

Religious Studies QUEST 1XX: Religion, Difference, and Children's Books

(to be submitted for cross-listing with African American Studies, Women's Studies)

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ALL ABOUT THIS COURSE

How can children's and young adult literature help us to think about religious difference? We all come from varied religious, racial, ethnic, and gender backgrounds. How are these identities told in children's books? How do we introduce young people to difficult ideas like inequality, discrimination, and violence? How do our own memories of children's and young adult literature affect what kind of people we become? What challenges and successes have women writers of children's literature had in America? The heroes and heroines of our texts all face, and sometimes bridge, intercultural differences. How will our own encounter with these stories affect how we imagine diversity in America?

ALL ABOUT QUEST I

All new students at UW Oshkosh take a Quest 1 course during their first fall on campus. Rather than thinking of this as an onerous requirement, I invite you to consider it an opportunity to build a learning community and to reflect on the exciting, sometimes dizzying experience of starting your college career. In addition to doing a lot of reading and writing this semester, we will also spend time getting to know UW Oshkosh by attending campus activities, visiting locations on campus, getting acclimated to the many resources available to you here, and learning about the University Studies Program (USP), which will form the core of your college education. Because many of the texts we read this semester are often taught in elementary and high schools and we will find ourselves confronting the very notion of learning itself, this course will provoke thoughts about your own ongoing educational journey.

OUR SIGNATURE QUESTION: INTERCULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

Our signature question is: **How do people understand and BRIDGE cultural differences?**

Intercultural knowledge and competence is the understanding of one's own culture as well as cultures beyond one's own; the recognition of the cultural values and history, language, traditions, arts, and social institutions of a group of people; the ability to negotiate and bridge cultural differences in ways that allow for broader perspectives to emerge; and the skill to investigate a wide range of world views, beliefs, practices, and values.

Bridges will be with us throughout the semester, both literally and figuratively. Look for the bridges, and the missing bridges, in our very first book of the semester, Jacqueline Woodson's *Feathers*. Do the bridges always succeed? What happens when they rupture and break? How do we build them? Throughout the semester, we will discuss the two other big terms in that question: "culture" and "difference," perhaps finding that they are more complex than we thought they were.

IT'S ACTUALLY A TRILOGY: THE OTHER TWO SIGNATURE QUESTIONS

This semester, you are studying intercultural differences, although we will touch upon the other two questions. Here's a preview of those other two topics:

SQ: Sustainability: How do people understand and create a more sustainable world?

SQ: Civic knowledge: How do people understand and engage in community life?

WHY A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION?

You might have noticed that this class is cross-listed in several different programs, including Religious Studies, African American Studies, and Women's Studies. That's the beauty of the liberal arts, which are not necessarily "liberal" (people with many different political stances work in the liberal arts) or about "art" (I love to draw, but I am quite terrible at it). The "liberal arts" refer to the broad study of all the myriad things that make humans and their societies tick. Human beings aren't programmed into just one academic department—why should your courses be that way? Life experiences, and our questions about them, are quite messy and interwoven like threads on a tapestry, so thinking about our question this semester involves thinking from many different perspectives. Parts of this course will feel like a history class; parts will feel like English; parts like political science; parts will resemble philosophy; and so on. Above all, heed the advice of sci-fi author Douglas Adams: DON'T PANIC. I expect you to be new to these kinds of thinking.

CRUCIAL SKILLS THAT WE WILL DEVELOP IN THIS COURSE

1. We will learn to identify and evaluate **underlying theories and assumptions** about religion, race, gender, and class in the United States
2. We will improve our **written communication** through myriad in-class and take home essay assignments, and will expand our **oral communication** skills through class discussions and presentations
3. We will develop our **information literacy** through time spent in UW Oshkosh's Polk Library and through the careful, critical use of online resources related to religion and to children's literature

4. We will develop skills in **empathy**, in considering other people's **worldview**, and in encountering **difference** that will serve us as global citizens both personally and professionally

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

PLEASE NOTE: There are more detailed versions of ALL assignments and grading policies under "Assignments" on Desire to Learn.

1. **Class attendance and participation.** This is probably the single most important category of your grade. Without attending class, you will miss out on our ongoing discussions; explanations of assignments and on campus resources; and, most importantly, the chance to make your voice heard. We have approximately **28 class meetings this semester, including the exam dates.** (NOTE TO REVIEWS: Assumes 2x per week 14 week course). I will take attendance via sign in sheet. Everyone gets **4 free absences, no questions asked**—because I know that life happens. 4 absences=2 weeks of class, which would cover one horrible bout of the flu, two family emergencies, or 4 missed alarm clocks. If something more extreme is going on in your life, you should be checking in with the Dean of Students' Office ([LINK](#)) anyway and having them send me a formal letter that covers your situation.

Showing up is only half of this grade. The other half is taking part in group activities, speaking up in full class discussions, asking questions, and being attentive, **with the day's readings in hand**, either in hard copy or on a laptop/tablet. If you are shy, remember that is not just quantity, but quality, that matters. I don't expect you all to raise your hands every second. I *do* expect you to be **present** in the moment (i.e., NOT checking Facebook or texting).

Attending class AND participating=20 pts

2. **Journal entries:** For each of our 4 reading units, you will complete a 3 page journal entry (500-750 words each) that includes a mix of your reflections on the reading and analysis of themes that we tackle in both the readings and our class activities. There will be a suggested question for each unit but I also encourage you to come up with your *own* questions to answer.

Although the term "journal" does imply a somewhat less formal sort of writing than a full-fledged essay, your journal entries must still follow standard written English, use proper grammar and spelling, and engage in analysis and very *specific* use of quotes and examples from the reading. We will discuss this further in class.

4 journal entries X 5 pts each= 20 pts

5 pts=A, excellent, near perfect

4 pts=B, good work, could have used further analysis

3 pts=C, completed the assignment, but sloppy, lacking specific examples

2 pts=D, submitted only a partial assignment (ie, too short)

1 pts=F extremely weak work, token effort

3. In class assignments: We will have 10 **un-announced in class writings**—these might be very short essays, half hour essays, a paragraph reacting to a film that we watch, a short quiz—anything goes. I will drop the lowest grade (just one assignment) in this category.

10 in class assignments x 2 pts each= 20 pts

2 pts=Fully completed the in class assignment, clearly

1 pts=Worked on the in class assignment, but did not complete it or writing was poor/sloppy

0 pts=Did not complete assignment

4. Office hours visit: You will visit my office at least once before the midpoint of the semester (before Week 7). We'll have sign-up sheets for this OR you can drop in during my regular drop-in hours. This is just to chat and see how you are doing in the course. There will be chocolate.

1 visit x 5 pts= 5 pts

(Just think--- 5 whole points just for saying hello and eating chocolate!)

5. Two on campus activities or talks that deal with difference: At some point throughout the semester, you will attend **two different** on campus activities that deal in some way with issues of religion OR gender OR race OR class OR ability OR sexuality—in other words, any of the many, many kinds of difference we will be discussing this semester. I will have an ongoing list of potential activities on Desire to Learn but you can always e-mail me if you hear about an on campus activity that sounds interesting to you. You will write up a 2 page summary and reflection on what it was like to attend your chosen event.

[Graded on the same scale as the journals)

6. Final book analysis and presentation: There is a vast, vast wealth of children's books relating to a tremendous number of religious experiences out there, and I simply could not ask all of you to purchase—or to read—they all. The last few weeks of our course will be a collaborative endeavor. I have put a large selection of such books on reserve at Polk Library. For your final project, you will each read and analyze a different **one** of these books in light of the themes and readings from this course. You will do a short oral presentation of this work for your classmates and will write up an analysis of the book (with some relevant hyperlinks and images) for our class Tumblr, which will become a nice collaborative record of the thinking we have done together this semester.

1 e-mail selecting book (5 pts) + 1 presentation (10 pts) + 1 write up (10 pts)= 25 pts

Grade Breakdown:

Attendance and participation: 20 pts

Journal entries: 20 pts

In class assignments: 20 pts

Office hours visit: 5 pts

Campus activities: 10 pts

Final book analysis and presentation: 25 pts

Total: 100 pts

Final Grade Scale:

Out of 100 possible points:

A+ 97-100	B+ 87-89	C+ 77-79	D+ 67-69	F below 60
A 93-96	B 83-86	C 73-76	D 63-66	
A- 90-92	B- 80-82	C- 70-72	D- 60-62	

CLASS POLICIES AND FUN WITH BUREAUCRACY

1. **Be civil.** This doesn't mean that in class we don't engage in vigorous debate and state our opinions. It *does* mean that we do so with decorum and without slurs or demeaning language.

Example of a civil question: "I don't understand why the African American students in *Feathers* are mistrusting of the white student who moves into their neighborhood. What kind of history is behind that?"

This question is critical but also raises an intellectual point.

Example of a not civil question: "*Feathers* is dumb. Why does this book waste our time with such whiny students?"

This question uses imprecise language ("dumb") and just complains; it doesn't raise an intellectual point.

2. **Early alert:** Instructors at UW Oshkosh are asked to check out how you all are doing very early in the semester, meaning, during the first 2-3 weeks. This is why your Unit 1 journal is due a bit early. We actually go into our grading system and rate your performance and attendance during the first two weeks. If you're having trouble with either aspect of the class, you might receive some notification letters from on campus offices that can help you. If this happens, **don't** panic, but **do** take it seriously; this Early Alert system is there to make sure you get help with your studying/writing/organization right away, and is not intended to be a form of punishment.

3. **ePortfolio:** You will upload at least two of your assignments this semester (the first journal entry and the final assignment) to your **ePortfolio**, which is embedded in Desire to Learn. The ePortfolio allows you to keep a nice online file of your work from throughout your college career; you will revisit some of your essays from this year in later semesters. We will discuss the ePortfolio and learn how to use it in class and with your peer mentor.

4. **E-mail** (your uwosh.edu account) is an official form of class business. This means that I expect you to check it daily on weekdays and to read my e-mails, as they are official class announcements. E-mail is also an *excellent* way to reach me, but you, 1) always identify who you are and what course you are taking in your e-mail! And 2) understand that I receive a high volume of mail so it may take me up to 24 hours to respond (longer on weekends), and plan accordingly.

5. **Intercultural difference can be challenging but rewarding.** Both within our class discussions and in our on-campus activities, you *will* encounter people whose backgrounds and/or views are different from your own. This can sometimes be uncomfortable. Much like a challenging physical exercise (i.e., sit ups), that discomfort can be **productive**, causing us to build our empathy muscles (rather than our core abdominal muscles). We'll discuss this further in class.

ACADEMIC RESOURCES: USE THEM

[The UW Oshkosh Writing Center](#)

Even the strongest writers need second opinions.

[Polk Library.](#)

It's awesome. Ask a librarian, in person or online. Find great resources. Study with friends.

[Undergraduate Advising Resource Center \(UARC\)](#)

Learn about different majors, get advise about registration, and more.

[Center for Academic Resources](#)

Get tutoring support.

READINGS AND CLASS SCHEDULE

Below is a list of our readings, and some other major dates of importance, for this semester. Each reading should be completed **before** the class for which it is listed. Bring the readings with you to class. A reading followed by a **TB** is a **text to purchase** at University Books and More or at the retailer of your choice. A reading followed by an **ER** means it is available on E-reserve via the Polk Library website; you can download and/or print it out. A reading followed by an **OL** means it's simply online and it is then hyperlinked in the syllabus; again, you can either save the file or print it out.

So, remember:

TB: textbook/text to purchase

ER: E-reserve

OL: Online

UNIT 1: DIFFERENCE AND HOPE: JACQUELINE WOODSON'S FEATHERS

Jacqueline Woodson is one of the most prominent and prolific authors of African American children's literature working today. Her 2007 novel, *Feathers* (aimed at grades 4-7), was a Newberry Honor book. It explores the dynamics in 'tween-aged Fannie's family and classroom when a white student suddenly appears in her all-black classroom and students speculate that he may—or may not—be Jesus.

Week 1: Introductions

Feathers, first third

Week 2: *Feathers*, second third

Edward Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012), excerpt (**ER**)

First journal essay: In *Feathers*, Fannie notices different attitudes toward religion (specifically, toward Christian traditions) when she observes her mother, her friend Samantha, her other classmates, and her own thoughts. Compare and contrast any statements about “religion,” “hope,” or related topics from *Feathers* with your own observations about religion in your life, the lives of those around you, or in lives portrayed today in fictional or news media. How are aspects of religion that you see around you similar to the portrayals in *Feathers*? How are they different? Write *freely* (try not to self-censor) and *analytically* (we will discuss analysis in class) about these questions in an essay of **approximately 500-750 words**. (About 2-3 typed double-spaced pages). **Upload this essay to the D2L Dropbox folder that I have created for this assignment, AND upload it to your E-Portfolio.**

Journal on *Feathers* due at the end of this week.

Week 3: *Feathers*, to conclusion

UNIT 2: RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN PICTURE BOOKS

Week 4: Karen English, *Nadia's Hands* (Boyd Mills Reprint, 2009) (TB)

The publisher's blurb says it quite concisely: "When Nadia is chosen to be a flower girl in Auntie Laila's traditional Pakistani wedding, her hands are decorated with beautiful designs made with mehndi. When Nadia's hands are done, she worries what her classmates will say."

Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *Abuelita's Secret Matzahs* (Clerisy, 2005) (TB)

Sandy Eisenberg Sasso is a reconstructionist Jewish rabbi and children's book author. *Abuelita's Secret Matzahs* delves into the history of the *conversos*, Jews whose ancestors converted to Catholicism at the time of the Spanish inquisition but whose families retained closeted Jewish practices in subsequent generations.

Jewish Women's Archive, "Conversas."

<http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/conversas> (OL)

Week 5: Fun with Holidays

Excerpts from the *Festival Time* series on Eid, Diwali and other holy days; discussion of marketing and explaining holidays to small children. (ER)

Richard King, "spirituality, capitalist," <http://freq.uenci.es/2011/11/24/spirituality-capitalist/> (OL)

Melissa Renck Payton and Mary Renck Jalingo, "Make me an instrument of your peace: Honoring Religious Diversity and Modeling Respect for Faiths Through Children's Literature." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 35 (2008), 301-303 (ER)

UNIT 3: LEARNING DIFFERENCE, LEARNING TRAUMA: HABIBI

Naomi Shihab Nye is the daughter of an American mother and a Palestinian father. She is one of the leading poets of her generation and a powerful voice for global peace. In addition to authoring numerous volumes of poetry, she has written a picture book, *Sitti's Secrets*, and a young adult novel, *Habibi*, which are loosely based upon her own family's history and her relationship with her Palestinian grandmother.

Week 6: Naomi Shihab Nye, *Habibi* (Simon Pulse Reissue, 1999), 1-74 (TB)

Rachel Barenblat, "Interview with Naomi Shihab Nye."

<http://www.pifmagazine.com/1999/08/interview-withnaomi-shihab-nye/> (OL)

Week 7: *Habibi*, 75-148

Arwa Abuwara, “This is What a Muslim Vegetarian Looks Like,” (OL)
<http://www.greenprophet.com/2010/12/muslim-vegetarians-meet/>

For a comparative religion perspective on vegetarianism: Jeff Wilson, “Tofu and War Gods,”
<http://killingthebuddha.com/mag/hunger/tofu-and-war-gods/> (OL)

Viewing: *Wearing Hijab*

Week 8: *Habibi* 149-212

Ashley Makar, “Christian, for All Intents and Purposes,”
<http://killingthebuddha.com/mag/dispatch/unpacking-religious-baggage/> (OL)

Week 9: *Habibi* 213-271

Stephen Prothero, “A Niche of Prayer in a Vulnerable Place,”
<http://killingthebuddha.com/mag/damnation/a-niche-of-a-prayer-in-a-vulnerable-place/> (OL)

UNIT 4: PACKAGING DIFFERENCE OR, RELIGIOUS FUN WITH THE AMERICAN GIRL SERIES

Week 10: Connie Porter, *Addy’s Surprise: A Christmas Story* (American Girl, 1993), 1-27 (TB)

Addy’s Surprise is Book 3 of the *Addy American Girl* books. Addy and her mother are former slaves who escaped to freedom in Philadelphia at the time of the Civil War. This particular volume focuses on their experience during the Christmas season, including several scenes set in an African Methodist Episcopal Church,

Peggy Orenstein, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), Chapter 2, 11-32 (ER)

Week 11: Porter, *Addy’s Surprise*, 28-65 (TB)

Jacqueline Greene, *Candlelight for Rebecca* (American Girl, 2009), excerpt (ER)

Rebecca is the first Jewish American Girl doll; she lives on the Lower East Side of New York.

Janet Shaw, *Meet Kaya* (American Girl, 2002), excerpt (ER)

Kaya is a Native American character in the nineteenth century; her introductory book includes representations of Native American spirituality.

Weeks 12-14: In class presentations and completion of collaborative tumblr blog of written analysis.