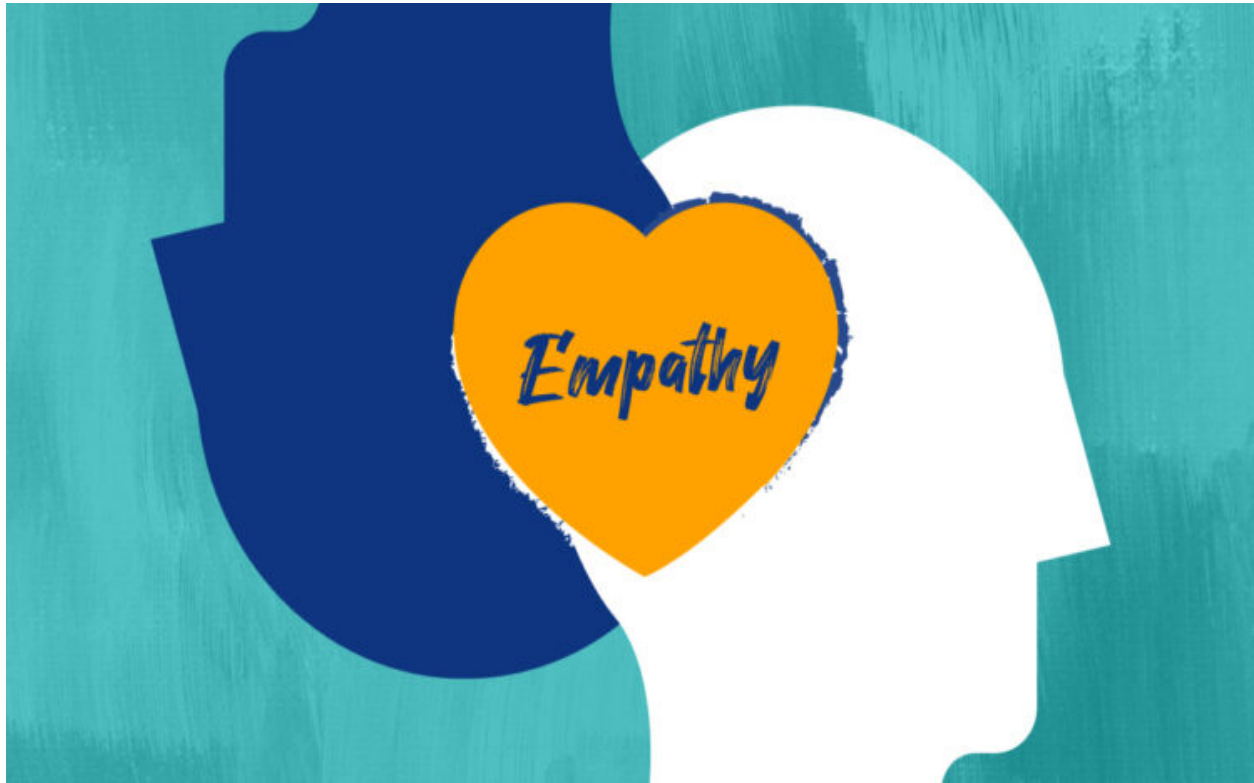


# Syllabus for Ethics in Fiction



Discovery Seminar: Ethics in Fiction (Fall 2024) with Dr. Brad K. Hawley

Location: Pierce Hall 227 / Mondays & Wednesdays: 11:30-12:45

Office Location: Humanities 117

Office Hours: In Office or Over Zoom by Appointment

e-mail: [bhawley@emory.edu](mailto:bhawley@emory.edu) (This is my preferred method of communication—I love to get emails from students!)

**Welcome to the Ethics in Fiction Discovery Seminar!** In this course, we will read short stories, novels, and comics to discuss fictional narratives as acts of communication between writer and reader. This act of communication presents an ethical view of the world in very rich and complex ways. So, we will need to consider in equally complex ways the ethical issues raised and addressed (though not always answered) in these stories. As we discuss *ethics*, which we are using as a descriptive term, we also will be thinking about virtues like love, justice and compassion, as well as intellectual virtues that we will define over the course of the semester. And we will also make the jump from fictional texts to the real world by considering how these ethics and virtues impact us in our daily lives.

Compassion will be our key virtue, and we will study the ways fiction gives us the opportunity to practice the virtue of compassion through our empathizing in subtle ways with a variety of characters in a variety of circumstances. And through that empathizing, the author guides the reader to some claims about what is the best way to live. In that way, fiction presents views of right and wrong actions, of certain notions of “good” and “bad” in the world. However, we need to make sure that we do not look at all

fictional narratives as simplistic moral fables; we need to avoid that simplification. Rather, we need to look in subtle ways at the hints of ethical ideas conveyed to us by the writer/artist through plot, character development, point-of-view, irony, art etc.

As a class, we will focus on understanding and consensus: There are a wide range of readings of any novel, for example, but disagreements about what a text means depends upon first finding interpretive common ground. Our class will seek to identify the common ground for each narrative we read, before looking at what in the text is more open to interpretation. This class will also involve reading some rhetorical theory about ethics in fiction and the concept of the implied author. Finally, each student will select a text from the assigned reading on which to conduct further research on the ethical issues—or virtues—raised by the narrative.

### **From *Shaped by Stories: The Ethical Power of Narratives* by Marshall Gregory:**

"When practiced in a spirit of intellectual give-and-take, the particular mode of warning used by responsible ethical critics produces discussion and argument, not dogmatic assertion. Moralizing shuts topics down. Ethical criticism powers them up. The point to performing a piece of practical negative criticism is neither to bully works of art nor to foreclose further discussion. The responsible ethical critic assumes that the ethical issues raised by stories are complex, subtle, thorny, and best analyzed within a community of thinkers who all agree about the importance of ethics in general but who do not necessarily make the same ethical judgments about particular narratives. And since we don't all agree, discussion is needed, *not* in order for one view to win out over all others but in order for us to learn what we think is important" (122).

"our emotional, intellectual, and ethical responses to stories are the same emotional, intellectual, and ethical responses we have to life. . . We toggle back and forth between life and stories, and each of these domains assists in understanding the other. We do not have to pretend that the secondhand experiences of story are real in a firsthand sense. On the other hand, the difference between firsthand and secondhand experiences does not necessarily force us to conclude that story is less of an influence on us than real life merely because it is secondhand. In the words of Peter Lamarque, 'we can know something is fictional but still take it seriously without having to believe or even half-believe it. We can reflect on, be moved by, a thought independently of accepting it as true'" (42-43).

**Evil as the lack of empathy:** *"In my work with the defendants (at the Nuremberg Trials 1945-1949), I was searching for the nature of evil, and I now think I have come close to defining it. A lack of empathy. It's the one characteristic that connects all the defendants, a genuine incapacity to feel with their fellow men. Evil, I think, is the absence of empathy."* -Captain G. M. Gilbert, the Army psychologist assigned to watching the defendants at the Nuremberg trials

**The importance of empathy:** *"Learning to stand in someone else's shoes, to see through their eyes, that's how peace begins. And it's up to you to make that happen. Empathy is a quality of character that can change the world."* -Barack Obama

### **Learning Objectives:**

1. Engage in inquiry-based learning to begin to ask more meaningful questions, question and examine evidence more rigorously, and use evidence in argument more effectively.
2. Expand communication skills.
3. Develop information literacy through engagement with the library and other appropriate resources.
4. Ethical Reasoning: Be able to discuss ethics in fiction and in our daily lives
5. Work on developing the virtue of compassion/empathy through regular practice in daily life, particularly through the practice of exercising empathy for characters while reading fiction

**Meetings with the Professor:** I will be available after class every meeting to discuss your writing, to answer any questions you may have about the course, and to give you feedback on your performance in the course. I am also available for private meetings in my office and over Zoom. I also encourage the use of email: I enjoy communicating with students over email, and many students are more comfortable communicating that way. I usually respond fairly quickly to emails. Some students like to extend our discussions of the texts in private discourse with me over email.

**Class Community and Confidentiality:** We are building a community as a class, and I hope we develop friendships and caring relationships. To have any hope of building such relationships, we must be able to share with one another and trust one another. Therefore, any personal information shared in this class must not be shared outside of class. Please respect each other's privacy. With that being said, do not feel you have to share extremely private information that makes you uncomfortable. That is not a requirement of the course.

**Ethical Friendships in Class:** Forming certain kinds of friendships helps shape us in ethical ways; therefore, let us be the kind of "decent" friends to one another that Aristotle describes. Lamb, Brant, and Brooks clarify, "simply having friends or being a member of a community is not enough to acquire *good* character: the moral quality of these relationships matters. As Aristotle writes, 'the friendship of base people turns out to be vicious. . . . But the friendship of decent people is decent, and increases the more often they meet. And they seem to become still better from their activities and their mutual correction.' The influence of common activities is among the reasons Aristotle prioritizes friendships based on virtue rather than utility or pleasure." ("Seven Strategies for Cultivating Virtue in the University" by Michael Lamb, Jonathan Brant, and Edward Brooks 136)

**A Note on the terms *Morality* and *Ethics*:** We are using the term *morality* in a "broad descriptive sense," as explained by Mattison: "*morality* just means some identifiable way to live one's life, evident through the myriad of choices one makes. We decide to act or not to act. We decide when and how to act. . . . Since everybody in life makes such decisions in one way or another, everyone has some morality in this descriptive sense of the term" (28). Also, we all follow rules that guide our actions, even if we have not articulated clearly for ourselves what those rules are—and those rules may be good or bad. Thus, moral rules are not inherently good ones. And therefore, we could describe someone as having a good morality or a bad morality, with *morality* acting as a neutral, descriptive term. I will use the term *ethics* as a synonym for *morals* in this class. *Moral Philosophy/Ethics* is a branch of philosophy that considers these sets of rules and other related ethical issues.

**Key Virtues:** We will be discussing a wide variety of ethics and virtues in this class, because the various fictional texts we are reading bring up so many different ethical issues. However, we will focus on compassion/empathy, love, and justice. Compassion/empathy is our overarching virtue, for several reasons. First, we want to have one virtue that you work on developing through habit formation, because focusing on practicing too many virtues at once can be overwhelming. Second, the act of reading fiction is itself a way of practicing the habit of compassion, because authors invite us to empathize with characters in very specific ways when we are engaging with the stories. Third, compassion in many ways leads us to the other two key virtues—it leads us to love others in better ways and leads us to want justice for others based on our empathizing with their particular situations. Thus, while I encourage you to practice multiple virtues in your life whenever you can, we will have this focus on the habit formation of compassion through reading.

**Assumptions on which this course is based:** First is the assumption that one's character can change over time. Second is the assumption that one can intentionally change character through education and habit formation. Third is the assumption that reading fiction is itself to practice the virtue of compassion by regularly and repeatedly empathizing with characters in the stories, particularly when we are led to empathize with characters who are either different from us or who are facing situations that we have never encountered ourselves.

**Ethics Journal (use a physical and not a digital journal):** First, go to the store or order on-line a journal that you find aesthetically pleasing that you want to use all semester. For this class, you will take notes in your journal every time you read an assignment for class. When reading the fiction, you should pay particular attention to justice, love (in all its various forms), and/or compassion (and its connection to empathy). We will consider many types of ethical ideas and virtues, but these are our key virtues for the course. Compassion/empathy is the one virtue that we will always consider, because reading fiction, as I've already mentioned, is a way of practicing the habit of compassion/empathy and because the virtues of love and justice are based, in part, on one's ability to exercise compassion for another person. I will not read these journals, because I know some of what you write might be private. But, your journal grade will be based on your being able to read from it in class every day as we discuss fiction and ethics (you can be selective and not read in front of your peers any of your writing that is too personal for you).

1. Ethics in the Fiction—Ethics and Compassion/Empathy: What ethical arguments are being made in the fictional narrative? (How do you know?) How is your empathy engaged in the fiction? Which characters are we asked to have empathy for and in what ways? In other words, be specific about the ways in which the fiction asks you to practice the virtue of compassion.
2. Moral Exemplars in the Fiction: Are any of the characters offered as exemplars, or models, for ethical behavior? (Explain what aspects of their character the author is asking us to admire and imitate in our lives. What virtues do certain characters have?) You should also consider characters offered as negative examples, particularly in the *Criminal* comics—do these criminals have *any* virtues?
3. Practicing Compassion/Empathy—Habit formation: How have you been practicing empathy through the reading of this fiction? What types of people have you been asked to empathize with in these stories? You can also consider, if you'd like, other ways you have practiced compassion and empathy: You might have experienced empathy while reading for another class or while reading the news, or even through hearing the story of a friend. Are you listening to those around you who may need someone to hear them?
4. Other Ethical Concerns in Your Life, including Exemplars and Intellectual Virtues: How do the ethics alluded to in the literature apply to your life? Are there any exemplars in the fiction that model certain virtues for you? How might you be practicing intellectual virtues in this class? What about in other classes? Are any academic assignments that you have requiring you to practice any particular intellectual virtues?

**Class Participation:** *Class participation* refers to attentiveness and kindness to others, preparation for class, in-class assignments, informal out-of-class assignments to prepare for discussion (particularly journal writing), and quality (not just quantity) of participation. Remember that active listening is just as important as talking. Please listen to those speaking with curiosity and compassion. If you do not participate in these ways, particularly if you stay mostly silent throughout the semester during discussions, your final grade will be lowered by one full letter grade. And if you come to class without reading, you will be unable to participate in class discussion; therefore, you will be marked absent on those days.

**A Note on Class Discussions:** These are some of my favorite books you'll be reading, and every class, there will be students who really like the books, too. So, if you do not like the book, please keep your thoughts to yourself until the end of class when we can offer criticisms of the books if you want. But before that, focus on what you like; what was interesting about the story, characters, or art; and what you felt was done well in the book. If you come in criticizing the books, it shuts down conversation from those who did like the books, and as a result, conversation tends to end early rather than lasting the class as we explore what is good and interesting about these books. You should go into each book with an open mind asking, Why do people like this book? Why is Dr. Hawley offering it as a sample text for us to read? What ethical lessons can I learn from this text? Academic "critique" of texts is not the same as negatively "criticizing" a text. (It is best to suspend negative judgment of textbooks in college; you often will find the comments/lectures by the professor and discussion from your peers lead you to like a text you initially did

not. Also, even if you still do not like a text, there is the pleasure of academic analysis and discussion—think of when you see a movie you do not like and still enjoy having a discussion about it with friends after seeing it).

**Email:** Please check your Oxford email regularly, as will I. I usually respond quickly, but as a rule, allow a minimum of 24 hours for a response from your professors. When emailing me, or any professor, make sure you are not asking questions that you can easily find the answer to in some other way. Use [bhawley@emory.edu](mailto:bhawley@emory.edu) to contact me.

**The final grades are based on these percentages:**

1. Keeping an Ethics Journal and Reading from Your Ethics Journal in Class: 35%
2. Papers #1-2: 10% each\*
3. Three Reflection Assignments: 10%
4. Three Annotations: 5% each
5. Abstract: 5%
6. Research Paper Draft & Peer Review: 5%
7. Final Paper: 10%

\*These two papers can be rewritten for a higher grade if a student wishes to do so. They must be rewritten within a week of being graded by the professor.

**Missed Class:** If you miss a class, you are expected to write a 350-word (minimum) email to me giving me your response to the readings we covered for the day by sending me your answers to the four groups of questions you answered in your journal. I will respond to your comments and give you any necessary information you may have missed during class. You will be allowed a maximum of three absences. Your final grade will drop one-third of a letter for each absence after the third. But because of Covid, there is leniency. Please just make sure you communicate with me. Tardiness can also affect your grade. If you are consistently late for class, tardiness will start counting as an absence, and your grade will drop accordingly.

**The Oxford Writing and Communication Center:** Critical inquiry, scholarship, and public life run on writing. The Oxford Writing and Communication Center (OWCC) mission is to help students grow as flexible communicators and thinkers in their classes and also as global citizens. The OWCC supports students working on all forms of communication—whether for academic, professional, public, or personal purposes—through individual consultations, college-wide workshops, and an on-site library of communication resources. The OWC's peer consultants are trained to support writing, presentations, or multi-modal assignments for any class; they are available at any point in the process, from brainstorming to argument development to polishing. For more information, please visit the website at <https://inside.oxford.emory.edu/academics/writing-center/index.html>

**Honor Code:** Note that in this class, unless specifically directed to do so, using AI or the internet for any class preparation or assignments is an Honor Code violation (this rule varies from course to course). Research is allowed only during specified research assignments, and all sources must be documented properly. You are required to write your papers without the aid of AI (like ChatGPT), the internet, or other research (except during the research project), because I want your writing to be based on your own reading of the texts. However, if you do accidentally look at another source, please document it using MLA guidelines (as explained on the [OWL Purdue website](https://owl.purdue.edu)[Links to an external site.](#)[Links to an external site.](#)[Links to an external site.](#)). Please refer to <https://oxford.emory.edu/catalog/regulations/honor-code.html>

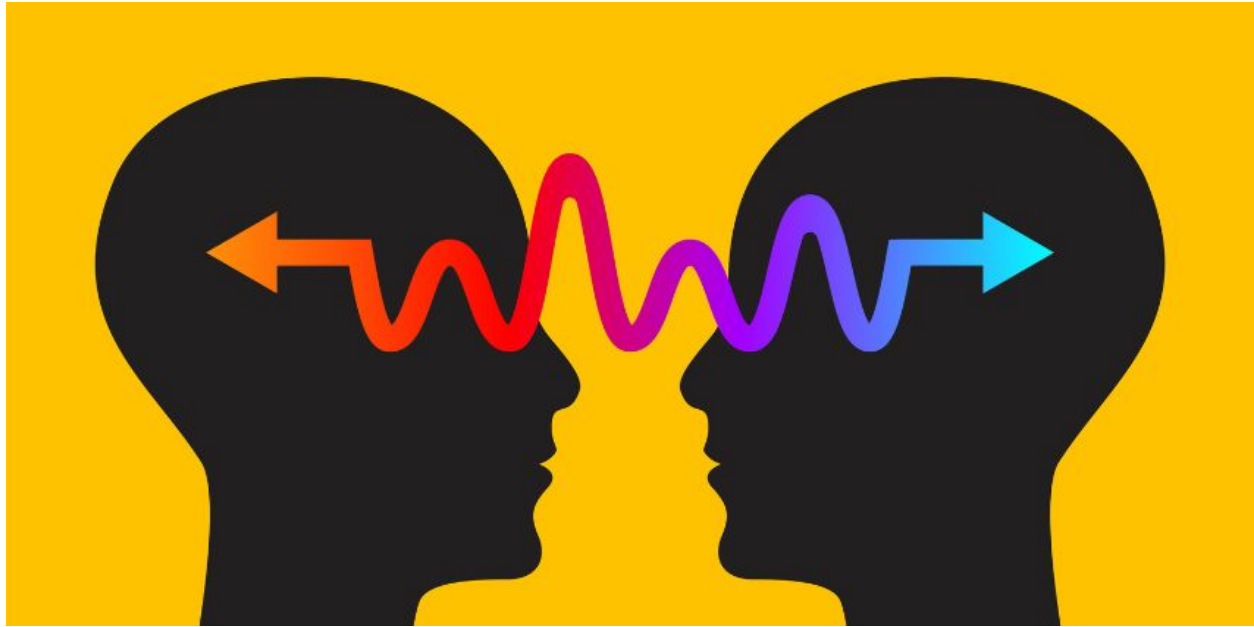
**Late Assignments and flexibility:** I usually accept late assignments when there is a good reason for the delay in turning them in. So, please contact me via email if you need to make a request for turning in a late assignment. Papers will receive more timely feedback if they are turned in within a week of the due date. Just make sure you communicate with me so I know what is going on for you.

**On Pedagogical Development and Student Work:** Student work submitted as part of this course may be reviewed by Oxford College and Emory College faculty and staff for the purposes of improving instruction and enhancing Emory education.

**Accessibility:** If needed, please contact [Department of Accessibility Services](#) to start the registration process. Faculty may not provide accommodations until an accommodation letter has been processed, and accommodations are not retroactive. Please contact me early in the semester regarding these matters, so we can have a meeting to discuss what I can do to help. <http://equityandinclusion.emory.edu/access/>.[Links to an external site.](#)[Links to an external site.](#)

**Religious Accommodation Policy:** Students seeking academic accommodations for religious observance should submit their requests to the instructor by email as early as possible in advance. If you have questions or concerns about your request, you may contact , the College Chaplain, Rev. Lyn Pace, [ppace@emory.edu](mailto:ppace@emory.edu), Oxford Student Center 224, the Ombuds Office, or the Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (OIEC). Academic accommodations for religious observance do not relieve students of responsibility for the completion of any part of the coursework they may miss as the result of a religious observance. Emory's official list of religious holidays may be found at [https://www.religiouslife.emory.edu/about\\_us/holidays.html](https://www.religiouslife.emory.edu/about_us/holidays.html)

**Title IX Reporting:** Title IX Reporting: Every Emory employee who is informed about an allegation of sexual misconduct involving any student is required to notify a Title IX Coordinator either directly or through their relevant reporting structure. However, employees who serve in a professional role in which communications are afforded confidential status under the law (e.g., medical providers, therapists, and professional and pastoral counselors) are not bound by this requirement but may, consistent with their ethical and legal obligations, be required to report limited information about incidents without revealing the identities of the individuals involved, to a Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Title IX Coordinator. All members of the Emory community are encouraged to promptly report incidents of sexual harassment and discrimination. **For more information,** visit: <http://sexualmisconductresources.emory.edu/policies/index.html>



**Required Texts:~**

*Radicalized* by Cory Doctorow (bookstore)

*Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card (bookstore)

*Early Autumn* by Robert B. Parker (bookstore)

*Rain and Other Stories* by Somerset Maugham (bookstore)

*He, She, and It* by Marge Piercy (bookstore)

*Criminal (Volume 2): Lawless\** by Ed Brubaker and Sean Phillips (digital)

*Criminal (Volume 5): The Sinners\** by Ed Brubaker and Sean Phillips (digital)

*Criminal (Volume 7): Wrong Time, Wrong Place\** by Ed Brubaker and Sean Phillips (digital)

*Icon: A Hero's Welcome* by Dwayne McDuffie (digital)

*GCPD: The Blue Wall (2022-)* by John Ridley (digital)

*Octavia Butler's Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation\** adapted by Damian Duffy and John Jennings (Digital)

*Incognegro\** by Mat Johnson (digital)

*Canopus* by Dave Chisholm (digital)

*Talk to My Back* by Yamada Murasaki (digital)

*Genkaku Picasso\** (3 volumes) by Usamaru Furuya (digital)

\*Trigger Warnings: Many of these texts contain depictions of sex and violence, as well as the use of extremely offensive language. We will discuss the ethical implications of these potentially offensive texts as part of the course agenda.