Italian American Life in Literature

Italian American writers have expressed their heritage and their engagement in American life in vivid fiction or poetry which reflects their changing status and concerns. From narratives of immigration to current work by "assimilated" writers, the course explores the depiction of Italian American identity. Challenging stereotypes, it explores the changing family relationships, sexual mores, and political and social concerns evident in fiction, poetry and selected film and television representations. Situating the field of Italian American Studies in the context of contemporary ethnic studies, this course highlights its contribution to American literature.

Required Texts:


Assigned Readings in Anthology:


Selected Short Fiction: Tony Ardizzone. Salvatore La Puma, Don DeLillo.

Selected Essays: Gardaphé. "From Oral Tradition to the Written Word: Toward an Ethnographically Based Literary Criticism."


1/24 & 1/26 Introductory Lectures on Immigrant Narratives and Ethnic Studies.
Introducing the ethos of the immigrant novel. 1/22. Gardaphé, "From Oral Tradition to the Written Word" in From the Margin. Screening—televised depictions of Italian Americans.

1/31 & 2/2 Pietro Di Donato's Christ in Concrete, Parts 1-3, pages 3-134
The immigrant novel. Labor and the definition of manhood, family responsibility, and womanhood.

2/7 & 2/9 Pietro Di Donato's Christ in Concrete. Parts IV-V. 137-236.
Discussion of la serietà, womanliness, and immigrant narratives, Summary and discussion. Role of language in conveying ethnic experience, cultural difference, political ideology, and sexual roles.


2/21 & 2/23 Mangione's Mount Allegro: A Memoir of Italian American Life
Chapters through 6. pp. 1-116. Discussion of memoir as "cultural contact zone."

2/28 & 3/1 Mangione. Conclusion. Chapters 7-10. 117-206
The immigrant experience in terms of memory, myth, politics, and sexual roles. Portraits of women in fiction and poetry: Diane di Prima's "Prayer to the Mothers," Jay Parini's, "Grandmother in Heaven," Dana Gioia's "Photograph of My Mother as a Young Girl."

3/6* & 3/8 Mario Puzo. The Fortunate Pilgrim
Chapters 1-7; pp. 3-120. MIDTERM Writing Assignment due 3/6.


3/20- 3/22 The Fortunate Pilgrim. Pp. 120-283. Viewing of Godfather I & II outside of
class hours during spring recess: March 12-March 17.


4/10 & 4/12  Poetry ctd. 4/10, Screening of *True Love,* a film by Nancy Savoca.


4/24 & 4/26  Don DeLillo. “Spaghetti & Meatballs” and “Take the A Train,” Short Fiction TBA, Screening of John Turturro’s MAC.

5/1 & 5/3  Short Fiction ctd. 5/3. Conclusion: Italian Americana and contemporary life.

5/8  Reading Day, No Class. Final Exam Period: May 9-May 15. Our last day of class is 5/3.

Assignments:

Students are asked to keep an informal log of their views of: (1) the distinguishing characteristics and definitions of Italian American identity as they evolve throughout the semester, (2) the role of storytelling in both immigrant and contemporary narratives, (3) the role of formal memoir and the voice of memory in fiction and poetry (3) a catalogue of markers of ethnicity in general.

Course requirements:

1. Class participation. Students are asked to jot down a subject based on the assigned reading that they would like to comment on or discuss in class.

2. Brief response paper. Requirements TBA.


4. Brief final paper which may be either a critical paper or personal essay selecting an event—wedding, family dinner, funeral, birthday celebration, etc., that conveys the ethnic practices or customs of your family.

5. Final essay exam. During final exam period: May 9-15. Date TBA.