

History Lab #4: How to Read a Novel**Due Fri 11/3**

Yes, I know you know how to read and analyze a novel. You've done it in English classes for years. But this is an interdisciplinary history class, and what is a novel doing in a history class? Novels are a special category of primary sources. They can be subjected to the same kind of "cross-examination" we did for primary sources, but they also have some special considerations because they are self-consciously fictional, addressed to an audience of readers, and written from a particular perspective (or set of perspectives). Fiction can make history "come alive" in ways that textbooks cannot, but since a work of fiction creates a stand-alone universe, it may also distort the past in ways that are sometimes useful, sometimes dangerous. Fiction and History are often presumed to be opposing fields, with fiction concerned with the imaginative world of language, characterization and representation, while history is dedicated to exploring the "real" world of the past.¹ But using fiction AS history can help illuminate the ways that history blurs the line with fiction by crafting story and using a well-informed imagination to narrate a meaningful representation of the past. When using a novel as historical evidence, you need to think about the following (in addition to the questions we asked in How to Read a Primary Source):

- Who is the author? Who is the novel's narrator(s)? Are the author and narrator(s) linked/related?
- When was the novel written? What's the historical context of this novel?
- Notice the "non-textual" material, such as front matter, epigraphs, supporting documentation or essays, even illustrations and cover art, if they are original to the first edition.
- Is there a significant gap between the period the novel was written, and the period it is written *about*? In general, a novel is most useful to historians of the period IN which (not ABOUT which) it was written. For example, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* tells us much more about what people in the 1930s thought about the Old South than it does about the actual Civil War period.
- What aspects of a historical period are the focus of this novel?
- How are those aspects portrayed? Are they presented as "accurate," or are they magnified, exaggerated, or deliberately contorted? If the latter, why? How might you verify or corroborate those aspects?
- What specific literary techniques or devices does the author employ?
- How do content and form interact in this novel?

¹ Jane Pederson, "History in Fiction; Fiction in History," University of Wisconsin Eau-Claire

History Lab #4 – Due Fri 11/3

Grading: Worth 10% of your grade

Using the best-selling novel *Peyton Place* by Grace Metalious, write a 5 page paper that does the following:

DESCRIBES the novel and sets it in historical context;

ANALYZES some aspect of the novel from a historical point of view (see below for ideas);

CONSIDERS the benefits and limitations of using fiction as historical evidence

And **PROPOSES** some unanswered questions that this assignment has left you with.

Use MLA for any citations within the paper.

Ideas for Analysis of *Peyton Place*

What span of time is covered in *Peyton Place*? What (else) was happening in America at the time? How much of that history, if any, is reflected in the happenings of this small town? In other words, how insulated v. integrated is this story with the broader outlines of US history in this time period?

Why is this novel *not* set in the suburbs, the iconic landscape of the 1950s in advertising, TV and historical memory?

To what extent does *Peyton Place* document changing gender norms, a greater cultural openness to sexuality and sexual content in fiction, or troubling trends in American family life?

Consider social class, hierarchy or authority in the novel. Who are the town's elite, and what might that tell us about society in the 1950s? Is this a society in flux or on the move; if so, what's changing and why?

Write your own review of the novel, and then compare your review with one of its reviews from when it was first published, or retrospectively now that it has recently passed its 50th anniversary. (If you choose this option, please print & attach the other review to your paper, unless you use the one in the book itself). The book spent more than a year on the bestseller list and sold briskly, as well as being made into a popular movie and later a television series, but it was also banned from many public and school libraries. It remains a highly controversial book in many ways. Some reviews you could use:

- Ardis Cameron's introductory essay to our re-issued paperback edition
- "Peyton Place's Real Victim,"
<http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2006/03/peytonplace200603>
- "Dirty Whites and Dark Secrets: Sex and Race in *Peyton Place*"
<http://inquire.streetmag.org/articles/109> - this is a book review of a scholarly book ABOUT *Peyton Place* but it will work for our purposes
- "Toxic Togetherness in a Postwar 'Potboiler': Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place*"
http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/fall_2006/anderson.htm
- "Small Town Peep Show." Rev. of *Peyton Place*, by Grace Metalious. *The New York Times Book Review* 23 September 1956: 4 (PDF on course Blackboard)
- "Outsiders Don't Know" Rev. of *Peyton Place*, by Grace Metalious. *TIME* 24 September 1956, p. 100 (available online through our library, using Academic Search Premier)