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Muhlenberg College

First-Year Seminars

Class of 2021

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First-Year Seminars at Muhlenberg

What are First-Year Seminars?

First-Year Seminars are small, discussion-oriented courses that introduce students to what it means to think deeply, to talk, read and write critically about ideas. Required of all first-year students, First-Year Seminars provide the opportunity to work closely with a faculty member and to read and write about a topic in depth.

Taught by faculty from departments throughout the College, seminars vary in subject. Some examine a topic from an interdisciplinary perspective; others focus on particular issues within a discipline. What all First-Year Seminars share is an emphasis on writing and thinking critically about the values and assumptions underlying various approaches to knowledge.

All First-Year Seminars are designated writing-intensive, and therefore, they require frequent writing and reading. Seminars teach students how to formulate a thesis and develop an argument or an interpretation. In addition, students learn how to collect, evaluate and cite evidence that supports and qualifies a thesis. With the help of the professor's comments on preliminary drafts, students also learn how to revise their work.

What distinguishes First-Year Seminars from other courses at Muhlenberg?

First-Year Seminars are limited in size to fifteen. This small size creates a community of inquiry where participants share ideas. Often the professor serves as the academic advisor to the seminar participants. This arrangement enhances the effectiveness of the advising process and helps ease the transition to college life.

In addition, First-Year Seminars are assigned a **Writing Assistant**, a trained writing tutor who assists first-year students with their writing, reading and critical thinking skills. Writing Assistants (WAs) are highly motivated Muhlenberg students; all are skilled writers. They attend seminar classes and arrange one-on-one and small group conferences with students. Because WAs and professors work together closely, these peers provide first-year students with a writing specialist who understands the course material and the expectations of the seminar.

First-Year Seminars — 2017-2018

FYS 111: Competition and American Culture

Prof. Jeffrey Peterson

This seminar examines the extent to which Vince Lombardi's famous quote "Winning isn't everything - it's the only thing" is the dominant attitude in American culture. Does it bother you when someone merges in front of you on the highway? Were you chosen (first or) last for kickball in gym class? Did you pay close attention to class rank in high school? Competition infiltrates our everyday lives: little league players burst into tears upon losing, workers compete against each other for "friendliest employee," and millions tune in to see which real people on TV "are out" or have to "sashay away" each week. This course will grapple with the ramifications of the competitiveness of American society. We will analyze the impact of competitiveness on child development, sports, dance, and other elements of contemporary culture. We will consider the causes and the effects, as well as the pros and the cons of competition as a cultural value—compared, for example, with collaboration. We will work through, and regularly write about a range of readings by writers such as Malcolm Gladwell, Alfie Kohn (*No Contest: The Case Against Competition*), and Isaac Kramnick ("Equal Opportunity and 'The Race of Life'"). In addition, seminar members will engage in role-play: observing and/or participating in cooperative and competitive activities such as board and leadership games, sports, dance, and marching band; no experience necessary.

FYS 113: Quentin Tarantino, Film Geek

Dr. Franz Birgel

This course will examine the films directed by Quentin Tarantino as a basis for practicing oral and written communication. Tarantino, whose fast talking, allegedly super violent films helped to reinvigorate American cinema, was largely an autodidact who learned his craft watching films while working in a video store. Like Tarantino, we will watch films closely and analyze their themes, structures, and influences. This seminar will examine *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Jackie Brown*, the two-part *Kill Bill*, *Inglourious Basterds*, and *Django Unchained*, as well as some of the many disparate films that inspired him. Excerpts from selected French New Wave and Asian films, *The Killing*, *Coffy*, *The White Hell of Piz Palu*, and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, as well as others will also be screened. Time should permit us to watch some of these films in their entirety. From other films we will only have time to watch excerpts, and you will probably be required to watch two or three films outside of class—more details regarding out-of-class screenings will follow.

Course readings will consist of secondary literature on Tarantino and postmodern popular culture. Since this is a writing-intensive course, students will write short weekly essays as well as some longer essays during the semester.

The seminar will meet twice per week, for four hours on Tuesday evenings and two hours on Thursday evenings. The major films will be screened during the four-hour meetings.

Disclaimer: As stated in the FYS course description, these films contain scenes of very graphic violence and vulgar language. If you feel uncomfortable watching and discussing these films, then you should choose another seminar.

FYS 119: Representing the Body in Art

Dr. Pearl Rosenberg

How do creative representations of the human body invite us to imagine our idealized selves, as well as reflect back to us information about ourselves within social, political, and historical contexts? In this seminar we explore how the notion of the human body as a site of continuing fascination, as well as critical inquiry, has been conceptualized across time by the language of the arts. Through a variety of encounters with works of art by iconic figurative artists (Michelangelo, Frida Kahlo, Egon

Schiele to start), as well as more contemporary visions of the body (in performance, photography, film, literary fiction, essays and memoir), we will explore themes of idealism, vanity, power, and various forms of distortions, projections, and scapegoating. This seminar is considered to be a writing-intensive class where students will be asked to participate in critical reading, writing, and research activities in addition to having encounters with a variety of art forms.

FYS 132: Thinking Like a Writer

Dr. Jill Stephen

Not since its origin in 18th-century journalism has the non-fiction essay been a more popular form—crowding the shelves in Barnes and Noble and filling the pages of newspapers and magazines like *The New Yorker*, *Forbes*, *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *Huffington Post*, and *The Paris Review*. During the semester we will survey a range of contemporary non-fiction forms, such as memoirs, reflective essays, and cultural commentaries. The aim of the seminar will be to turn you into a writer—not just a person who writes, but a person who reads, thinks, and sees in the ways that writers do. Seminar members will work together on developing their powers of observation, their knowledge of the writing process, and their confidence as thinkers.

FYS 137: FYS Frankensteins

Dr. Bruce Wightman

We seem to have a love-hate relationship with biotechnology. On the one hand, we celebrate penicillin, the dairy cow, and bypass surgery. On the other, some fear “genetically-modified” crops and tinkering with the human genome. The mad scientist who toys with nature for profit or ego—inevitably to a disastrous end—is a staple of fiction, from Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to Crichton’s *Jurassic Park*. When are we helping humankind and when are we “playing God”? What are the responsibilities of scientists for the ways in which their creations are used? Society has grappled with these issues during the anti-vivisection movement of the late 19th century and the recombinant DNA technology debates of the late 20th century. This course will explore the dangers, limitations, and promise of biological technology by reading and writing about literature, critical essays, and science. Readings will include H.G. Wells’s *Island of Dr. Moreau*, critiques of biotechnology by the economist Jeremy Rifkin, and biologist Lee Silver’s optimistic answer to Rifkin.

FYS 139: Reading Fairy Tales

Dr. Grant Scott

This course focuses on the origins, cultural and social history, psychology, gender dynamics and literary genre of Fairy Tales. We will examine some of the most influential works by Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm in a variety of interdisciplinary contexts. The second half of the course will consider selected adaptations of these tales in different media, including illustrated books, paintings, poems, novels, short stories and films from different historical eras. The course will analyze how the meaning of these original tales has changed over time and how they have been transformed by contemporary culture.

FYS 142: Who Controls Your Digital World?

Prof. Tina Hertel

Digital technologies are closely integrated in how we learn, work, socialize and collaborate in an ever-connected digital culture. Alongside these opportunities are challenges and realities in how these digital technologies intersect with our everyday lives. This course examines the cultural impact of digital technologies, how an individual can actively and effectively participate in these digital cultures, and what external forces, policies, and institutions may influence control over these digital environments. This seminar will explore contemporary online behaviors and the challenges associated with them. Each

student will create their own blog domain and explore other technologies integral to learning and productivity. Throughout the semester, students will be given exercises to mindfully observe, understand, reflect, and take control of these information technology practices. Students will blog and use social media to reflect on their experiences, observations, and learning.

FYS 143: Musical Revolutions

Dr. Ted Conner

What makes Nietzsche think that “God is Dead”? How is Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro* related to the French revolution? What’s so earthshaking about Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, and why did Marx write the *Communist Manifesto*? Revolutions in music, politics, science and literature are often intertwined. We will read books and listen to music that shook the very foundations of Western culture. Through class discussions and writing explorations, we will see what kinds of connections can be made between these works and how they affect us today. Other possible texts for the seminar may include Freud’s *On Dreams*, Berlioz’s *The Damnation of Faust*, Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* and Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*.

FYS 149: The Power of Maps

Prof. Sharon Albert

In this course, we will read, think, and write about maps: how we use them, how we make them, and the power they have to inform, to transform, and to shape how we understand our world. Readings will include work on the significance of maps as visual representations of space and the authoritative power they can wield. We will also read texts dealing with the history of cartography, as well as some travel literature and geographies, real and imagined. Our questions will explore the assumptions that underlie the making and using of maps. For instance: What gets included on maps? How are they oriented? What gets left out? Who makes the maps? How do maps sustain structures of power? And how and when can they be instruments of change? Students will use the theoretical work we read to create their own critical analyses of maps, and will also think and write analytically about the creation of maps and how maps are used.

FYS 151: No Song Left Behind

Dr. Roland Kushner

Songs captivate listeners with sound, with memory, and with voice. This seminar examines the large body of songs in such canons as the “Great American Songbook,” folk music, musical theatre, “classic rock,” and more, and tries to answer the question of why some songs captivate listeners for a very long time. Seminar participants will read and think about songs as evidence of their historic and social contexts, as expressions of the artistic movements of their day. We’ll use songs to learn about measurement and dimension, to explore how they have fit into the music marketplaces over time, and learn the business of songwriting over the centuries and decades. We’ll write about songs as individual forms of expression that are shared and sung together in ensemble and choral work, and as the work of individual singer-songwriters. Student participants do not need to be musicians, but they should be good listeners with open hearts who welcome discussion and learning about different kinds of artistic and lyrical expression.

FYS 158: Art, Experience, and the Irrational

Prof. Kevin Tuttle

Artists and writers work at the limits of understanding. As they struggle with experiences that seem beyond language, possibly in realms that appear irrational, how do artists and writers invent the language they need to reveal these experiences? What is

the nature of language and what is its potential for newfound experience? In what ways have artists and writers created new structure in order to describe their experience? Picasso said "There is no such thing as 'feet' in nature." The French artist Matisse, as an old man, said with satisfaction "At last I've forgotten how to draw." What can these statements have in common? We will examine these and other unusual statements that artists have uttered and analyze how artists think, how they work, and investigate the paradoxical worlds they inhabit. Through reading, weekly informal writing to extended written analyses, discussion, drawing, and working in a sketchbook/journal we will analyze these issues—issues which haunt artists and may propel their work in unexpected directions. Some of the readings will come from John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, Charles Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Rudolph Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception*.

FYS 172: Mysterious East & West

Dr. Mark Stein

People have long been fascinated by stories of travel to distant lands, among “barbaric” people, who practice “exotic” customs. We are most familiar with Europeans, like Marco Polo, who traveled to the East, but similar attitudes are found in the accounts of Muslims traveling in Europe and the New World. In this seminar, we will read and write about travel accounts by people from Europe and the Middle East, from medieval to modern times. How does travel change the writers? How did they talk about foreign cultures and their own? How do their ideas reflect or differ from ours today?

FYS 174: Brand New Plays

Dr. Jim Peck

This course examines contemporary playwriting in the United States. We will read plays that have premiered in the last five years. Two questions will animate our study. First, we'll read these plays to develop facility with the process of script analysis. Dramatic structure, it turns out, is a rich topic with a twenty-five hundred year history. Really. Experienced readers of drama have developed numerous ways of reading suited to the demands of playtexts. We'll learn some of those methods. Second, we'll attend to the perspectives these plays offer on life in the contemporary United States. Taken individually, how does each play represent a world? Who populates that world? Who matters in it? What forms of action prove effective? Are some inert? How does the play shape the audience's sympathies towards its characters and events? Towards what ends? Taken *en masse*, how do the plays accumulate into a conversation about our moment in American history?

FYS 176: Road Trip: American Literature & Film

Prof. Susan Clemens

Road Trip! The excitement of dropping everything and taking to the road is an American joy. We love the road and the freedom and adventure it represents, whether by automobile, train, bicycle, or on foot. In this seminar we will read books, short stories, and articles about other people's journeys. We will see films, listen to the music of the road, take a short road trip, and connect the intellectual with the actual wherever possible. In the past, core readings have been chosen from the following: *Water for Elephants*, *On the Road*, *Into the Wild*, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, *The Glass Castle*. We will watch a number of films that deal with road experiences, for example: *Oh! Brother*, *Where Art Thou*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Big Fish*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Elizabeth Town*, and even *Up!* From our readings and film, we will explore the lessons learned on and from the road, including personal growth and new ways of thinking.

FYS 183: Warm Regards: The History, Psychology, & Art of Letter Writing

Prof. Tina Hertel

When was the last time you sat down and wrote—not typed but “pen and paper” wrote—a letter to someone? Received a letter? This course will examine the importance of letter writing in our culture. We will explore the extent to which, as some cultural critics claim, letter writing is dying and what implications that might have for our culture. But we will also consider alternative possibilities—that, rather than dying, letter writing is assuming new and vital forms. We will look at letter writing as a cultural practice, examining famous letters in their historical context, learning about who writes letters and why, analyzing the impact of digital technology on letter writing, and exploring epistolary fiction as a genre. And yes, there will be some actual letter writing! We will also be writing analyses to further understand what scholars across different disciplines wish to teach us about this subject.

FYS 184: Global Humanitarians

Dr. John Ramsay

Leaders of non-profit organizations work daily on what is often called "humanitarian relief" for children and youth throughout the world. We'll read case studies of Malala, Doctors Without Borders, the International Red Cross, Paul Farmer and others who have earned global admiration for their work. And we will study less acclaimed leaders and organizations who have dedicated themselves to problems such as poverty, hunger/malnutrition, political violence, stigmatization of ethnic and racial minorities, child labor, human trafficking. Importantly, we will use these case studies to write about complex questions: What is "humanitarianism?" What inspires "humanitarians" to do this difficult work? What codes of conduct inform their behavior? How do their organizations actually work? How are they funded? How should their effectiveness be evaluated? How should we reckon with their successes and failures? How and why does their work matter?

FYS 187: The Science and Art of Sleep

Dr. Erika Bagley

Sleep is a biological imperative and a focus of much scientific research, but sleep is also the muse of great artists, writers, and philosophers. Why do we spend a third of our lives asleep? What is really happening while we dream? Surprisingly, many basic questions about sleep remain unanswered by science, leaving much room for interpretation. This seminar will allow students to learn about the science and art of sleep and think about how one has informed the other across time. We will take a historical perspective and consider how technologies such as the invention of electric lighting and the internet have led to a 24/7 world with much less room for sleep. Students will develop strategies for critical reading of non-fiction texts and skills to improve their analytic writing. There will be several opportunities for students to draft and revise their responses to the readings, building to a thesis-driven paper. Through the reading of the dystopian novella, *Sleep Donation*, and we will imagine a world in which sleep has become a commodity traded among donors and recipients. This course will allow students to integrate multiple ways of understanding the phenomenon of sleep through their own non-fiction and creative writing, hopefully leaving some time to sleep.

FYS 193: Queer Media

Dr. Beth Corzo-Duchardt

In recent years, we have seen an explosion in queer representations in mainstream media. No longer relegated to the role of “gay best friend,” queer characters are foregrounded in TV shows like *Glee*, *Orange is the New Black*, and movies like *Carol* and *The Danish Girl*. In this writing-intensive seminar, we will analyze and discuss some of these media texts, but we

will also consider the long history of scholarly debate and analysis of independent queer media production and the vibrant cultural tradition of “queering” mainstream texts. Some of the questions we will consider include: Does media representation translate into political representation? Should cisgender actors play transgender characters? How does queerness intersect with other identity categories like race, class, and gender?

FYS 194: To Hell and Back

Dr. Alec Marsh

Nietzsche said it: one must undergo to overcome. A descent into the underworld is a standard feature of epic literature, but also of shaman stories. A metaphorical descent into depression, madness and addiction is also a frequent theme in recent literature. This is not a course about PTSD, the hell of combat or of the concentration camps; rather, this course will feature “to Hell and back” journeys that have to do with gaining knowledge and vision. Projected texts include Dante’s classic *Inferno*, a Greek tragedy (probably *Agamemnon*), *King Lear*, Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, some shaman tales. Critical literature may include certain anthropological and psychological texts. One goal of the course is to provide first-year students with a range of intellectual capital on which to draw regardless of which academic direction they later take.

FYS 197: Metamorphoses: Bodily Transformation in Literature & Film

Dr. Dawn Lonsinger

Bodily metamorphosis is abundant in literature; from Greek and Roman mythology to contemporary literature we find bodies transforming into something other than human: animals, monsters, plants, ghosts, machinery, etc. This course will explore how and why writers have focused on people as they negotiate such bodily transformations, both conspicuous and subtle. Whether the physical transformations are the result of choice, force, or chance, we will discuss the purpose, connotations, and consequences of these transformations within the literary and filmic works in which they are found. We will consider how a body-in-transformation becomes a site of contention for various sociopolitical forces. How do these transformations reflect the anxieties regarding specific cultural and ideological developments and failures within a given time and place? How do such transformations speak to common human concerns about identity, change, agency, and the often-complicated relationship between what we think of as the human mind/heart/soul and the limits and capabilities of the human body? Readings will include such texts as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, David Garnett’s *Lady into Fox*, shorter works by Haruki Murakami and Aimee Bender, and the film *Spirited Away*.

FYS 200: X Marks the Spot: The Anthropology of Piracy

Dr. Ben Carter

Aarr... Pirates are blood-thirsty criminals who cravenly loot and pillage the hardworking and upstanding people of the world, right? Or, were they counter-cultural folk heroes? This seminar will examine the lives of pirates (infamous and common), smugglers, and their legal counterparts, privateers, through an anthropological and archaeological lens. We will strive to understand all aspects of the lives of pirates, including the economic, political, religious and social. What sort of community developed upon pirate ships and in settlements? What were the rules? How did pirates interact with law-abiding villagers, farmers, craftspeople and traders? How did pirates circumvent gender, ethnic and racial boundaries? The course addresses broader questions directly relevant to the present day. Who gets to define who is a law-breaker and who is a law-abider? What is life like outside the law? How can life outside the law be more inclusive than within? What is modern-day piracy like?

FYS 205: Cuisine as Culture: Exploring Allentown's Hispanic Immigrant Communities

Dr. Erika M. Sutherland

Food has always provided much more than physical sustenance. In this course we will explore the ways cuisine marks and is marked by migration. In the Lehigh Valley's Hispanic immigrant communities food may be a marker of assimilation or socioeconomic status or it may be a nostalgic link to a distant homeland or disappearing culture. Writers, artists, historians, activists, and cooks will help frame our exploration of food as an object of study and a lens through which broader issues of immigration can be analyzed. Exploring the culinary offerings of the area's diverse Hispanic communities, you will be able to add your own sensorial and analytical impressions to this mix.

FYS 217: Speak My Language?

Dr. Jeremy Teissere

This sentence introduces the theme of this first-year seminar and is composed of words strung together using the rules of English grammar. On second glance, the sentence not only contains words, but also meaning, content, reference, figurative language, an implied audience, and a winking meta-awareness. Where did all of these other elements arrive from and how do they function (more or less) seamlessly together to comprise what we call 'language'? How does one use language to create 'understanding'? And what is happening, down at the level of words and their translations, when we don't understand one another? Our conversations in this seminar will be guided by the premise that language reflects and is in turn shaped by thought, culture, and experience. We will consider how language constructs social identities, how languages are 'built', problems of translation, the relationship of syntax to semantics, and the intersections of power and ideology with language. Our raw data will include fiction, memoirs, media, critical theory, and speech acts in art and performance.

FYS 223: Decisions Under Uncertainty

Dr. Daniel Doviak

Decisions pervade human life. Individuals choose careers, relationships, and consumer products. Policy makers and citizens cast votes. Medical professionals weigh and select therapies. Business executives develop corporate strategies and make investments. While some choices are properly led by impression and gut-feeling, others are too difficult to address with commonsense alone. Relevant information is incomplete and ambiguous; fundamental values clash; objectives are unclear; risks and uncertainties abound. Are there effective ways of dealing with these challenges as we reason and decide? Can different values be measured and meaningfully compared? By what criteria are we to assess the quality of our actions? How should we balance conflicting preferences, or expectations? In this writing-intensive seminar, we will explore these and related questions of decision theory, with a special focus on decision making under risk and uncertainty. As an integral part of our investigation, we'll reflect on various biases and errors that can distort the ways in which we interpret evidence, make choices and justify our decisions to others. Because decision theory is widely applied in professional fields such as business, government, and medicine, we will analyze a number of challenging and instructive case studies in these areas. Course readings will draw largely from philosophy, legal theory, psychology, and economics.

FYS 224: Reading Museums

Prof. Linda Miller

In this seminar, we will look at museums as texts - as objects to read and interpret - and we will try to understand the cultural assumptions that guide the design of museums. What stories do museum exhibits tell? What do these exhibits tell us about who we are as a culture and as people? Why do we even collect objects and place them on display? We will investigate how

museum exhibits are constructed: what objects are included, excluded, emphasized and downplayed and why certain exhibitions are popular, ignored and/or controversial. Since our primary texts will be museums, we will take day trips to a wide variety of local museums, such as the Allentown Art Museum, the Mack Trucks Historical Museum, the Martin Guitar Factory, and the National Canal Museum. We will also try and visit museums in New York City, such as the MOMA, the Museum of Sex, or the 9/11 Museum, and in Philadelphia, such as The Franklin Institute or the Eastern State Penitentiary.

FYS 238: Reading the Supreme Court

Prof. Kathleen Fitzpatrick

In her dissenting opinion on the recent police misconduct case, *Utah v. Strieff*, Justice Sonia Sotomayor references James Baldwin's literary essay *The Fire Next Time* and Ta-Nehisi Coates's award-winning memoir *Between the World and Me*. Her dissent makes clear that Supreme Court decisions do not only rely on dusty precedents and obscure technicalities; they always respond to the cultural movements and political pressures that swirl around the case. In this class, students will explore three major Supreme Court decisions of the last 70 years. But rather than focusing on the legal jargon the Justices often deploy, we will use literary, cultural, and political documents to consider how each case emerges from a unique moment in American history. We will read cases like *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), or the birth control case *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965), alongside fiction, theater, political manifestos, and historical analysis. Our multidisciplinary approach will be helpful to students interested in the humanities and social sciences or in a future legal career. Extensive focus will also be placed on the process of writing - from invention, to planning, to revision - and students will produce expository and interpretive essays.

FYS 246: Proving the Unprovable: Religion, Science, & the "Unknown" in Modernity

Dr. Dustin Nash

While the search for the remains of Noah's ark, evidence of alien abductions, or the hunt for the Loch Ness Monster may seem unrelated, they are linked as products of a uniquely modern desire for "proof." Indeed, modernity has seen an explosion of interest in scientifically "proving" elements of the scriptures, folk tales, and myths that have shaped various peoples' conceptions of the past and the true nature of the present. In this course, we will question the origin and function of this desire within modern globalized culture. Furthermore, we will read literature produced by authors attempting to prove such arguments, as well as those who challenge their conclusions. In this way, we will discuss the nature of "evidence" and its interpretation, and think critically about the ways in which we, as writers, interpret evidence in order to make claims and create knowledge.

FYS 251: Martin Luther, Muhlenberg, and Me

Dr. Peter Pettit

The volatile social and political context of the late Renaissance and early modern period provided the backdrop to the 16th-century Lutheran Reformation, of which Muhlenberg College is a direct descendant. Exploring the dynamics of the Reformation through literature, music, art, theology, and history, we will seek to understand what re-formed Western Christianity 500 years ago and think about how it might still apply to the re-forming of selves that takes place in college. Readings from Luther, Luther biography, historical analysis of the Reformation and scholarly criticism of its art and music (Durer, Cranach, Luther hymns, etc.), a contemporary Luther film, and studies on Muhlenberg College, Lutheran higher education, and the challenges of liberal arts education will shape and inform our explorations.

FYS 254: Springsteen's America

Dr. Christopher Borick

Few artists are more associated with America than Bruce Springsteen. For nearly 35 years, Springsteen has been hailed as the heir to a great tradition of musicians that have used their art to define the promise and perils of the nation. From Woody Guthrie and his Depression Era ballads to Bob Dylan and his 1960s folk critiques of a society in turmoil, artists have helped define America through their lyrics and music. Since his arrival on the scene in the early 1970s, Springsteen has used his music to portray America in a manner that shows both the beauty and ugliness that is found in his native land. In this course we will use Springsteen's work as a point of departure for an examination of contemporary culture. Topics will include war, economic displacement, racial tensions, urban decline, and immigration. The course will also examine Springsteen's focus on the importance of place in the American consciousness, with an emphasis on New Jersey and the northeast corner of the United States.

FYS 257: Strange Neighbors: Science Fiction Looks at Culture

Dr. Gail Marsella

Reading science fiction (SF) resembles an auction - the tables hold an impossibly enticing variety of unique things, the sellers make multiple bid calls for your attention, and you're never the oddest person in the room. You can be tongue-tied, brainy, or as socially awkward as a chimp at a wedding, but read SF and you've got a posse: people (some admittedly fictional) who along with you ask questions others avoid, imagine bizarre futures with new kinds of good and evil, and wonder aloud how they might fare in such scenarios. Why SF stories? Survival information, for one thing, but also provocative and potentially useful ideas on current cultural questions of otherness, change, technology, the future, and the environment. In the seminar, we will consider some of these ideas through various lenses, particularly scientific and literary.

FYS 263: Forced From Home

Dr. John Ramsay

The course will examine the plights of refugee families, forced from their homes by persecution, war, violence, disease or environmental crises. We'll study a wide variety of non-fiction case studies, essays, short stories and documentary films, including Matthew Cassel's documentary film "The Journey," the story of the Shalhoub family's three-year struggle to escape war-torn Syria and gain legal entry to The Netherlands. We'll read Rachel Aviv's "Letter from Sweden," about a mysterious medical condition that afflicts refugee children, and Viet Thanh Nguyen's collection of short stories *The Refugees*. We'll also consider the humanitarian responses of international organizations, such as the UN General Assembly's "New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants," adopted in September, 2016.

FYS 266: Do Robots Dream?

Dr. Irene Chien

From nineteenth-century mechanical automata to C3PO to Siri, our concept of humanoid machines has shifted from the alien to the personal. And as technologies have interpenetrated our bodies and daily lives, it becomes harder to maintain the boundaries between what is natural and what is artificially constructed. What distinguishes humans from machines? Why do we continue to create artificial beings in our human image? Should we care if our machines are not only smarter than us, but also more creative and compassionate? In this writing seminar, we will trace how artificial intelligences have been imagined as loyal friends, alien invaders, docile laborers, and evil geniuses across a range of literature, film, visual art, and popular culture. With a particular focus on the figure of the female, racialized, and/or queer robot, we will critically examine how gender, race, and sexuality intersect with artificial intelligence technology to destabilize fundamental ideas of what it means to

be human. We will read work in robotics science, fiction, and critical theory, including Alan Turing, Isaac Asimov, and Donna Haraway. And we will view works including the film *Her*, the video game *Portal*, and art by Lynn Hershman Leeson.

FYS 272: The Next Pandemic

Prof. Melissa Dowd

In 1996, microbiologist Rita Corwell suggested the idea that one could use the history of cholera to better understand other emerging diseases and their potential to lead to a pandemic, something she called the Cholera Paradigm. Using Sonia Shah's *Pandemic*, in conjunction with various other resources, we will explore the biological, public health, socioeconomic, and political intersections involved in understanding past outbreaks, from the flu to Ebola to HIV/AIDS. We will consider the role of culture, access to healthcare, and climate change in leading to the spread of infectious diseases. In studying these past outbreaks, we will examine the ethical, social, and political repercussions on both local populations and international relations. We will analyze our potential ability to learn from past pandemics and explore the way in which it can impact our desire to respond to all facets of a potential outbreak.

FYS 282: Coffee: The Great Soberer

Dr. Keri Colabroy

The sale and consumption of coffee is a billion dollar industry, making it the second most traded commodity around the world (behind petroleum). The coffee bean was first discovered in the mountains of Ethiopia and treasured for its psychoactive properties. This powerful elixir has fueled political, cultural and economic revolutions since its discovery in the 6th century. Today growing and exporting coffee employs some of the world's most impoverished people, while the urban chic flock to a new generation of coffeehouses. Did coffee really shape world history? Why are so many of the world's poor tied to the economy of coffee farming? Why do we think of coffeehouses as places of comfort and conversation? Can coffee really break down social barriers? In this seminar, we will explore the globalization, economy and culture of coffee and the coffee industry. Course work will include analysis of short stories, other narratives, essays, and film. Students should expect to analyze through writing and improve that analysis by revision.

FYS 283: Salem Witchcraft: Challenges of Evidence and Interpretation

Dr. Lynda Yankaskas

Salem, 1692. Nineteen witches hanged. One man pressed to death. A community in panic. We know this story. But what really happened at Salem in the last decade of the seventeenth century? How can we know, and why does it matter how we tell this story? Why has the same evidence given rise to so many very different interpretations of the events of 1692? In this writing-intensive seminar, we will consider the story of the Salem witch trials from multiple angles, from records produced at the time to historians' diverse takes to fiction and art. We will delve deeply into the world of colonial Massachusetts in order to try to understand how religion, economics, gender, and race may have shaped the witchcraft crisis. We will also investigate the different ways that the evidence of the trials has been interpreted—explained, exploited, and made into art—over time, and what those retellings might tell us about the interpreters of Salem, including what they might say about us as readers and as writers.

Scholar Seminars — 2017-2018

DNA 118: 1917—The Year that Changed the World

Dr. Jessica Cooperman

1917 was a pivotal year in history. In the chaos unleashed by World War I, the Russian tsar was overthrown by Communists, the Balfour Declaration established Zionism as a viable nationalist movement, and the United States entered the war and announced its arrival as an economic, political, and military super power. These events, the reactions that they triggered, and the conflicts they engendered, set the stage for the ideologies and cultural movements that defined the twentieth century. This seminar will explore this momentous year of change and turmoil, and consider its implications for modern society. Working with primary materials like the wartime writing of Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves, the music of Irving Berlin, the work of artists like Kathe Kollwitz and John Singer Sargent, British and American wartime propaganda, and the ideas of political leaders from Lenin to Woodrow Wilson, we will encounter both the trauma and the idealism of the war. Through readings, class discussion, and writing assignments, students will develop an appreciation of the ways that the experiences of 1917 set the stage for the artistic, social, and political revolutions that continue to shape our world.

DNA 119: George Orwell: Art of Political Writing

Dr. Jack Gambino

Can writers take sides in the struggle against tyranny and injustice without sacrificing their intellectual honesty and artistic integrity? Can political writing become art and not merely propaganda? This seminar considers these questions by examining George Orwell's career as both a writer and political actor. Orwell lived through, and wrote about, some of the most traumatic events of the 20th century—the Great War, Russian Revolution, the rise of Hitler and Stalin, Spanish Civil War, WW II, and the early Cold War. He responded to these events by taking sides “against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism,” and he sought to use his writings not only to resist imperialism, capitalism, fascism and communism but also to promote revolutionary politics. At the same time, Orwell aimed to make “political writing into art” capable of truth-telling by means of satire, parody and irony. Students will be asked to write about the complicated relationship between Orwell's political commitments and his novels, reportage and essays. They will follow the literary and political paths that led him to socialism and revolutionary politics, as well as to his celebrated last novels, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, both of which portray the betrayal of revolutionary hopes and the forebodings of a dystopian future.

FYS 167: Imagining Michael Jackson (Emerging Leaders)

Prof. Roberta Meek

Few would argue that Michael Jackson's star persona was in a realm of its own. At the time of his death on June 25, 2009 at the age of 50, he had been a global superstar for four decades. This course will trace his public persona from child prodigy, cherubic front man of the Jackson 5 to global megastar responsible for the biggest selling album of all time to the demonized “monster” accused of child sexual molestation as a lens through which to understand the complexities of race, racism and gender identity. We will explore the social construction of race, gender and specifically Black masculinity. Questions we will explore are: Who was Michael Jackson? What were Jackson's cultural, social, and political origins? What Black vernacular practices shaped Jackson's performance practices? How was Jackson's race and gender “read” at various stages and why? The sources we will examine to begin to answer these complex questions include among other things, Jackson's recordings, short films, scholarly articles, news coverage, and readings on critical theory.

FYS 294: Border Crossings (Emerging Leaders)

Dr. Maura Finkelstein

This course explores the question of “border crossings” – what is a border, in terms of bodies, identities and geography? What does it mean to map, remap and resist these boundaries? And how do we use borders and boundaries to engage with our own writing and writing process? Through these themes, this class asks how reading and writing become forms of thinking and engaging. How do these practices become active modes through which learning is personalized? These are the cognitive questions at the core of this FYS. Students will be asked to use the readings as a point of entry into their own relationships with course themes and use writing exercises to challenge and expand their thought processes. How can writing be a form of thinking? How can revising be a form of expanding? Class assignments will include free-writes, reading-based reflections and assigned writing prompts. We will also learn to share and engage with each other’s writing in generative and supportive ways. Certain pieces of writing will be revised throughout the semester in order to practice extended development and the transformation of rough drafts into polished pieces of writing. Class readings will include writings on critical moments in the United States, several global case studies, and the borders and boundaries of identities.

MBS 102: Nurtured by Nature: Human Relationships with Wilderness

Dr. Jordanna Sprayberry

Is it the scent of fall leaves carried on crisp air, or the unceasing rumble of ocean waves that gives you a moment of pause and peace? Human relationships with nature have been the subject of paintings, prose, and science. This course will take you on a literary exploration across biomes; from the familiar scenes of New England with Henry David Thoreau, to the lush tropics with sea-turtle biologist Archie Carr. We will explore both the art and science of our species’ rapport with the natural world, comparing authors’ depictions of their wilderness affairs with psychological and physiological studies on the relationship between human health and exposure to the outdoors. This exploration will take the form of lived experiences, scholarly readings, in-class writing, and periodic formalized essays.

RJF 109: Wilderness: America’s Story

Dr. Matt Moore

Wildernesses—the literal untamed territories of our continent—have operated as resource, wealth, and threat in American history, driving the growth and image of our young country. At the same time, an ever-changing *idea of wilderness* (that lives more in acts of representation than anywhere “out there”) has played an equally important role in the evolution of the American psyche. Civilization’s other, wilderness promises practical and existential escape from the inequities and pressures of human social life. Associated with primitivism and lost indigenous cultures, the idea of wilderness has driven narratives of self-reliance, the pioneering spirit, masculinity, and a romantic aesthetic. Today, in face of its imminent eradication, wilderness continues to occupy our fantasies, ideals, and fears, appearing more and more frequently in popular cultural productions like reality TV, nature writing, novels, and documentary film. This course explores the politics, goals and historical changes in the ways we represent, construct, and (re)produce wilderness from within the frame of culture. From the Wild West to Walden, the Hudson River School to the National Parks, Muir to McCandless, this seminar explores the historical idea of wilderness and its relationship to American identity, social values, art, and philosophy.

First-Year Seminar Registration Form

Please complete this form prior to your June Advising session

Muhlenberg ID Number

Last Name

First Name

Middle Initial

Please circle your top 8 choices.

(Before you complete this form, please read all the seminar descriptions, which are listed in the First-Year Seminar brochure. Make sure that you are interested in *all* 8 of your choices. As a member of the Class of 2021, you will take one seminar, either in the fall or spring.)

FYS 111: Competition and American Culture

FYS 113: Quentin Tarantino, Film Geek

FYS 119: Representing the Body in Art

FYS 132: Thinking Like a Writer

FYS 137: Frankensteins

FYS 139: Reading Fairy Tales

FYS 142: Who Controls Your Digital World?

FYS 143: Musical Revolutions

FYS 149: The Power of Maps

FYS 151: No Song Left Behind

FYS 158: Art, Experience, and the Irrational

FYS 172: Mysterious East and West

FYS 174: Brand New Plays

FYS 176: Road Trip: American Literature & Film

FYS 183: Warm Regards: The History, Psychology, & Art of Letter Writing

FYS 184: Global Humanitarians

FYS 187: The Science and Art of Sleep

FYS 193: Queer Media

FYS 194: To Hell and Back

FYS 197: Metamorphoses: Bodily Transformation in Literature & Film

FYS 200: X Marks the Spot: The Anthropology of Piracy

FYS 205: Cuisine as Culture: Exploring Allentown's Hispanic Immigrant Communities

FYS 217: Speak My Language?

FYS 223: Decisions Under Uncertainty

FYS 224: Reading Museums

FYS 238: Reading the Supreme Court

FYS 246: Proving the Unprovable: Religion, Science, & the "Unknown" in Modernity

FYS 251: Martin Luther, Muhlenberg, and Me

FYS 254: Springsteen's America

FYS 257: Strange Neighbors: Science Fiction Looks at Culture

FYS 263: Forced From Home

FYS 266: Do Robots Dream?

FYS 272: The Next Pandemic

FYS 282: Coffee: The Great Soberer

FYS 238: Salem Witchcraft: Challenges of Evidence and Interpretation

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