



University of Wisconsin, Madison
English 245: Seminar in the Major (Fall 2022)

Friendship

Professor Ramzi Fawaz

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Class Meetings: M 2:30-5 PM, Humanities 2251

Office hours: T 3-5 PM, or by appt. on Zoom: <https://uwmadison.zoom.us/j/95073505741>

This course will explore how US writers, artists, and filmmakers have depicted one of the most foundational forms of human relation: the bond of friendship. As a deep emotional tie to others built on trust, shared experience, and open dialogue, friendship has often been at odds with the US-American values of individualism, acquisitiveness, and ownership. Against these latter ideals, creative producers working across many mediums have recurrently depicted friendship as a bedrock part of democratic life, as a basis for mutually transformative exchanges across difference, as sanctuary from social exclusion, and as a highly unpredictable social form that can produce entirely new types of community. In the digital age, however, friendship has diffused into the elaborate algorithmic interface of social media, stretched to its thinnest possible expression until it potentially has no meaning. Moreover, while US-Americans are experiencing a massive mental health crisis brought on by the manifold stresses of the digital revolution, climate change, a global pandemic and increasing economic precarity, statistics show that deep and sustained friendships are declining, thus exacerbating alienation and loneliness at the very moment that people need connectivity, investment, and engagement with others. This class will ask how imaginative and artistic representations of friendship might provide tools for reclaiming the most life-affirming aspects of this necessary social tie. We will spend a significant amount of time tracking how novelists, filmmakers, and playwrights have used innovative formal tools to represent friendship as a site for negotiating meaningful human differences, not only of race, gender, sexuality, class and ability but temperament, personality, and spiritual worldview.

Alongside critical scholarship in the philosophy of friendship, we will view some of the following films: *Thelma & Louise* (Scott, 1991), *The Social Network* (Fincher, 2012), *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016), *Booksmart* (Wilde, 2019); and read some of the following literature: Carson McCuller's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and André Aciman's *Call Me By Your Name*.

What are we learning?

As a “Seminar in the Major,” this course is intended to help English majors perfect their interpretive skills through a focused study of a single topic, theme, literary genre, time period, or set of ideas central to the study of literature and culture. This class will explore the concept of friendship across a broad cross-section of literary and film texts that span the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. By the end of the semester, students will have:

- 1) Developed a multi-dimensional understanding of friendship as a social form of relationship, an orientation of reciprocity toward the world, and a generous way of relating to literary and cultural texts.
- 2) Gained a strong grasp on how social relationships—including long-term bonds of trust, intimacy, and shared experience—can be imaginatively translated into aesthetic or creative forms, like literature, film, and visual media.
- 3) Honed significant skills in paying close attention to the nuances of literary and cultural production. This includes how works of literature, art, and culture convey multiple meanings, deploy a diverse repertoire of formal techniques to tell stories in distinct mediums, and produce a variety of emotional or visceral effects in their audience.
- 4) Strengthened abilities in complex note taking, argumentative writing, and verbal communication.

What are we reading?

The texts below are required. They are available for purchase at the University Bookstore or online. I recommend Bookshop.org, BetterWorldBooks, Powell's Bookstore or other independent online retailers that support local booksellers. All readings marked with * will be available on the course website. You must bring copies of readings to class with you either in print or on electronic tablets. All course films will be streamed online.

- André Aciman, *Call Me By Your Name* (2007)
- Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003)
- Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955)
- Kate Johnson, *Radical Friendship: Seven Ways to Love Yourself and Find Your People in an Unjust World* (2021)
- Callie Khouri, *Thelma & Louise And, Something to Talk About: Screenplays* (2006)
- Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940)
- Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973)
- Jeff VanderMeer, *Borne* (2017)

Most weeks will require you to complete an entire work of literature, or view a film alongside an assortment of critical or theoretical readings. This means you will need to manage your time well, plan ahead for each week of reading and viewing, and commit significant time to prepare for our discussions. Officially speaking: the credit standard for this course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course learning activities (at least 45 hours per credit), which include regularly scheduled meeting times, reading, writing, and other student work as described in the syllabus. That is roughly ten hours of work a week. If you are putting in this kind of time and still struggling to keep up with the course readings, we will thoughtfully trim readings as we go along. At all times, the syllabus may be subject to change at my discretion as an instructor.

What do we have to write?

In addition to our weekly readings, this course has five assignments. These include a short reflection paper, note-taking exercises, online posts, a take-home mid-term exam, and a final research paper. The last three of these assignments will be completed with a group. Since this is a course about friendship, a central value of the seminar will be to develop new bonds of trust and conviviality with your fellow classmates. At the beginning of the term, I will place you into randomized groups of 3-4 members. You will work with this unit for the entire semester, gaining knowledge of each other's strengths, negotiating collective writing and research, and providing one another feedback. While many people tend to dislike group work, it is extremely rewarding to develop a long-term intellectual dialogue with fellow students, receive mutual support, and build new friendships. I will also have policies in place to ensure all members of a group are pulling their weight.

Upon receiving your group assignments, each group member will write out a request for help or support from the other participants with improving or strengthening some aspect of their interpersonal, academic, or social skills over the course of the semester. You might ask your fellow teammates to help you improve your verbal or written communication abilities, negotiate or resolve interpersonal conflicts with greater ease, or be more socially adventurous; alternatively, you might want to develop co-working habits like meeting periodically to discuss the course readings outside of class, proofreading each other's work, or simply watching and taking note on the course movies together. These requests will be compiled and sent to me early in the semester as a way of documenting your commitments. I will check in with each group periodically to ensure that you are keeping up with your commitments.

- 1) **Short reflection paper—15%:** in the first two weeks of class, I will ask you to write a 3-4 page reflection paper on your deepest, most meaningful, or most difficult friendship. You will consider various aspects of this relationship and creatively imagine how you might tell the story of the friendship if you were to translate it into a fictional narrative (like a novel, a theatrical production, or a movie) for other readers and viewers.
- 2) **Weekly Online Discussion and Group Engagement—15%:** at the start of the semester, I will assign people to groups of 3-4 members. You will work with this group on three assignments in the course, forming a small intellectual community that will help keep you motivated throughout the term. Every week, the members of one group will be

responsible for developing a substantive set of response to a pre-circulated question or task related to that week's reading. These are mini-essays around 500 words that should be well written and organized in thought and execution. You should have an original argument or stake a distinct position and incorporate at least 1-2 direct citations from the week's reading in making your claims. These posts must be online by 8 PM on Sunday evenings before our class meetings the following afternoon; they should not take more than 1-2 hours of your time to formulate. Every group will offer online posts three times throughout the semester. The rest of the class is responsible for reading these posts before our class meeting.

- 3) **Take-home mid-term exam—20%:** halfway through the term, each group will need to complete a take-home mid-term exam. You will be asked to explain a handful of key concepts from our course in your own words, substantively answer a series of short questions, and craft a long-form essay response to an analytical question. All elements of the exam must be completed collaboratively. You will be given two weeks to complete this assignment.
- 4) **Final research paper—20%:** a final 8-10-page group research essay in which you will offer a sustained analysis of a novel, film, comic book, work of art, or other popular culture production we did not discuss in the class (I will provide a list of possible choices). You will need to draw upon three outside or secondary sources related to the social, psychological, artistic, or historical study of friendship.

The remaining 30% of your grade rests on your dedicated engagement in our class discussion. This is, without a doubt, where most of the magic happens in a seminar. The heft of this percentage is intended to stress how important it is for you to bring your A-game every week. Note: All assignments will be submitted through Canvas as .docx documents. There will be a link to submit each paper under the Assignments tab on the course Canvas site.

****Everyone should maintain a notebook explicitly for this course, in which you write down key ideas from the readings, keep track of important page numbers and passages, draft your own thoughts, and keep track of our weekly discussions. Your notebook should serve as a reference point that anchors you to the central issues we are exploring throughout the course.****

Attendance Policy: Attendance and participation at every class session is mandatory. That means not only showing up, but being awake, attentive, and actively engaged in our meetings. Most importantly, this includes coming to class having completed that day's reading (and viewing) assignments, taken careful notes on all these items, and prepared to engage in dialogue about them. I will grant each student one excused absence for any reason; all other unexcused absences will incur the 5% participation grade deduction listed above. The following three class sessions will take place over Zoom: September 27, November 15, and November 22. All course policies and procedures will be in effect, and students will be expected to sign in to our Zoom sessions with their video turned on. We will use the office hours Zoom link above to convene for these sessions.

Covid-19: I am acutely aware that the conditions of the Covid pandemic might create obstacles to a consistent attendance record. Please inform me of all unforeseeable absences, such as those caused by severe illness or a personal emergency, as soon as possible. I will do everything in my power to accommodate unexpected changes in anyone's personal circumstances. **Your health and wellbeing is paramount. If you feel serious symptoms of illness you should not attend class but rest and recover. With this in mind, however, remember that anytime you miss a class session, you lose the opportunity to participate in a completely original intellectual event that can never be reproduced or adequately conveyed after the fact. This loss is no small thing.** Moreover, during a period of intense stress and isolation under the disorganizing conditions of the pandemic, our class sessions can provide an uplifting weekly anchor in the storm, connecting you to a larger intellectual and social community. You should make every effort to attend as consistently as possible. General tiredness, irritability or feeling "stressed out" are not legitimate excuses to miss class. Finally, while the university no longer requires the use of masks, I support anyone's choice to use them for their personal health.

Email etiquette: Whenever you write an email to a professor, you should always begin with a formal salutation (such as Dear Professor or Dr. Fawaz) and sign off with an appropriate ending followed by your name (Sincerely, All Best, Have a wonderful day etc.). You should read all emails from your professors carefully to ensure you receive appropriate instructions and details about course assignments and schedules. **Finally, I cannot stress enough that you must reply to any email individually directed to you by a professor, and provide a specific explanation for any absences.** I will underscore again: a general statement that you are exhausted or overwhelmed will not suffice as an excuse for an absence. If you are at any time struggling with your mental health, or your state of mind is preventing you from completing work or attending class, please inform me immediately and reach out to university Mental Health Services at <https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/mental-health/> or 608-265-5600 to receive appropriate care and attention.

Disability Support Services At all times, this seminar will be open and accessible to students with disabilities. If you are a student enrolled with the McBurney Disability Resource Center or have a disability but have not used the MDRC, I encourage you to speak with me regarding your rights to accommodation. Please come see me about any questions you have regarding additional support for your success in this class. For more information, contact MDRC, 702 W. Johnson Street, Suite #2104 at 608-263-2741. Or refer to <https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>.

How do we talk to one other?

This is a course about how human beings develop meaningful, complex relationships of trust, intimacy and care, and how artists, writers, and filmmakers depict or reimagine those relationships in cultural production. Human relationships are fraught and messy as much as beautiful and life affirming. When we talk about friendship in life and art, we will be considering both its most inspiring aspects—including mutual aid, shared experiences, loyalty, trust, and understanding—as well as its darkest dimensions—including jealousy, betrayal, rage, insecurity, misunderstanding, and co-dependence. Talking about friendship's many dimensions, while also encountering new ideas and images about intimacy, kinship, care, and the negotiation of desire and attachment, will likely activate a range of emotions from joy and excitement to deep

discomfort and even revulsion. In the various cultural texts we read and view, you will encounter numerous types of relationships and experiences including gay sex and intimacy, the creation of alternative or “queer” families, people living with and sometimes dying from HIV/AIDS, the experience of sexual assault, cross-species friendship, betrayal, murder and suicide, inter-generational desire and bonding, and the formation of political collectives. Our job is to remain open to the entire gamut of affects, emotions, and sensations that comprise the human experience, and to thoughtfully grapple with our complex, sometimes painful, but most often transformative responses to them. With this in mind, it is up to you as informed adults, to decide how you wish to view and engage with this material.

Ultimately, our job is to develop a sophisticated vocabulary for grappling with these relational forms, and the texts that illuminate them, in an open-minded and dynamic way. I want you to be transformed positively by these conversations, which might mean being open to changing your mind, defending your position with substantial arguments, or simply listening and thinking through what others are saying. Sometimes it will just involve sitting with your discomfort. Under no circumstance, however, should anyone ever be personally attacked. We are all flawed and will make mistakes, including saying things that might seem off-base, accidentally mischaracterizing other people’s ideas or identities, or simply stating incorrect information. When this happens, others should generously chime in and offer thoughtful corrections, or an alternative perspective; the point is not to punish anyone or moralize at them but to collectively uplift our consciousness. In other words, we should practice being intellectual friends to one another. At the same time, I want to encourage you to take risks, get involved, and debate one another with care, even when it might feel easier to bow out of a controversial conversation. I guarantee the rewards of participating will be extraordinary. Below are best practices for class discussion:

1. All students must speak at least once in every class session.
2. Regardless of what we discuss, we will treat one another with respect, knowing that we may not always agree on other peoples’ conclusions, interpretations, or claims.
3. Anything you bring up in class is up for discussion and others are free to agree, disagree, or respond to what you have said in a respectful way.
4. **You must always begin by responding to what other students have said before you or inform the class that you intend to move the dialogue in a new direction.**
5. Practice making arguments, not stating opinions. This requires you to always have your reading materials with you in class and to be able to point to specific moments or features of a text to support your ideas.

Part I: Friendship as a Way of Life

Week 1—“One Must be Fond of People and Trust Them”: The Necessity of Friendship in Dark Times

Monday, September 12

Watch the following YouTube video: Lissa Rankin, “The #1 Public Health Issue Doctors Aren't Talking About,” TEDxFargo:
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2hLhWSIOI0>>

Listen to the following podcast episode: Esther Perel, “Friendship—My Reliable Gift”:
<<https://www.estherperel.com/podcasts/wswb-s5-episode1>>

Week 2—“Friendship as a Way of Life”: Five Theories of Friendship

Monday, September 19

Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life” (1981)*

Jon Nixon, selections from *Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Friendship* (2015)* Read the following pages: Preface, 26-39, 46-59.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, selections from *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2013)*

Audre Lorde, “The Uses of the Erotic,” (1978)*

Maria C. Lugones in collaborations with Pat Lake Rosezelle, “Sisterhood and Friendship as Feminist Models,” in *Feminism and Community*, edited by Penny A. Weiss, and Marilyn Friedman (1992)*

Week 3—“The Two Friends Were Very Different”: The Struggle for Understanding

Monday, September 26

Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940)

****Assignment #1 Due Saturday October 1 by 11:30 PM****

Part II: Entrustment

Week 4—“A Constant Sharing of Perceptions”

Monday, October 3

Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973)

Frank Lebowitz, “Toni Morrison—The Titan of Literature,” *The New York Times Magazine*, December 23, 2019:

<<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/23/magazine/toni-morrison-death.html>>

Week 5—“Let’s Keep Going”

Monday, October 10

Screening: *Thelma & Louise* (Scott, 1991)

After watching the movie, read the *Thelma & Louise* script in Callie Khouri, *Thelma & Louise And, Something to Talk About: Screenplays* (1996)

Part III: Betrayal, Deceit, and other Disasters

Week 6—“They Were Not Friends”: On Cruel Intentions

Monday, October 17

Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955)

Week 7—“Your Best Friend is Suing you for 600 Million Dollars”

Monday, October 24

Screening: **The Social Network** (Fincher, 2010)

Jia Tolentino, “The I in the Internet,” from *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self Delusion* (2019)*

danah boyd, “Introduction,” and “Chapter 5: bullying is social media amplifying meanness and cruelty?” from *The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (2014)*

Jean M. Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?” *The Atlantic*, September

2017: <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>>

Johann Hari, “Chapters 6-7: The Rise of Technology that Can Track and Manipulate You,” from *Stolen Focus: Why You Can’t Pay Attention—and how to Think Deeply Again* (2022)*

****Group Midterm Exam Due Saturday, November 5 by 11:30 PM****

***Part IV:
Families We Choose,
or Queer Love for the Future***

Week 8—“They treat each other like sisters or brothers . . . or mothers. You know, like I say, ‘Oh, that’s my sister because she’s gay and I’m gay too.’”

Monday, October 31

Screening: **Paris is Burning** (Livingston, 1990)

Marlon Bailey, “Engendering space: Ballroom culture and the spatial practice of possibility in Detroit,” *Gender, Place, and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 21.4 (2014)*

Michael Hobbes, “Together Alone: The Epidemic of Gay Loneliness,” *The Huffington Post* March 2, 2017*

Hil Malatino, selections from *Trans Care* (2020)

Week 9—“We won’t die secret deaths anymore. . . . We will be citizens.”

Monday, November 7

Screening: **Angels in America** (Nichols, 2003)

Deborah Gould, “Chapter 3: The Pleasures and Intensities of Activism; or, Making a Place for Yourself in the Universe,” from *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (2009)

Week 10—“We had the stars, you and I. And this is given once only.”

Monday, November 14

André Aciman, *Call Me By Your Name* (2007)

Week 11—“Let Your Head Rest In My Hand. I Got You.”

Monday, November 21

Screening: **Moonlight** (Jenkins, 2016)

Kate Johnson, *Radical Friendship: Seven Ways to Love Yourself and Find Your People in an Unjust World* (2021)

***Part V:
Significant Otherness***

Week 12—“To be in love is to be worldly, to be in connection with significant otherness and signifying Others, on many scales, in layers of locals and globals, in ramifying webs.”

Monday, November 28

Screening: **My Octopus Teacher** (Ehrlich and Reed, 2020)

Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003)

Jenny O’Dell, “Chapter 5: Ecology of Strangers,” from *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (2019)*

Week 13—“That’s the problem with people who are not human. You can’t tell how badly they’re hurt, or how much they need your help, and until you ask, they don’t always know how to tell you.”

Monday, December 5

Jeff VanderMeer, *Borne* (2017)

Week 14—“Who Allowed you to Take My Breath Away?”

Monday, December 12

Screening: **Booksmart** (Wilde, 2019)

****Group Final Research Paper Due Saturday, December 17 by 11:30 PM****