

Friendship: Portrayals in Modern Novels

(time and place to be determined)

The word “friend” is often used casually, but not in this seminar! We will explore the concept of friendship in some depth, acknowledging the long history of serious thinking about a human relationship that can be life-shaping and life-altering. We will share our personal views of true friendship at the beginning and then again at the end of the seminar. During the seminar we will use eight excellent novels portraying a variety of kinds of friendship as case histories that may provoke new thoughts and ideas on the subject. *(For a list of works we will read, see p. 3.)*

Our Procedures: As in past seminars (on the family, science, illness, marriage), we will devote an entire session to each work, approaching it twice: once for its literary qualities and once for its portrayal of friendship. In advance of the seminar, you will be asked to choose one of the novels and which “side”—the literary or the friendship portrayal—you wish to take on as discussion leader. We will begin the semester with an introductory session; the moderators will provide guidance on ways to lead our literary and friendship discussions, and we will each introduce ourselves by reading aloud a 50-word description of our personal conception of true friendship. Our final session will be devoted to the group’s comparisons of all the works we’ve read and to our thoughts of any revisions we might have in our own conceptions of friendship.

Leading a Literature Discussion: In exploring the literary qualities of the works, we will focus on authors’ choices of elements of the work that shape our responses as readers. A suggestive (not comprehensive) list of such elements follows:

Plot Is the plot unusual or familiar? Believable? Are there subplots? If so, what is their function? Is the pace fast or slow? Do we know outcome from beginning, or are we kept in suspense? Flashbacks used? Foreshadowing?

Point of view (i.e., who’s telling the story?) Do we end up knowing only what one person thinks, feels? Selected people? Everybody? Is the point of view male or female?

Settings Where are we in place and time? Do they set the mood, reveal character, define problem? Is this about an ethnicity, a specific culture?

Characters How introduced, described?—by appearance, by actions, back story? Who’s central, who’s not, and why? Are any “offstage”? Who’s fully rounded and who’s not, and why? Anyone a stereotype, cartoonish?

Structure (what are the working parts and how are they arranged?) Divisions: breaks in text, chapters, parts, acts? Titles for chapters, parts? Beginnings and endings—are they used to pique interest, to create suspense, resolutions? Are epigraphs used?

Language and style Simple or ornate? Formal or not? Accents or dialect? Slangy? Does the language change between narrative and dialogue or according to who’s speaking? Is the story told in the past tense, present tense, a combination of tenses? Does the author use humor? Why? Use description? Of what? For what purpose? Are the language choices appropriate to the characters, the story? To the intended reader?

Literary allusions Used? If so, how or where—in titles, names, quotations? Symbols or metaphors? To what purpose?

Title Meaning clear, or subtle and elusive? Is it explained or does it appear in the text somewhere? Is it a literary allusion—even a quotation? How does this work, what does it mean?

Leading a Friendship Discussion: A novel may focus on just one friendship or may include several friendships, inviting comparison. Friendships can take different forms and can have differing qualities. Ideal friendship may be an implicit value (your own or the author’s) against which the friendships in the story can be judged. The types of friendship we encounter in novels include at least the following:

Competitive	Interest-based (e.g., on occupation, common causes)
Toxic (or is this friendship?)	Utilitarian, exploitive
Lifelong vs. brief	Failed (how or why?)
Distant (geographically) or not	Childhood and adolescent
Dominant & dependent (i.e., power differences)	Male-male, female-female, mixed

You may think of other types. In leading one of our discussions of the friendship(s) in a novel, you may want to highlight specific passages to analyze together.

The Books: All but one of our novels is set in the 20th or 21st century, and all are books written by modern authors. All reflect modern, Western thinking about human relationships. If you are interested in a historical overview of the ideal of friendship in

Western thought, we recommend A.C. Grayling's *Friendship*, available in paperback from Yale University Press. This is not required reading.

Many if not all of the books participants are required to read are available in paperback. All can be purchased new or used online, and they are available in local libraries and bookstores. Be warned: *Wonder* will likely be found in sections for young readers.

Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye*. A woman artist returns to Toronto and confronts memories of a compelling but toxic friendship.

Fannie Flagg, *Fried Green Tomatoes*. At the center of a southern small town is a cluster of friendships that challenge and define a community.

Gail Godwin, *Old Lovegood Girls*. Two girls matched as roommates by the dean begin a lifelong friendship watched over by the dean. Can friendship be a triangle?

John Knowles, *A Separate Peace*. Two boys in prep school become friends, launching dark forces in a personal war as world war looms.

R. J. Palacio, *Wonder*. Youngsters in the upper grades and middle school grapple with the difficulties of befriending a kid with a profoundly disturbing disability.

Sarah Perry, *The Essex Serpent*. Interesting Victorians, including some rebels, struggle with the temptations of cross-gender friendship and troubles of competing.

Wallace Stegner, *Crossing to Safety*. An all-time favorite of many readers; the focus is on two couples, life-long friends, who confront personal conflicts and death together.

Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*. A university friendship of two men from contrasting backgrounds launches a lifetime entanglement involving family stresses.

If you have any questions feel free to call or email one of the moderators:

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