Informal Reading Groups  
Spring Semester 2011

Meet just one hour per week with 10-15 students and one faculty member from the Honors College to discuss about 50 pages of reading from specific books on the topics described in the following pages. The only commitment you make is a good-faith effort to get the reading done and come to the group meeting as often as you can, with the understanding there may be one or two weeks when you need to do other things. Meet other Honors students with similar interests. Our goals are “maximum information and enjoyment, with zero stress.”

- No tuition or fees
- No quizzes or tests
- No grades
- Free books
- Read, think, discuss with other Honors College students on important topics of mutual interest

Twenty-five of these groups begin the week of January 24-28, and meet from 4 to 15 weeks as indicated. BOOKS WILL BE DISTRIBUTED AT THE FIRST MEETING. There are also three groups that begin later in the semester, as indicated in this brochure. To participate, email HonorsReading@ou.edu – groups are filled on a “first-come, first-served” basis, so it would be helpful to indicate a second choice, if you have one.
AS I LAY DYING
William Faulkner's great 1930 novel

*Mondays, 12:00 to 12:50*
180 Cate 1 Hall
6 Weeks

The fifth novel by Nobel Prize winner William Faulkner, this is consistently ranked among the best novels of 20th century literature. The book is known for its stream of consciousness writing technique, multiple narrators, and varying chapter lengths (the shortest chapter is just five words). Faulkner pioneered this writing technique and in its use he is ranked with James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. The novel is set in Faulkner’s native Mississippi. This group will be moderated by Dr. Brian Johnson, Director of the Honors College Writing Center.

William Gibson's NEUROMANCER
Winner of the science fiction "triple crown" and a seminal work in the genre of cyberpunk

*Thursdays, 4:30 to 5:20*
182 David L. Boren Hall
6 Weeks

Gibson's first novel won the Nebula Award, the Philip K. Dock Award, and the Hugo Award when it was published in 1984. It tells the story of a washed-up computer hacker hired by a mysterious employer to work on the ultimate hack. Lavishly praised, the book has been called “a mind-bender of a read” and Gibson's prose has been described as “astonishing in its clarity and skill… high-tech electronic poetry.” This group will be moderated by Honors senior Will O'Donnell.

James Joyce's masterpiece ULYSSES
The most important work of modernist literature

*Mondays, 4:30 to 5:20*
The HUB
140 David L. Boren Hall
13 Weeks

*Tuesdays, 4:30 to 5:20*
The HUB
140 David L. Boren Hall
13 Weeks

Perhaps the single greatest novel of the 20th century, this is an account of one day in June 1904 in Dublin, Ireland. It traces the actions of Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus and brings much more into the narrative. Funny, humane, and mindboggling, the novel shows how rich language can be when used well. You will not regret reading this novel! Two different groups, limited to 10 students in each. Because the novel is 644 pages, the reading group will run 13 weeks, excluding Spring Break, from Jan. 24-April 25 for the Monday group, and Jan. 25-April 26 for the Tuesday group. These groups will be moderated by Dr. Melanie Wright, Director of Curriculum in the Honors College.
SLAUGHTER HOUSE FIVE
by Kurt Vonnegut

*Thursdays, 1:00 - 1:50*
*160-E David L. Boren Hall*
*5 Weeks*

This short novel was included in Time magazine’s list of the 100 all-time best English-language novels written since 1923. Chaplain’s Assistant Billy Pilgrim is a disoriented, fatalistic, and ill-trained American soldier who is captured by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge. He and his fellow prisoners are placed in a disused slaughterhouse and they and their German guards are some of the few survivors of the Allied firestorm bombing of Dresden that destroyed the city. Billy has come “unstuck in time” and experiences past and future events out of sequence and repetitively, following a nonlinear narrative. This group will be moderated by Dr. Ben Alpers.

DRESDEN: TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 1945
History of the controversial fire-storm bombing
by Frederick Taylor

*Thursdays, 1:00 - 1:50*
*160-E David L. Boren Hall*
*8 Weeks*

*This group begins March 3rd*

This group begins on March 3rd and first preference is given to students who have participated in the SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE reading group (above), although others are also welcome if space permits. Of all the cities that were destroyed in World War II, Dresden rivals Hiroshima as a symbol of the war’s cruelty, and its bombing has been hugely controversial. Frederick Taylor’s history has been called “riveting, compassionate, and powerful.” This group will be moderated by Dr. Ben Alpers.

Michael Lewis’
THE BIG SHORT:
INSIDE THE DOOMSDAY MACHINE

*Fridays, 1:00 - 1:50*
*182 David L. Boren Hall*
*7 Weeks*

By the author of LIAR’S POKER, this account of the 2007-2008 financial crisis is written by “our greatest financial journalist at the top of his game.” One reviewer called it “superb” and said it “illuminates the idiocy, madness, and greed of modern finance.” THE FINANCIAL TIMES said it was “the most entertaining and accessible account yet of the subprime mortgage catastrophe” and that “no book on the subject should be this much fun to read.” This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.
English poet and novelist Robert Graves shocked the world in 1946 when he penned King Jesus, a novel in which Jesus is presented in an historical context that accounts for the myriad of religions, cults, sages, and mystics that populated the world during the time of Christ. Jesus, his family, friends, and foes are all presented as normal people struggling to survive under the oppression of the Roman Empire where Jesus was, in fact, the “King of the Jews,” albeit a king without the divine lineage that Christians ascribe to him today. The group will be moderated by Dr. Rich Hamerla, Associate Dean of the Honors College.

Pulitzer winner Jane Smiley examines the emotional and moral complexity of family life in these two novellas. While “Ordinary Love” is told from a mother’s point of view and “Good Will” from a father’s, both demonstrate how children often pay for their parent’s mistakes. One reviewer called them “unforgettable novellas, built on lucid characterizations and elegant prose.” Others said “extraordinary achievement” and “a dazzling feat.” This group will be moderated by Dr. Carolyn Morgan, Director of the Honors College Student Achievement Center (the HUB).

Samuel Beckett was an Irish avant-garde writer, dramatist and poet who wrote in both English and French, and was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1969. As a young man, Beckett was James Joyce’s secretary in Paris, and has been called “the last modernist” or “the first post-modernist.” His plays are major works in the genre known as “theater of the absurd.” In this trilogy, he “dispenses with all the customary props of contemporary fiction—including exposition, plot, and increasingly, paragraphs—and turns his attention to consciousness itself. Nobody has ever evoked the pain of existence, or the steady slide toward nonexistence, with such poetic, garrulous accuracy, or – oddly – hilarity.” This group will be moderated by Honors College alumnus Drew Shipley, now a graduate student in the English Department.
QUEEN OF THE OIL CLUB
The Intrepid Wanda Jablonski and the Power of Information
by Anna Rubino
Thursdays, 2:00 - 2:50
160-E David L. Boren Hall
7 Weeks
This biography examines a journalist, publisher and power broker who came to wield exceptional influence by shedding light on the secretive world of oil in the decades after WW II. Her scoops, commentaries and networking helped shape the debate that led to the creation of OPEC and the largest transfer of wealth in history. Jablonski coaxed her way into exploration sites in Middle Eastern deserts, drilling camps in Venezuela, and the male-only board rooms in New York and London. This book promises to be of interest to anyone curious about the history of oil, the Middle East, or journalism. This group will be moderated by Prof. Robert Lifset.

THE MASTER AND MARGARITA
Mikhail Bulgakov’s Anti-Stalinist Allegory
Wednesday, 1:00 - 1:50
180 Cate 1 Hall
9 Weeks
Written during the Soviet crackdown of the 1930s, when Mikhail Bulgakov’s works were effectively banned, this novel wraps its anti-Stalinist message in a complex allegory of good and evil. Not published until 1967, almost three decades after his death, the book has been a sensation. THE NEW YORK TIMES calls it “one of the truly great Russian novels of the twentieth century.” Another reviewer found it “shocking, touching, and scathingly funny – a novel like no other.” This group will be moderated by Honors senior Sarah Swenson, OU’s 28th Rhodes Scholar.

DON QUIJOTE
by Miguel De Cervantes
A new translation of one of the first and greatest novels
Thursdays, 3:00 - 3:50
160-E David L. Boren Hall
14 Weeks
Recognized by most scholars as the first modern novel, and by almost everyone as one of the greatest works of fiction ever written. DON QUIJOTE was first published in 1605, and tells the story of a retired country gentleman nearing 50 years of age who becomes obsessed with books of chivalry, and believes every word to be true, despite the fact that many of the events in them are clearly impossible. Losing his mind, he decides to go out as a knight-errant seeking adventures, rescuing those in trouble, and righting wrongs. In so doing, he becomes one of the truly quintessential figures in all literature, and his creator, Cervantes, joins the ranks of Dante and Shakespeare. This group will be moderated by Honors student Dillon Carroll.
THE GREAT GATSBY
F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Most Famous Work

Mondays, 1:00 - 1:50
180 Cate 1 Hall
4 Weeks

Widely regarded as one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century, Fitzgerald finished four novels. GATSBY is regarded as his supreme achievement and the exemplary novel of the Jazz Age, a phrase he coined. It is “an exquisitely crafted tale” of the fabulously wealthy Jay Gatsby and his doomed love for the beautiful Daisy Buchanan, told in the context of lavish parties on Long Island in the 1920s. This group will be moderated by Honors student Nick Stanley.

TENDER IS THE NIGHT
by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Mondays, 3:00 - 3:50
182 David L. Boren Hall
6 Weeks

This group begins on February 21st and first preference is given to students who have participated in the THE GREAT GATSBY reading group, although others are also welcome if space permits. In 1932, Fitzgerald’s wife Zelda was hospitalized for schizophrenia in Baltimore, MD. At the same time, Fitzgerald was working on this novel about the story of the rise and fall of Dick Diver, a promising young psychiatrist, and his wife Nicole, who is also one of his patients. In 1998, Modern Library ranked TENDER IS THE NIGHT 28th on its list of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century. This group will be moderated by Honors student Nick Stanley.

A Clockwork Orange
by Anthony Burgess

Mondays, 1:00 - 1:50
180 Cate 1 Hall
6 Weeks

This is Anthony Burgess’ modern classic of youthful violence and social redemption. Set in a dismal dystopia, it is the first-person account of a juvenile delinquent who undergoes state-sponsored psychological rehabilitation for his aberrant behavior. The novel satirizes extreme political systems that are based on opposing models of the perfectibility or incorrigibility of humanity. Alex, the protagonist, has a passion for classical music and is a member of a vicious teenage gang that commits random acts of brutality. Captured and imprisoned, he is transformed through behavioral conditioning into a model citizen, but his taming also leaves him defenseless. This group will be moderated by Honors College students Amanda Niedzwiecki and Elizabeth Abell.
NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND and THE GRAND INQUISITOR by Fyodor Dostoevsky

These are the two best-known short works by the great Russian novelist. NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND is an 1864 novella presented as the rambling memoirs of a bitter, isolated, unnamed narrator who is a retired civil servant living in St. Petersburg. THE GRAND INQUISITOR is an excerpt from the massive novel THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV; it is a parable told by one brother to the other, and is one of the best known passages in all modern literature. This group will be moderated by Honors student Geri Richlin.

MORAL POLITICS How Liberals and Conservatives Think by George Lakoff

Mondays, 2:00 - 2:50
180 Cate 1 Hall
9 Weeks

Author George Lakoff is a professor of cognitive linguistics at the University of California in Berkeley. In this controversial book, he analyzes the unconscious world-views of liberals and conservatives, explaining that the differences arise from radically different conceptions of morality and ideal family life. Lakoff argues that these differences are at the heart of current American politics in ways that are far from obvious. Not just an issue-by-issue discussion, this is a provocative and entirely new way to see the partisan and ideological divisions in America. This group will be moderated by Honors student Tim Burr.

SHERLOCK HOLMES Selected Short Stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Tuesdays, 1:00 - 1:50
160-E David L. Boren Hall
5 Weeks

Many students have suggested that some of the reading groups should focus on short stories rather than a long narrative; thus each week's reading "stands alone," and having to miss one week's meeting does not mean participants are behind in the reading. This group will choose a selection of the short stories featuring legendary detective Sherlock Holmes, created by the Scottish physician Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and written from 1887 through 1924. Holmes is a master of logic and disguise, and his cases are narrated by his assistant and close friend, the fictional Dr. John Watson. This group will be moderated by Honors College student Maura Cremin.
HOW TO READ LITERATURE LIKE A PROFESSOR
The best-seller by Thomas C. Foster

*Fridays, 11:00 - 11:50*
180 Cate 1 Hall
7 Weeks

The subtitle for this popular book is “a lively and entertaining guide to reading between the lines,” and the author is a professor of English at the University of Michigan. In many ways, reading this book is an exercise in deciding if English classes and literary criticism truly help the reader find a deeper appreciation of literature. One reviewer called this book “casual, unpretentious, yet brilliant.” This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY
by Boethius
(ca.476-526 C.E.)

*Wednesdays, 11:30 - 12:20*
180 Cate 1 Hall
4 Weeks

The best-known work by the Roman philosopher of the early sixth century, who is often regarded as “the last Roman.” THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY “occupies a central place in the history of Western thought” and is considered by some to be a bridge between Classical antiquity and the medieval world. Written while Boethius was in prison awaiting execution, CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY has been described as the last great Western work which can be called Classical. The book is a dialogue between Boethius and philosophy, and touches upon some of the most profound and fundamental questions of human existence. This group will be moderated by Honors student Gerard Kreiser.

BLOOD MERIDIAN
by Pulitzer Prize winner Cormac McCarthy

*Fridays, 3:00 - 3:50*
182 David L. Boren Hall
8 Weeks

Written by the author of NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN, this novel was picked by TIME magazine as one of the 100 best English-language books published since 1923. Literary critic Harold Bloom has called it “the single greatest book published since Faulkner’s AS I LAY DYING. The narrative follows a teenage runaway in 1849-50, who joins a gang of scalp hunters who massacred Indians along the US-Mexico border. WARNING: This book contains graphic violence and depicts the pervasive racism of most white Americans in the 1850’s. If you find such material offensive, DO NOT sign up to read this book. This group will be moderated by Honors students Dillon Votaw and David Uriell.
Nick Hornby’s
HIGH FIDELITY
Hilarious 1995 novel and basis for the 2000 film
Tuesdays, 12:00 - 12:50
160 E David L. Boren Hall
7 Weeks
Rob Fleming is a record store owner in his 30s whose girlfriend, Laura, has just left him. At the record shop — named Championship Vinyl — Rob and his employees Dick and Barry spend their free moments discussing mix-tape aesthetics and constructing “top-five” lists of anything that demonstrates their knowledge of music. Reviewers said: “a substantial yet effortless read. Skillful and stimulating, an all-too-true guy’s tale.” In the film version, starring John Cusak, the action was shifted from London to Chicago. This group will be moderated by Honors students John Goetzinger and Cliff Marroquin.

THE UGLY AMERICAN
Classic novel by
William J. Lederer and
Eugene Burdick
Mondays, 4:30 - 5:20
182 David L. Boren Hall
6 Weeks
This is the multi-million-copy bestseller that coined the phrase for tragic American blunders abroad. First published in 1958, The Ugly American became a runaway national bestseller for its slashing expose of American arrogance, incompetence, and corruption in Southeast Asia. Based on fact, the book’s eye-opening stories and sketches drew a devastating picture of how the United States was losing the struggle with Communism in Asia. Combining gripping storytelling with an urgent call to action, the book prompted President Eisenhower to launch a study of our military aid program that led the way to much-needed reform. This group will be moderated by Dr. Vicki Schaeffer, Honors College Director of Recruitment.

AMULET
by Roberto Bolaño
Wednesdays, 2:00 - 2:50
180 Cate 1 Hall
4 Weeks
Counting the summer session of 2009, this is the fourth semester in which a reading group has focused on a work by the Chilean Roberto Bolaño, who died in Spain in 2003, at the age of 50. The novella AMULET reintroduces one of the minor characters from a much longer novel, THE SAVAGE DETECTIVES, Auxilio Lacouture, “the mother of Mexican poetry.” Based on a real incident, she is in a building at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma in Mexico City (UNAM), where she has been trapped by an army occupation of the campus. She stays in hiding there for 12 days, the only remaining person on the campus, and the book is a fevered stream of consciousness in which she provides an account, of sorts, of her life and times among the poets of Mexico. This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.
EVERYTHING GOOD WILL COME
by Sefi Atta
A coming-of-age tale from Nigeria

Every other Thursday, 7:00 - 8:00
182 David L. Boren Hall

This group is a continuation of the post-feminist reading group that has met for the past two semesters. First preference is given to those who have previously participated in the group, but new members are also welcome, space permitting. The group uses a different format, meeting once every two weeks and reading an entire book for each meeting. This semester’s theme is “global women’s literature,” and the group intends to read novels from Nigeria, Japan, India, Algeria, and Iran. This group will be moderated by Honors College student Madison Melon.

RADICALISM OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION
Gordon S. Wood’s Pulitzer Prize winning book

Fridays, 2:00 - 2:50
182 David L. Boren Hall
8 Weeks

Some historians have seen the American revolution as conservative or not even revolutionary. In this beautifully written and persuasively argued book, one of the most noted U.S. historians restores the radicalism to what he terms “one of the greatest revolutions the world has ever known.” It was the American Revolution, Wood argues, that unleashed the social forces that transformed American society between 1760 and 1820. The change from a deferential, monarchical, ordered, and static society to a liberal, democratic, and commercial one was astonishing, all the more so because it took place without industrialization or urbanization. It was a revolution of the mind, in which the concepts of equality, democracy, and private interest were grasped by hundreds of thousands of Americans nearly overnight. This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

SIDDHARTHA
by Nobel Prize winner Herman Hesse

Wednesdays, 2:00 - 2:50
180 Cate 1 Hall
3 Weeks
This Group Begins February 23rd

Hermann Hesse’s short novel Siddhartha has sometimes been called a work of reverse missionary activity, bringing to the West the lessons of a typically Eastern story of spiritual searching and fulfillment. However, this deceptively simple and episodic tale of the title character’s progress through life provides no conventional resolutions to the questions it poses. In many ways, this is a Western interpretation of Buddhism. This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.
Surprising Benefits of Informal Reading Groups at the OU Honors College

[Excerpts from a letter from Jordan Rogers, engineering major and Honors College alumnus]

I remember anticipating the reading group featuring Other Colors and commenting to a friend who had encouraged me to sign up for it that I did not expect to enjoy myself. This was because of nothing more than the fact that I had, “no interest in Turkey, and no interest in literature.”

I soon found that I was completely in the wrong. As I engaged in the book as well as dialogue with a professor and with other students, especially the ones who had visited Turkey, I found myself thrilled and excited to learn more about Orhan Pamuk, Istanbul, the Ottoman Empire, and Turkey.

And then I understood what might be the most important lesson I’ve ever received: I AM interested in both Turkey and literature. This is something that I would have never anticipated for I have no personal connection or natural interest in either.

The implications of this discovery were astounding, for my lack of interest in Turkey was actually a presumed lack of interest, and it only took one book to prove otherwise.

But if this was true of Turkey and literature, what wouldn’t I find fascinating if I took the time to study? Suddenly, everything in the world was interesting. I was overwhelmed, but in a very positive way.

When I started the informal reading groups this semester I had to be very disciplined to finish the 50 pages required for both books each week.

Since my epiphany, if it can so be called, I have required myself to read 50 pages of any book every day. At first, this seemed like a chore, for my days were full already with school and clubs. But I pushed myself, and every day it seems less and less like a chore. I’m feeling now the daily desire to read, the feeling that I WANT to read, something I have never felt before.

You’ll be amazed to hear that I wake up about 90 minutes earlier now just so I can start the day right - with a book. By the time you read this I will have finished three books in as many weeks - all fiction classics.

I want to emphasize that the books we read and the discussions we had among the students were great… and I left feeling energized about reading. My definition of education has drastically morphed, and I now challenge myself to pursue lifelong learning.