

RELIGIOUS PLOTS,

Or How to Tell a True Story About Ghosts, Prophets, Animal Sacrifice, and a Band of Wandering Pilgrims

What This Course Is About

History 2xx
Spring 2016
Tuesday & Thursday
<time>
<building> <room #>
Prof. Guthman

Historians tell stories. The really good ones can turn their theses, their heaps of evidence, and their historiographic concerns into literary narratives that vibrate with the kind of energy we usually associate with novels, memoirs, or the types of nonfiction titles on the best-seller lists. There is a style to good history writing, and that style does work. This course is about understanding the ways in which literary style—choices about plot, character, narrative trajectory, and point of view—shapes the writing of serious religious history. As we will see, religions and religious people offer historians the most compelling and difficult subjects for writing true stories about the past.

the state of affairs

Institutional Context

Berea College is technically considered a comprehensive college, which in this case means that it operates essentially like a liberal arts college while also offering a couple of pre-professional degrees in nursing and teaching. But the main things to know about Berea are this: it is tuition free; it admits only low-income students, about 80% of whom hail from Appalachia; it is a labor college, so it requires all students to work ten to fifteen hours per week on campus or in the community; and it has an egalitarian Christian self-understanding rooted in its origins in 1855 as an interracial and coeducational school founded by abolitionists. These factors combine to create a palpable Berea culture that is nurtured in various ways, including a required first-year writing seminar that explores the college's history and identity. Part of Berea's Christian commitment (that's how the college terms it) is embodied in another required course—this time on Christianity—that all students take in their second or third year. About half of our incoming students identify themselves as born-again Christians, but Berea is neither a church-affiliated college nor a Bible college (much to the chagrin of some conservative Christian students). And, for what it's worth (which may not be much at all), I have taught a staggering number of self-identified pagan students. Do they seek me out? Have the Baptists not finished their work in the hollers? Friends, I just don't know.

Berea admits a significant number of “high risk” students who, for a variety of reasons, are considered statistically unlikely to complete college. Especially in classes populated by first- and second-year students, the skill level of students often ranges from immensely talented to simply overmatched. The gap narrows considerably in courses with juniors and seniors. As a whole, however, I have found very few differences in ability between Berea students and the undergraduates I have taught at Guilford College and the University of

North Carolina at Chapel Hill. So this place is different, but it's not a world apart from most American colleges and universities.

Curricular Context

I am part of a five-member history department. The religion department only has three souls. I am the only professor on campus who works on U.S. religion.

I imagine this course as a 200-level history seminar (15 students max) that will also fulfill the religion perspective in the college's general education curriculum. In history, our 200-level courses blend primary source material with historical monographs and an introduction to historiographic debates. (Our 100-level classes are introductory and feature mostly primary sources. Our 300-level courses are often research-driven and more deeply engage historiographic complexity.)

Most likely, about half the students in the course will be history majors or minors. For many students, this will be their first course in religion. For the folks outside the history major or minor, this might be their first history course. The only prerequisite here will be the completion of a required writing seminar that first-year students take in their second semester. That means, of course, that the class will have no first-year students.

Teaching Methodology

This is a seminar built on writing and discussion. Each meeting begins with a series of semi-private process-writing assignments. The process-writing asks everyone in class—that includes me—to write continuously by hand for five to seven minutes on a particular open-ended problem or question. We then selectively share excerpts from our writing. I never collect or grade this work. We use it, instead, to help launch our discussions and to embody on a daily basis the classroom ethos—namely, that we are a community of writers and thinkers, that writing and thinking are inseparable pursuits, and that posing questions and venturing possible answers lie at the heart of our work together.

Discussions are friendly and rigorous and occasionally contentious. I often use a modified Socratic method to start (I'll play a devil's advocate who is eagerly inquisitive rather than sternly judgmental), but if the classroom culture is right, the discussions soon veer away from me. I offer mid-flight course corrections if we need them.

The graded writing assignments here are straightforward: three brief conventional essays and one larger final project that asks students to write what amounts to their own tiny microhistory (a *micro* microhistory?) of a religious group. I provide the primary sources and help steer students to relevant secondary source material. The point is to have students apply to their own work some of the writerly techniques we have studied across the term. The primary sources in this version of the syllabus have to do with the Vermont Pilgrims of 1817. Why the Pilgrims? They fascinate me, the primary sources are limited in quantity, and right now I'm trying my own hand at writing about them. (Also, they wore bearskin girdles.) I figure I can share my literary struggles and triumphs with my students. Future versions of the course will inevitably explore different subjects for this final project. All that is needed, really, is a curated batch of primary source material.

Finally, a quick note about how I have set up the readings. During many of the course's units, students only read a historian's interpretation of an event or figure after they have read the key primary sources. The "game" here is for students to know certain building blocks so well that they can think with and against a historian as she constructs her story. But there are other games the course can play. In some cases, it may be worth either interleaving a secondary source with its related primary sources or reading a secondary source entirely before encountering the relevant primary source material. Or, in the case of the final project, one could, say, first familiarize students with some of the pertinent historiography before plunging them into the curated primary sources. Here that would mean introducing sweeping accounts of early-nineteenth century American religious history, such as Nathan Hatch's *The Democratization of the American Christianity*, before introducing the material on the Vermont Pilgrims. The syllabus is only a frame. Students and professors should feel free to change it at will.

learning goals

Here's a numbered list of the most significant things you will learn this semester. All of them are important, but I like numbers three and four the best. Of course, numbers three and four depend on successfully grappling with numbers one and two, so ...

In brief, successful students will learn to:

1. identify and analyze the research methods and story-telling choices made by historians of religion
2. use primary and secondary sources to write a religious history of their own
3. cultivate puzzlement
4. engage a confusing, disturbing, and thrilling past, and, in so doing, discover how "history holds the potential, only partly realized, of humanizing us in ways offered by few other areas in the school curriculum." (Thanks, [Sam Wineburg](#).)

materials

Writing Utensils & Paper

This is straightforward. Bring pens or pencils and a spiral notebook (or something similar) with you to class each day. Most days we will write. Such writing will always be done by hand.

Books

The [Berea College online bookstore](#) carries all of these books. If you order your books through a different online retailer, please search and purchase by each book's ISBN number. Doing so ensures that you will get the proper edition of the book. If you don't search by the ISBN number, you will likely end up with the wrong edition, there will be much gnashing of teeth, chaos will reign, and your professor will be very unhappy. But if

you search and order by the ISBN number, there will be, as they say, much rejoicing in the land.

*The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down**

By Anne Fadiman • ISBN 0374533407

Conversions: Two Family Stories from the Reformation and Modern America

By Craig Harline • ISBN 9780300192445

Narrative of Sojourner Truth

By Olive Gilbert and Frances Titus • ISBN 9780140436785

Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol

By Nell Irvin Painter • ISBN 9780393317084

The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America

By John Demos • ISBN 9780679759614

Moodle

Check Moodle regularly. I post assignments there—everything from brief in-week writing assignments to longer essays. Essays, book chapters, primary sources, and other documents will be available there.

grading

Participation (25%)

This class is a learning community, and the quality of each class discussion will depend on your investment in it as well as your preparation for it. There should never be a class session in which you do not add an important thought. Asking tough questions and responding with earnest, probing ideas constitutes a substantive contribution to our daily discussion. I expect you to treat one another's ideas with seriousness and respect. Of course, to participate effectively, you must read each of our sources carefully. You will read a lot in this course. You will also occasionally write brief responses to these same sources. These responses will not receive formal letter grades, but the quality of your work contributes to your overall participation grade. If intense study and the generous-but-rigorous exchange of ideas does not appeal to you, then this will be a tough course for you and you should see me as soon as possible.

Quizzes (15%)

There will be an occasional quiz on the reading or other material due that day. Quizzes feature short answer, multiple choice, and true/false questions.

* No, Anne Fadiman is not a professionally trained historian. I don't care. The book is so good and teaches so well.

Essays (30%)

You will write three brief graded essays. You must complete each essay assignment to pass the course.

Final Project (30%)

By the end of the term, you will write a brief religious history of your own. Writing this story should be fun and challenging. Yes, both. You must complete this project to pass the course. Details to follow.

Attendance

Attendance is required at all class meetings. Except in cases of documented illness or family emergency, more than two absences during the semester will adversely affect this portion of your grade. Students missing more than two class meeting will have their final course grade lowered by one percentage point for each for each class missed in excess of two. For example, an 80% (B-) will become a 79% (C+) for a student with three absences. If, for any reason, you have five or more absences, you cannot pass the course. Punctuality is important as well. Three late arrivals will count as an absence and affect a student's course grade as described above. Finally, if you are absent, it is your responsibility to find out what you missed in class. Do not contact the instructor to find out what you missed when you did not come to his class. Contact a classmate. Always.

standards

Plagiarism

The use of other people's words or ideas without sufficient citation, is an act of cowardice, a self-betrayal, and the most serious academic offense. All writers must avoid it. Citing one's sources of information is the straightforward way to avoid plagiarizing. Crediting other writers is also a rhetorically effective practice that lends you, the writer, additional authority in readers' eyes. If I detect plagiarism in work submitted for a grade, you will fail the course. All plagiarism offenses will be reported to the Associate Provost for Academic Services. Plagiarists may also be referred to the Student Admissions and Academic Standing Committee (SAAS) to determine whether further disciplinary action, including suspension, is needed. More information about Berea's plagiarism policies is available in the [section on academic honesty and dishonesty in the college catalog](#).

Laptops, Tablets, and E-Readers

You will not need a laptop, a tablet, or an e-reader such as the Kindle during our meetings. If you bring one of these lovely devices to class, please keep it stored silently beneath your seat. Using one of these devices in class constitutes an absence for the day.

Phones

Phones must be completely silent and out of sight during class. Even the supposedly quiet vibrate feature needs to be shut off. In-class cell phone use constitutes an absence for the day.

Miscellaneous

These are tedious issues, but they need to be mentioned. Please refrain from talking while someone else is talking. It's simple courtesy. Also, do not walk in and out of class as if this were a bus terminal, consume food or beverages ostentatiously, fall asleep as if the classroom were your dorm room, or engage in other irksome behavior. Thank you in advance.

calendar

Guidelines for our Timeline

Reading and writing assignments are to be completed for the class period for which they are listed—not afterward. I reserve the right to make scheduling and assignment changes, all of which will be announced in class and/or on Moodle. Assignments found on Moodle will have the following after their title: — M.

WEEK 1: ENCOUNTERS

1. Tues., 1/12 First Questions, First Thoughts
2. Thur., 1/14 Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, “Preface” and chs. 1–5 (62 pages)

WEEK 2: RIVALRY

3. Tues., 1/19 Fadiman, *Spirit*, chs. 6–14 (149 pages)
4. Thur., 1/21 Fadiman, *Spirit*, chs. 15–19 (78 pages)

WEEK 3: GHOST STORIES

5. Tues., 1/26 George Keatinge, *Authentic Account of the Appearance of a Ghost in Queen-Ann's County, Maryland* (12 pages) — M
6. Thur., 1/28 Elaine Forman Crane, “A Ghost Story” in *Witches, Wife Beaters, and Whores* (40 pages)
- Sat., 1/30 → *Paper #1 Due* — M

WEEK 4: TRANSFORMATION

7. Tues., 2/2 Craig Harline, *Conversions*, “To the Blesséd Reader” and chs. 1–20 (141 pages)
8. Thur., 2/4 Harline, *Conversions*, chs. 21–34, “Postscript,” and “Bibliographical Essay” (157 pages)

WEEK 5: LIFE WRITING, PART 1

9. Tues., 2/9 *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (78 pages)
10. Thur., 2/11 *Narrative*, excerpts from “Book of Life” and “A Memorial Chapter” (75 pages)

WEEK 6: LIFE WRITING, PART 2

11. Tues., 2/16 Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, “A Note on the Sources,” “Part I: Isabella,” and “Part II: Sojourner Truth, A Life” (148 pages)
12. Thur., 2/18 Painter, “Part III: Sojourner Truth, A Symbol” (136 pages)

WEEK 7: DESIRE

13. Tues., 2/23 Jill Lepore, “Historians Who Love Too Much” (16 pages) — M
14. Thur., 2/25 Richard Brown, “Microhistory and the Post-Modern Challenge” (20 pages) — M
- Sun. 2/28 → *Paper #2 Due* — M

WEEK 8: CAPTIVITY

- Tues., 3/1 No Class Meeting — Berea College’s Labor Day
15. Thur., 3/3 Selections from primary sources about the Deerfield raid, including John Williams’s *Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion*, **Stephen Williams’s diary**, and Native American oral traditions

WEEK 9: SPRING BREAK

- Tues., 3/8 No Class Meeting — Spring Break
- Thur., 3/10 No Class Meeting — Spring Break

WEEK 10: RESCUE

16. Tues., 3/15 John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive* (read the entire book)
 17. Thur., 3/17 Continued discussion: Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive*
 Sun., 3/20 → *Paper #3 Due* — M

WEEK 11

18. Tues., 3/22 Introducing the (Vermont) Pilgrims — M
 19. Thur., 3/24 Trying to make (some) sense of the Pilgrims — M

WEEK 12

20. Tues., 3/29 Contexts for the Pilgrims — M
 21. Thur., 3/31 Contexts for the Pilgrims — M

WEEK 13

22. Tues., 4/5 Writing Conferences with Prof. Guthman
 23. Thur., 4/7 Writing Conferences with Prof. Guthman

WEEK 14

- Tues., 4/12 No Class Meeting — Prof. Guthman at a conference
 Thur., 4/14 No Class Meeting — Prof. Guthman at a conference

WEEK 15

24. Tues., 4/19 Writing Workshop
 25. Thur., 4/21 Writing Workshop

WEEK 16

26. Tues., 4/26 Wrap-up and Reflections
 27. Thur., 4/28 → *Final Project Due* — M