

English 346: Contemporary American Fiction

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY GUIDELINES

DUE DATE

This assignment is due on the day of your class presentation (see course syllabus).

The written portion of this assignment has two parts: 1) you will write an annotated bibliography of at least ten outside sources on your book; and 2) You will identify and briefly explain what seem to you to be the two or three dominant themes or recurring concerns in the criticism regarding the book.

PART I

Some types of sources that you may want to use in your bibliography include the following:

1. Background Source Material: One or two of your sources (**no more**) may be from standard research works that examine multiple authors. Works you'll probably find particularly useful include *Contemporary Authors* and *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*.
2. Reviews: Book reviews can be good sources for initial reaction to the book. However, you need to use the type of review usually called the "essay-review"—these tend to be longer and more analytic than short reviews appearing in *Kirkus Reviews*, the *Library Journal*, and similar sources. The reviews which appear in *The New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Atlantic*, *The Nation*, and other such journals may be particularly useful. Reviews which appeared in large newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, or *The Washington Post* will also be useful.
3. Published Interviews: Interviews can be a good source for understanding what authors may have intended in particular works, or how they understand their own works. A good source for interviews is the library's literature databases. For many of the authors we are reading, numerous interviews have been collected together and published in book form, often as part of the "Conversations with . . ." series.
4. Critical Articles: The most useful items to your research will likely be published critical articles on the works. Look for critical articles in periodical indexes, especially the *MLA Index* (which you can find online in the College's list of databases). If you need help wading through the large number of articles you might find, don't hesitate to come see me in my office. Often, the best or most influential articles about a work or author are collected together and published in book form. So don't forget to search for books on the authors.
5. Historic Source Material: One option you may not have considered yet is researching a particular historical sub-text in your work. For instance, you might be interested in legislation concerning U.S. government/Indian relations in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*. Or you might be curious about Ojibwa history or myth. Historical sources such as these are fine to use.

The sources that you include should appear in bibliography format (alphabetized, of course!), with their MLA-style citation first, followed by a paragraph summarizing the source's main argument.

PART II

For the second part of this assignment, you'll need to identify and explain two or three of the main themes or concerns you discover in the criticism of your work. What are the main issues the critics discuss? How do they agree or disagree about these issues? What I'd like to see you do in this section is some synthesis of the criticism—group together and discuss the varying views. Don't, though, try to account for EVERYTHING in the criticism—choose two or three key strands to focus on.

EXAMPLES

So you'll have an example of the kind of written work I'm expecting on this assignment, here is a sample entry from an annotated bibliography on Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (which we're not actually reading this semester), followed by a discussion of the main themes in the criticism of the work.

Sample Annotated Bibliography Entry

Bates, Milton J. "Tim O'Brien's Myth of Courage." *Modern Fiction Studies* 32.2 (Summer 1987): 263-279.

Bates sees Paul Berlin's decision not to desert the war as a positive one. He praises what he perceives as O'Brien's "myth of courage [that] combines masculine endurance with feminine commitment" (278). Initially, Berlin seems to lack courage; he experiences both physical fear and passive inertia. But it is not a lack of courage that informs Berlin's final decision to stay at the war. Rather, he is influenced by his love for family and sense of obligation to society. This obligation overrides even a consideration of what is just. The strength of Berlin's choice is in his courage to commit to the "human community, flawed as it always is" (278). Bates simultaneously looks at the role of women in Berlin's decision. Despite the Army's "contempt for the feminine principle," Bates says Berlin exhibits some compassion in caring for the wounded little girl he encounters (270). Sarkin Aung Wan is compared to Catherine Barkley from *A Farewell to Arms*, but ultimately, Berlin has no obligation to her because she is imagined. Although he cannot confidently say that staying in Vietnam is the right choice, Bates believes it is an act of true courage.

Part II: Overall Themes in the Criticism

In discussing *Going After Cacciato*, critics have focused heavily on the book's self-reflective and metafictional qualities and on untangling its complicated structure. They have focused as well on how to interpret the end of the novel and, more recently, on O'Brien's treatment of gender, especially in regard to the refugee character Sarkin Aung Wan.

Several articles published in the early 1980s by critics such as Dennis Vanatta, Tobey Herzog, Michael Raymond, and Thomas Couser explore the self-reflective nature of *Cacciato*, reading the book as an example of metafiction: fiction that explores the very process of fiction-making itself. These early critics note that what is unique about *Cacciato* is that the medium becomes as important as the message, that the novel focuses on "the appropriate method of communicating the experience and significance of the war" (Couser 1) as fully as it focuses on the actual events that occur during the war. These early articles about *Cacciato* generally spend some time as well untangling for readers the complicated structure of the novel, the critics agreeing that there are three main types of chapters: 1) war memory chapters; 2) chapters containing the imagined pursuit of Cacciato; and finally, 3) chapters that take place on an observation post by the sea, in which Berlin considers his own storytelling processes. As the title of Tobey Herzog's 1983 article, "The Soldier-Author-Character Seeking Control," makes apparent, most of these early readings of the novel address the fact that the war memory chapters are chaotic and non-linear, while the imagined pursuit chapters proceed in a chronologically and geographically well-ordered progression. These

critics suggest that Paul Berlin's imagined story is an attempt to provide order and control to actual war experiences that seem random, chaotic, and deeply disturbing to him.

The question of how to interpret the ending of the novel was an issue raised by the book's earliest critics as well, who tend to disagree about whether Berlin's choice not to desert the war is courageous or cowardly. Milton Bates praises Berlin's decision to stay as a true act of courage, which demonstrates a commitment to humanity and a love for family and home. While Maria Bonn concludes that O'Brien's war stories should not uplift, she does suggest that Berlin learns what is best for himself at the end and thus makes a wise decision to stay at the war. Tobey Herzog also believes that Berlin makes the correct decision at the end, citing O'Brien's own comment that "Berlin's fantasized run for Paris would have been an unhappy experience—it wasn't compatible with his background, personality, his beliefs" (98). Yet, nearly as many critics take an opposing view. Dean McWilliams sees Berlin's rejection of Sarkin Aung Wan's plea to step into his imagination and flee the war as an act of cowardice. He condemns Berlin's final decision, saying its implications are "deterministic" (253). Kali Tal agrees, arguing that Berlin's choice to stay at the war represents a failure to connect to his feminine side; instead he falls back on the "hypermasculine stance" of a stereotypical soldier (88). A third set of critics takes more of a middle ground about the end of the novel. Vera Froelich perhaps best represents this view when she writes that Berlin's decision to keep fighting is "understandable," though it does not provide a happy conclusion.

A final trend in *Cacciato* criticism arose out of a new interest in Vietnam War literature on the part of feminist scholars who tend to disagree about whether O'Brien reinforces or undermines traditional gender stereotypes in the novel. Kali Tal, in a 1990 article that looked at images of women in Vietnam novels written by combat veterans, argued that, in *Cacciato*, the "division between men and women . . . is unbreachable"; Paul Berlin succumbs in the end to "traditional myths of male romance" and Sarkin Aung Wan, who represents Berlin's own feminine impulses, vanishes from the book (78). Tal sees O'Brien's depiction of gender as problematic, on a par with a slew of Vietnam War novels in which women characters have no real life of their own and conveniently fade out of existence by the novel's end. In 1995, critic Renny Christopher also critiqued the figure of Sarkin Aung Wan in *Cacciato*, pointing out that she never develops into "anything more than [Paul] Berlin's imagining, a projection the book acknowledges but does not critique" (231). Christopher adds that this character embodies "all the American clichés about Asian women" (232). However, more recent articles have questioned these early assumptions. Leigh-Anne Womack, for instance, reads Sarkin Aung Wan in *Going After Cacciato* as complicating rather than reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies. Womack argues that the character tests out models of femininity by trying on several distinct roles: "the damsel in distress in the western, the native guide in the colonial contact narrative, the homemaker in the domestic narrative, the leading lady in the Paris romance, and the first female peace negotiator in the diplomacy narrative" (812). Other critics like Womack argue that O'Brien is self-conscious about issues of gender and gender performativity; they assert that he carefully probes and questions received notions of masculinity and femininity in the novel.

PRESENTATION

On the day that your annotated bibliography is due (see syllabus), you will serve on a panel of "experts" about the novel—a group of 3-4 students who have all done research on the same book. As an expert on the panel, you will carefully explain the two or three main concerns you've identified in the criticism, which critics take what views, and what evidence they cite to support themselves. In your presentation, you should **not** simply go through the works on your bibliography, summarizing each one-by-one. You **must** synthesize—in other words, explain the most important critical trends you have found.

Your individual presentation should last approximately ten minutes. Each expert will have a turn to speak, and the class will have the opportunity to ask questions of the panelists when the last expert is finished. You needn't confer with the other panelists before the session, unless you want to. My experience has shown that even if the experts pick similar critical trends to present, they often have very different takes on them and explain them differently.

You will need to prepare a short power-point or other type of slideshow so that your presentation will be easy for the class to follow.

You will be graded on how clearly you present the critical trends to the class, how thoughtfully you seem to have grappled with the text and the critics, and how actively and helpfully you participate in discussion afterward.