

AMERICAN FICTION AND THE CALL TO SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

There is a long tradition of concern in American fiction with neglected or emerging social problems. Focusing on different historical periods, with an emphasis on the present day, this course will examine the way that writers have used their work to address race relations, inequality, homelessness, health care reform, climate change, and other major public issues. In true interdisciplinary fashion, a combined literary/political framework will guide our approach to these texts (and supportive material in popular media and film) as we consider how the authors both document and dramatize their subject matter.

Instructor: David A. Rochefort (d.rochefort@northeastern.edu)

Course Length, Location and Meeting Time: Five Weeks, Thursdays starting September 3, 2026 from 1:00-3:00 p.m. Meets at Midcoast Senior College Learning Center, 14 Middle St.

Books:

John Grisham, *The Street Lawyer* (Vintage, 2010; ISBN 13: 978-0440245957). This novel is also available online at: <https://online.pubhtml5.com/hmeo/qrlk/#p=1>.

Meg Little Reilly, *We Are Unprepared* (MIRA, 2016; ISBN 13: 978-0778319436)

Other supplemental materials will be accessible via web links or as pdfs located on the course website.

Course Calendar including Topics, Assignments, and “Warm-Up” Questions:

	Topics:	Readings, films, video clips, etc., due for each week (complete in order listed):	Questions to think about:
Sometime before first class meeting		Please view “Native Son” film before first class meeting: (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KlVxOnQWu-w)	How did the film “Native Son” make you <u>feel</u> about race relations in American society? Did the film affect the way that you <u>think</u> about race relations in American in any respect? Would you re-write the ending of this film, if you could?
Week 1 September	- Course intro - “Genres” & “social problem fiction” - Discussion of the film “Native Son”		

Week 2 September	- “Problem Definition” - Discussion of first part of <i>The Street Lawyer</i>	- David A. Rochefort, “Narrative and Its Political Uses,” with special emphasis on pp. 55-72 (see pdf on website) - John Grisham, <i>The Street Lawyer</i>, chapters 1-3 (https://online.pubhtml5.com/hmeo/qrk/#p=1, pp. 2-45. (Keep going, if you can. The full book will be due for discussion in Week 3.) - Rachel Louise Snyder, “It Sounds Really Dire Because It is Really Dire” (Opinion - Domestic Violence Support Is Unraveling – <i>The New York Times</i> (see pdf on website) Listen to: Roald Dahl, “Lamb to the Slaughter,” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpyVl3XKVLs)	Why has it been said that “problem definition” is one of the most powerful factors that determine the outcome in a political conflict? How could you apply this concept of problem definition to the analysis of a campaign and who emerges as the winner? Does the story “Lamb to the Slaughter” contain the elements that we expect to find in the genre of social problem fiction?
Week 3 September	- “HERO’S ADVENTURE” literary motif - Discussion of <i>The Street Lawyer</i> (full book)	- Grisham, <i>The Street Lawyer</i>, entire book (https://online.pubhtml5.com/hmeo/qrk/#p=1, pp. 2-509)	How well did you like <i>The Street Lawyer</i>? What are its strong points and weak points? How would you describe the main character, Michael Brock, when we meet him at the start of the book? What passages in <i>The Street Lawyer</i> show Grisham employing the problem-definition framework in portraying the problem of homelessness? Examples?
Week 4 September	- Making the case for “SYSTEMIC REFORM” - Two Examples: Health Care and Artificial Intelligence	- “Artificial Intelligence,” Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/procon/artificial-intelligence-AI-debate - Listen to: Ray Bradbury, “Marionettes, Inc.” (1949): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXg6CBinC-Q - View: “Writing Doom,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfMQ7hzyFW4 - Lionel Shriver, <i>So Much for That</i> (2010) brief excerpts (see pdf on website) - Listen to: Ursula Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SPWq8Qmsz0	Why is the “double” is one of the most common motifs in literature and films? What makes the “double” motif appealing to writers when they are imagining the future trajectory of AI? Are you, personally, more frightened or more optimistic about what AI will turn into? Does Le Guin’s story persuasively capture inequality and exploitation as the systemic structure of modern society?

Week 5 October	- “Dystopian” fiction - The growth of Climate Fiction - Discussion of “We Are Unprepared”	- View: “Player Piano Explained: Vonnegut’s Automated Dystopia,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnzZ22XoVeY - Meg Little Reilly, <i>We Are Unprepared</i>, entire book	Who are Pia and Ash and what are they like? Describe the town of Isole. What does it symbolize? How does the author build a sense of escalating crisis? How does governmental ineptitude contribute to the crisis presented in this book?