

Early Master Course Announcement

Winter Term 22/23

Literature and Human Rights (Prof. Dr. Katja Sarkowsky)

Critics have long seen a close relation between literature and human rights. Historian Lynn Hunt (2007) and literary scholar Jonathan Slaughter (2007), for instance, see a direct connection between the emergence of the Bildungsroman and the epistolary novel and the development of modern human rights regimes. Life writing, and the testimonio in particular, are important vehicles of witnessing and testifying on human rights violations. Last but not least, literary texts, both fictional and non-fictional, potentially confront the reader with questions regarding personhood and the “grievability” (Butler 2004) of human lives.

Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, human rights have a – however fragile – legal international framework that has become an important reference point for political and social activism; at the same time, legal frameworks – both national and international – have become important touchstones in literary texts, too, and the concept of ‘human rights’ serves increasingly broad legal and ethical functions to insist on universal human dignity and rights within and across nation states.

In this class, we will first look at some of the theoretical debates regarding human rights and literature/human rights as a framework for reading literary texts. We will then discuss literary texts that address different facets of human rights and their violation; central will be not only how these texts address questions of ethics, personhood, and rights, but also the role of ‘the law’ as well as its limits in claiming the protection of a person’s integrity. Besides a few poems and drama excerpts, we will focus particularly on two novels: Louise Erdrich’s award-winning *The Roundhouse* (2012), a novel centered around the brutal attack and rape on a Native American woman and the legal difficulties to bring the perpetrator to justice; and Sharon Bala’s *The Boat People* (2018), a novel about Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka’s civil war and their legal struggle for admission in Canada.

The theoretical and shorter literary texts will be provided on Digicampus. Students are expected to buy a copy of Erdrich’s *The Roundhouse* and Bala’s *The Boat People* (you may use ebook versions).

Please note:

This class will take place as a block seminar before the beginning of the **regular semester, on October 14-16**; the seminar will be on site, a first meeting will take place via zoom **on October 10**. This means that you will have to have read one theoretical text by October 10 and all other assigned texts – theoretical and literary – by October 14, including, of course, the two novels!

The early date of the class does not change the date of submission for your term papers: **March 15, 2023**.

There will be an information meeting on this class on July 27, 5.30 pm / HS III

If you are interested in taking this class, attendance of this meeting is strongly recommended; if you cannot participate in this meeting but are interested in the class, please contact me via email (katja.sarkowsky@uni-a.de).

You can register for this class on Digicampus during the early registration period, that is, **between Monday, August 22, and Wednesday, August 31, 2022**.