

**BLACK LETTERS MATTER:  
Mid/Late Twentieth Century Classics**

5CLIR Seminar, Spring 2021

Ralph Ellison



James Baldwin



Toni Morrison



This seminar aims to explore aspects of black experience in America through reading a selection of twentieth century masterpieces of fiction.

**The Books:**

By way of introduction, here's what's been written of this selection of books:

- Invisible Man (1952) by Ralph Ellison is *one of the most audacious and dazzling novels of our time*. Its nameless protagonist's journey from the Deep South to Harlem...ushers readers into a parallel universe that throws our own into harsh and hilarious relief.
- Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953,) by James Baldwin is an American classic that chronicles a 14 year-old boy's search for identity *with lyrical precision, psychological directness, symbolic power and rage that is at once unrelenting and compassionate*.
- The Bluest Eye (1970) by Toni Morrison is the author's unforgettable first novel, set in her Ohio girlhood home in 1941. It speaks of *the fear and loneliness at the heart of an 11-year-old girl's yearning, and tragedy of its fulfillment*.
- Beloved (1987) by Toni Morrison is a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel featuring a former slave woman haunted by the ghost of her baby. It's *a story as powerful as Exodus and as intimate as a lullaby that's filled with bitter poetry and suspense as taut as a rope*.

**Participants' Role:**

In lieu of making a presentation, participants will be asked to:

- Read and participate in discussion of all four books;
- Prepare questions with which to co-lead a discussion of their chosen "focus" book; and
- Submit a selection of quotes from each book.

**Seminar Plan:**

Enrollees will be asked to list their first and second choices of books on which they'd like to focus. The moderator will propose discussion leader teams based on such preferences.

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The first online Zoom session will be devoted to introductions; confirmation of scheduling and discussion leader teams; and an overview by the moderator. Sessions thereafter will be spaced two weeks apart to allow for sufficient reading time prior to discussions. For our sixth (and final) session, we will review our compilation of quotes drawn from the four books. See below for explanatory details.

**Discussions and Questions:** Book discussions will be led by a “team” of participants who will have prepared and coordinated a series of thought-provoking and open-ended questions. Good questions, distributed in advance, promise to make for productive, more-than-skin-deep discussions.

**Quotes:** Some sentences or whole passages will inevitably stand out to us (for content and/or style) as we read. Our final “project” for this seminar will be to produce a compilation of such quotes – for further reference (or not, as the case may be). Participants will be asked to submit in writing their selection of quotes from each book (a maximum of three per book). The moderator will compile quotes in order of appearance and distribute them prior to our final wrap-up discussion.