

GOING VIRAL

AMERICAN BESTSELLERS FROM THE 18TH CENTURY UNTIL TODAY

Room and time: Seminar Room (Attems-gasse 25, Top Floor) · Friday, 16:00-17:30

First session: October 13, 2017 · **Course number:** 512.312

Lecturer: Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Brandt · **Office hours:** Thursdays, 4-6 p.m. · **Email:** stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at

Description: What turns a book into a bestseller? Why do some bestselling books seem restricted in their popularity to the historical context in which they were produced, while others remain well-liked and ‘trendy’ for decades and centuries? The term ‘bestseller,’ first used in 1889 by the *Kansas Times & Star*, points to the traditional distinction between ‘high-brow literature’ on the one side and ‘popular/mass literature’ on the other. Even in postmodernity, an age devoted to the blurring of boundaries, popular literature is often regarded as “derivative, banal stuff,” as Pulitzer-Prize winning author Jennifer Egan has famously put it. This course takes its participants on a journey throughout the history of American literature, from its colonial beginnings to the contemporary era. How have bestsellers such as Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1794), Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936), or, more recently, Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* (2003) shaped literary and cultural practice in the United States (and, by implication, marketing mechanisms)? To what extent do these books reflect the dominant narrative parameters and *zeitgeist* of their times? Do bestsellers really signal a “democracy of readers [...] against an aristocracy of critics,” as literary historian Jill Lepore has suggested? Or are do they cater to mainstream, trivial tastes in literature? The seminar will discuss the ‘anatomies’ of various bestsellers, paying special attention to the composition, background, and aesthetics of these texts.

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 a fact file on a handout). Experts upload their questions 6 days in advance!

Materials: All printed texts will be made available on Moodle.

Aims: The course aims at examining the main features of U.S. American bestsellers and their cultural functions.

Assessment: A.) regular attendance (no more than 2 absences!) and active in-class participation, as well as **seven (!) entries** in the discussion forum (1/3); B.) presentation as part of an expert session plus 3-page handout and online questions (1/3); C.) research proposal (2 pages) and final paper (10-12 pages) (1/3). You need to pass each section to pass the course.

Deadline for Final Papers (including declaration of honesty): Thursday, February 15, 2018. *There is no (!) extension of this deadline.* Please indicate on a **post-it** attached to your final paper if you would like to get detailed feedback!

SYLLABUS

- 13 October** **Introduction – The ‘Bestseller’: Composition, Genealogy, Marketing**
Basic texts:
 Sarah Churchwell & Thomas R. Smith, “Introduction” to *Must Read* (2012). [Moodle]
 Sarah Garland, “Missing Numbers: The Partial History of the Bestseller” (2012). [Moodle]
- 20 October** **The Tearjerker – *Charlotte Temple* and the Early Sentimental Novel**
Main text (reading required):
 Susanna Rowson, *Charlotte Temple, A Tale of Truth* (1791/94). [Moodle]
Additional text:
 Gideon Mailer, “*Charlotte Temple* as an American Bestseller” (2012). [Moodle]
Keywords: Deathbed Scene, Early Transnational Authors, Seduction Novel, Sentimentalism, USA/UK.
- 27 October** **The Religious Epic – *Ben-Hur* and the Christian *Bildungsroman***
Main text (reading required):
 Lew Wallace, *Ben-Hur, A Tale of the Christ* (1880). [Moodle]
Additional text:
 James Russell, “Exhilaration and Enlightenment in the Biblical Bestseller” (2012). [Moodle]
Keywords: Bible, Bildungsroman, Enlightenment, Film Adaptation, L. Wallace.

10 November Popular Children's Literature – *Charlotte's Web* and the Politics of Empathy

Main text (reading required):

E.B. White, *Charlotte's Web* (1952). [Moodle]

Additional text:

Rebecca J. Lukens, "Literature: What Is It?" (2006/2017) [Moodle]

Keywords: Animals, Anthropomorphism, Children's Fiction, Death/Mortality, Empathy.

17 November Educational Literature – *The Power of Positive Thinking* and the Genre of Self-Help Books

Main text (reading required):

Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952). [Moodle]

Additional text:

David Collinson, "Prozac Leadership and the Limits of Positive Thinking" (2012). [Moodle]

Keywords: Advice Books, Autosuggestion, Christianity, D. Carnegie, N.V. Peale, Positive Thinking, Protestantism.

24 November Shocking Bestsellers – *Peyton Place* and Sensationalism

Main text (reading required):

Grace Metalious, *Peyton Place* (1956). [Moodle]

Additional text:

Ardis Cameron, "Blockbuster Feminism: *Peyton Place* and the Uses of Scandal" (2012). [Moodle]

Keywords: Coming of Age, Feminism, Fifties, Film, Scandal, Sensationalism.

01 December Horror Fiction – Stephen King's *It* as the Ultimate Nail-Biter

Main text (reading required):

Stephen King, *It* (1986). [Moodle]

Additional text:

Sara Martín Alegre, "Nightmares of Childhood" (2001). [Moodle]

Keywords: Childhood, Clown Hype, Gothic, Horror, Stephen King, TV series, The Uncanny (freud).

12 January The Historical Romance – *The Notebook* and the Power of Emotions

Main text (reading required):

Nicholas Sparks, *The Notebook* (1996). [Moodle]

Additional text:

Sarah Churchwell, "Master of Sentiment: The Romances of Nicholas Sparks" (2012). [Moodle]

Keywords: Film, Historical Romance, Romantic Fiction, N. Sparks, Sentiment.

19 January Political Bestsellers – *The Kite Runner* and Transnational Fiction

Main text (reading required):

Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* (2003). [Moodle]

Additional text:

Georgiana Banita, "Anatomy of an Afghan-American Bestseller" (2012). [Moodle]

Keywords: Afghanistan, Film, K. Hosseini, Soviet Union, Taliban, Transnational Bestseller.

26 January Young Adult Fiction – Collins's *The Hunger Games* and the Dystopian Bestseller

Main text (reading required):

Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (1969). [Moodle]

Additional text:

Mark Fisher, "Precarious Dystopias" (2012). [Moodle]

Keywords: S. Collins, Dystopia, Film Adaptation, Katniss character, Young Adult Fiction.

2 February Crime and Conspiracy – Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and Cinematic Storytelling

Main text (reading required):

Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). [Moodle]

Additional text:

Stephen J. Mexal, "The Fiction of History: *The Da Vinci Code* and the Virtual Public Sphere" (2012). [Moodle]

Keywords: D. Brown, Conspiracy, Crime, Da Vinci Myth, Film, Mystery 'Robert Langdon,' Religious History.



DUE DATE
RESEARCH PROPOSAL



BRING TWO BOOKS



DUE DATE FINAL PAPER: THURSDAY, 15 FEBRUARY 2018