

TBIS Proposal

(Items ordered according to TBIS Proposal Guidelines)

Course Title: Conversations About Family

Course Description (& course questions):

Theme: Conversations about Family: Mothers, Fathers, Sisters, Brothers, Daughters, Sons, Great-Relatives, and Members of the Human Family. Glimpses of family life through stories, poems, essays, editorials, and film. This course is interested in the public and private spheres of family and the ways in which these spheres influence each other.

We will examine the idea of family as it manifests itself in the public, often political sphere, particularly in regard to the 2004 presidential election. We will read editorials and research essays that explore the following questions: How does the definition of “family values” change as one moves from left to right on the political continuum?; Which of these definitions are legitimate?; What are the various arguments for and against a “national definition of marriage”?; Does “it take a village to raise a child” as Hilary Clinton argued at the 1996 Democratic National Convention?; and as for children of the 21st century, are they less responsible than children of past generations due to overindulgent parenting?

In examining the private sphere of family, we will study stories, poems, essays, and a film that address themes ranging from family lineage to incest. Through discussion, we will attempt to answer the following questions: How do we define our own families? Within these families, is it possible to form identities, endure pain, discover joy, and remain loyal? With whom in our family do we feel safe and with whom do we feel afraid? Which traditions or family patterns will we repeat when starting our own families, which will we revise, and why?; To what extent is our family life conscious?

Craft: We write best when our subject matter moves and interests us. Therefore we will dedicate the semester to unearthing our own memories and beliefs about family and then writing about them in artistic form. Students will take risks and write to discover their *own* voices, not merely to please others. True, every writer must take his or her apprenticeship in the craft of writing. In this course students will study and practice the art of writing introductions, transitions, and conclusions; the art of creating flow; the art of writing concisely and without pretension; the art of writing honestly; and the glorious necessity of revision. Students will also refresh their memories (or learn from scratch) the elements of grammar, style, and punctuation that make for professionalism. These fundamentals, however, are what great writers have in common. Our imaginations, our perceptions, and our guts are what make us unique. The good news is that essayists today are having just as much fun as poets, short story writers, novelists, and playwrights. The essay has long had a reputation as the boring genre! We will begin the semester by learning to write a traditional academic paper with a thesis, but from there we will break free from the rigid structure of a term paper and write pieces in creative nonfiction.

Students will also study masterful writers as a necessary requisite to learning the craft of writing. They will come to understand the essential balance between reading critically and reading with an open mind. In a perfect world, students will come to class eager for discussions of works by these stylistic masters.

Required Texts (*materials collated in a coursepack*):

*Texts are arranged in “clusters” and assigned together for the purposes of discussion. With a few exceptions, essays, stories, and poems are relatively short, e.g. 1-page poems and 2-5—page essays and stories. Students will only have about 30-45 minutes of coursepack reading per week. We will read some pieces in class and some will be assigned independently as part of written assignments.

Public Sphere: These texts are meant to incite classroom debates during which students will write responses, form arguments, meditate with classmates, and study rhetorical strategies to guide them in writing the final course paper: an argumentative essay.

“Text of Hillary Clinton Speech” by AP; “It Takes a Village: An Analysis of Hillary Clinton’s Book” by Kerby Anderson. [This review of Hillary’s speech/book takes on Hillary’s “liberal ideas.” Despite calling her the “most visible, articulate feminist in the world” throughout the essay, he finally asks “Where is the church in Hillary’s book?” He argues that children should be raised by the church, not the government.]

“American Coddle” by Alexandra Wolfe; “Are Children Today More Overindulged than We Were” by David J. Bredehoft; and “Relationships Between Childhood Overindulgence and Parenting Attributes: Implications for Family Life Educators” by David J. Bredehoft. [Wolfe’s line “My mother, my secretary” sums up her rant about children whose parents do all their work and negotiating for them; Bredehoft’s articles look at statistics on material wealth, obesity, and debt as well as research on parenting to support his argument that more children today are overindulged than in past generations.]

“Whose Family Values?” by George Lakoff; and “Why we need a national definition of marriage” by Maggie Gallagher. [Lakoff argues that opposing same-sex marriage is a way of defending patriarchy and denying women equal rights. Gallagher uses Congressional history to argue that same-sex marriage should not be legal just as polygamy is not legal.]

“Stone Soup” by Barbara Kingsolver; and “Bush Family Values” by Stephen Pizzo of *Mother Jones*. [Kingsolver takes a historical look at family arguing that “values” have more to do with acceptance than hatred. Pizzo gives a business history of the “Bush clan” to show that Bush family values are more about greed than about sanctity.]

Private Sphere: These texts will help us delve into the more personal themes we associate with family. Students will write responses to these texts, imitate the styles of certain authors, and use these pieces as inspiration to generate ideas for their own creative works. I suspect these texts will dredge up memories for and give courage to students to write honestly about their own families. It is likely interesting debates and meditations will develop from our discussions of these texts as well.

“Burden of a Happy Childhood” by Mary Cantwell; “Family Reunion” by Maxine Kumin; “Names of Women” by Louise Erdrich; and “Lineage” by Daisy Zamora. [Cantwell writes that even a secure childhood has its drawbacks because as an adult she finds herself still running home for comfort. Maxine Kumin’s 2nd person narrative poem juxtaposes images of a sophisticated young adult returning home to crude farming images. Louise Erdrich laments not being as strong and self-sufficient as the women who came before her; Daisy Zamora notes that only stories of men have been passed down in her family.]

“Bread” by Naomi Shihab Nye; “Brothers and Sisters Around the World” by Andrea Lee. [When Nye is interrogated at an Israeli airport, it is fresh-baked bread from her grandmother that convinces the security officer to see her humanity. In Lee’s story two girls in Madagascar feel threatened by an African American woman who eventually becomes another member of their sisterhood.]

“An Orange Line Train to Ballston” by Edward P. Jones; “Conversation in June about Mothers” by Hwang Sun-Won; and “A Mother’s Tale” by James Agee. [At the end of “Orange Line Train” Jones writes about the main character Marvella, “She did not like scenes like this, particularly around white people, who believed that nothing good ever happened between black people and their children, but she could not stop herself.” The speakers in Sun-Won’s tell stories about their mothers and debate whether a mother is “an absolute being.” In Agee’s story a baby cow wonders if his mother can be trusted to tell the truth.]

“The Shawl” by Cynthia Ozick; and “A Woman Mourned by Daughters” by Adrienne Rich. [In Ozick’s story, a mother Rose witnesses the murder of her infant daughter Magda. In Rich’s poem, a dead mother inhabits everyday objects in the house.]

“Nighttime Fires” by Regina Barreca; “Angry Fathers” by Mel Lazarus; and “Anxiety” by Grace Paley. [Barreca writes about a father who would pack up his children in the night to drive to wealthy neighborhoods and watch homes burn down. Mel Lazarus remembers the kindness his father showed to him in lieu of the good beating his friends received for the same naughty behavior. In Paley’s surreal story,

a woman looking down onto a sidewalk calls out to a father to make him aware of his aloof behavior toward his children.]

“Lawns” by Mona Simpson; and “A Father’s Story” by Andre Dubus. [In Mona Simpson’s story, a girl finally puts an end to an incestuous relationship with her father when she feels pity for him. The father in “A Father’s Story” covers up a car accident in which his daughter kills a man. At the end of this story, he explains this decision to God, his father.]

“Goodbye, My Brother” by John Cheever; “Silver Water” by Amy Bloom; and “Everyday Use” by Alice Walker. [The narrator in Cheever’s story finally responds to his brother’s divisiveness (amid other themes of jealousy, adultery, and indiscretion) by hitting him over the head with a rock on the beach just as his brother once did to him in childhood. The narrator in “Silver Water” facilitates her mentally ill sister’s suicide; In Walker’s story, the mother finally stands up to her older (pretentious and superficial) daughter Dee by handing family quilts down to her younger daughter Maggie.]

“In Dreams Begin Responsibilities” by Delmore Schwartz and “The Kid’s Guide to Divorce” by Lorrie Moore. [The narrator dreams up a movie of his parents’ engagement and attempts to stop their engagement because he knows how unhappy it will make them. He himself harbors some guilt for not making them happy after the fact. The narrator in Moore’s story offers dark but humorous advice to the daughter of divorced parents.]

On Writing: These two pieces will introduce students to the importance of revision and reading their work aloud.

“Reading Blind” by Margaret Atwood; and “Shitty First Drafts” by Anne LaMott. [Atwood reminds us that we first discovered the rhythm of language in its oral form. LaMott levels with young writers by telling them that all writers, famous or not, write shitty first drafts.]

Electronic & Visual Texts: I will show the movie *In America* as part of a writing assignment. I will play one or more NPR recordings (likely from *Fresh Air*) regarding the presidential race as it relates to “family values” and other related family-relevant topics that arise. Students will receive a tutorial on internet/library research and will be required to do research as part of two small writing assignments.

Writing Assignments:

Major Papers (4)

- Literary (Critical) Analysis Paper: *Defining Family in Times of War*. Students will look for recurring themes in *A Piece of My Heart*, stories from *The Things They Carried*, and the short story “Conversations in June about Mothers” and will develop a thesis that describes the purpose of that recurring theme as it relates to traditional and nontraditional definitions of family. Students will be able to move beyond summary when it comes to integrating readings into a paper with a unique argument. Students will begin to develop skills as careful readers and structured writers. Students will receive both line-by-line comments and edits as well as end comments from me. *Revision required.*
- Epistolary (consolation, confession, or diatribe)/portrait or sketch/personal narrative or meditation: Students will draw numbers at the beginning of the semester to determine which type of personal essay they will write. The purpose here is to guide students in developing an argument or meaningful set of exploratory questions within a personal essay and in considering audience. Students will focus on developing their voices. Each student will receive a full-class workshop at some point in the semester (they will sign up on a schedule the first week of classes), which essentially means receiving a 20-minute discussion by the class of their piece and typed critiques from their peers and from me. *Revision required.*
- Observation/Experiment Essay: Students must interact with or observe the world around them in a meaningful way in order to develop an essay that relates to an idea about family that interests them. They must first develop a central or guiding question and then search for answers to that question. For example, a student might wonder how relatives maintain relationships with

deceased family members. For such an essay, the student might begin by visiting the cemetery and studying the kinds of tokens left at gravesites. The purpose of this paper is to teach students the art of describing a process as well as to remind students that writers must have an awareness of the world around them. For this paper, students will conference one-on-one with me and will receive extensive oral feedback. *Revision required.*

- **Argumentative Paper:** Throughout the semester students will take notes during our discussions of readings primarily from the public sphere but also those from the private sphere and will ultimately develop a convincing and bold opinion about those topics. They will develop an opinion that interests them into a paper. The purpose of this paper is to teach students how to develop an argument about a controversial subject in a way that is both honest and logical with some focus on cause-and-effect writing. They will have the opportunity to meet with peers in small groups several times before submitting a final draft to me. *Revision Required.*

Smaller Writing Assignments (3)

- **Family History Assignment:** Several student volunteers will tell oral family stories. Essentially they will simulate the act of passing those family stories down to a younger generation by sharing them with the class. Students in the classroom will take notes on these stories, choose the one that interests them most, and write a draft of the story. They will then share their written versions of these stories in a later class, and we will talk about whether or not family histories can truly be preserved based on the exercise. The purpose here is to teach students the importance of listening as it relates to writing. *No revision required.*
- **Movie Review of *In America*:** The purpose of this assignment is to encourage students to watch this film critically and with an eye for theme and then to develop an opinion of the movie that is fair and justified. *No revision required.*
- **Two Research Projects:** Students will be required to research two family-related questions that I recommend or approve. To the first question students must write a response in the form of their choice. To the second, students must write a proposal for an interesting and meaningful way to incorporate the results of the research into one of the papers he or she has written over the course of the semester. He or she must then incorporate that research into the final revised draft.

Breakdown of Grading:

Class participation (discussion, workshop comments, and in-class group writing assign.)	15%
Reading and grammar quizzes	10%
Written workshop critiques (24 total, one for each classmate throughout semester)	15%
Midterm portfolio (approximately 5 in-class individual writing assign. and revised lit analysis)	10%
Final Portfolio (approx. 5 in-class individual writing assign. and three remaining papers revised)	30%
Two Research Assign.	10%
Family History Assign.	5%
Movie Review	5%

Classroom Activities: Most classroom activities are addressed in the above sections of this proposal. They include discussion of readings, film, and NPR broadcasts; full-class workshops; oral storytelling as part of Family History Assignment; individual writing assignments (e.g. an exercise on the use of inventories and lists in writing; a poetry exercise to help students understand flow and lyricism, etc.); group writing assignments (e.g. inkblotting; writing transitions; organizing an argument); and peer review/advice/brainstorm sessions for the final research paper.