

AMERICAN GODS AND MONSTERS

Professor Jodi Eichler-Levine

Contact

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Email is the **best** way to reach me, but do be patient— allow 24-48 hours for a response.

Office hours

Tuesday 9:30-11:30 AM

(And by appointment)

Course meets

Tuesday/Thursday 3-4:15 PM

Linderman Library 300

Fun facts

My favorite television show of all time is *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I love to run (slowly), knit, and read. Everyone should listen to singer-songwriter Dar Williams at least once in their life.



About this course

What do we revere as gods in America, and what do we fear as monsters? From Mickey Mouse to vampire lore, we will look in unlikely places to expand our notions of religiosity. A wide variety of examples from popular culture and religious texts will help us to think critically about the categories of “religion” and “America.” What cultural work is happening when we call something a monster, or hold something up as sacred—or both?

Learning Objectives

Students in this course will:

- 1) Develop critical writing and speaking skills
- 2) Learn to navigate the world’s complexity and ambiguity, with plenty of room for introspection
- 3) Become familiar with central theoretical approaches in the academic study of religion



Required texts and communication

Most of the course readings are available on Course Site in PDF form. I expect you to PRINT each reading and bring it to class with you.

Additionally, the following book is **required**. Although we will not read every page, we are using too much of it for me to excerpt it. It can be purchased at University Books and More or wherever fine books are sold. All other required readings will be available on Course Site.

Timothy Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2002)

Since this class deals with a great deal of popular culture, we will have some viewings and additional readings in class; if time constraints require it, I might require some out of class viewings, so stay tuned to e-mail and Course Site for those.

Assignments

What follows is a general summary of the assignments for this course. Further details are on Course Site.

1) Class Attendance and Participation: This will come from a combination of attendance (I will have a sign in sheet) and, most crucially, participation. This is a seminar, which means that it requires all of us to truly be present and engaged. **Value: 15% of final grade**

2) Weekly work: Being deeply and thoughtfully engaged with the readings is the bread-and-butter of this class, and a great habit for all college courses. You will be required to hand in a (very short) memo, prepared before class, engaging with the readings, at **every class meeting**. These memos will help to drive our discussions. We will also have some occasional in-class writing that I collect, so be sure to always have paper and a writing implement with you. All “weekly work” will be graded on a credit/no-credit basis. As you can see, it forms a large percentage of your total grade, so take it seriously! **Value: 30% of final grade**





3) Essay 1: This formal assignment will get you engaged with college-level writing and help to prepare you for your final project of the semester. In this 3-4 page essay, you will write about any topic of your choice using readings and/or in class examples from the first month of the seminar. As in any good essay, you should include an argument, clear support, and analysis. Details on Course Site. **Due: Thursday, September 26, 10 PM, to Course Site. Value: 15% of final grade**

4) Gods and Monsters Journal: One of the best ways to meditate on a topic is to write about it regularly. Throughout the semester, you will keep a journal on the theme of “gods and monsters,” free-writing on whatever you notice in the world around you that relates to the theme of the course. Write weekly (or more often!). This will also be a good way to brainstorm ideas for your final project. Details will be available on Course Site. I may spot-check these occasionally to see how you are doing, but will not grade them until the end of the semester. **Due: Tuesday, November 19, in class, hard copy. Value: 15% of final grade.**

5) Final project: Nominate a God or Monster. For your final project, you will nominate an example of an American “god” or “monster” (or something that is both!) that was *not* included in our examples throughout the semester. You will make the case for how it relates to the themes of the course and why it should be included the next time I teach “American Gods and Monsters.” This final project will have two components: a poster (or possibly a power-point) for an in-class poster fair during the final week of class, and a write-up (short essay), due during exam week. We will start to discuss this assignment in October. **Due: Poster-Due in class December 3. Write up (3-4 pages): Due to Course Site, Tuesday, December 10, 10 pm. Value: 25% of final grade**



Extra Credit: This course intersects with a host of fields in the humanities, arts, and social sciences, including the study of race, gender, religion, history, sexuality, English, modern languages and literatures, sociology, art history, and philosophy, to name just a few possibilities. Throughout the semester, I will be sharing events, typically sponsored by academic departments and programs, that can broaden your intellectual horizons while at Lehigh. You can also ask me about events you have learned about on your own and if they would be suitable for extra credit. For extra credit, you may attend **up to 3** such events and write them up in a 2 page typed, double-spaced summary and reflection paper; in this paper, you should both describe the event and relate it to the themes of this course. An extra-credit paper can either: replace a small missed assignment (i.e., one memo), OR add 1-5 points to your Essay 1 grade (depending upon its quality). *The final date on which you may turn in such papers is **Thursday, December 5, but I recommend writing up an extra credit event right after you attend it.***

Policies

Low-tech life: Try it. You'll like it. "Multitasking" is a myth; it's hard to be truly present in a conversation if you are checking Snapchat on your phone. Although you may bring laptops and tablets to class, I strongly **recommend** printing out the readings and taking notes by hand, and will at times specifically ask you to close your devices. *Being mindfully present in our conversations is paramount.* Going screen-free changes how you think. See, for example, the study discussed in this article: <http://www.npr.org/2016/04/17/474525392/attention-students-put-your-laptops-away>

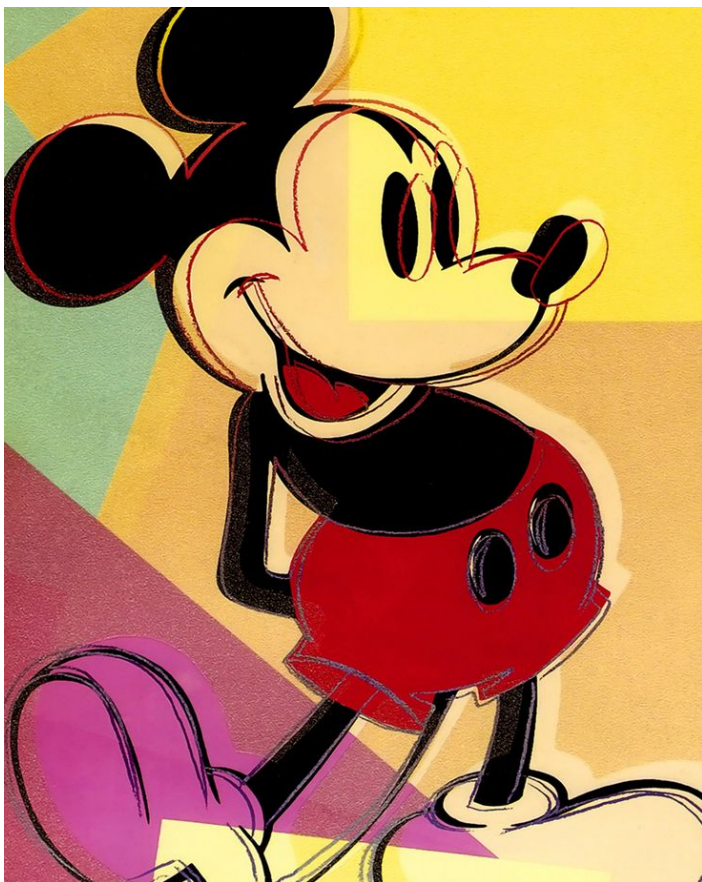
Communication: E-mail is the best way to reach me. However, I receive a high volume of e-mail; you need to allow plenty of time for a reply. (I also typically do not check my work e-mail on weekends, particularly on Saturday). **Always indicate your name and what course you are taking in your e-**

mail! Your Lehigh university e-mail address is an official form of university communication; check it daily. It is how I will communicate regarding any cancelled classes and other changes.

Ch-ch-ch-changes: The instructor reserves the **right to alter readings, assignments, or the schedule below**

I DO NOT ACCEPT LATE PAPERS. The only exceptions are extraordinary situations (i.e., hospitalizations, serious family emergencies) that are documented **through the Dean of Students' office**. This is the best way for me to be fair to everyone. Plan your time accordingly, and get started *early*.

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."



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.

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. At times, we will disagree. This is normal. However, we will not engage in mockery, the use of slurs, or other disrespectful behavior.

Schedule of Readings

Readings are to be completed *before* the date for which they are assigned; come to class with the readings printed out and in hand, with key ideas and questions underlined, highlighted, notated, and/or bedazzled.

August

Tues. 8.27 Welcome, introductions.

Thurs. 8.29 What is religion? What are gods? David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, 30-51

September

Tues. 9.3 What are monsters? Jeffrey Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)”

Thurs. 9.5 Oprah. Kathryn Lofton, *O: The Gospel of an Icon*, 1-19

Tues. 9.10. Star Wars. John C. Lyden, “Whose Film Is It, Anyway? Canonicity and Authority in *Star Wars Fandom*.”

S. Brent Plate, “Star Wars,” *frequencies* <http://frequencies.ssrc.org/2012/01/09/star-wars/>

Thurs. 9.12. Frankenstein+More. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 1-22

Tues. 9.17 Mickey Mouse and Disney Corp I. Robert Brockway, “The Masks of Mickey Mouse.”

Eric Michael Mazur and Tara K. Koda, “The Happiest Place on Earth: Disney’s America and the Commodification of Religion.”

Thurs. 9.19 Disney, Part II. Stephanie Brehm and Myev Rees. “Mirror, Mirror on Ourselves: Disney as a Site of Religio-Cultural Dialogue.”

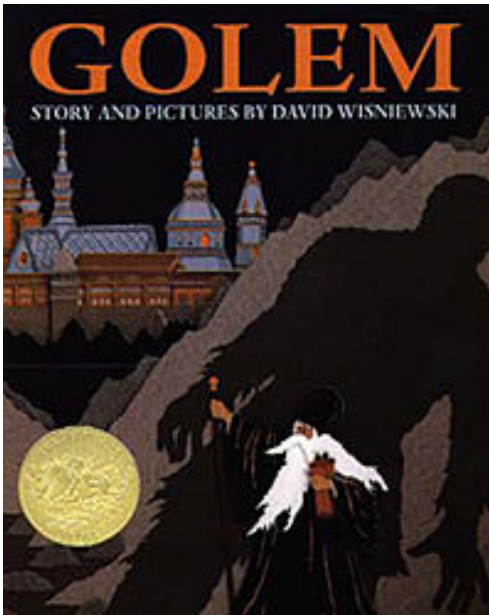
Tues. 9.24 The Almighty \$\$\$. Sarah McFarland Taylor, “Shopping, Religion, and the Sacred ‘Buyosphere.’”

Thurs. 9.26 NO CLASS. *Use the time to proofread your first essay! Essay 1 due on Course Site by 10 pm.*

October

Tues. 10.1 NO CLASS (Rosh Hashanah-Jewish New Year)





Thurs. 10.3 Leviathan. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 23-35

Tues. 10.8 Chaos and *Where the Wild Things Are*. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 35-55.

Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*, excerpts.

Thurs. 10.10 Apocalypse, Dragons. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 71-85.

Tues. 10.15 NO CLASS: HAPPY FALL BREAK!

Thurs. 10.17 Elvis. Erika Doss, "Believing in Elvis: Popular Piety in Material Culture."

Tues. 10.22 The Boss. Kate McCarthy, "Deliver Me from Nowhere: Bruce Springsteen and the Myth of the American Promised Land."

Thurs. 10.24 Billie Holiday. Tracy Fessenden, *Religion Around Billie Holiday* (excerpt).

Tues. 10.29 A "Wicked" Witch. Stacy Wolf, "*Wicked Divas*, Musical Theater, and Internet Girl Fans."

Thurs. 10.31 Vampires. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 123-140

November

Tues. 11.5 Superman. Dan W. Clanton, Jr. "The Origins of Superman: Reimagining Religion in the Man of Steel."

Thurs. 11.7 Black Panther. Tim Posada, "Afrofuturism, Power, and Marvel Comic's *Black Panther*."

Tues. 11.12. Visit from Andrea Reger, Lehigh Center for Career and Professional Development

Tues. 11.14 Golems. Jodi Eichler-Levine, "Golems and Goblins: The Monstrous in Jewish Children's Literature."

Robert G. Weiner, "Marvel Comics and the Golem Legend."

Tues. 11.19 Monkeys and Orientalism. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 103-121

Thurs. 11.21 Ecopocalypse. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 159-171. (Possible further reading TBD).

11.26-28. NO CLASS! HAPPY THANKSGIVING.

December

Tues. 12.3 Poster presentations in class

Thurs. 12.5 Last class—back up poster day and class party