

Department of English Language and Literature  
 Carleton University  
**ENGL 4115B Culture and the Text I**  
**ENGL 5610S Studies in Contemporary Literature I**  
 Early Summer (May-June)  
 Time: M/W 11:35-2:25  
 Location: 234 Paterson Hall  
 Instructor: Prof. B. Johnson  
 Office: 1818 Dunton Tower  
 Office Hours: M/W 2:35-3:25  
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# Superhero Fiction

Although costumed superheroes have been fixtures of comic books since the debut of Superman in 1938, the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2001 to Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* seemed to register a shift in the superhero's cultural status and domain—but did it? The main goals of this seminar will be to explore the history, contours, and concerns of superhero fiction. What are its principle generic features? When, how, and why did it emerge? What cultural work does it do? What is its relation to superhero comics? And why is it (suddenly?) so ubiquitous? With an eye to such questions, this seminar will proceed along two different but intersecting lines of inquiry. One of these will be to trace the emergence and transformation of the superhero in comic books, from the early twentieth century to the present day. The second will be to examine the points of connection and disjunction between the history of the superhero in comics and the appearance of superhero figures in other genres and media, particularly pulp fiction, science fiction, the “literary” novel, and the short story.

## TEXTS (tentative):

- Emmuska Orczy, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (Modern Library)
- Philip Wylie, *Gladiator* (Wildside)
- Theodore Sturgeon, *More Than Human* (Vintage)
- Robert Mayer, *Superfolks* (St. Martin's Griffin)
- Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (DC Comics)
- Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (Picador)
- Claude Lalumière and Camille Alexa, eds., *Masked Mosaic: Canadian Super Stories* (Tyche)
- Samit Basu, *Turbulence* (Titan)

\*\*\*Additional primary and secondary readings will be available on electronic reserve at the library. We will read a variety of superhero comics as well. Students will be expected to purchase electronic copies of selected comic books from an online source like comiXology.

## Evaluation:

Short seminar (20%): You will have 15-20 minutes to present a short paper that focuses on an assigned primary text or group of texts. Seminars should proceed as a detailed analysis of ONE topic (which you will select) that emerges from the primary reading. Don't feel that you must cover the entire primary text in detail (which would not be possible, in any case); rather, think of the seminar as an opportunity to do some



original research and thinking. Teach the class something about the primary text that they would not otherwise have known. For example: you might zero-in on a particular allusion or symbol or convention in the text you are considering and develop an argument about its function, meaning, or importance. You might select an idea from one of the secondary readings from that week (or some other week) and show how it could be used to inform a productive reading of the primary text. You might show how a given work of fiction adapts or comments on material from another medium: comics, film, tv, radio, etc. You might pursue some combination of these alternatives. The main thing I want to see in the seminar is a *focused, well-developed, and original* discussion of the material. Following your seminar, there will be a brief period of 5 minutes when other students may ask you questions about what you have presented. Following the question period, you will be expected to pose one or two questions for discussion (this may be connected to a passage or image that you select specifically for this purpose, or it may be more general). You will lead the discussion for this period of the class. A note on presentation: You may read out a paper that you have written or you may speak from notes. Handouts are always welcome as a way of helping your audience follow along, and especially if you are going to be making reference to visual material. (15-20 minutes is usually equivalent to approximately 7-9 double-spaced pages.)

Essay (40%): Undergraduate essays will be 10-12 pages; graduate essays will be 18-20 pages. Essay topics should be developed in consultation with the professor and must be substantially different from the topics presented in the seminar. Please include scans of any images that you discuss in detail. 3-4 secondary sources are expected for undergraduate essays; 5-8 for graduate papers. Essay Due: Friday, June 19 before 8:30 a.m. Essays can be submitted through the drop box on the 18<sup>th</sup> floor of Dunton Tower beside the main English Department office. (Late penalty: one letter grade per day; essays submitted at 8:31 a.m. on Friday, June 19 are considered 1 day late.) If you would like to have your final essay returned to you with comments, you must include a stamped, self-addressed envelope with adequate postage with the submission of your paper.

Four In-Class Commentaries (40%; see below): the purpose of the commentaries is to keep you engaged in the class readings throughout the term and to provide the class with starting-points for discussion. You do not need to sign-up for these; simply complete the following four assignments for any four different class meetings (excluding the day you present your seminar). To be considered for full marks, assignments must be handed in in class; I will only accept one assignment for any given meeting. These commentaries will be shared orally with the rest of the class. Assignments handed in outside of class will be graded at a penalty of one letter grade per day late; commentaries submitted on the day of class but after class is over will be considered 1 day late.) Graduate students are expected to write at or around the 500 word limit. Quotations from primary and secondary texts do not count towards the word limit.

Comic Book Panel Commentary [10%]: a 250-500-word commentary on a single panel from any comic book assigned that week as a Primary Source. (You may stretch this to up to 3 panels, but the purpose of this assignment is to have you look carefully and critically/analytically at comic books.) Please reproduce the image or images you are addressing at the top of the page of the commentary and provide a Works Cited list if you make reference to any additional texts.

Secondary Source Commentary [10%]: a 250-500word commentary on a critical term, period, idea, or text from any assigned secondary source for that week. Rather than spending the entire commentary summarizing some portion of the article, quote the relevant passage directly at the outset, concisely paraphrase or gloss any key terms, and then move quickly into a reflection on the term, period, idea, or text that you are considering. Works Cited required.

Primary Text Commentaries (Prose Fiction) [2x10%]: two 250-500word commentaries on passages from two different primary prose fiction texts. As in the other types of commentaries, please reproduce the passage you are commenting on at the top of the page. The commentary should briefly situate the passage in the text as a whole and then move rapidly into an analysis of the passage's significance. Close reading is expected, as is a Works Cited list.