

# First Year Seminar 203: Family Value

## *Tales of Childhood and Kinship Across Cultures*



Professor Kirk D. Read | 405 Roger Williams Hall | kread@bates.edu

Class meeting: MWF: 9:30-10:50am  
Office hours: MW: 11-12 and by appointment

### Course Description:

This is a first year seminar about the representation of family and childhood as told in a variety of cultures. The main method of analysis will be literary: we will read a number of accounts, both fictional and non-fictional, which have as their focus the formative experiences of childhood and family relationships. Through close readings and supplemental analysis of films and other media that treat these experiences, we will strive to appreciate the construction of family across cultures. An important goal of this course will be to become good readers of culture in a way that can expose our own preconceived notions regarding the value of family.



This course (and most specifically its title) were borne out of a specific moment in American cultural and political history: Dan Quayle, in a speech to the Washington Press Club during his 1992 re-election campaign with George Bush, Sr., condemned the then-popular television series *Murphy Brown* as a dangerous promotion of single-parent families. Though the protagonist was loving, wealthy and quite competent by most standards of judgment, the program was seen as a sign of social disintegration: Quayle's remarks were offered as an analysis of the desperately torn social fabric which led to the Los Angeles riots, sparked by the Rodney King verdict in April of that year. Our course

is not so much a judgment or condemnation of the robust political agenda that fuels comments such as those of Dan Quayle (and the Family Values organizations that it spawned), but a look into the powerful currency that discussion of family appears to hold. A more recent televised engagement with the value of family that we will examine is the wildly popular series *Modern Family* that on one level strives to put into question received notions of the family unit while on the other reinscribes age-old (not so modern) hetero-normative assumptions and stereotypes about gender, ethnicity, sex and sexuality.



The experience of family is a primal drama with which we all must contend: we may flee or embrace certain notions of family based on our own particular situations. This course will hopefully lead to an appreciation of our stories and also of some contrasting versions—versions that grow out of values, histories and contingencies dramatically different from our own.

The "texts" for the course will be varied and will introduce you to a variety of cultures, some far-flung, some very local: *Somalis in Maine* is a text that presents one of the more robust demographic changes for Lewiston in recent memory and will frame our reading and some visits with local citizens; James McBride's memoir, *The Color of Water*, chronicles the author's coming to terms with his mother's hidden past as a Jew living in the south and her marriages to black men during the civil rights era; Claire Messud's novel *The Last Life* is a family drama set in a hotel on the French Riviera where multiple generations of family stories coalesce and collide; Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* tells of her childhood in a harem in Fez, Morocco, illustrating with great insistence the differences between male and female spheres in her upbringing; Daniel Clowes' graphic novel, *Ghost World*, is an often ironic view of adolescence in suburbia that challenges the reader/viewer with both its medium and its messages. We will also view and analyze several films that depict culturally normative and non-normative situations: *101 Dalmations*, a hymn to heterosexual union and reproduction; *C.R.A.Z.Y.*, the coming of age and coming out story of a Canadian teenager; *Transamerica*, a story of parenthood complicated by the protagonist's evolving sense of sex and gender identification; and *Le Grand Voyage*, a father-son road movie where issues of origin, faith and family unfold during a car ride from southern France to Mecca.



This course will challenge you to appraise critically the rhetoric of family values still prevalent in our cultures and to make a comparative assessment of a widely divergent set of narratives regarding this topic. The material for the course will demand that you come to terms with constructions of family that may reject dominant notions of propriety based upon sexuality, religion, class and gender. You may read things that make you feel quite uncomfortable. You may read stories that make you feel comfortable for the first time. Mutual respect must accompany all of our discussions and we will strive to nourish an environment of tolerance.

Following is a list of guiding questions to which we will refer throughout the course when reading, viewing or discussing material:

*How is the notion of family constructed in this work? What or whom is privileged? What or who is absent or denounced? How do you know?*

*What are the hidden assumptions regarding youth and/or family life in this work? How do these differ from other works or experiences that you know of?*

*What is the value and definition of family that YOU bring to this work and how does it influence your appreciation of it?*

### Learning to write/Writing to learn.

This seminar is a “W1” course and as such will concentrate heavily on writing. All of you come to the class with various strengths and weaknesses and it is our goal to move you forward throughout the semester so that you are ever more comfortable and accomplished with regard to written assignments at the college level. Papers will be short (3-5 pages) and revised at least once each time. Each will concentrate on a fairly discreet mode of writing, though these modes are not entirely separable. Paper 1: Descriptive Writing; Paper 2: Analytical Writing; Paper 3: Evaluative Writing; Paper 4: Creative Writing. You will have peer editing in and out of class with your classmates; professor-editing by me; and several other resources including our assigned Peer Writing

Tutor, the fabulous Emma Timbers, '14 and other friendly faces at the Learning Commons.

In addition to the short papers you will also be asked to write short responses to the reading you do for class in a journal forum on Lyceum. This is low-stakes, ungraded writing. There are no official prompts and you can stick with the questions directly above if you wish. This serves two purposes: preparing and thinking a bit on screen/paper, and allowing me (and others) to see your reactions in the case that they do not get expressed in class discussion.

### Texts (to purchase):

Daniel CLOWES, *Ghost World*  
 HUISMAN et al, *Somalis in Maine*  
 Claire MESSUD, *The Last Life*  
 James McBRIDE, *The Color of Water*  
 Fatima MERNISSI, *Dreams of Trespass*

### Media (Screen):

Ismaël FERROUKHI (Director), *Le Grand Voyage* (2004)  
 Stephen HEREK (Director), *101 Dalmatians* (1996)  
 Duncan TUCKER (Director), *Transamerica* (2006)  
 Jean-Marc VALLÉE (Director), *C.R.A.Z.Y.* (2005)

Christopher LLOYD & Steven LEVITAN (Creators) , *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-)

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### A word about First Year Seminars According to Me.



Each First Year Seminar is different, but all have a few things in common that make them special and wonderful beyond your normal, everyday Bates courses. Here are some things about them that I (and, to be truthful, the overseers of this marvelous pedagogical adventure) would like you to know.



**You are all in this together for the first time.**

The most unique thing about a First Year Seminar is the word "first." You are all first year students. There are no intimidating upper class monsters there to weigh in or size up. You can ask all the naive questions you want and no one will roll their eyes. In fact, they will be grateful.

**Lots of support. Lots of exposure.**

I teach this course because I enjoy bringing students into the Bates experience. I am your professor and your advisor. Our relationship will be a bit different than in other courses for our having met up even before the official start of classes. And for all the drama and hilarity that can ensue during your first months in college. Historically, I have remained in close touch with many of my seminar participants throughout their four years (which is why I normally teach this again only after the last seminar has graduated). Beyond my support, there is that of the writing assistant, Emma Timbers, whose magical combination of smarts, personal integrity and conviviality is a boon to us all. Beyond her, there are some wonderful Writing Specialists and the Peer Writing Center associated with the Learning Commons and you will come to know and love them all as your needs and energy dictate. Beyond the academic support, there is also assistance for other needs in this particularly poignant transition to college life: the multifaith chaplaincy is an amazing resource, as is the Office of Intercultural Education (we will have visits with both); and the health center has wonderful professional counselors available for checking in should you want to gain some perspective on your new life here as things unfold or unravel in ways that may challenge you. One of my primary goals in the seminar will be to connect you with as many entities on campus and off as possible so that you can appreciate all of the avenues of education and exploration that the community offers: we will tour downtown; we will meet with some leaders of student organizations; we will attend concerts and talks together when possible.

**Academic integrity. Engagement.**

Some schools require their students to sign pledges and take oaths affirming their commitment to doing their own work and behaving with honesty and integrity in all academic pursuits at the college. For reasons I will explain perhaps personally later, I resist such declarations. Here is the understanding that I hope we will all share: your word is your word; your work is your work. While there may be quibbles that we can

discuss about proper citation and the level of involvement of assistants in helping you to hone your prose into acceptable assignments (and we will spend time on this!) I hold you to the notion that your ideas are your own and that you struggle and explore and experiment to the best of your own abilities to make the presentation of your knowledge as articulate, clear and personally-conceived as possible.

As a professor who teaches mainly in a second language (French) with students for whom French is not their native language, it is usually very clear when assistance in an assignment has crossed a line. All of the sudden, it is as if Molière himself has miraculously entered the student's brain and channeled exquisite prose through their grateful hand. Not acceptable. The same can be detected in suddenly brilliant prose in more familiar languages where just hours before students struggled with basic syntax and citation. You might ask yourself: could I produce this writing as clearly and convincingly if asked to do so in class with only my lonely self as a resource? If not, you may wish to interrogate the ways in which your voice is being taken over by the help (and sometimes interference) of others. My goal in this course is not to make you a miraculous writer, simply a better one.

Come to class. All the time. We miss you terribly and rely on your unique insights to make us happy and whole. If illness takes you over, email me and if this becomes chronic, I'll insist on oversight from the deans. We do lots of group activities and the in-class discussion is crucial to your understanding of the material, even if some days you are just listening. I have in the past allowed 3 unexcused absences and then begun reducing your overall grade by 1/3 (A to A-; A- to B+, etc.) for each subsequent absence. But I do NOT like it when this is seen as 3 "personal days" that you get to use up. So that's sort of my background thinking, but don't use them. Save them for when the President of the United States really needs your attendance at the White House and he can't fit you in around our seminar.

Don't leave class. Unless you are about to burst. It is disruptive and sometimes more distracting than you think.

If you prefer to take notes or consult texts on your computer or tablet device you may, but YOU MAY NEVER EVER use these devices for emailing or texting or social networking unless it is part of a class exercise or campus wide emergency.

**Turn off your phone in class. Way off. Be. Here. Now.**

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 Class Calendar
 

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## Week 1 (3-7 September)

- (W)ednesday, September 5 Introduction to the Course  
Primary texts: re-encountering children's books
- (F)riday, September 7 Dorothy Allison, "Mama" (in *Trash*)  
Adam Schwartz, "Where is it Written" (in *Coming of Age in America*)
- Gulaid, "How We Left Mogadishu" (p. 3)  
Fartuna Hussein, "Zest" (p. 103)  
Ubah Bashir, "It's Difficult to Be Me" (p. 143)  
(all in *Somalis in Maine: Crossing Cultural Currents*)
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## Week 2 (10-14 September)

- (M)onday, September 10 Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, Chapter 1, "The Way We Wish We Were," Chapter 8, "First Comes Love..."
- Viewing in class: *101 Dalmatians*
- (W) September 12 Emily Kane, "Introduction" to *The Gender Trap*
- Continued viewing: *101 Dalmatians*
- (F) September 14 **Paper 1: Description. *A Family Not My Own That I Have Known***
- Library Tour and Information Session with Tom Hayward** (Leave from classroom).
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## Week 3 (17-21 September)

- (M) September 17 *The Somali Diaspora* (pp. 1-26; 53-94\*\*) (\*\*)pages 62-94 are photographs)

**Throughout the week: *Scheduled individual conferences on Paper 1.***

- (W) September 19      *Somalis in Maine* (pp. xx-76)  
[Part I: "The Water in Maine is Sweet": Contexts of Cultural Contact]
- (F) September 21      *Somalis in Maine* (pp. 245-285)  
[Part V: "Don't You Know? I'm Somali!": Somali Voices in Maine]
- Visit to Tree Street Youth Center & Downtown Lewiston with Julia Sleeper, '08
- Meeting, Q & A with local immigrant youth. Most likely later afternoon. TBA. Friday or Monday.
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#### Week 4 (24-28 September)

- (M) September 24      Patricia Buck & Rachel Silver, *They Were Very Beautiful. Such Things Are.!: Memoirs from Dadaab, Kenya and Lewiston, Maine* (excerpts)
- (W) September 26      Camille Lessard-Bissonnette, "Life in the Mills" (in *Canuck*); also accompanying texts.  
Rhea Côté Robbins, "If The River Behaves," from *Wednesday's Child*
- (F) September 28      Denis Ledoux, "Big Brother" (in *Mountain Dance* and other stories); from *Roots on a Yankee Farm* (in *Lives in Translation*); "The Summer I Was Thirteen" (in *Voyages*)
- Visit with Denis Ledoux in class.

#### **Paper 1, *A Family Not My Own That I Have Known*, Version 2**

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#### Week 5 (1-5 October)

- (M) October 1      James McBride, *The Color of Water* (Chapters 1-5)
- (W) October 3      James McBride, *The Color of Water* (Chapters 6-10)

(F) October 5 James McBride, *The Color of Water* (Chapters 11-15)

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Parents & Family Weekend | October 5-7

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Week 6 (8-15 October)

(M) October 8 James McBride, *The Color of Water* (Chapters 16-20)

(W) October 10 James McBride, *The Color of Water* (Chapters 21-25)

(F) October 12 In-class viewing and discussion: Duncan Tucker, *Transamerica*  
Preparation of Paper 2.

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(M) October 15 **Paper 2: Analysis Religion and Family Value in McBride**  
In-class viewing and discussion: Duncan Tucker, *Transamerica*

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October 17-21 | Fall Break!

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Week 7 (22-26 October)

(M) October 22 In-class viewing and discussion: Jean-Marc Vallée, *C.R.A.Z.Y.*  
David Sedaris, "I Like Guys," in *Naked*

(W) October 24 **Paper 2: Religion and Family Value in McBride, Version 2**  
In-class viewing and discussion: Jean-Marc Vallée, *C.R.A.Z.Y.*

(F) October 26 In-class exercise: Group therapy with characters from  
*Transamerica* and *C.R.A.Z.Y.*

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Week 8 (29 October-2 November)

(M) October 29 Dan Clowes, *Ghost World*  
Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (Chapters 1 & 2)

(W) October 31 Dan Clowes, *Ghost World*

Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (Chapters 3 & 4)  
Viewing in class (portion): *Ghost World* (Zwigoff, 2001)

(F) November 2      Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass* (Chapters 1-3)

**Discussion of the Creative Writing paper whose final version is due on the last day of class and that you will work on throughout the rest of the semester in consultation with the professor and writing assistant.**

Week 9 (5-9 November)

(M) November 5      Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass* (Chapters 4-10)

(W) November 7      Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass* (Chapters 12, 13, 14)

(F) November 9      Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass* (Chapters 16, 18, 21, 22)

Week 10 (12-16 November)

(M) November 12      **Paper 3: Evaluation : *How Best to Document the Family Drama?***

(W) November 14      Claire Messud, *The Last Life* (Part I)

(F) November 16      Claire Messud, *The Last Life* (Parts II-III)

November 17-25 | Thanksgiving Break!

Week 11 (26-30 November)

(M) November 26      Claire Messud, *The Last Life* (Parts IV-V)

(W) November 28      Claire Messud, *The Last Life* (Parts VI-VIII)

**Paper 3: *How Best to Document the Family Drama?*, Version 2**

(F) November 30      Claire Messud, *The Last Life* (Part IX-X)

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Week 12 (3-7 December)

(M) December 3      Ismaël Ferroukhi, *Le Grand Voyage* (in class)

(W) December 5      Ismaël Ferroukhi, *Le Grand Voyage* (in class)  
& discussion

(F) December 7      Surprise ending.

Finals Week: Date: TBA; Location: Professor Read's House

**Paper 4: Creative Writing, final version**