

Professor: Zdravko Planinc (planincz@mcmaster.ca)

Office: UH B127, but it's not in use this term.

Office hours: Through video-conferencing; please make arrangements by e-mail.

Course times: Mondays, 12:30 – 1:20; Tuesdays, 1:30 – 2:20; tutorials, TBA.

Course form: The course will be offered through a combination of synchronous and asynchronous online methods. Students will be required to attend Zoom classes and use Avenue (A2L). The details will be discussed in the first class.

## 1. The Course

### *Description*

The short course description in the Calendar is: “An introduction to religious themes, imagery and issues through a study of selected works of modern literature (novels, short stories, poetry, drama), music, art, and film.” The term “religious” in the description is meant in the broadest cultural sense. We will consider ethical, political, philosophical and theological issues as well as more narrowly doctrinal or conventionally religious matters through our discussion of a range of modern works of literature and art.

### *Objectives and pedagogy, in a pandemic*

This is a liberal arts course. It is not intended to provide students with information or data and test their memories. A basis of contextualizing information will be established whenever necessary and assumed in our analyses and interpretations of the course materials. The primary pedagogical purpose of the course is to cultivate literacy in the traditional sense and, more ambitiously, to promote better insight, understanding, and moral and aesthetic judgment by encouraging students to reflect on intrinsically meaningful, challenging, or at least interesting books, plays, performances, movies, TV shows, and other products of the entertainment industry.

To use a term favoured by administrators, the primary “content” of a liberal arts course is discussion – informed and mindful discussion in the shared circumstance of a classroom. The content is also students’ engagement with the course texts and other materials; and the content might also be said to be the assignments. But the content of this course is most definitely *not* information or data that can be accessed, delivered, and reproduced in one way or another indifferently. If a course were nothing but the delivery of known information, there’d be no reason for a university; it would be sufficient for each of us to scroll through web searches and watch videos on our own.

The ongoing pandemic – among its many other, more catastrophic consequences – does present a challenge to liberal arts courses in compelling universities to go online. “Asynchronous content delivery” is not conducive to engaged discussion. In order to best preserve this course’s

particular content, therefore, classes will be held through video-conferencing on the Zoom platform, supported through A2L and e-mail as necessary. There will be no distinction between the “lecture” and “tutorial” aspects of the course. The details will be discussed in the first class.

### *Required course material (and editions of texts)*

Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (Square Fish); also available on Kindle  
Trey Parker et al, *The Book of Mormon Script Book* (Newmarket Press); *only* available in print  
Anne Washburn, *Mr Burns: A post-electric play* (Oberon); print copies are rare, but the play is available on Kindle in Washburn, *Mr Burns and other plays*  
Thornton Wilder, *Our Town* (Harper Perennial); also available on Kindle  
Spalding Gray, *Monster in a Box* (Vintage); also available on Kindle

The course will deal with both print and audio-visual materials. First, the books, listed above. If possible, I’d recommend having print copies. The books should be available as relatively inexpensive paperbacks. The McMaster bookstore, better known as the Campus Store, will attempt to acquire print copies in sufficient numbers and is offering “free shipping across Canada with a minimum purchase of \$75 (combination of textbooks, supplies and clothing).” There are also many other online sites, both Canadian and American, from which you might purchase new and used copies of these texts. If one of them is more convenient for you, please ensure that you purchase the right editions. If you’re in doubt, write me to inquire.

Now, about digital editions of the books. I think it’s good practice to mark up a paperback while reading it, scribbling initial reactions and reflections in the margins, but if no paperbacks are available, a digital book will have to do. Four of the five course books are available on the Kindle platform, both in Canada and the US; and the Kindle reader is available as a free download for all devices. The exception is *The Book of Mormon Script Book* by Trey Parker and friends, *only* available in print form. As usual, digital editions are less expensive than the print editions. As well, it might even be possible to find some of the books online for free. Again, if you have any questions, just write me.

We will also be watching and discussing a good deal of non-print material in the course: TV show episodes, stage shows, a movie, and videos of various sorts, both required and optional. It will *not* be necessary to purchase any DVDs, CDs, or access to audio-visual media for the course. (Students with subscriptions to streaming services might find them handy on occasion, but they are *not* necessary.) Wherever possible, the required non-print media will be made available either through the McMaster Library or through postings on the course’s A2L site. Each of the audio-visual titles required for the course presents its own unique access problems. We will discuss them individually, as necessary, in class.

### *Course requirements and evaluation*

Class participation	10%
Response papers (2x15%)	30%
Essay	30%
Final take-home assignment	30%

### *Class schedule*

Jan. 11, 12	Introduction to the course
Jan. 18	<i>Star Trek</i> , “The Paradise Syndrome” (Original series, s03e03)
Jan. 19	<i>The Orville</i> , “Mad Idolatry” (s01e12)
Jan. 25	<i>Star Trek: Discovery</i> , “New Eden” (s02e02)
Jan. 26	Yang, <i>American Born Chinese</i>
Feb. 1, 2	Yang, <i>American Born Chinese</i>
Feb. 8	<i>Ramy</i> , “Dude, Where’s My Country?” (s01e09)
Feb. 9	<i>Ramy</i> , “Cairo Cowboy” (s01e10)

### Reading week

Feb. 22	<i>South Park</i> , “Super Best Friends” (s05e03)
Feb. 23	<i>The Book of Mormon</i> (the Broadway musical)
Mar. 1, 2	<i>The Book of Mormon</i>
Mar. 8, 9	Washburn, <i>Mr Burns</i>
Mar. 15	Washburn, <i>Mr Burns</i>
Mar. 16	Srinivas Krishna (director), <i>Masala</i> (1991)
Mar. 22, 23	Krishna, <i>Masala</i>
Mar. 29, 30	Wilder, <i>Our Town</i>
Apr. 5, 6	Gray, <i>Monster in a Box</i>
Apr. 12	Concluding discussion
Apr. 13	Preparation for the take-home

## **2. The Assignments**

### *Class participation (10%)*

This should be self-explanatory. The details will be discussed in class.

### *General requirements for all written work*

Use only the course materials for your assignments. In other words, don’t consult any secondary sources or reference works – and don’t even think of searching the internet. It’s simply not

necessary. All your written work should be your own considered thoughts expressed in your own well-chosen words, based on your interpretation of the course material and your participation in class discussions; and any references made in your work should be to the course material alone. Any evidence of anything else will be penalized. As well, your written work must be proof-read the old-fashioned way for spelling and grammatical errors and clarity of style: relying on spelling and grammar functions of your software will not be enough.

### *Response papers (2x15%)*

Students will write two short papers, each of which responds to an assigned text or show *and its discussion in class*. Each of the response papers should be (no more than) 3 typed pages, standard essay format (double-spaced, normal margins, 12-point font).

Write on any **two** of the following: A, B, or C.

(A) Any **one** of the SciFi shows: *Star Trek*'s "The Paradise Syndrome," or *The Orville*'s "Mad Idolatry," or *Star Trek: Discovery*'s "New Eden."

(B) Yang's *American Born Chinese*.

(C) **Either** (1) *South Park*'s "Super Best Friends" **or** (2) one of the *Ramy* episodes, "Dude, Where's My Country?" or "Cairo Cowboy."

Due dates: one week after the final class covering the group (A, B, or C) from which you've selected your topic.

### *The essay itself – topic, outline, final form (30%)*

The essay will be a discussion of some relevant topic in either (1) *The Book of Mormon* (the Broadway musical) or (2) *Mr Burns: A post-electric play*. Each student is required to select his or her own topic, formulate an argument, and demonstrate it with appropriate textual exegesis, presenting everything as elegantly as possible. The finished essay should be about 8 pages (*not* counting title page and any apparatus) – in other words, no less than 7 and no more than 9 pages – standard essay format (double-spacing, normal margins, 12-point font).

Due dates: three weeks after the final lecture on the text selected.

As part of the process of working up the essay, students have the option of submitting an outline and discussing it with me. An outline should be approximately two typed pages; and it must be written in prose, i.e., not in point form. Neither the outline nor our discussion will be graded.

### *Final take-home assignment (30%)*

I'm sure we're all relieved, and for many reasons, that there won't be a Registrar-scheduled sit-down final exam in this course. There will, however, be a final "take-home" assignment, to be completed at some convenient time shortly after the end of classes. The format, content,

procedures and timing of the test will be decided in class, before the end of term, with student suggestions welcome and taken into consideration. Some things about it can be safely inferred now, though: it will cover Krishna's *Masala*, Wilder's *Our Town*, and Gray's *Monster in a Box*; and attendance and participation throughout the course will be assumed. And one feature of it is non-negotiable: students will be required to write answers in prose, i.e., there will be *no* multiple-choice questions.

### *Assignment policies*

Assignments will be submitted either on A2L or as email attachments; announcements about the most appropriate means will be made in class and posted on A2L. Assignments will be graded using McMaster's scale: <https://registrar.mcmaster.ca/exams-grades/grades/#tab-3> Late assignments will be penalized one grading scale increment a day, and weekends will count as two days. Late penalties will be applied if assignments are submitted after deadlines without prior notification and submission of appropriate documentation.

### **3. The Word**

Written work will be marked on grammar, clarity of expression, organization and presentation, as well as on the quality of its content and analysis. Students who wish to improve their writing skills might visit any of McMaster's various support services. There are no shortcuts, however. The best way to improve is to write a lot and, more importantly, to read a lot – "indiscriminately and all the time with [your] eyes hanging out" (Dylan Thomas).

### *Words and power*

In everything they write, students should follow five fundamental rules recommended by George Orwell in "Politics and the English Language" (1946):

1. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
2. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
3. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
4. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
5. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

### *41 other rules for writing good stuff*

1. Always check your spelling.
2. Proof-read to see if you any words out.
3. Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
4. Verb tense, today and always, was important.
5. Prepositions are terms one should not end sentences with.
6. Steer clear of incorrect forms of verbs that have snuck in the language.
7. The right way to use "is" is, is that it shouldn't be used this way.
8. Muster the courage to boldly refuse to incorrectly split an infinitive.

9. Don't use contractions in formal writing.
10. Use the apostrophe in its proper place and omit it when it's not needed.
11. Verb's and simple plural's don't require them.
12. Don't use no double negatives.
13. The adverb usually follows the verb.
14. Statements, like, aren't similes or guesses?
15. Write all adverbial forms correct.
16. Place pronouns as close as possible, especially in long sentences, as of ten words or more, to their antecedents.
17. Everyone should be careful to use a singular pronoun with singular nouns in their writing.
18. Avoid run-on sentences they are hard to read.
19. No sentence fragments.
20. And don't start a sentence with a conjunction.
21. If you write well and I write well, how is it that you and me don't? If this is a lesson to you, and to me as well, then why isn't it a lesson to you and I?
22. Don't overuse exclamation marks!!!
23. "It is best not to use too many 'quotation 'marks,'" he said.
24. Avoid commas, that are not necessary, and un-necessary hyphens, too.
25. Use the semicolon properly, always use it where it is appropriate; and never where it isn't.
26. Writing carefully, dangling participles must be avoided.
27. Don't string too many prepositional phrases together unless you are one of those walking through the valley of the shadow of death.
28. If you reread your work, you will find on rereading that a great deal of repetition and redundancy can be avoided by rereading and editing.
29. Never, ever use repetitive redundancies.
30. A writer must not shift your point of view in mid-sentence.
31. It's really unfair, but things such as human beings, which are animate, get to begin their subordinate clauses differently than other things such as rocks, who are not.
32. Eschew dialect, irregardless.
33. Also, avoid awkward and affected alliteration.
34. Of course, it is incumbent upon everyone to avoid archaisms.
35. Always pick on the correct idiom.
36. Take the bull by the hand and say no to mixed metaphors.
37. Avoid trendy elocutions that sound flaky.
38. From the dawn of time, we have been commanded not to utter sweeping generalizations.
39. Resist hyperbole, even if you have to remind yourself a thousand times.
40. Last but not least, avoid clichés like the plague.
41. First, lists are not arguments; and thirdly, they are often numbered inconsistently.
42. Great green dragons might exist, but green great dragons certainly don't because the mysterious rule about adjectival order in English is opinion-size-age-shape-colour-origin-material-purpose before the noun. If you don't believe me, check out my lovely little old rectangular green French silver whittling knife.

## 4. The Law

### *University policies*

#### *1. Academic integrity statement*

You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behavior in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity. Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behavior can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: “Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty”), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university.

It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, located at [www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity](http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity). The following are only three forms of academic dishonesty: (1) plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one’s own or for which credit has been obtained; (2) improper collaboration in group work; (3) copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

#### *2. Authenticity / plagiarism detection*

*Some courses* might use a web-based service (Turnitin.com) to reveal authenticity and ownership of student submitted work. For courses using such software, students will be expected to submit their work electronically either directly to Turnitin.com or via an online learning platform (e.g. A2L, etc.) using plagiarism detection (a service supported by Turnitin.com) so it can be checked for academic dishonesty.

Students who do not wish their work to be submitted through the plagiarism detection software must inform the Instructor before the assignment is due. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to the plagiarism detection software. *All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld* (e.g., on-line search, other software). For more details about McMaster’s use of Turnitin.com please go to:

[www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity](http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity).

#### *3. Courses with an on-line element*

*Some courses* might use on-line elements (e.g., e-mail, Avenue to Learn (A2L), LearnLink, web pages, capa, Moodle, ThinkingCap, etc.). Students should be aware that, when they access the electronic components of a course using these elements, private information such as first and last names, user names for the McMaster e-mail accounts, and program affiliation might become apparent to all other students in the same course. The available information is dependent on the technology used. Continuation in a course that uses on-line elements will be deemed consent to this disclosure. If you have any questions or concerns about such disclosure please discuss this with the course instructor.

#### 4. *Online proctoring*

*Some courses* might use online proctoring software for tests and exams. This software may require students to turn on their video camera, present identification, monitor and record their computer activities, and/or lock/restrict their browser or other applications/software during tests or exams. This software may be required to be installed before the test/exam begins.

#### 5. *Conduct expectations*

As a McMaster student, you have the right to experience, and the responsibility to demonstrate, respectful and dignified interactions within all of our living, learning and working communities. These expectations are described in the *Code of Student Rights & Responsibilities* (the “Code”). All students share the responsibility of maintaining a positive environment for the academic and personal growth of all McMaster community members, *whether in person or online*.

It is essential that students be mindful of their interactions online, as the Code remains in effect in virtual learning environments. The Code applies to any interactions that adversely affect, disrupt, or interfere with reasonable participation in University activities. Student disruptions or behaviours that interfere with university functions on online platforms (e.g., the use of Avenue 2 Learn, WebEx or Zoom for delivery), will be taken very seriously and will be investigated. Outcomes may include restriction or removal of the involved students’ access to these platforms.

#### 6. *Academic accommodation of students with disabilities*

Students with disabilities who require academic accommodation must contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS) at 905-525-9140 ext. 28652 or [sas@mcmaster.ca](mailto:sas@mcmaster.ca) to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. For further information, consult McMaster University’s *Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities* policy.

#### 7. *Requests for relief for missed academic term work*

The McMaster Student Absence Form (MSAF): In the event of an absence for medical or other reasons, students should review and follow the Academic Regulation in the Undergraduate Calendar “Requests for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work.”

#### 8. *Academic accommodation for religious, indigenous or spiritual observances (RISO)*

Students requiring academic accommodation based on religious, indigenous or spiritual observances should follow the procedures set out in the RISO policy. Students should submit their request to their Faculty Office *normally within 10 working days* of the beginning of term in which they anticipate a need for accommodation *or* to the Registrar's Office prior to their examinations. Students should also contact their instructors as soon as possible to make alternative arrangements for classes, assignments, and tests.



### *9. Copyright and recording*

Students are advised that lectures, demonstrations, performances, and any other course material provided by an instructor include copyright protected works. The Copyright Act and copyright law protect every original literary, dramatic, musical and artistic work, *including lectures by University instructors.*

The recording of lectures, tutorials, or other methods of instruction may occur during a course. Recording may be done either by the instructor for the purpose of authorized distribution or by a student for the purpose of personal study. Students should be aware that their voice and/or image may be recorded by others during the class. Please speak with the instructor if this is a concern for you.

### *10. Extreme circumstances*

The University reserves the right to change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances (e.g., severe weather, labour disruptions, etc.). Changes will be communicated through regular McMaster communication channels, such as McMaster Daily News, A2L and/or McMaster email.

### *And a final course policy*

If you've gone through the entire syllabus carefully, you might not be best pleased to read that this syllabus is subject to change at any time, with due notice given to in-course students. All changes will be announced and discussed in class and posted on A2L.