

I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging, and it's very difficult to find anyone.
— Gandalf (J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*)

English 234: The Elusive Narrator in American Literature

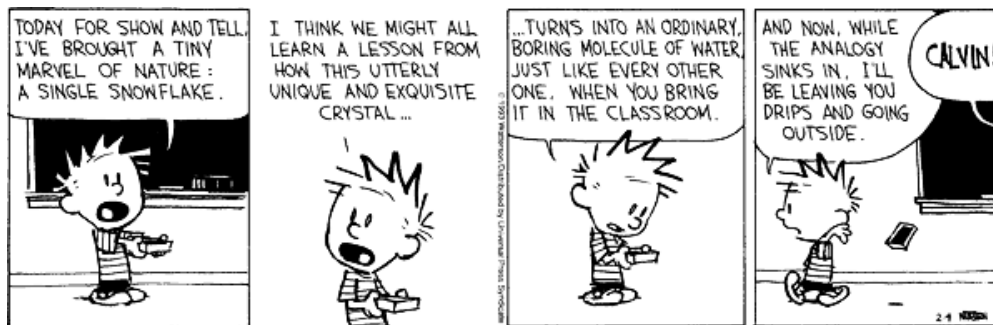
Section 10753 – 1X
Orlando 105
1:30 – 2:45 PM (MW)

Dr. Matthew Forsythe
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Conference Hours: Monday (12-1), Tuesday (2:30-3:30), Wednesday (12-1)
Additional Times Available by Appointment

Course Description & Objectives

Part of the reality and evolution of a mature culture resides in that culture's literary tradition, and the knowledgeable citizen will have read widely and understood that material. English 234 is a course that aids students in developing the means to discover and write about the ways in which literature imaginatively reflects the human condition. Each section considers a distinct literary subject: This term, our class will focus on the elusive narrator in American literature.



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Where is the voice coming from? Who is speaking? When an author chooses to write in the first person — whether they are telling their own story (creative nonfiction) or allowing a fictional character to narrate — the delivery can often gain a level of intimacy. After all, the speaker is directly addressing the reading, relating their tale, and the works that result will often strike the reader as honest, open, and authentic. Yet such a raw, unfiltered approach has its limitations. Can a person truly speak without bias? Even a narrator with the best intentions can struggle with restrictions on their understanding and perspective. Yet this subconscious manipulation is only the tip of the iceberg. Many speakers do not have noble objectives, while others struggle to articulate their truest feelings. Some face a range of severe restrictions that distort the story that “actually” happened, forcing the readers to interpret the deeper tale within their words. These contradictions can result in nuanced works of literature, and many writers have experimented with the possibilities — and problems — created by first-person narratives.

This course will focus on a series of works from American literature since 1960 that utilize the first-person perspective. Some of the works will be fiction — novellas and short stories delivered by a

character — but we will also consider memoirs and nonfiction writing. We will try to avoid the trap of labeling a narrator as “reliable” or “unreliable,” a dichotomy that glosses over a reality truth: even the most “reliable” speakers have limitations, and many “unreliable” narrators have moments of clarity and precision in their delivery, points at which they reveal the truth with a brutal honesty and understanding. Thus the issue is slippery, and the narrative proves elusive. Rather than lament this problematic aspect of our readings, we will celebrate its possibilities. What is gained by the uncertainty in the text? Does it enhance the “game” of reading, increasing its delight? At what point does it grow frustrating? Perhaps the joy does not stem from cornering the voice and attempting to decipher the “true” narrative, but from the pleasure of the chase itself.

The first half of the course will emphasize fiction, including a series of short stories and novellas by Shirley Jackson (*We Have Always Lived in the Castle*) and Stephen King (*Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption* & *The Body*, which correlate to Spring and Fall in his collection *Different Seasons*). After Spring Break, we will turn our attention to nonfiction, with a series of memoir essays, the graphic novel *Maus* (Art Spiegelman), and Jeannette Walls’s memoir *The Glass Castle*. The semester will close with Tim O’Brien’s harrowing account of the Vietnam War, *The Things They Carried*, which can be linked with both halves of the course.

This course fulfills the L requirement in the Rollins curriculum, which seeks to develop lifelong readers, sensitive to the richness of literary texts and to the pleasure of exploring that richness. These courses expose the student to compelling contemporary writing as well as literary works that, by tradition and broad cultural consensus, have been deemed excellent in form or expression and of lasting, or even permanent, value and universal interest. Students will craft a wide range of written responses to these texts, including both formal essays and an informal collection of critical sketches and observations. Thus the course offers practice and instruction in engaging a work of literature through cogent, insightful prose.

Texts & Materials

We Have Always Lived in the Castle
Shirley Jackson
ISBN: 0143039970 (\$16.00)

Different Seasons
Stephen King
ISBN: 0451167538 (\$8.99)

Maus
Art Spiegelman
ISBN: 9780679406419 (\$35.00)

The Glass Castle
Jeannette Walls
ISBN: 074324754X (\$16.00)

The Things They Carried
Tim O’Brien
ISBN: 0618706410 (\$15.95)

Additional readings will be archived on the Course Blackboard Site, and some students will elect to read an additional novel or a work of nonfiction as part of their Course Project.

Do or do not – there is no try.

— Yoda

Course Requirements

Critical Essays: Students will showcase their critical abilities through writing that has been revised and edited for presentation. Students will complete **two critical essays**. The first paper, an **Analysis** (3-5 pages), will involve a focused discussion of a specific character, technique, or scene in one of the works that we read. The second paper, a **Synthesis** (5-7 pages), will involve the comparison of elements or themes that appear in multiple texts. For each essay, students will select from a series of prompts that the instructor provides; some prompts will be specific questions, while others will suggest a general direction. Both essays will emphasize Close Reading — using specific scenes, images, details, and quotations from the text to support the focused claims that they offer — and they will emphasize the writing process, including Topic Proposals that students present before completing the project.

***Optional Revision – Analysis Essay:** After students submit their final draft of this initial paper to be graded, they will receive extensive comments from Dr. Forsythe as well as their essay's mark. Using this input, they will be allowed to craft one additional revision of the essay. If they do, the overall mark for the project will stem from both submissions: half of the mark will come from the grade on the initial submission, and half of the mark will come from the grade on this optional revision.*

Course Project: Students will explore the intersection between the course content and their personal interests in the Course Project. They will have a great deal of freedom to design a project that engages their curiosity, following **one of two routes**: 1) Some students will choose to complete a **Reading Project**, consulting with the instructor and selecting an additional novel or nonfiction work to read, one that fits the theme and focus of our course. After completing the reading, they will offer a presentation about the book to the class, meet with the instructor for an in-depth discussion, and provide a written component that considers its potential addition to the course. 2) Most students will attempt a **Creative Project**, an artistic response to a text or texts that we have read. For example, one of the readings might inspire them to compose their own first-person narrative. But they may also conceive works in other genres, including various forms of visual art, multi-media creations, or they might explore the connection between this course and their major. The process should include a conference with the instructor, a statement that explains the project, and a short presentation to the class, but the majority of the student's effort will be spent on the artistic creation itself.

Talking Points & Reading Worksheets: The course will involve a significant amount of reading. You will respond to the texts in many ways, but the most important will be a series of Talking Points that you compose for most class sessions. These brief but lucid observations (a short paragraph each) will often respond to questions that I have asked, and they will exercise your skill at presenting analytical insights. In addition, the Reading Worksheets will prepare you to participate in our vigorous class discussions.

Midterm Exam, Final Exam: On the Midterm and Final Exam, students will exhibit their grasp of the individual readings and authors as well as their understanding of our topic on the whole. The Midterm will involve a section of objective questions, including quote and character identifications, followed by a series of paragraph-length responses. The Final Exam will include these components as well, focusing on the readings from the second half of the course, but it will also involve a cumulative, in-class essay and a take-home prompt that students will write in advance.

Preparation & Participation: Your contributions to our class sessions, including daily preparation for class, discussions, in-class writing, and posts on the discussion boards will all factor into my evaluation.

Grade Distribution

Critical Essays

- Analysis Essay: 10%
- Synthesis Essay: 20%

Course Project: 10%

Midterm Exam: 10%

Final Exam: 20%

Talking Points & Reading Worksheets: 20%

Class Participation: 10%

Grading Scale

At the end of the semester, the following scale will be used to assign marks:

- A (94+)
- A- (90-93)
- B+ (87-89)
- B (84-86)
- B- (80-83)
- C+ (77-79)
- C (74-76)
- C- (70-73)
- D+ (67-69)
- D (64-66)
- D- (60-63)
- F (below 60)



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Attendance Policy: The success of our course will hinge on the reading and writing community that we establish, so regular attendance is essential. **It is impossible to earn strong marks for Class participation if you are not present to participate**, and in-class activities cannot be duplicated outside of class. **In addition, if you are absent for more than four of our class sessions, your final average will be penalized by one point for every additional class that you miss.** All absences count: they are neither excused nor unexcused. The only exceptions involve students who are travelling on official, documented Rollins business or students who must be absent for a religious holiday. These students are required to notify the instructor of the absence in advance & provide appropriate documentation.

Grading Criteria for Essays: Each piece of formal writing will be assigned a letter and number grade, marks that stem from the grading criteria that follows.

The Rollins College catalogue provides the following definitions for student grades:

- *The grade of A is reserved for work that is exceptional in quality and shows keen insight, understanding, and initiative.*
- *The grade of B is given for work that is consistently superior and shows interest, effort, or originality.*
- *The grade of C is a respectable grade. A C average (2.00) is required for graduation. It reflects consistent daily preparation and satisfactory completion of all work required.*

When marking your essays this term, I will apply these standards when determining a grade for your writing. In particular, I will be using them to evaluate your performance in the following categories:

I. Concept *Does the essay have an original topic, a significant objective & an interesting approach?
Is there a clear purpose, a specific focus, and an effective thesis?*

II. Design *Is the organization successful? Is the structural framework thoughtful and complete?
Does each body paragraph play an important role in the overall design?
Are the transitions graceful?
Are the introductory and concluding passages effective?*

III. Content *Is there clarity and quality in the content? Are the claims meaningful and precise?
Is the supporting detail vivid, significant, and compelling?
Is there adequate reflection and discussion? Is the commentary insightful?
Is the reasoning persuasive?
Is the coverage thorough? Does it explore the topic in sufficient depth?*

IV. Presentation *Is there skill in the sentence construction? Are the syntax and diction effective?
Does the author demonstrate a command of grammar and mechanics (punctuation),
reinforcing their ethos (credibility) as a trustworthy source?*

V. Editing *Is the editing effective, or do major errors distract the readers from the essay's purpose?*

A detailed set of instructions will accompany each assignment, and observations on grading in the course as a whole will be available on Blackboard in the handout "Frequently Asked Questions."

Grading Criteria for Miscellaneous Work: Most daily work (such as Talking Points & Participation elements) will be evaluated using a basic rubric: Exceptional, Very Good, Good, Satisfactory, and Below English 234 Standards. At the end of February – and again in April – students will receive an update (a letter grade) about their current marks in these categories.

Excellent: First-rate work that stands apart due to its superior vision and execution.

Very Good: Strong work that exceeds the goals of the assignment.

Good: Effective, competent work that clearly fulfills the assignment's objectives.

Satisfactory: Acceptable work that meets the basic, minimum requirements of the assignment.

Below E234 Standards: Work that falls short of the assignment's requirements or expectations.

The Fine Print

Classroom Etiquette: Consider yourself a participant rather than a spectator. Quality teamwork takes many forms, though all invest in the community. Maintain a professional standard of conduct: arrive on time, prepare for class in advance, keep your cell phones silent, and respect the contributions of your peers. Excessive tardiness will be counted as an absence, and students whose behavior disrupts the learning experience of the class can expect to receive poor marks for class participation.

Laptop Policy: You may utilize laptops or other tablets for course activities, but only if you refrain from multitasking. Not only is such behavior rude, disrupting the educational experience of the other class members, but it damages your Ethos, undermining the credibility of the work that you submit. I will not always interrupt class to correct unprofessional behavior, such as texting, sleeping, or surfing the web, but these actions are a clear sign of your disinterest in the course.

Late Work: Unless prior arrangements have been made, I'll apply a penalty for each class period that assignments are late.

Conferences: I encourage you to meet with me throughout the semester to discuss your work. I will not predict a grade that an essay might receive, but I'll be eager to offer advice that should help you improve the writing. I'll bring a sign-up sheet to most classes: please make an appointment if you have questions about your work or the course as a whole.

The **Writing Center** is a helpful and worthwhile resource that I encourage you to utilize this term. It provides a comfortable setting where students, faculty, and trained peer writing consultants can collaborate at any stage of the writing process (<http://r-net.rollins.edu/twc/>).

Communication: I will use the email tool on Blackboard, which links to your Rollins email address, to provide announcements throughout the semester. Students are responsible for checking their Rollins email account for class information on a regular basis.

Academic Honor Pledge: Membership in the student body of Rollins College carries with it an obligation, and requires a commitment, to act with honor in all things. The student commitment to uphold the values of honor — honesty, trust, respect, fairness, and responsibility — particularly manifests itself in two public aspects of student life. First, as part of the admission process to the College, students agree to commit themselves to the Honor Code. Then, as part of the matriculation process during Orientation, students sign a more detailed pledge to uphold the Honor Code and to conduct themselves honorably in all their activities, both academic and social, as a Rollins student. A student signature on the following pledge is a binding commitment by the student that lasts for his or her entire tenure at Rollins College: “The development of the virtues of Honor and Integrity are integral to a Rollins College education and to membership in the Rollins College community. Therefore, I, a student of Rollins College, pledge to show my commitment to these virtues by abstaining from any lying, cheating, or plagiarism in my academic endeavors and by behaving responsibly, respectfully and honorably in my social life and in my relationships with others.” This pledge is reinforced every time a student submits work for academic credit as his/her own. Students shall add to the paper, quiz, test, lab report, etc., the handwritten signed statement “On my honor, I have not given, nor received, nor witnessed any unauthorized assistance on this work.” Material submitted electronically should contain the pledge; submission implies signing the pledge.

Rollins College is committed to equal access and does not discriminate unlawfully against persons with disabilities in its policies, procedures, programs or employment processes. The College recognizes its obligations under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 to provide an environment that does not discriminate against persons with disabilities.

If you are a person with a disability on this campus and anticipate needing any type of academic/ medical accommodations in order to participate in your classes, please make timely arrangements by disclosing this disability in writing to the Disability Services Office at (Box 2772) – Mills Building, 1000 Holt Ave., Winter Park, FL, 32789. Appointments can be scheduled by calling 407-646-2354 or by emailing: gridgeway@rollins.edu

English 234 – Course Overview

Consult the Course Calendar for each month to determine the reading and writing assignments for each class session. Distributing the calendar in this manner provides the flexibility to respond to the unique needs & interests of each class.

The Voices in My Head – First-Person Narrators in American Fiction:

Monday, January 12 – Wednesday, February 25

In the opening half of the course, we will sample three novellas and a series of short stories from American literature since 1960. They are not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the time period, merely a glimpse of various approaches that authors have designed. After two sessions devoted to short stories, we will consider novellas by Stephen King (*Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*, *The Body*) and Shirley Jackson (*We Have Always Lived in the Castle*).

As we read and discuss and write about these works, we will occasionally consider two types of secondary resources: 1) articles about the use of first-person; and 2) information about the authors and their projects from interviews and articles on Blackboard. In addition to your thoughtful reading, you will complete a Talking Point & Reading Worksheet as you prepare for most class sessions. The Midterm Exam will occur on Wednesday, February 18, and you will complete your first Essay (the Rhetorical Analysis) before you leave for Spring Break.

A disclaimer for Spring 2015: Near the end of February, my wife Gretchen and I will be welcoming the arrival of our second daughter. You can be sure to expect a few last-minute changes, a guest speaker or an online assignment, and simply a tired & haggard professor who is happy but scrambling to stay on top of his work. I thank you in advance for your patience and understanding.

The Story of My Life – Memoir and Creative Nonfiction:

Monday, March 9 – Wednesday, April 8

After Spring Break, we will shift genres and consider the role of first-person narration in two book-length memoirs and several shorter works of creative nonfiction. After two sessions devoted to essays, we will consider the memoir *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls and the graphic memoir *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. You will continue to complete Talking Points & Reading Worksheets as you prepare for most class sessions, and you will submit either the Course Project or Essay #2 (Synthesis) by the end of March.

“That part of the story is my own” – *The Things They Carried*

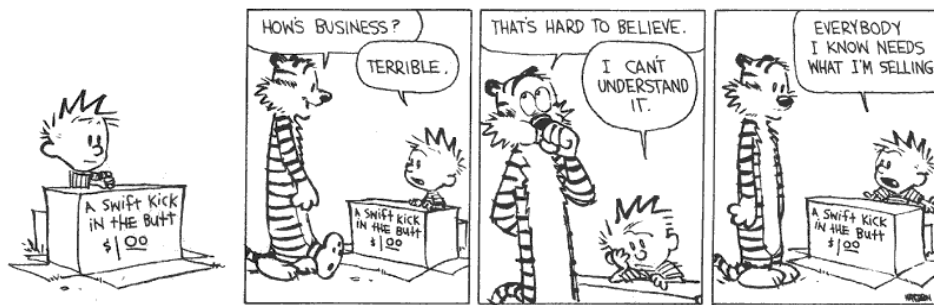
Monday, April 13 – Monday, April 27

In the final weeks of the semester, we will consider a novel (*The Things They Carried*) and one or two essays that straddle the lines between the genres that we have considered this term — not through a deception on the part of the author, but through the unique form that they have designed. As we wrestle with this final topic, the most elusive of all these slippery narrators, you will complete your final Talking Points & Reading Worksheets, and you will submit either the Course Project or Essay #2 (Synthesis) — whichever you didn’t complete in March — by April 27, the last day of class.

Tuesday, May 5 (2-4 PM): Final Exam

The Final Exam has been scheduled for Tuesday, May 5, from 2-4 PM. It will resemble the Midterm in terms of the objective questions and paragraph responses, but it will also involve an in-class essay and a take-home prompt (completed prior to the test).

*The course syllabus is a general plan for the course.
Deviations announced by the instructor will be necessary and inevitable.*



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A Word from the Class Narrator

I expect you to work hard, both individually and as a community. Students should be committed to the enterprise, eager to talk about reading and writing, and willing to revise their work. In addition, given our focus on first-person narratives, I assume that the topic interests you, whether it’s a field you’ve previously explored or you’re considering it for the first time. Approach your work seriously, but not so seriously that you won’t take risks or engage your imagination. Demand excellence, both of the course and your own contributions to the endeavor. Work hard, pay attention, and balance your industry with a sense of humor. I’ll do my best to make this an interesting, challenging, and memorable session.

“When you wake up in the morning, Pooh,” said Piglet at last, “what’s the first thing you say to yourself?”

“What’s for breakfast?” said Pooh. “What do you say, Piglet?”

“I say, I wonder what’s going to happen exciting today?” said Piglet.

Pooh nodded thoughtfully.

“It’s the same thing,” he said.

A.A. Milne’s *Winnie-the-Pooh*

I do hope this is an interesting game, otherwise the afternoon will be so terribly dull.
Milo (Norton Juster's *The Phantom Tollbooth*)

English 234: Course Calendar, January 12 – February 25

In-Class Readings for Monday, January 12:

- “Deportation at Breakfast” (Larry Fondation)
- “Snow” (Julia Alvarez)
- “Vision Out of the Corner of One Eye” (Luisa Valenzuela)
- “Thank You for Stopping” (Jack Handy)

Assignments for Wednesday, January 14:

1. Review the Syllabus & complete the Course Questionnaire.
2. Read the following short stories (all available on Blackboard):
 - “The Cask of Amontillado” (Edgar Allen Poe)
 - “Silver Water” (Amy Bloom)
 - “The Ceiling” (Kevin Brockmeier)
 - “Dear Amanda” (Steve Martin)
3. Complete the worksheet “Reading Assignment – Wednesday, January 16,” which includes your initial Talking Point of the semester.

Monday, January 19:

No Class – Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Assignments for Wednesday, January 21:

1. Find the Discussion Boards on Blackboard, enter the Forum “Introductions,” and follow the directions.
2. Read the following short stories (all available on Blackboard):
 - “The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas” (Reginald McKnight)
 - “Powder” (Tobias Wolff)
 - “Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot” (Robert Owen Butler)
 - “Eleven” (Sandra Cisneros)
 - “Lust” (Susan Minot)
 - “Orientation” (Daniel Orozco)
3. Complete the worksheet “Reading Assignment – Wednesday, January 21.”

Assignments for Monday, January 26:

1. Read the first half of *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption* (from *Different Seasons*).
2. Complete the worksheet “Reading Assignment – Monday, January 26.”

Assignments for Wednesday, January 28:

1. Finish reading *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption* (from *Different Seasons*).
2. Complete the worksheet “Reading Assignment – Wednesday, January 28.”



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Assignments for Monday, February 2:

1. Read the first half of *The Body* (from *Different Seasons*).
2. Complete the worksheet “Reading Assignment – Monday, February 2.”

Assignments for Wednesday, February 4:

1. Finish reading *The Body* (from *Different Seasons*).
2. Complete the worksheet “Reading Assignment – Wednesday, February 4.”

Assignments for Monday, February 9:

1. Begin reading *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (Chapters 1-4).
2. Complete the worksheet “Reading Assignment – Monday, February 9.”

Assignments for Wednesday, February 11:

1. Continue reading *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (Chapters 5-8).
2. Complete the worksheet “Reading Assignment – Monday, January 26.”

Topic Proposal – Essay #1: At some point during the first two weeks of February, you should complete a Topic Proposal for Essay #1 (Analysis), and post your idea in the appropriate Discussion Board on Blackboard. See the assignment sheet for additional details.

As my wife's due date (February 22) nears, pay attention to your email for last-minute adjustments to the schedule.

Assignments for Monday, February 16:

1. Finish reading *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*.
2. Complete the worksheet "Reading Assignment – Monday, February 16."
3. Complete the Midterm review guide, and email it to Dr. Forsythe prior to class.

Assignments for Wednesday, February 18:

1. Study for your **Midterm Exam**, which will occur during class on Wednesday, February 18. A description of the format will be available on Blackboard.

Peer Reviews – Essay #1: At some point during the first three weeks of February, you should comment on four of the Topic Proposals that your peers have posted in the Discussion Board "Topic Proposals – Essay #1." Follow the instructions for Peer Reviews on the Essay #1 assignment sheet.

(Tentative) Assignments for the week of February 23-25:

If our daughter arrives when she is due (February 22), I will be in the hospital with my wife on Monday and Wednesday. Hence we may not be meeting as a class this week.

As a substitute for the sessions on Monday and Wednesday, I have designed the following out-of-class activities: 1) a Discussion Board (a post and two responses) based on the film adaptation of either *Rita Hayworth and Shansbank Redemption* or *The Body* (a copy of one will be available at the Olin Library reserve desk); 2) a Discussion Board reflecting on the readings from the first half of the semester.

Essay #1 (Analysis) Due prior to Spring Break:

Before you leave for Spring Break, you should complete your work on Essay #1 (Analysis) and submit the paper for Dr. Forsythe's evaluation. Because Dr. Forsythe will be off-campus for most of this week, you should submit the essay in two ways: 1) Email him a copy, along with the worksheet "Essay #1 Checklist & Honor Code"; 2) Upload a copy to Turnitin, using the link that he provides on Blackboard.

Note: Dr. Forsythe is more than willing to schedule a conference with you to discuss drafts of your essay. However, plan ahead: all conferences for Essay #1 must be completed by Friday, February 20. (Since he'll provide you the assignment by January 21, you will have a month to discuss it with him.)