

WITTY, SUBVERSIVE, MODERN ENGLISH NOVELS

We'll read and discuss witty, ironic, unsentimental, apparently quiet English novels of the 20th century, asking “What are these writers up to?” Who has influenced whom? What is “witty” about them? In what ways are they “subversive”? Common themes are the emotional violence of middle-class family life and the family tyrant.

It would be ideal if students read all six of the books before the course begins. If that's not possible, it would be helpful if you could read the first two-thirds of *The Way of All Flesh* ahead of time. We will aim to spend one session on each book, but since Samuel Butler was a major influence on 20th-century writers, we may go back to him.

Week 1: Samuel Butler, *The Way of All Flesh* (1904; Penguin Classics edition has an excellent introduction by Richard Hoggart). Written in the 19th century but published posthumously in 1904, this novel has had a powerful influence on many English-speaking writers. The story features strong autobiographical elements such as the writer's experience of the Anglican Church, family tyrants, and the hero's slowly achieved independence from his parents.

Week 2: Ivy Compton-Burnett, *A House and Its Head* (1935; NYR Books Classics \$17.95 or Abebooks). Ivy Compton-Burnett's books were much admired by our other four novelists. Vita Sackville West likened reading an Ivy Compton-Burnett novel to sucking a lemon: but if one threw it across the room, one would retrieve it and continue sucking. The novel is set in an English village in 1885, includes a family tyrant, lots of dialogue, and a melodramatic plot.

Week 3: Henry Green, *Back* (1946; NYR Books Classics \$14 or used from Abebooks). *Back* begins just after Charlie Summers has been repatriated from a prisoner of war camp in Germany. Henry Green's terse style combined with the peculiarity of wartime conditions and Charlie's confused emotions make an odd and absorbing book.

Week 4: Barbara Pym, *Excellent Women* (1952; Penguin Classics \$15, or Abebooks \$3.50 +). The Penguin edition has an introduction by A.N. Wilson. This novel is set in London after World War II, a period of severe postwar housing shortages and food rationing. The main character is a well bred Anglican clergyman's daughter, a quiet and incisive observer of human behavior.

Week 5: Elizabeth Taylor, *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* (1971; NYR Books \$15.95 or Abebooks used). Mrs Palfrey is an elderly woman, recently widowed, who in the 1960s comes to live at the Claremont Hotel on the Cromwell Road in London. Heroically, she contrives a new life.

Week 6: Hilary Mantel, *Fludd* (1989; Amazon \$17.99 or used from Abebooks). Hilary Mantel's early novel is both violent and comical. Unlike the previous books, its characters are lower middle class. Fludd, the novel's main character, is a mysterious priest or devil who liberates the troubled Father Angwin.

LEADER: Judith Wooldridge has led 6 Evergreen Forum Classes.

FORMAT: Virtual

MAXIMUM: 18

TUESDAYS 10:00 a.m. to noon 6 sessions starting September 27th through November 1st