we will look at Uwem Akpam, a Nigerian Jesuit priest and writer whose collection Say You’re One of Them (OBC 2009) provides a microcosm of contemporary Africa by focusing on the narrative perspectives of children across five short stories in settings from Kenya to Rwanda.

In addition to the primary readings, several secondary articles related to the Oprah Book Club will also be assigned and will be made available on Blackboard. Appendix I to this syllabus (to be distributed in the coming weeks) will include a compendium of critical resources in Oprah studies and related to the Oprah Book Club specifically that will also facilitate research in the course. Finally, this course will draw on multimedia at times, from “books on tape” recordings to video related to the Oprah Book Club. Additional technological resources on the internet will also facilitate our reading and discussion of the books in this course. Resources that remain available on the Oprah Book Club Website will be valuable to refer to and draw on for examination and reference, for example, as students prepare to lead discussion of the books in our sessions. The major sites that we will engage include the following:

**Official Website for the Oprah Book Club**

<http://www.oprah.com/book_club.html>

**Oprah Book Club-The Comprehensive Reading List**

<http://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/Complete-List-of-Oprahs-Book-Club-Books>

**COURSE FORMAT AND ASSIGMENTS**

The main requirement of this course is a paper 15-20 pages in length by the end of the quarter that takes a critical look at one of the texts (or two at most), and through a lens that at some point considers some of the critical materials related to Oprah studies and the Oprah Book Club or the related internet resources. Style manuals that you might consult as you develop your papers include Kate Turabian's A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, The Chicago Manual of Style: The Essential Guide for Writers, Editors and Publishers, Joseph Gibaldi's MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing, and Claire Kehrwald Cook's Line by Line: How to Improve Your Own Writing. This paper will count for 60% of your final grade and is due by Friday, December 16, at 5:00 p.m.

Advanced undergraduates enrolled in the course should produce final papers 10-12 pages in length, an assignment that is also due at this time and that will count for 30% of the final grade. The exams in the course, a midterm and final, each count for 15% of the credit toward the final grade.

As a precursor to the final paper assignment, you are required to produce an annotated bibliography of three articles or shorter reviews that engage the text(s) on which you plan to focus your final paper. This assignment will count for 15% of your final grade. Annotated bibliographies are due in class on Tuesday, November 22. In general, this assignment, which will establish foundations for your paper, is designed to reinforce your ability to summarize, paraphrase and evaluate critical and theoretical articles.

In addition, you are required to make a presentation during a session of class this semester, which may occur with or without a partner. On the day of your presentation, you should bring a one-page precís that summarizes the text, provides some commentary, and lists several substantive and well-thought-out questions for discussion in class. Copies should be distributed to members of the class, and two should be passed in to the instructor. This assignment will count for 10% of your final grade. Students might assemble a portfolio to keep track of the archive of course materials that develops over the course of the semester.

Your class participation is required in this seminar and will count for 15% of your final grade. On a weekly basis, lectures in the course will be complemented by discussion in which ALL class participants and course auditors should engage.

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

WEEK I. (August 30) Introduction and syllabus overview.

WEEK II. (September 6) Toni Morrison, The Bluest Eye

WEEK III. (September 13) Toni Morrison, Sula

John Young, “Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey and Postmodern

Popular Audiences,” African American Review

WEEK IV. (September 20) Ernest J. Gaines, A Lesson Before Dying

WEEK V. (September 27) Maya Angelou, The Heart of a Woman

WEEK VI. (October 4) Kathryn Stockett, The Help (Reviewed by O

Magazine)

WEEK VII. Fall Break; no classes October 11

WEEK VIII. (October 18) Midterm (for undergraduates enrolled)

WEEK IX. (October 25) Pearl Cleage, What Looks Like Crazy on an

Ordinary Day

WEEK X. (November 1) Breena Clarke, River, Cross My Heart

WEEK XI. (November 8) Lalita Tademy, Cane River

Elizabeth McHenry, “Building Community in Contemporary

Reading Groups,” from Forgotten Readers

WEEK XII. (November 15) Lalita Tademy, Cane River

WEEK XIII. (November 22) Edwidge Danticat, Breath, Eyes, Memory

**Annotated Bibliographies Due**

**Thanksgiving Break, November 24, 25**

WEEK XIV. (November 29) Uwem Akpam, Say You’re One of Them

WEEK XV. (December 6) Sidney Poitier, The Measure of a Man

**Conclusion**

**APPENDIX I**