



Promised Lands

Jewish and African American Children's Literature

Africana Studies, English, Jewish Studies, Religion Studies 102

Spring 2020

Professor Jodi Eichler-Levine

Contact Information

E-mail: jeichlerlevine@lehigh.edu

Class Meets: M/W 3:00-4:15 PM

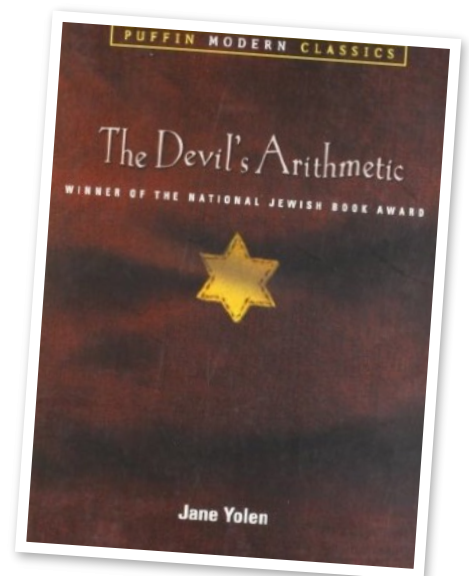
Class location: Chandler-Ullman 116

Office: Williams Hall 194

Office Hours: T/R 2-3 pm *and by appointment*

About This Course

In the Hebrew Bible, Psalm 137 asks, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" For Jews, African Americans, and Black Jews, this was and is a poignant question. This course examines how these two rich, often overlapping and interacting groups tell their stories in literature for children and young adults, with a particular focus on the mediation of traumatic pasts. What does it mean to imagine promised lands beyond such pasts—and can they be reached?



Why religion?

Understanding different religious traditions and their internal diversity helps you to encounter other people thoughtfully, to understand world history, and to be a strong citizen.

Why race?

While race is a social concept, it is a concept that has profound material effects on the world. Everyone is raced; but we all experience different levels of oppression and/or privilege related to race. Thinking intellectually about race is part of living in the world.



Why literature?

I could teach this entire course with history texts, but the creativity of literature—especially books aimed at young people—has a powerful, and very evocative, effect on how we process the past.

Learning Objectives

1) Oral and written communication

We will improve these through essays, class participation, and presentations.

2) Grappling with difference

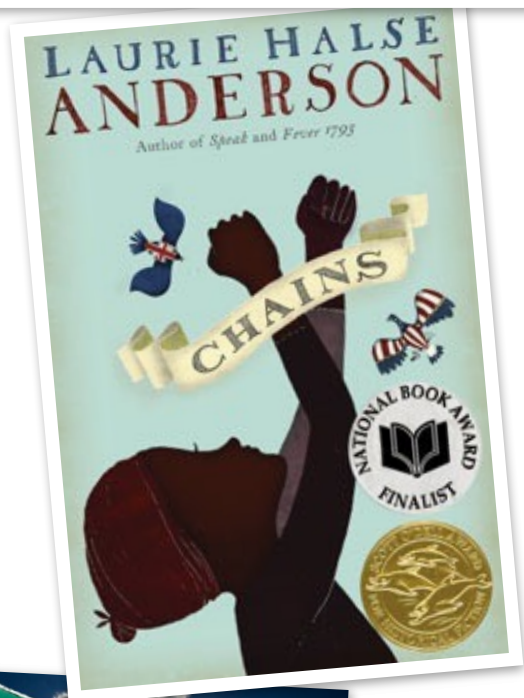
We will be closely examining the intersectional nature of many aspects of identity, including religion, gender, race, ethnicity, class, and more.

3) Religious literacy

By looking at the book of Exodus in conversation with contemporary literature, we will be able to see how scriptures have “afterlives.” We will also learn some basic facts about various religious traditions, particularly Judaism and Christianity.

4) Close reading

We will practice examining texts in great detail. This skill can be helpfully applied to ANY text (or artwork, media object, etc).



Class Policies

1) Equitable Community

Lehigh University endorses **The Principles of Our Equitable Community** [http://www.lehigh.edu/~inprv/initiatives/PrinciplesEquity_Sheet_v2_032212.pdf]. I expect each member of this class to acknowledge and practice these Principles. Respect for each other and for differing viewpoints is a vital component of the learning environment inside and outside the classroom. Our class is a **safe space** for discussion of topics that might be difficult to speak about. We will disagree. However, we will engage in respectful **dialogue**.

2) Academic Integrity. Here is the Lehigh University Undergraduate Student Senate Statement on Academic Integrity:

We, the Lehigh University Student Senate, as the standing representative body of all undergraduates, reaffirm the duty and obligation of students to meet and uphold the highest principles and values of personal, moral and ethical conduct. As partners in our educational community, both students and faculty share the responsibility for promoting and helping to ensure an environment of academic integrity. As such, each student is expected to complete all academic course work in accordance to the standards set forth by the faculty and in compliance with the University's Code of Conduct.

3) I love e-mail. It is the best way to reach me. That said, I get a lot of it and don't always check it on weekends [or, say, while hopefully asleep at 3 a.m., or while teaching!], so please be patient when awaiting a reply (up to 48 hours). **Always indicate your name and what course you are taking in your e-mail! Your university e-mail address is an official form of university communication; check it daily.**

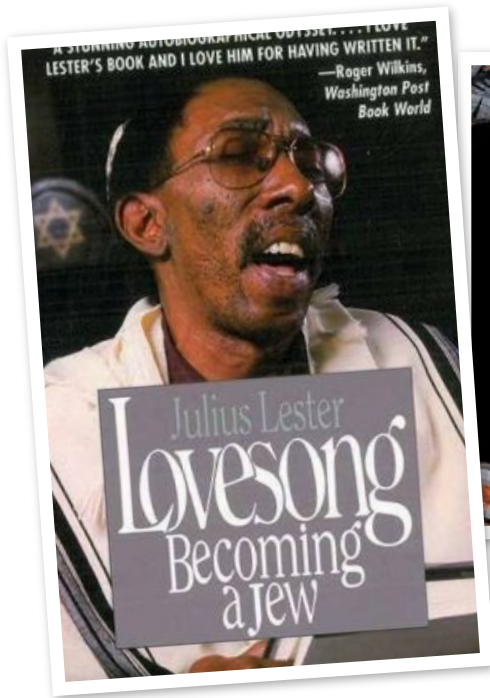
4) Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting accommodations, please contact both your instructor and the Office of Academic Support Services, Williams Hall, Suite 301 (610-758-4152) as early as possible in the semester. You must have documentation from the Academic Support Services office before accommodations can be granted.

5) I do not accept late papers except in the case of extraordinary circumstances (i.e., hospitalization) that you have **documented through the Dean of Students Office**.

6) We will have a mostly low-tech classroom experience this semester. All readings should be brought in **hard copy** to the class for which they are scheduled. Although I do permit laptops and tablets (no phones) in class, I strongly encourage you to try putting them down and taking notes by hand. I realize that this may sound daunting. However, this provides a focused, interactive, and distraction-free environment in which we can all deeply engage with one another. See, for example, the study discussed in this article: <http://www.npr.org/2016/04/17/474525392/attention-students-put-your-laptops-away>

I reserve the right to alter this syllabus as needed. I may add or subtract readings according to our class needs. Updates will be announced in class or by e-mail.



Assignments

CLASS ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

This is a small class. You are required to attend each class, to be prepared by having done the reading for the day, to bring the reading to class, and to participate in each week's discussion. While participation grades are not neatly quantifiable, here's a sense of how those grades work. An A=attends nearly every class; speaks thoughtfully every week; attentive to colleagues. B=attends nearly every class but rarely speaks; or, speaks frequently but misses more than 4 classes. C=insufficient in both areas, but shows some effort. D=major issues in both areas (i.e., misses 10 classes, or never speaks or is disruptive/disrespectful to colleagues or professor). **Value: 20 percent of final grade.**



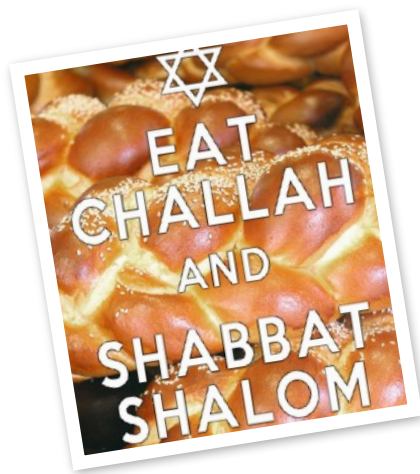
SHORT ASSIGNMENTS

I will ask you to do occasional short, informal written assignments as the needs of the class require—some will be in class, some will be very short assignments you prepare before class. These will be graded on a credit/no credit basis, but you must complete them, and there are no make-ups if you miss an in-class writing. All of these *together* will form this portion of your grade. **Value: 15 percent of final grade**

ESSAY I

This will be a short (3 page) essay on any topic if your choice related to the readings so far. The goal here is to write a basic college essay: clear argument, support from the readings and class material, no outside research—in which you analyze something that has interested you about our topic so far.

Value: 15 percent of final grade. DUE DATE: Monday, February 10, 10 pm.



ESSAY 2: DIALOGUE

For this essay, you will write an imagined dialogue between/among any two or three figures from the semester to date: two characters from different books; two authors; etc. You will be graded on a combination of creativity and how well you use the characters' dialogue in order to demonstrate how much you have learned. We will discuss dialogue writing in class. Length: 3-4 typed, double-spaced pages.

Due date: Wednesday, March 4, 10 PM

Value: 20 percent of final grade

BOOK REVIEW

Each student will produce a short review essay on a children's or young adult book that was *not* assigned for the class. A strongly suggested list of possible books will be available on Course Site. You should select a book from this list OR you may request to review a different book of your own choice, but if you do so you will need to clear that choice with me in writing by **March 18. (Submitting your choice to me will count towards your grade on the review).**

Your essay will be similar in style to a book review in an academic journal or popular literary magazine (I will provide some examples).

Length: 4-5 typed, double-spaced pages

Due date: Monday, April 20

Value: 20 per cent of final grade

PRESENTATION OF BOOK REVIEW

During the final week of class, you will each be responsible for teaching the class a mini-lesson (approximately 10 minutes) on your book review selection. Details to follow.

Due date: Final 1-2 weeks of the semester, in class (I will assign you to a date).

Value: 10 percent of final grade

EXTRA CREDIT You may attend up to two relevant on-campus events related to any of themes of this course and write a 1-2 page reflection on the event. These can count for **up to five points each. (added to an assignment).**

They will be submitted to Course Site folders. The final date to submit them is Thursday, April 30.

Required Readings

The following books are available for purchase at the university bookstore. MANY ADDITIONAL READINGS WILL BE ON COURSE SITE.

Karen Hesse, *Witness*

Marilyn Nelson, *A Wreath for Emmett Till*

Sydney Taylor, *All-of-a-Kind Family*

Jacqueline Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming*

Julius Lester, *Pharaoh's Daughter*.

Richard Michelson, *As Good As Anybody*

Patricia Polacco, *Chicken Sunday*

Carole Boston Weatherford, *Moses (Harriet Tubman)*

Jane Yolen, *The Devil's Arithmetic*

READING SCHEDULE



Welcome!

MON 1/20

Welcome! Introductions, icebreakers, etc.

Strangers and Neighbors

WED 1/22

Richard Michelson, *As Good As Anybody*



Julian Bond, "Introduction,"

Strangers and Neighbors: Relations Between Blacks and Jews in the United States (CS) (CS=Course Site)

UNIT 1: BIBLICAL AFTERLIVES

Questions to think about this week: What do you think of when you hear the word "bible"? What is it like reading or re-reading this story? What characters and themes stand out as particularly crucial?

MON 1/27

Exodus (bible), Chapters 1-15 (CS)

Julius Lester, *Pharaoh's Daughter*, 1-16

WED 1/29

Julius Lester, *Pharaoh's Daughter*, 17-109

Things to think about this week Now that you have read parts of the book of Exodus and all of *Pharaoh's Daughter*, how do the two books compare? Be specific. What is at stake in re-telling biblical narrative? How does gender play out in both narratives? Do you see connections between Lester's biography and the book he produced? How does Weatherford's *Moses* compare?

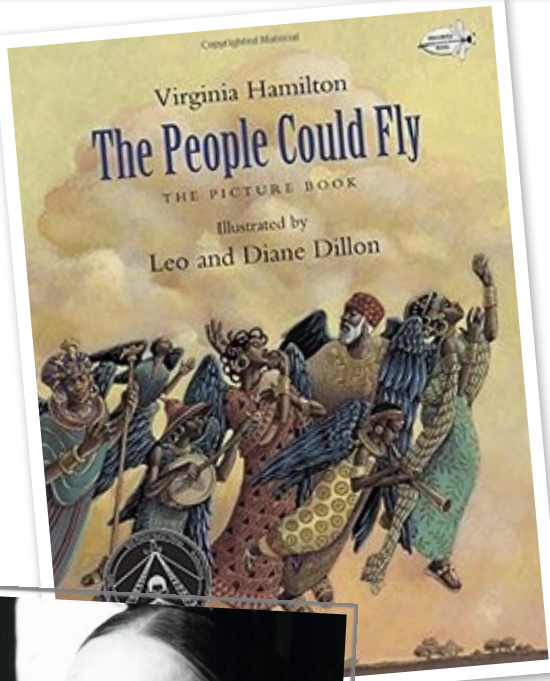
MON 2/3

Lester, *Pharaoh's Daughter*, 110-173

WED 2/5

Carole Boston Weatherford, *Moses: How Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom*

Milton Sernett, *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History*, 1-40 (CS)



Reading schedule: continued

UNIT 2: SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STORIES

Things to think about this week: What is it like reading a book that is a collection of poems, compared with our other weeks? Try writing a poem yourself.

MON 2/10

Jacqueline Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming*, 1-107

WED 2/12

Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming*, 108-215

Things to think about this week:

“Promised Lands” are the main theme of this course. What, if any, sorts of Promised Lands does Woodson describe? How are the varied settings of the book conveyed? What kinds of Promised Lands do we find as we begin *All-of-a-Kind Family*?

MON 2/17

Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming*, 216-end

WED 2/19

Sydney Taylor, *All-of-a-Kind Family*, 1-90

June Cummins, “Becoming An All-of-a-Kind American: Sydney Taylor’s Strategies of Assimilation.” (CS)

Things to think about this week: How does Taylor’s work compare with Woodson’s? How does Cummins’ article affect your understanding of Taylor? In both Taylor and Polacco, food becomes an important theme. How does food connect with religion, ethnicity, gender, and other aspects of identity?

MON 2/24

Taylor, *All-of-a-Kind Family*, 91-189

WED 2/26

Patricia Polacco, *Chicken Sunday*.

Michael Twitty, *The Cooking Gene*, excerpt (CS)

Feasting and Fasting: The History and Ethics of Jewish Food, excerpt (CS)



UNIT 3: ENGAGING HISTORICAL TRAUMAS

Questions to consider: What does it mean to think about and teach about painful things from the past? How did *you* learn about slavery, and how does it compare with the depictions in these books? What are some of the ethical quandaries of depicting slavery?

MON 3/2

Excerpts from literature about slavery, including Virginia Hamilton, *The People Could Fly*, excerpts (CS)

Further secondary readings to be decided.

WED 3/4

Excerpts from picture books on quilts and slavery (CS).

Bernstein, “Children’s Books, Dolls, and the Performance of Race” (CS)

WEEK OF 3/8: SPRING BREAK

Questions to consider: This week we turn towards the Holocaust, one of the most oft-covered periods in Jewish history. What do you associate with the term “Holocaust”? How does *The Devil’s Arithmetic* compare with other encounters you have had with this historical time period?

MON 3/16

Jane Yolen, *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, 1-83

WED 3/18

Jane Yolen, *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, 84-170

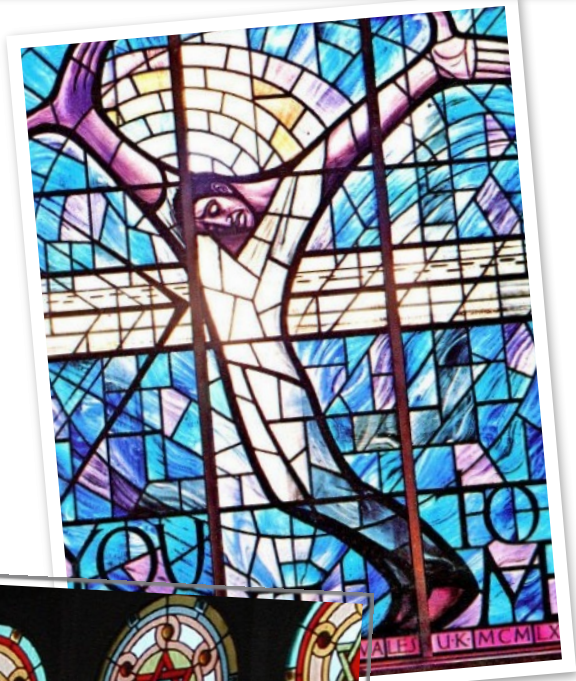
Suggestions to think about: *Witness* combines poetry with the form of a play. How does it compare with other forms we have seen. *Witness* also delves into what it means to be American—just as we hit election day. How does being American fit into notions of Promised Lands?

MON 3/23

NO CLASS—USE TIME TO READ.

WED 3/25

Witness, 1-161



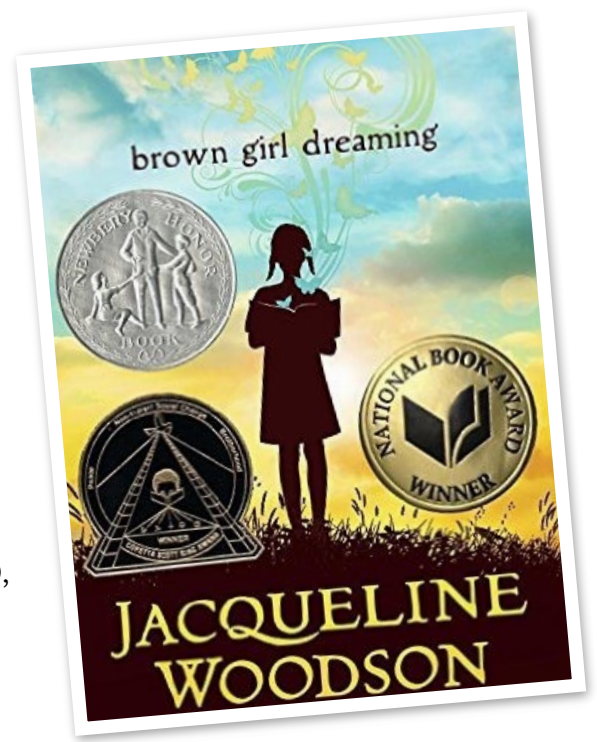
Reading schedule: continued

Questions to consider: Illustrations, photography, and visual culture play a crucial role in both the history of Emmett Till's life and death and in *A Wreath For Emmett Till*. Write about your reactions to the book's imagery. Had you heard of Emmett Till before this course? If so, where and how? If not—what is it like learning about this moment in American history for the first time?

MON 3/30

Marilyn Nelson, *A Wreath for Emmett Till*

Myisha Priest, "The Nightmare Is Not Cured': Emmett Till and American Healing." *American Quarterly* 62:1 (March 2010), pp. 1-24 (CS)



UNIT 4: THE FANTASTIC

WED 4/1

Virginia Hamilton, *The People Could Fly*, excerpts (CS)

MON 4/6

Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*

Eichler-Levine, "Maurice Sendak's Jewish Mothers" (CS)

WED 4/8

NO CLASS (PASSOVER).

MON 4/13

Virginia Hamilton, excerpts. Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic* (CS)

WED 4/15

Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic* (CS)

WEEKS of 4/20-22 and 4/27-29: IN CLASS

PRESENTATIONS OF BOOK REVIEWS

