



"This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill -- the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill -- you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes."

– The Matrix

"...to tell a story about the past is to tell a story about the present. To recount a fantasy, a story of the imaginary, is also a way of recounting a tale about the actual. If this were not true then the deed would be pointless."

– Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights, a novel by Salman Rushdie

Belief and Doubt in Contemporary Fictions

English 461.02 Capstone Seminar I – Fall 2016 – Thursdays, 4-6:45 pm – Prof. Barbara Liu

Since before written language, human beings have used stories to create and communicate belief systems: ancient myths sought to explain the origins of our world; parables and fables helped develop our sense of right and wrong; allegories provided models by which to judge our actions.

While we might not see contemporary novels and films as functioning in the same ways, they can indeed help us to develop our beliefs about the nature of our world, our role within it, and how we should live our lives. They might do this by showing us a character who is struggling with doubt or working to define his or her own worldview. They might allow us to vicariously try on the belief system of a character or narrator, testing it against our own lived experience. Or sometimes, they incorporate stories within stories to help us understand the role storytelling itself plays in the development of our beliefs this world, the universe, the transcendent, our actions, and ourselves.

In this seminar, we will be reading a variety of contemporary novels and, perhaps, viewing a film or two that provide opportunities for us to encounter stories as testing grounds for doubt and belief. Our readings will include works in a variety of literary and popular genres (e.g. science fiction/fantasy, young adult fiction, graphic novels, and mysteries) that allow us to encounter a variety of worldviews both religious (e.g. Christianity and Islam) and non-religious (e.g. naturalism). We will also engage with some secondary sources that will help us understand the various worldviews we encounter and/or how literature engages "ultimate questions" of meaning and belief.

The fall semester will focus on reading, writing about, and discussing assigned texts that will immerse us in this way of thinking about fiction. In spring, students will (with the support of the instructor and classmates) pursue their individual interests related to our topic through scholarly and/or creative capstone projects.