

# FAMILY

**Setting:**

Fall 2008  
T, R 4:55-6:10 p.m.  
715 B'way, Rm. 501  
K10.0035

**Instructor:**

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**DESCRIPTION**

We will attempt a lot in this First-Year Seminar.

First and foremost, we will conduct a critical examination of “family”—focusing particularly on the ways that academics, politicians, journalists and private individuals in the United States have understood that term over the past 150 years. As we will see, the legal, social and personal definitions of family are fluid and contested. It is not our job as a class to construct one definition of “family” upon which all of us can agree. Instead, we will identify which social forces have attempted to define the term, and under what circumstances those various definitions have been established and abandoned, limited and expanded.

At the same time, we will examine the concept of family through particular disciplinary lenses. For example, what can the field of history tell us about the family? For that matter, what *is* “history”? What are its particular research methodologies, and what types of knowledge do those methodologies produce? We will ask these questions about all the disciplines we encounter.

Finally, this course will serve as a further introduction to Gallatin’s curriculum, degree requirements and interdisciplinary approach to learning.

By the end of the course, you should have a comprehensive understanding of the many conceptualizations of family in the United States. You should also have a deeper knowledge of several academic disciplines and of interdisciplinary research—knowledge you can use as you begin to build your own Gallatin concentration.

**BOOKS/READINGS**

The following books are required reading:

- J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* (1911; Penguin Classics Edition, 2004)
- Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (Basic Books, 2000 ed.)
- Dorothy Nelkin and M. Susan Lindee, *The DNA Mystique: The Gene as a Cultural Icon* (Univ. of Michigan Press, 2004 ed.)

The books are available in the basement textbook section of the NYU Bookstore, located at 18 Washington Place. A packet of readings will be available for purchase during the week of Sept. 8 at Advanced Copy Center, 552 LaGuardia Place—this you have to buy.

## ASSIGNMENTS

You are responsible for the following:

- Reading and being prepared to discuss all books, essays and short stories
- Writing three 5- to 7-page essays

For the first and third essays, I will give you three questions, and you will pick which one you want to answer. I will hand out these assignments at least one week before they are due. You will choose the topic of the second essay yourself—the only parameter is that it must clearly relate to the subject of family. Here you may engage one or more texts from the syllabus, but that is not required.

The purpose of all these assignments is to give you the opportunity to demonstrate the following: your knowledge of the readings; your understanding of the (dis)connections between authors' arguments and methodologies; and your ability to express yourself clearly and succinctly. (I will hand out specific guidelines with each assignment.)

## PARTICIPATION & ATTENDANCE

Because this course is a seminar, you should participate fully in discussions. You need to prepare for that: Read everything closely; underline points that interest you and write out a few questions that you want to raise; in discussions, expand on points with which you agree and ask questions about statements or points of view you think are unclear. Of course, you may also disagree with some of the readings or with my comments or those of the other students, but please do so in a way that respects others.

Attend class, be on time, and stay for the entire meeting. You are allowed one unexcused absence; additional absences may require written documentation, such as a doctor's note. Repeated absences and/or chronic lateness will result in lowered grades.

## GRADING

I will grade you according to this formula:

- Three Essays - 25% each
- Participation/Attendance - 25%

In general, I will grade you on how well you articulate, develop and support your arguments. This includes keeping your arguments relevant to the question or issue at hand.

## INCOMPLETES / PLAGIARISM

I follow Gallatin's policy on incompletes. This means that I strongly discourage incompletes and give them only for *well-documented* reasons. If I do agree to give you an incomplete, we will set a deadline by which you should complete all the work. (This most likely will be only an extra few weeks.)

Another word of warning: Students whose essays contain plagiarized material will flunk the course. Please contact me prior to submitting an essay if you have any questions as to what constitutes plagiarism.

## CONCLUSION

Be assured that I want you to learn and to receive the good grades you deserve. So please make an appointment with me if you feel you are having difficulty in the course.

# ***READING & DISCUSSION SCHEDULE***

## **WEEK ONE: Introductions to the course and each other**

- Tues., Sept. 2                      You, Me, the Syllabus...
- Thurs., Sept. 4                      Laurel George, "Like Family to Me': Families of Origin, Families of Choice, and Class Mobility" (2001), 16 pp.

## **WEEK TWO: The Cultural Politics of Family Life**

- Tues., Sept. 9                      Russell Shorto, "No Babies?" (2008), 8 pp.
- Thurs., Sept. 11                      Judith Levine, "Crimes of Passion: Statutory Rape and the Denial of Female Desire" (2002), 22 pp.

## **WEEK THREE: The Historical American Family, Part 1**

- Tues., Sept. 16                      Walter Johnson, "A Person with a Price" (1999), 18 pp.  
& "The Chattel Principle" (1999), 26 pp.
- Thurs., Sept. 18                      Elaine Tyler May, "Barren to Infertile: Childlessness Before the Twentieth Century" (1995), 39 pp.

## **WEEK FOUR: The Historical American Family, Part 2**

- Tues., Sept. 23                      Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were* (2000), to Page 148
- Thurs., Sept. 25                      Coontz, Pages 149-288

## **WEEK FIVE: The Mediated Family**

- Tues., Sept. 30                      **FIRST ESSAY DUE—Group Meeting with Class Adviser(s)**
- Thurs., Oct. 2                      Joshua Gamson, "Talking Freaks: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Families on Daytime Talk TV" (2001), 19 pp.

## CLASS SCHEDULE (cont.)

### WEEK SIX: Literature and the Fantasy of Family, Part 1

- Tues., Oct. 7 J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* (1911), 236 pp.
- Thurs., Oct. 9 Barrie (cont.)  
Jacqueline Rose, "Introduction" to *The Case of Peter Pan: Or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (Rev. ed., 1992), 11 pp.  
Alison Lurie, "The Boy Who Couldn't Grow Up: James Barrie" (1990), 17 pp.

### WEEK SEVEN: Literature and the Fantasy of Family, Part 2

- Tues., Oct. 14 **NO CLASS SCHEDULED**
- Thurs., Oct. 16 Doris Lessing, "To Room Nineteen," (1978), 30 pp.

### WEEK EIGHT: Law and the Legislated Family

- Tues., Oct. 21 Dorothy E. Roberts, "Punishing Drug Addicts Who Have Babies: Women of Color, Equality, And the Right of Privacy" (1995), 22 pp.
- Thurs., Oct. 23 Nancy D. Polikoff, "Raising Children: Lesbian and Gay Parents Face the Public and the Courts" (2000), 31 pp.

### WEEK NINE: Family: Biologically Determined?

- Tues., Oct. 28 Dorothy Nelkin and M. Susan Lindee, *The DNA Mystique* (2004), to Page 101
- Thurs., Oct. 30 Nelkin and Lindee, Pages 102-205

### WEEK TEN: Psychology and Family Life

- Tues., Nov. 4 Erik Erikson, "Relevance and Relativity in the Case History" (1950), 25 pp.
- Thurs., Nov. 7 Henry Jenkins, "The Sensuous Child: Benjamin Spock and the Sexual Revolution" (1998), 22 pp.

