Fall 2020 Course Description

Instructor: Emily Johansen
Course: ENGL 303
Title: Approaches to English Studies

Description: What does it mean to study contemporary fiction? Often when we think of a topic of study, we imagine that it is something already complete, that we can approach it as an entire object. While this might not ever be as true as we think, it definitely isn’t true when thinking about contemporary literature and culture. What, for instance, do we even mean by “contemporary?” How does it fit into ideas of “cultural tradition” which continue to shape what it means to study literature? How do the methods of English studies help us to understand current texts? How do the questions about form, genre, theme, or rhetoric that we associate with older texts shape how we understand contemporary texts that we might typically understand as “popular,” rather than “literary?” How does cultural value get attributed when there aren’t decades, even centuries, of scholarly evaluation? The contemporary, then, can be a useful place from which to interrogate what it exactly we do when we study literature and culture. These are the questions that will shape this section of English 303, “Reading the Contemporary.” Focusing on principally prose fiction published since 2017 as well as scholarship on contemporary literature and literary periodization, we’ll consider what it means to study the moment in which we find ourselves.

Proposed Readings: