

Instructor: Dr. O. Alan Weltzien

Office: MH 315B

Hours: before and after class, in The CUP or in classroom

Phones: 683-7431 (office) or 683-6858 (home—between 10 a.m. – 10 p.m.) or 802-2345-2620

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Texts:

Crumley, James, *The Wrong Case* (1975)

Hammett, Dashiell, *Red Harvest* (1929)

Hugo, Richard, *Death and the Good Life* (1982; posth., 1991; 2002)

McMahon, Neil, *Sand Creek* (2007)

In addition, we'll screen several films, including adaptations of one or more of these texts (e.g. The Hound of the Baskervilles, Double Indemnity, The Big Sleep); also, probably R. Polanski's Chinatown and L. Kasdan's The Big Chill

Course statement:

Literature and Popular Culture forms one of the English Department's Introduction to Literature series. So you'll learn more, I hope, about the study of literature as a discipline, and I hope you'll have fun with this "genre fiction." In our course we'll study Montana noir, and in the process, ask and answer why murder mysteries and detective fiction remain so popular among the reading public. There's a well-established "Montana noir" genre of writing; Jim Crumley is one among many famous Montana mystery writers, and we'll read two others: poet Richard Hugo, and suspense fiction writer Neil McMahon.

What do we like, in fiction and film, about watching whodunit? Why are we attracted to murder and the psyche of detectives? Why do we like the distances between individual investigators and the official arms of the law, i.e. police commissioners or chiefs or sergeants or homicide detectives, etc? These are fundamental questions for our class.

These are easy and fun reads. I expect you to have little to no difficulty getting through the texts.

Attendance and expectations: Simple. Don't miss more than one class, otherwise you're course grade might descend. Though I love to talk, I get bored with myself, so be forewarned. Besides, this is a discussion class so I expect and want you to take an active

part in our meetings. If you tend to be quiet, you need to figure out how to be active and involved.

Evaluation:

Four papers: 75%

Attendance and participation: 25%

***Special event: On Thursday evening, 3 December, the English Department's *Dances With Words* visiting writers series concludes with a visit and reading from fiction writer, Robert Stubblefield, who is a member of the UM Missoula MFA faculty. Though I don't require you to come, I strongly recommend it. Further, if you do and write a one-page critique, due the following afternoon (4 December), you'll receive extra credit.

****Another special event: Either Thursday afternoon, 10 December, or Friday afternoon, 11 December, we'll be visited by author Neil McMahon. You'll just be reading *Sand Creek* and he's visiting to talk about his novel with you, answer questions you have, and probably give a reading. It's rare that any English class at UMW secures a visit from an author the class is reading!

A Possible Schedule:

I'm not going to write out details about what I expect or what we'll focus on each class day. Rather, I'll give you a heads up about the reading schedule and paper due dates—in advance, of course. In fact I'll suggest topics to you for your papers, though I prefer you to follow your own interests.

You'll be reading more than a novel a week. So, the first four days, we'll focus on Hammett's *Red Harvest*. Your first paper will be due on Friday, 20 November. We'll start *The Wrong Case*, which I expect you to finish over Thanksgiving Break. Then, 30 Nov ff., we'll focus on Hugo's *Death and the Good Life*, and the week of 7 December (as mentioned above), McMahon's *Sand Creek*.

Along our way, I plan for us to watch several classic noir films—almost all of which do not focus upon our state.