

San José State University
Humanities and the Arts/Department of English
English 255: Reading the American West, Spring 2021

Instructor:	Susan Shillinglaw
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Online Office Hours for 255:	Tuesday: 1-2 online and by appointment
Class Days/Time:	Tuesday: 4:00-6:45
Classroom:	Online

Course Description: This course begins with the works of two seminal western writers, Willa Cather, drawn to Nebraska prairies of her youth, and Wallace Stegner, who blew “tumbleweed-fashion around the continent”; we then turn to a few other western writers, as well as two films. We will consider the complexity of western narratives: Is the west a borderland, where different cultures meet? A homeland, where settlers take root? A wilderness, where intrepid adventurers prove their mettle? An attitude, suggesting freedom, creativity, restlessness? Is it a place to reinvent oneself? Is the West characterized by conflict or community? What about the indigenous west? What about race and ethnicity in the west? These questions and others will inform our discussions.

Course Format: online

1. The class will be conducted synchronously, meaning that students are expected to reserve the allotted class time for online Zoom sessions. “Every trail has some puddles.” If you must miss a class, please let me know in advance.
2. Please leave your video camera on during class and mute your microphone when you are not speaking. Be prepared to engage in class discussions and respond if called on. *"Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect."*
If you wish to select an appropriate virtual background, that is an excellent option. Please contact me after the first class with any individual challenges.
3. Please focus camera at eye level so all students can engage with one another.
4. Please turn off all notifications, close or minimize apps, turn off cell phones.

5. If the class wishes, I will record the seminars and post on zoom; we'll discuss the first day. Please note that University policy requires that students agree to the recording in advance of recording/posting on Canvas.
6. If anyone wishes to record sessions, you need to obtain instructor's permission in advance. And all recordings must be used for private, study purposes only—not shared with other individuals.
7. All students are required to have an electronic device (laptop, desktop, or tablet) with a camera and built-in microphone. SJSU has a free equipment loan program.

MYSJSU

Course materials will be available on Canvas. Please check messaging system through MySJSU. Also, feel free to email me at any time with questions.

Course Learning Outcomes:

- To appreciate the historical and contemporary significance of regional literature in the U.S.
- To understand the cultural and historical significance of the American west.
- To appreciate how the American west has shaped national dialogues.
- To consider how literature of the west shapes our understanding of place, region, movement in the U.S.
- To consider differing attitudes/approaches to the American West.

The Student Learning Outcomes of the Department of English and Comparative Literature are that students will demonstrate the ability to:

1. read closely in a variety of forms, styles, structures, and modes, and articulate the value of close reading in the study of literature, creative writing, and/or rhetoric;
2. show familiarity with major literary works, genres, periods, and critical approaches to British, American and World Literature;
3. write clearly, effectively, and creatively, and adjust writing style appropriately to the content, the context, and the nature of the subject;
4. develop and carry out research projects, and locate, evaluate, organize, and incorporate information effectively;
5. articulate the relations among culture, history, and texts.

Required Texts/Readings:

Willa Cather (1873-1947), *My Antonia* (1918); *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927)

Wallace Stegner (1909-1993), *Angle of Repose* (1976); *Crossing to Safety* (1987)

Stories (PDFs, online) "Buglesong," "Butcher Bird," articles: "Finding the Place: A Migrant Childhood." "At Home in the Fields of the Lord"

Cormac McCarthy (1933-), *All the Pretty Horses* (1992)

Marilynne Robinson (1943), *Housekeeping* (1980)

Student book groups/reports: In groups of 3-4, students will choose a text for presentations:

Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* (1962); or *Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943)

Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* (1985)

Annie Proulx, *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* (1999)

James Welch, *Winter in the Blood* (1974)

Leslie Ann Silko, *Ceremony* (1977)

Louise Erdrich, *Roundhouse* (2013)

Larry McMurtry, *Lonesome Dove*, (1985)

Jim Harrison, *Legends of the Fall*, (1979)

Course Requirements and Assignments:

1. **Book groups, 25%:** In groups of 3-4, please select one book from the above list (dates of presentations are on the syllabus). The group will read and discuss the book together; I will give you some time to meet in class with your groups, and you will meet outside class to prepare presentations. On the assigned day, the group will give a swash buckling 30 minute presentation on the book, relating your text to course themes. Please corral your major points into a two-page summary to distribute.

Your group will engage the class in why this is a significant book about the west. The team will decide what you want the class to focus on, what your pedagogical goal is, and how you will achieve that goal—how you will engage the class in the material. You might decide to bring in outside materials or handouts. You might choose to present a short lecture (being sure each of you speaks) and then lead discussion. You might want to create a video, a play, compare text to films, etc. Your goal is to relate the text you read to relevant material in the class.

2. **Weekly Response Papers, Feb. 9-April 20. 25%:** Each week write a 350-500 word response (typed) to the reading, turned in by **10 AM Tues** on Canvas (**10 total**). Occasionally there will be an assigned focus for your response, but usually it will be open. **Suggestions:** look closely at an issue, topic, or section of a text; reflect on your own feelings, experience, and reactions to regional history and culture;

discuss the writing itself—why or why not is it stylistically impactful. Consider thematic issues: the role of violence in texts; gender; place; cultural stereotypes; movement; dreams; masculinity in the west. Your goal is to engage the material and put some of your thoughts down on paper before coming to class.

Before class, every student is expected to respond to one other commentary by your peers. After the seminar, I will read all student responses + peer comments and send a written response to each student about responses/comments. The weekly grade (1-4) is based on both.

Your weekly responses will often serve as springboards for discussion. Please be prepared to discuss your points in class.

- 3. Final paper, 25% (letter grade—see below): Option A:** a relatively traditional research paper, focused on one of the semester's texts, writers, or theoretical concerns, 10-12 pages. Paper topic proposals (2 pages) are due by April 22. Each student must discuss the topic with me that week or before.

Option B: A western story—fiction or nonfiction. This could be a memoir; an exploration of a place (travel narrative about the west); a short story about the west, modeled on one of the authors we've read (influence noted at the end of narrative).

- 4. Class participation, 25%:** Active participation in all discussions; insightful responses to peer's comments; curiosity about texts, authors, and issues. All assigned novels/films must be completed before class, as noted on syllabus.

At the heart of any good graduate seminar is discussion, both in-class and, of course, outside class in book groups and beyond. As a full participant, you should come to class with texts read and questions formulated. Please respectfully consider all viewpoints and ask thoughtful questions about your peers' responses. All of this will enter into a participation grade. More specifically, I will evaluate your participation grade as follows:

Excellent, 4: Someone who has been a reliable and constant positive force in class, who has not missed classes, who poses questions about the reading, who responds thoughtfully to other students' comments. Oral presentations are lucid, to the point, well-rehearsed.

Good, 3: Someone who has been a reliable and constant positive force in class but may have missed one or two classes. Oral presentations are clear, mostly to the point, perhaps a little rough.

Adequate, 2: A mostly positive force in class but sometimes unprepared. Someone who has missed a few classes. Oral presentations are serviceable, might be more focused, might need more practice.

Unprepared, 1: Someone who has not contributed because of poor attendance and poor participation and poor preparedness. Oral presentations not fully rehearsed, unclear.

In grading your final paper, I consider the following in assigning grades:

A and A-: A superior piece of writing. The topic focused, the language sharp, and the writing free of grammatical errors. The piece has originality and style, is elegant, thoughtful and persuasive. If research is included, it is relevant and clearly cited.

B+ and B: A good piece of writing, solid and clear. But it may lack the innovation and sharpness of the top category. The point is clear but could be supported with additional details. There may be minor spelling, typographic, and/or grammatical errors. But it is interesting enough to hold a reader's attention. If research is included, it is mostly solid and the paper draws from the research.

B- and C+: This response may be too broad or unsupported. Examples may be general rather than specific. There may be grammatical errors. The central idea may not be fresh. The writing may be wordy and vague. If research is included, scholarship might not be relevant, fresh or focused on the topic and hand. Citations may be infrequent, general.

C and below: These essays are unfocused, without a sharp thesis. Examples are general or the essay lacks examples. Research is not thorough. There may be serious grammatical errors. If research is included, sources may be general, unfocused, not cited properly.

Determination of final grade will depend on completion of work noted under "Course Requirements and Assignments": Full participation in bookgroups and group presentation; 10 response essays; final essay and active class participation.

The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined by the SJSU Catalog (Grades-Letter Grading). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: *A+/A/A-* = excellent; *B+/B/B-* = above average; *C+/C/C-* = average; *D+/D/D-* = below average; F = failure. *Within any of the letter grade ranges (e.g. B+/B/B-), the assignment of a + or - grade will reflect stronger (+) or weaker (-) completion of the goals of the assignment.*

Classroom Protocol

I expect students to sign onto Zoom on time; to refrain from texting on phones or other devices; to actively engage in discussion; to listen politely and attentively to peers; to respond thoughtfully.

University Policies

Please see syllabus information web page at <http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo>

“Success in this course is based on the expectation that students will spend, for each unit of credit, a minimum of 45 hours over the length of the course (normally three hours per unit per week) for instruction, preparation/studying, or course related activities, including but not limited to internships, labs, and clinical practica. Other course structures will have equivalent workload expectations as described in the syllabus.”

Schedule

Feb 2: Course Introduction. “The American West and Me.” Select 3 objects; or 2 experiences; or 1 film, television show. Each student will introduce him/herself through contact with the west.

Introduction to Willa Cather: “Old Mrs. Harris,”

<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0201131h.html#S02>

Feb. 9: Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (1918). Book I and II.

See Tuesday Tours on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVJGDEfLhOI&list=UUpxTZPYkfOOG4hLhMOzVw4w>

Feb 16: *My Antonia*. Complete. “A Walk in Willa Cather’s Prairie,”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/02/a-walk-in-willa-cathers-prairie>

Jane Smiley: <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/02/27/willa-cather-pioneer/>

Willa Cather: The Road is All: <https://vimeo.com/40206991>

Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927) “The Vicar Apostolic,” “Missionary Journeys,” “The Mass at Acoma.”

Feb. 23: *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, complete. **Wallace Stegner,** “Introduction to *The Sound of Mountain Water*” “Finding the Place: A Migrant Childhood,” “Buglesong,” “Butcher Bird.” “The Colt”

March 2: *Angle of Repose*, Sections I, II, III: “Grass Valley,” “New Almaden,” “Santa Cruz”

March 9: *Angle of Repose*, Sections IV, V, VI, VII, “Leadville,” “Michoacán,” “On the Bough,” “The Canyon.”

“And the entire history of the West, when we hold at arm’s length the excitement, the adventure, the romance, and the legendry, is a history of resources often mismanaged and of compelling conditions often misunderstood or disregarded,” Wallace Stegner, *The Sound of Mountain Water: The Changing American West*, 19.

March 16: *Angle of Repose*, complete. “At Home in the Fields of the Lord,” “Letter, Much too Late.” “The Sense of Place,” “The Best Idea We ever Had.”

March 23: *Crossing to Safety*, Chapters 1-10

Wallace Stegner *A Writer's Life*. <https://youtu.be/ZGCC6hhrSKQ>

March 30: SPRING BREAK

April 6: Borderlands: *Crossing to Safety*, complete. Discussion of **John Sayles'** film, *Lone Star* (1996) (On Prime Video)

Student presentation: Stegner, *Wolf Willow* or *Big Rock Candy Mountain*

April 13: Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992)

Student presentation: McMurtry, *Lonesome Dove*, (1985)

April 20: *All the Pretty Horses*, complete

Student presentation: McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* (1985)

April 27: Discussion of film/story: **Annie Proulx**, "*Brokeback Mountain*"/*Brokeback Mountain* (on Prime Video)

Student presentation: Proulx, *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* (1999)

May 4: Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

Student presentation: James Welch, *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and Jim Harrison, *Legends of the Fall*

May 11: Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

Student presentation: Leslie Ann Silko, *Ceremony* or Louise Erdrich, *Roundhouse*.