

**Late Summer 2014
Department of English
ENGL 4115/5900: Culture and the Text**

Monday/Wednesday 10:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

**Mixing It Up:
Complication, Contradiction, and Complicity in
Five Novels of Oppression 1900-1950**

**Location: 303 Southam Hall
*Please confirm location on Carleton Central***

**Instructor: Dr. P. Whiting
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Office Hours: Monday 1:00 – 2:00, or by appointment**

DESCRIPTION:

In this course, we will read fictional representations of oppression in the first half of the twentieth century in the context of worker exploitation, revolution, imperialism, racism, and political imprisonment. Each of the books on the course was authored by someone who was personally involved in real events and situations that generated or reacted to oppression, and their novels understandably present an insider perspective that is ideologically freighted. Nevertheless, these novels set out a view of history that is in some ways extraordinarily balanced in the sense that they complicate the reductive tendency to situate people and events on either one side or the other of an assumed binary situation. Though the setting and context of the novels differ widely in time and place, they all conclude that oppression is bad for everyone. They are consistent in teasing out the implications of terms such as “dehumanization,” and they are equally consistent in relentlessly interrogating the implications of being human, for better or worse.

The governing question of this course focuses broadly on the contribution literature makes to history. More specifically, what advantages do literary forms (in this course, the novel) offer those who want to chronicle historical events based on personal experience? What does the literary imagination bring to the table? Why, when each of these authors is known to have a distinct political agenda, are they so uniform in highlighting contradiction and complicity in ways that deny readers the easy answers we desire from troubling books? More broadly, can we postulate a unique and important role for literature in current discourses of human rights, one not limited to bearing witness, truth-telling, or confessing guilt?

In keeping with the aims of each author, we will undertake to understand as fully as is possible in a seminar the historical and political contexts of each novel, the author’s relationship to events, and the author’s aims in writing the novel, and to examine the books within these contexts. Research and arguments will be primarily based on documents other than literary criticism, not only history, but law, biography, letters, newspapers, and other contemporary evidence.

EVALUATION:

Seminar 30%

Background group seminar (x 2) 20%

Discussion group 10%

Attendance/participation 10%

Essay 30%

REQUIRED READING:

Azuela, Mariano. *The Underdogs: A Novel of the Mexican Revolution* (Penguin Classics)

Kogawa, Joy. *Obasan* (Penguin Canada)

Orwell, George. *Burmese Days* (Penguin Classics)

Sinclair, Upton. *The Jungle* (Penguin Classics)

Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (Signet Classics)