

# JEWISH AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

**Course number:** 512.312

**Time:** Wednesday, 15:15-16:45 · **Room:** Seminar Room, Attemsgasse 25, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor

**First session:** March 11, 2015

**Lecturer:** Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Brandt · **Office Hours:** Thursdays, 4-6 p.m. (Room DG-0036) · **Email:** [stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at](mailto:stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at)

**Short description:** Cultural criticism of the past few decades has been marked by a conspicuous exclusion of **Jewish American experience and literature** from dominant discourses of multiculturalism and antiracism. Collections such as *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader* (ed. David Theo Goldberg) barely mention Jewish writers or artists. This seminar wants to challenge this consensus in multiculturalism studies and examine Jewish American literary and social practice as a crucial part of U.S. cultural history. We will discuss works by authors such as Abraham **Cahan**, Anzia **Yeziarska**, Saul **Bellow**, and Philip **Roth** and analyze influential **films** (e.g., *Crimes and Misdemeanors*) as well as U.S. **sitcoms** (*The Nanny*, *Seinfeld*). In close readings, the main themes of Jewish American literature and culture, e.g., the Jewish vision of the '**promised land**,' **immigration**, **anti-Semitism**, **Jewish humor** (the 'schlemiel') and **wortwitz**, as well as religious traditions, will be examined. For a general introduction to the course theme, see Jules Chametzky's Introduction to the *Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature*, "A Long History Briefly Conveyed" on Moodle.

**Teaching and Learning Method:** This is an interactive course. Participation in group discussions as well as contributions to the discussion forum on the Moodle course site will be part of the final grade. Each meeting will be held by 'experts' who organize the session by means of questions, games, illustrations, video clips, and group work. The most relevant facts will be conveyed in a short information block (or, alternatively, a fact file on a handout).

**Materials:** All relevant texts will be made available on Moodle.

**Aims:** The course will convey a deeper understanding of the presence and influence of Jewish American life and art in U.S. cultural history from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present.

**Assessment:** Regular *attendance* (no more than two absences!), **active in-class participation**; *presentation* as part of an **expert session** plus **3-page handout** and online questions; **at least 9 (!) substantial entries in the discussion forum**; 2-page **research proposal** and **final paper** of 10-12 pages.

**Deadline for Final Papers:** Wednesday, July 1, 2015 in class. There is no (!) extension of this deadline.

## Syllabus:

- March 11**      **Introduction: Jewish American Literature and Culture**  
Main text (recommended):  
Jules Chametzky, "General Introduction" from Norton anthology *Jewish American Literature* (2001).
- March 18**      **The Promised Land**  
Main texts (required):  
Emma Lazarus, "In the Jewish Synagogue" (1871), "1492" (1871), "The New Colossus" (1895).  
Keywords: Ellis Island; Immigration; Jewish Poetry; Statue of Liberty; Synagogues.
- March 25**      **Emigration into the Diaspora**  
Main text (required):  
Joseph Roth, "A Jew Emigrates to America" (1926/27).  
Keywords: Assimilation; Diaspora; Eastern Europe; Peddlers; "Wandering Jew".
- April 22**      **Jewish Immigration and the Ghetto**  
Main text (required):  
Abraham Cahan, "A Ghetto Wedding" (1898).  
Keywords: Acculturation; Americanization; Immigration; New York Ghetto; Poverty.
- April 29**      **Jewish—Yiddish—American – Mythology and Tradition**  
Main text (required):  
Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Gimpel the Fool" (1944/1953).  
Keywords: Characters in Jewish Mythology; Faith; Individual vs. Society; Schlemiel Character.



- May 6**      **New York as New Jerusalem**  
 Main text (required):  
     Henry James, excerpts from *the American Scene* (1907)  
 Additional text (optional):  
     Anzia Yezierska, "Children of Loneliness" (1923).  
 Keywords: Anti-Semitism; 'Hebrew Conquest'; New Jerusalem; Tenements, Zionism.
- May 13**      **Urban Experience and Jewishness**  
 Main text (required):  
     Michael Gold, from *Jews without Money* (1930).  
 Keywords: Jewish Proletariat; Lower East Side; Poverty; Proletarian Literature; Socialism.
- May 20**      **Hollywood and the Shoah**  
 Main film (watching is required):  
     *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959, dir. George Stevens).  
 Additional text (optional):  
     Jules Chametzky, "From Margin to Mainstream in Difficult Times" (2001).  
 Keywords: Commercialization; Holocaust, Hollywood; Shoah.
- May 27**      **Artistic Identity and the Redefinition of the Past**  
 Main text (required):  
     Philip Roth, "The Ghost Writer" (1979).  
 Keywords: Contemporary Writing; Semi-autobiographical Themes; Tradition/Americanization; Zuckerman Series.  
**Deadline Research Proposal TODAY, May 27!**
- June 3**      **Alienation and Solitude: Jewish Poetry**  
 Main text (required):  
     Adrienne Rich, "Yom Kippur, 1984" (1986).  
 Keywords: Feminist Reading; Isolation and Belonging; Jewish Post-War History; Yom Kippur.
- June 10**      **Irony and Jewish Self-Deprecation**  
 Main example (it is *required* to watch this film):  
     *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1988, dir. Woody Allen).  
 Additional text:  
     Woody Allen, "The Scrolls" (1975).  
 Keywords: Woody Allen; Jewish Cinema; Justice; Jewish Humor; Representation.
- June 17**      **The Holocaust as Comic Strip**  
 Main text (required):  
     Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1989)  
 Keywords: Comic Relief; Graphic Novels; Holocaust; Postmodernist Techniques.
- June 24**      **Jewish Humor and Popular Culture**  
 Main examples (required):  
     "Contemporary and Perennial Jewish Jokes" (from J. Chametzky, *Jewish American Literature*);  
     Selected episode from *The Nanny* (U.S. TV series, CBS, 1993-1999) (to be announced).  
 Keywords: Jewish Humor; Jewish Stereotypes; Sitcoms; Popular Culture.
- July 1**      **Lost in Time and Space -- Postmodern Jewish Fiction**  
 Main text (required):  
     Jonathan Safran Foer, excerpts from: *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002).  
 Additional text:  
     *Everything Is Illuminated* (2005, dir. Liev Schreiber)  
 Keywords: Cultural Memory; Magical Realism; Non-Linearity; Postmodernism; *Shtetl*.  
**Deadline Final Paper TODAY, July 1!**