

## James McAdams Syllabus

### The Medical Humanities, Illness Narratives, and Creative Writing

#### **Course Description**

“Writers, if they are great, are more like doctors than patients.” (Gilles Deleuze)  
“Not that it was beautiful/but that there was a certain sense of order there.” (Anne Sexton)

This interdisciplinary course will operate in hybrid fashion, examining emerging practices in the medical humanities primarily through the perspective of fictional and non-fictional narratives, i.e. short stories, memoirs, film, etc. By reading (and writing) these narratives, we will expose ourselves to multiple developments throughout the last three decades in the sociology/psychology of medical treatment, generally subsumed under the phrase “medical humanities.” This term denotes a move away from “evidence-based medicine,” where patients are often regarded as merely a set of symptoms, scans, and insurance codes, towards an approach that prioritizes an empathetic and human relationship between doctor and patient.

Such a humanistic, reciprocal relationship between doctor and patient has been portrayed in narrative form for centuries, from writers who were themselves doctors, such as Chekhov, William Carlos Williams, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Somerset Maugham, to creative writers reflecting upon their own illness experiences, such as William Styron, Susan Sontag, and Kathy Acker. Not only will we read these texts to familiarize ourselves with the narrative turn they, in part, engendered, but we will also be writing our own creative narratives and workshopping them in class. Thus, this class will braid together elements of a traditional academic classroom with that of a creative writing workshop in order to fully immerse ourselves in this fascinating, and innovative, movement in the medical humanities.

#### **Protocol**

This class might function differently than those to which you are accustomed. Essentially, I propose to design this classroom experience to be as democratic and collaborative as possible. We will discuss this more through the first weeks, but the way I envision such a scenario would be to empower you, individually, or in groups, to 1) find and share relevant texts or news related to the class topic; 2) suggest new sub-topics of study; 3) and help me design the syllabus. At this

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point, this description is provisional—as we discuss it amongst ourselves, we will find certain things we want to do and certain things we don't. The important thing is that you should be involved and concerned, and in this way ensure that you get the most out of this class.

NB: As a corollary to the previous paragraph, it's my firm conviction that not only does intensive writing improve writing quality, but also that editing the writing of others' not only promotes a generous, collaborative classroom, but it also makes you more self-reflexive about your own writing. Therefore, we will install a Google Drive workshop platform that will be running in a constant cycle—probably in groups of 4, where you will edit 3 papers and receive 4 edits to your paper. We will schedule a Google Drive workshop early in the semester to demonstrate what I expect, but I imagine at this point you are all well aware of GD and shouldn't have any trouble using it in the capacity I envision. The difference between peer review and workshop, as I define it, is that in a workshop we think a lot more creatively (which fits this class) about the characters, tone, symbology, time sense, and figurative language used in the student text, whether it be a short story or non-fiction illness narrative. Once we figure out what we're into (e.g., who likes writing memoir, who likes writing non-fiction illness narratives, who likes writing short stories involving illness, who likes writing traditional analytical papers), we will break into groups and practice on Google Drive.

### Texts:

- *The Best of the Bellevue Literary Review*—selected stories
- *Narrative Medicine: Honoring Stories of Illness* (Charon)
- Selected .pdf's or urls (Available on CourseSite)
- *How to Survive a Plague, A Beautiful Mind, Dallas Buyers' Club, Girl, Interrupted, Awakenings*, et al. (Linked on Course Site or on Netflix, etc.)
- Selected .pdf's or urls about narrative medicine/medical humanities, including such theorists as Jerome Bruner, Arthur Kleinman, Ann Jurecic, Mark Bracher, Suzanne Keen, et al. (Available on Course Site)