

# Jews in America: the Yiddish Experience-JS 311

**INSTRUCTOR—Dr. Karen King**  
**Office Hours: MWF 2-3:00, MEZ 3.316**  
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## **Required Books**

*Enemies: A Love Story* by Isaac Bashevis Singer  
*Call It Sleep* by Henry Roth  
*The Shawl* by Cynthia Ozick  
*The Yiddish Policemen's Union* by Michael Chabon

One course packet

## **Required Movies**

*Tevye, American Matchmaker, To Be or Not To Be, Uncle Moses, Blazing Saddles, Fiddler on the Roof, Duck Soup, Goodbye Columbus, Annie Hall, Schindler's List, X-Men: First Class, A Serious Man*

## **Assigned Work**

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2 short papers-4 pages      40%  
2 Tests                              40%

**Class Participation**      20%

Unique numbers: 30565(AMS 315), 39995(JS 311), 43590(RS 315)

## Grading Policies

### **Written Work:**

1. All written work should be typed and double-spaced and a no-plagiarism policy is strictly enforced. **If you use words or ideas that are not your own you must cite your sources. Otherwise you will be guilty of plagiarism.** You will find a link to the University's Honor Code at <http://registrar.utexas.edu/catalogs/gi09-10/ch01/index.html>. (More information on how to cite sources will be provided before the first paper is due.)
2. The 2 short writing assignments (**20% each**) should be from 4 to 5 pages long in which you should aim to present a coherent and critical argument about a topic, using salient details from the assigned readings or movies. The topics will be announced at least two weeks in advance of the due date.
3. I am happy to help you organize your thinking and to give advice about first drafts handed in early. Otherwise, there are other useful resources on campus, including the UT Writing Center, where you can receive advice at any stage in the writing process.
4. **The two short papers may be revised and re-submitted one time within a week of being graded and returned.**
5. **A Firm Policy:** Papers should be turned in at the start of class on the due date. Papers turned in late will have their grades adjusted downward, as much as a letter grade for each day late.

### **Class Tests:**

There will be 2 in class tests during the semester (Oct. 3 and Dec. 2), covering assigned materials and class discussions. I will hand out a list of possible test questions in the week before the scheduled test.

### **Viewing the Movies:**

1. The schedule for the assigned movies and readings is included in the syllabus.
2. The easiest (and cheapest) way to see a movie is to go to the Fine Arts Library, near the Bass Concert Hall, where you can request to view the assigned film. You can find the correct number of the film by using one of the nearby computers, either to look up the specific title or consult the overall list of reserved movies for this class. With a UT ID you will be able to check out a movie, although you cannot take it out of the library. There are multiple televisions for viewing the movies, and you should be able to watch the film with other members of the class. **Because of the limited number of copies of the rarer movies, especially the Yiddish-language ones, I will be happy to schedule class viewings at the FA Library.**
3. Many of these movies may also be rented commercially, if you prefer.

### **Reading Assignments:**

1. There are 4 required texts listed above: One is a celebrated modernist novel by an immigrant American writer, famous for having waited over decades to write his second book. The second novel (translated from Yiddish into English) is by Nobel Laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose archive is housed at the Harry Ransom Center at UT. The third work is a long short story by the contemporary writer Cynthia Ozick and like Singer's work, is an American literary treatment of the Holocaust and its effect on survivors. The last novel is a recent bestselling crime novel, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, by Michael Chabon.
2. Starting the second week of class, you will also be expected to read a series of shorter pieces found in a course packet purchased at **Speedway Copy Service (located in the basement of Dobbie)**. This packet includes background materials on the history of Jews in America, as well as works by Sholem Aleichem, Michael Gold, Anzia Yezierska, and Philip Roth among others.
3. The specific due dates for completing the longer readings are provided in the course syllabus and if changes are made, you will be informed about them with plenty of notice.

### **Class Participation:**

1. Do not be late to class—perpetual tardiness will lower your participation grade.
2. No cell phones on during class, also no reading of newspapers, or text messaging, or using of laptop computers without my permission.
3. Each student will receive a class participation score (**20% of the final grade**) based upon three factors: attendance, active participation in class discussions, and lastly, on helping to lead at least **3** class discussions on particular movies and readings that you have chosen.
4. Having read the assigned reading or viewed the assigned film is critical to participating thoughtfully in these discussions and I will keep a record of which students contribute in class.
- 5. Accumulating more than three unexcused absences will cause your final grade to be lowered a full letter grade.** Excuses for absences will be accepted for documented illnesses, religious holidays, participation in sanctioned UT activities, or by prior arrangement with me.

### **Class Projects:**

Being a class leader. On two or three occasions, (the actual number times will depend on the final class size), students will be required to join a few other students in leading a class discussion about a movie or reading. This group of students should be able to sustain a discussion of at least 20 minutes by either asking questions or making observations about the particular assignment. Students may even show clips of a movie during class. The possible grades for the class projects are: **superior**/5 points, **average**/4 points, **disappointing**/3 points, a **no show**/0 points (unexcused or with no advance warning).

*Using the same 0-5 scale, students may be asked on occasion to grade the work of the discussion leaders (sent by email to me, with comments if possible), and I will compile and communicate the results to the respective students.*

### **Office Hours:**

If you have any questions, problems, or comments now or during the course of the semester, please feel free to talk to me about them. If my office hours (MEZ 3.316 MWF 2-3) are not convenient to your schedule, please make an appointment by calling my office or home, or contacting me by e-mail.

### **Syllabus:**

The schedule of readings and assignments that follows is a tentative outline of class activities. As the semester develops, reading and writing assignments may be modified, but due dates for papers will **not** be moved up. **Good news: there is no final exam.**

### **Emergency Evacuation Policy:**

In the event of a fire or other emergency, it may be necessary to evacuate a building rapidly. Upon the activation of a fire alarm or the announcement of an emergency, all occupants of the building are required to evacuate and assemble outside. Once evacuated, no one may re-enter the building without instruction to do so from the Austin Fire Dept., UT Police Dept. or Fire Prevention Services Office. Students should become familiar with all exit doors of each room and building they occupy at UT and should remember that the nearest exit may not be the same as the way they typically enter buildings. Students requiring assistance in evacuation shall inform their instructors in writing during the first week of class. Faculty members must then provide this information to the Fire Prevention Services office. Information regarding emergency evacuation routes and emergency procedures can be found at <http://www.utexas.edu/emergency%3Ewww.utexas.edu/emergency.http://www.utexas.edu/emergency>

### **Religious Holidays:**

By UT policy, students must notify the instructor of a pending absence at least 14 days prior to the date of observance of a religious holy day. If you must miss a class, an exam, an assignment, or a project in order to observe a religious holy day, you will be given an opportunity to complete the missed work within a reasonable time after the absence.

### **Documented Disability Statement**

Any student with a documented disability who requires academic accommodations should contact the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities at 471-6259. You may also check the following website:

<http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd/>

## Class Schedule

Week 1: AUG. 24 and 26 **Topic I. Introduction:** (Weeks 1-2)

What cultural world does Yiddish emerge from? What powerful forces are influencing Jewish communities in Europe? Why do millions of Eastern European immigrants flock to America?

**Read** background pieces on Yiddish by Miriam Weinstein Aug. 26.

Week 2: AUG. 29 and 31, SEPT. 2

**Listen** to a guest professor on the history of Yiddish for Aug. 29.

**Read** pieces by Irving Howe and Kim Chernin for Aug 31.

**Read** Sholem Aleichem stories for Sept. 2.

Week 3: SEPT. 7 and 9 **Topic II Assimilation and First Steps** (Weeks 3-4)

What obstacles and/or opportunities do Yiddish and its speakers face in America? What about life in the Lower East Side? Which audiences do Jewish writers and performers want to reach? What role do Yiddish speakers play in fomenting social activism?

**Read** background pieces about life in America for immigrants by Howe, Chernin, Chaver Paver, Abraham Raisin, Joseph Opatoshu, and Abraham Cahan for Sept. 7. I will let you know which stories to focus on for the class discussion.

Hand out first paper assignment, due Sept. 21.

**Watch** *American Matchmaker* for Sept. 9.

Week 4: SEPT. 12, 14, and 16

**Read** background by Howe and Rischin on the Jewish-led labor movement for Sept. 12.

**Watch** *Uncle Moses* for Sept. 14.

**Read** stories by Sholem Aleichem and Michael Gold for Sept. 16.

**FIRST SHORT PAPER DUE SEPT. 21.**

Week 5: SEPT. 19, 21, and 23 **Topic III Creative Transitions (Weeks 5-8)**

How did Yiddish speakers, both in English and Yiddish, succeed in transforming American Arts? How did English and Yiddish compete? Which audience(s) were Jewish-Americans trying to reach? Was Yiddish doomed to disappear from the start?

**Read** stories by Lamed Shapiro for Sept. 19.

**Read** background selection by Howe about the Yiddish theater and turn in first paper for Sept. 21.

**Watch** *Tevye* for Sept. 23.

Start reading *Call It Sleep*.

Week 6: SEPT. 26, 28, and 30

**Read** stories by Gold, I. Raboy, and Anzia Yezierska for Sept. 26. I will let you know which stories to focus on for class discussion.

**Discuss** *Call It Sleep* for Sept. 28.

**More discussion** of *Call It Sleep* for Sept. 30.

Week 7: OCT. 3 and 5

FIRST TEST ON OCT. 3

**Read** background readings about Tin Pan Alley and Vaudeville by Paul Buhle, and R. Bennet and Josh Kuhn and **listen** to Yiddish-inspired popular American music for Oct. 5.  
NO CLASS ON OCT. 7!

Week 8: OCT. 10, 12, and 14

**Learn** about “Jewish” Hollywood for Oct. 10.

**View** scenes from old Hollywood movies with Fanny Brice and Eddie Cantor for Oct. 12.

**Read** background about Depression era comic books, original *Batman* and *Superman* stories for Oct. 12.

Week 9: OCT. 17, 19, and 21

**Topic IV Post-War Expressions (Week 9-12)**

How do American Jews exhibit ambivalence in a mostly post-Yiddish/post-Holocaust world? confidence vs. doubt, nostalgia vs. regret, anger vs. resiliency. What is the significance of the Red Scare, Hollywood Black Lists, and their impact on Jewish-American artists? What about the mixed signals about assimilation? How is the Holocaust understood and depicted in different ways by the different generations?

**Read** background on Post-War America by Howe and watch excerpts in class from *The Goldbergs* television show for Oct. 17.

**Read** Philip Roth stories for Oct. 19. I will tell you which one to focus on for class discussion.

**Watch** *Goodbye, Columbus* for Oct. 21.

Week 10: OCT. 24, 26, and 28—American Jews in the mainstream of popular American culture—success at what cost? The Holocaust is Americanized.

**Discuss** Jerome Robbins, for Oct. 24 and hand out second paper assignment.

**Watch** *Fiddler on the Roof* for Oct. 26.

**Read** *The Shawl* for Oct. 28.

Start reading *Enemies: A Love Story*.

Week 11: OCT. 31, Nov. 2 and 4

**Discuss** *Enemies A Love Story* for Oct 31 and Nov. 2.

**Watch** *Schindler’s List* for Nov. 4.

## **SECOND SHORT PAPER DUE NOV. 9**

Week 12: Nov. 7, 9, and 11

**Watch** *X-Men: First Class* for Nov. 7 and discuss different American interpretations of the Holocaust.

**Topic V Jewish-American Humor (Weeks 12-14)**

How does Jewish-American humor demonstrate different cultural strategies, from basic

survival, to transgression, to self-masking and self-mocking? And how is the Yiddish element a necessary ingredient to its evolution? Is Yiddish itself still significant in Jewish-American humor?

**Read** a background piece by W. Markfield, comic pieces (from *Mad Magazine*, Woody Allen, etc.) and **write** the second paper for Nov. 9.

**Watch** *Duck Soup* for Nov. 11.

Week 13: Nov. 14, 16, and 18

**Watch** the old movie version of *To Be or Not To Be* for Nov. 14.

**Watch** *Annie Hall* for Nov. 16.

**Watch** *Blazing Saddles* for Nov. 18.

Week 14: Nov. 21

**Consider** a recent example of dark Jewish-American humor—**watch** *A Serious Man* for Nov. 21.

**Thanksgiving Week—no class on Nov. 23**

Week 15: Nov. 28 and 30, and Dec. 2

**Conclusion—What about Yiddish in America today? A cottage industry of nostalgia....?**

**Discuss** Michael Chabon's crime novel for NOV. 28 and 30.

**SECOND TEST ON DEC. 2**