

THE PHENOMENON OF OPRAH’S BOOK CLUB
ENGL 2000: TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

Professor: D. Tyler
Office: Lincoln Center Campus
Office Hours: Tues. 2-4 p.m. or by appt.

E-mail: dr.dennistylert@gmail.com
Class Location: N/A
Class Time: MW 11:30-12:45 p.m.



COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Since its inception in September 1996, Oprah’s Book Club (OBC) has transformed the literary landscape in a variety of profound ways—from ushering in a new wave of enthusiastic readers and spiking the sale of books around the globe to reshaping the advertising and marketing of fiction and offering readers a popular way of engaging literature. This level of success has allowed Oprah to accomplish her ultimate goal: to make her book club “the biggest book club in the world and get people reading again.”

But is bigger necessarily better? And where does the book fit in Oprah’s Book Club when one of the club’s principal goals rests on being the “biggest”? This course will discuss both the advantages and drawbacks of OBC, thinking through its formation and rise as well as its missteps and controversies. For instance, what methods does the book club employ to make literature accessible to a mass televisual audience, and why does an extended discussion of literary form, content, and genre often get condensed in order to reach and maintain such a large following? How does the book club serve as a litmus test for the ongoing debates between highbrow and lowbrow literary cultures? In what way does the book club figure Oprah as the arbiter of literary taste, and what kind of backlash does she receive by assuming this role?

We will explore these matters and questions as we engage secondary sources that map out various parts of OBC’s trajectory and as we examine OBC-selected texts, such as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*; Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*; and Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* (to name a few).

For additional help with writing, please make use of the Writing Center at Fordham University. I also recommend checking out the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* and the *Purdue Online Writing Lab* (<<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>>).

Grammar and Punctuation: Though we will discuss particularly problematic points of grammar and punctuation, this class is not designed to focus entirely on such issues. If I see persistent grammatical and/or punctuation problems in your work, I will mark the first instance of it. It will then be your responsibility to correct the issue and talk to me about it if you have any questions or need further assistance. The *MLA Handbook* is a great reference book for punctuation issues. For help with grammar, I recommend Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference* or Andrea A. Lunsford's *The St. Martin's Handbook*.

A Note on Plagiarism: Plagiarism refers to a form of cheating, which Alexander Lindey in *Plagiarism and Originality* defines as “the false assumption of authorship: the wrongful act of taking the product of another person’s mind, and presenting it as one’s own” (2). According to the seventh edition of the *MLA Handbook*, plagiarism “involves two kinds of wrongs”: “Using another person’s ideas, information, or expressions without acknowledging that person’s work constitutes intellectual theft. Passing off another person’s ideas, information, or expressions as your own to get a better grade or gain some advantage constitutes fraud” (52). Plagiarism also carries serious repercussions, ranging from failure in a course to expulsion from the university (*MLA* 53). Message: Don’t do it! Come and talk to me if you are having difficulties finishing your work before you think of resorting to plagiarism. For more information about this issue, please see the following website: <<http://www.virginia.edu/honor/fraud.html>>.

2. Regular and engaged participation in class (20%): One of the advantages and the challenges of taking a smaller-sized course is that you have more opportunities to discuss the reading material than you would in a larger lecture course. I will therefore expect you to make every effort to participate in class discussion in order to demonstrate your engagement with the material and to refine your thinking about the literature as you prepare for your analytical papers and your final proposal. Questions and comments about the readings, responses to other students, bringing assigned reading to class, and satisfactory completion of assignments all constitute valuable participation.

Of course, you cannot participate in class if you do not attend it, so it is vital that you attend every class meeting on time and that you contact me *beforehand* via e-mail if you must miss a particular class (except with emergencies, in which cases you should contact me as soon as possible). Excessive absences will negatively affect your participation grade, and only absences accompanied by authoritative documentation (usually a doctor’s note) will be excused. If you must be absent from class, it is your responsibility to speak with one or more of your classmates about what you missed. In-class writing assignments, discussions, and workshops are participatory processes and therefore cannot be made up.

3. Proposal (30%): You will be required to submit a 6-8 page proposal to the presidents of the Oprah Winfrey Network, crafting a recommendation for how to develop the book club for the new network. Using what you’ve learned in the course about OBC, you’ll have to put together a persuasive, informed, and argumentative proposal—where you provide advice on the possible ways of repackaging the book club for the new network and back up each of your main claims. This proposal will help you improve your critical thinking skills, your problem-solving skills, your

application of knowledge, your written communication, and your ability to integrate and synthesize course materials you've read.

Full description of the assignment:
"A Proposal for Oprah"

With the announcement of her penultimate Book Club selection, Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, Oprah claimed that she would bring OBC to her new network. She states, "There have been some rumors floating around the past day or so that this would be our last selection. Not true. *Not true*. I'll have books all season long and when I move over to OWN, my new network, the Book Club's coming with me." But since starting the Oprah Winfrey Network in January 2011, Oprah has not selected any new books. In fact, Oprah chose the last selection, a special double edition of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*, nearly two years ago in December 2010. This extended delay, the longest in OBC's history, suggests that Oprah may be having trouble figuring out how to fit OBC into OWN.

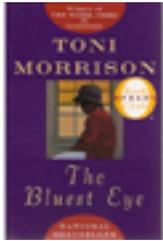
Your task will be to craft a 6-8 page proposal to the OWN presidents (Sherri Salata and Erik Logan), offering suggestions on how to incorporate OBC into OWN. Given what you've learned in the course about the formation, strategies, and successes of OBC, you'll have to put together a persuasive, informed, and argumentative proposal—where you provide advice on the possible ways of repackaging the book club for the new network and back up each of your main claims. Your proposal should include a variety of recommendations, from offering a list of specific titles and literary genres that can be included in OBC to offering advice about the marketing and format of OBC. With respect to suggesting titles or genres, make sure your proposal includes a rationale for why certain books and genres would be a good fit for OBC, or, if your suggestions differ dramatically from previous selections, make a strong case for why OBC should consider reading a different kind of text. With respect to marketing and format suggestions, feel free to consider a range of different issues: setting of the book club (Should the book club meeting take place in Oprah's home, office, or a studio set? Why? Why not?), structure of the book club (Should the club's meeting revolve around discussion or should there be a lecturing component? Why? Why not?), medium of the book club (Should the club continue to be aired on TV or on the web? Why? Why not?), tone of discussion questions (Should the questions be geared primarily around the content of the text or the experience of the author? Why? Why not?), etc.

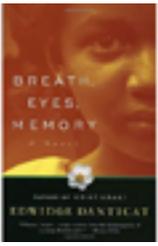
Your proposal should begin with a compellingly written introduction—stating who you are, why you care about OBC, and clearly outlining the main points of your proposal. The proposal itself should include a brief abstract giving an overview of the issues you've considered and an analysis of the resources you've consulted (what are the major points and counterpoints). The proposal will end with a carefully worded recommendation supported by thoughtful reasoning. We will have a "best" proposal competition, where as a group we will select a proposal that will be mailed to OWN. We will all offer feedback to ensure that this assignment is a collaborative effort.

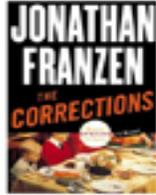
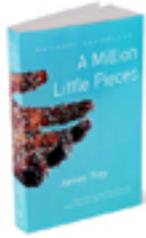
4. Reflection Journal (10%): Throughout the course, you will be expected to use your journals to reflect on a number of different issues and questions posed in the syllabus, and you must come prepared to share your responses with the class. In addition to answering pointed questions, you have the freedom to write any observations about OBC in your journal. These journal entries will help improve both your written and oral communication and will offer you the opportunity to make connections between the course material and your life experiences.

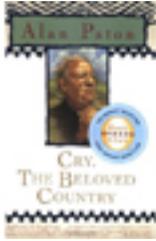
COURSE SCHEDULE:

Date	Topics	Reading & Activities	Assignments
Part I. The Formation and Rise of OBC: How was it born, and what did it give birth to?			
8/29	Introduction and Getting to Know Each Other	“A Reading Revolution”; <i>The Oprah Winfrey Show</i> Official Commemorative Edition Issue; <i>O, The Oprah Magazine</i> ; Blackboard	Reflection #1: By looking at the list of OBC-selected titles, what have you learned about the Book Club?
9/3		Labor Day: No class	
9/5	OBC’s auspicious beginning	Cecilia Konchar Farr, “Reading Oprah,” <i>Reading Oprah</i> , Blackboard Kathleen Rooney, “The Stories of Oprah: Oprah’s Book Club and American Literary Culture,” <i>Reading with Oprah</i> , Blackboard <u>In-class video:</u> “Books,” The Oprah Winfrey Show 20 th Anniversary Collection	
9/10	The Oprah Effect	<u>In-class video:</u> “The Oprah Effect,” <i>CNBC</i>	Reflection #2: What is the “Oprah Effect,” and what role did OBC play in creating it?
Part II. The Scale, Style, and Format of OBC: What does it take to be the biggest?			
9/12	Audience	Cecilia Farr, “What Women Want,” <i>Reading Oprah</i> , Blackboard Elizabeth McHenry, “Epilogue,” <i>Forgotten Readers</i> , Blackboard	
9/17	Quick, Seductive Reading Styles	Yung-Sing Wu, “The Romance of Reading Like Oprah,” <i>The Oprah Affect</i> , Blackboard	Reflection #3: How do you read, and how do your reading practices parallel or

		Simon Stow, “The Way We Read Now: Oprah Winfrey, Intellectuals, and Democracy,” <i>The Oprah Affect</i> , Blackboard	differ from the methods of OBC?
M 9/19	Reading with the television on	Kathleen Rooney, “Formatted to Fit Your Screen: The Flattening Effects of Television on the Books of OBC,” <i>Reading with Oprah</i> , Blackboard Mark Hall, “Oprah’s Book Selections: Teleliterature for <i>The Oprah Winfrey Show</i> ”	
W 9/24	Rhetoric of religion and capitalism: Authors as gods and Books as commodities	Kathryn Lofton, “Reading Religiously,” <i>Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon</i> , Blackboard “A Tour of Oprah’s Library,” Oprah.com, Blackboard “An Anatomy of Oprah’s Bookshelves,” Oprah.com, Blackboard	
Part III. The Women Writers: What do race and gender have to do with it?			
9/26	Black female writers, authorship, and the body Beloved Morrison: the most-selected author in OBC history	<i>The Bluest Eye</i> Discussion, <i>The Oprah Winfrey Show</i> , May 2000 John Young, “Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey, and Postmodern Popular Audiences,” <i>African American Review</i> , Blackboard <u>Workshop</u> : Selecting a Paper Topic and Developing a Thesis, <i>MLA Handbook</i> , Blackboard	Reflection #4 (Playing the role of the interviewer): If you were Oprah, what intriguing, provocative questions would you ask the author?
10/1	Key themes: Constructions of Beauty	 Toni Morrison, <i>The Bluest Eye</i>	Thesis Statement #1 Due Peer Review

		<p>“OBC Collection: <i>The Bluest Eye</i>,” Oprah.com, Blackboard;</p> <p><u>Workshop</u>: Outlining and Writing Drafts, <i>MLA Handbook</i>, 1.8-1.10, pp. 41-50</p>	
10/3	Key themes: Racial Self- Loathing	<p>Toni Morrison, <i>The Bluest Eye</i></p> <p><u>Audiobook</u>: Toni Morrison, <i>The Bluest Eye</i></p>	Reflection #5: What’s the difference between reading Toni’s novel and listening to it?
10/8		Columbus Day: No class	
10/10	Key themes	 <p>Toni Morrison, <i>Song of Solomon</i></p>	<p>Analytical Paper #1 Due</p> <p>Peer Review</p>
10/15	Key themes	Toni Morrison, <i>Song of Solomon</i>	
10/17	Key Themes	 <p>Edwidge Danticat, <i>Breath, Eyes, Memory</i></p>	Reflection #6 (Playing the role of the interviewer): If you were Oprah, what intriguing, provocative questions would you ask the author?
10/22	Key Themes	Edwidge Danticat, <i>Breath, Eyes, Memory</i>	
Part IV. The Controversies: What were they good for?			
10/24	OBC’s logo and the tension between authorship and corporatization	<p>Laura Miller, “Book Lovers’ Quarrel,” <i>Salon</i>, Blackboard</p> <p>Jane Elliot, “O is for the Other Things She Gave Me,” <i>Bitch</i>, Blackboard</p>	

		Jonathan Franzen, “Meet Me in St. Louis,” <i>How To Be Alone</i> , Blackboard <u>Recommended Reading</u> : Kevin Quirk, “Correcting Oprah,” <i>The Oprah Affect</i> , Blackboard	
10/29	The key themes of the novel	 Jonathan Franzen, <i>The Corrections</i> (pp. 1-336) “OBC Collection: <i>The Corrections</i> ,” Oprah.com, Blackboard In-class Debate : Does Oprah Winfrey’s decision to disinvite Jonathan Franzen from her show seem justifiable?	
10/31	The key themes of the novel	Jonathan Franzen, <i>The Corrections</i> (pp. 337-436)	
11/5	The key themes of the novel	Jonathan Franzen, <i>The Corrections</i> (pp. 436-566)	Thesis Statement #2 Due Peer Review
11/7	The genre of the memoir Truth vs. Lie	 “James Frey and the <i>A Million Little Pieces</i> Controversy,” Oprah.com, Blackboard “A Million Little Lies,” <i>The Smoking Gun</i> , Blackboard	Reflection #7 : How would you describe the differences between a memoir and an autobiography?

		“James Frey Interview,” <i>The Oprah Winfrey Show</i>	
11/12	Oprah’s apology to Frey	Videos: clips of Oprah’s 2011 interview with James Frey, Oprah.com, Blackboard	Analytical Paper #2 Due Peer Review
V. The Return: A Turn to Classics: Why is it easier to work with the dead than with the living?			
11/14	“Traveling with the Classics”	Kathleen Rooney, “Everything Old Is New Again: Oprah’s Book Club Returns with the Classics,” <i>Reading with Oprah</i> , Blackboard	
11/19	Key themes	 <p>Alan Paton, <i>Cry, the Beloved Country</i></p> <p>“OBC Collection: <i>Cry, the Beloved Country</i>,” Oprah.com, Blackboard</p>	
11/21		Thanksgiving Recess: No class	
11/26	Key themes	Alan Paton, <i>Cry, the Beloved Country</i>	
11/28	Assessing the Argument	Rita Bernard, “Oprah’s Paton, or South Africa and the Globalization of Suffering,” <i>English Studies in Africa</i> , Blackboard	
VI. The Future: What does it hold?			
12/3	OBC at OWN	“Oprah’s Book Announcement: Jonathan Franzen’s <i>Freedom</i> ,” Oprah.com, Blackboard	Reflection #8: What’s your vision for OBC’s future?

12/5	Alternative ideas: Book Club, Fight Club	“Oprah on Jimmy Kimmel,” Feb. 2012	Proposal Due
12/10	Conclusion and Evaluation	Reflection on what’s been learned during the course	