

RELS 298 Occult America

(Spring 2018, M/W/F, 10:00-10:50 PM ECTR 219)

Dr. Lee Irwin, Religious Studies Department

4-B Glebe Street, Room 201

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Office Hours: MWF (11:00 - 1:00) (or by appointment)

Course Description:

This course explores the topic of the occult, supernatural, and paranormal in America, primarily from the trans-religious perspective. Because occulture in America has been a liminal topic, associated with fringe movements, New Age, and popular culture, the course will delve into topics outside of mainstream religions. Topics covered will include the following: ghost encounters, mediumship, UFO sightings, Big Foot hunts, paranormal subcultures, psychic talents, and other strange and unusual topics. The approach will be historical and comparative with some emphasis on key movements and individuals; the later part of the course will explore theoretical models for the interpretation of the phenomena being studied. The course is also interdisciplinary and will draw on a range of disciplines – religion, anthropology, paranormal research, and transpersonal studies. At the end of the course we will read a series of case studies that illustrate the difficulties of paranormal research and the problem of validating paranormal experience as a creditable area of philosophical and religious research.

Books (Required):

Christopher Bader, Joseph Baker, and Carson Mencken. *Paranormal America: Ghost Encounters, UFO sightings, Bigfoot Hunters, and Other Curiosities in Religion and Culture* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2017). Second Edition.

Braude, Stephen. *The Gold Leaf Lady and Other Parapsychological Investigations* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Horowitz, Mitch. *Occult America: White House Seances, Ouija Circles, Masons and the Secret History of Our Nation* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 2009).

Samuel, Lawrence. *Supernatural America: A Cultural History*. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, ABC-CLIO, 2011).

Requirements: The course grade will be based on the following assignments: four Critical Reading Exercise (500 word) papers (each 5% = 20%); three take-home exams (each 15% = 45%), two papers (each 15% = 30%); one occult practice interview (5%). No excuses will be accepted for missed assignments, such as oversleeping, lost books, or being stuck out of town. Assignments and tests are due on the day they are assigned. If you have a legitimate excuse, please talk to me before the scheduled assignment. Students must make up any missed assignments within one week (with penalty, or if missed, receive a 50% F); if you miss more than two assignments you will receive a WF and be dropped from the course. Students are expected to attend all classes and participate in class discussions, failure to do so will result in a lower final grade (only three missed classes permitted).

Student Learning Outcomes (SLO): This course meets the requirements for General Education Certification based on the following two SLO. Outcome 1: Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted or valued in various expressions of human culture. Outcome 2: Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the discipline and interpret the material in writing assignments. These outcomes will be assessed in the final writing assignment (Paper #2, worth 15% of the final grade).

Classroom Electronics: Students must TURN OFF all electronic devices before class starts; you are not permitted to engage in texting or reading electronic mail (etc.) while class is in session. If you have a computer for taking notes, you must ONLY take notes (no jumping to read email or surf the web, unless requested). Violation of this code will result in deduction of points from your final grade average.

Honor Code: Lying, cheating, and plagiarism (failure to cite sources used in a paper) are violations of the Honor Code. Cases of suspected academic dishonesty will be reported directly to the Dean of Students. A student responsible for academic dishonesty will receive a XF in the course, indicating failure based on dishonesty. Students should be aware that unauthorized collaboration--working together without permission-- is a form of cheating.

Writing Lab: found in the Center for Student Learning (Addlestone Library, first floor). Trained writing consultants will help with writing for all courses; they offer one-to-one consultations that address everything from brainstorming and developing ideas to crafting strong sentences and documenting sources. For more information, call 843.953.5635 or visit <http://csl.cofc.edu/labs/writing-lab/>.

Disabilities: If you have a disability that qualifies you for academic accommodation, please present a letter to me from the Center for Disability Services at the beginning of the semester. Please discuss with me any special needs you may have. For more information regarding accommodation and the SNAP program, see: <http://www.cofc.edu/~cds/index.htm>

Grading Scale: Numerical/letter grades: A+ = 100-97; A = 96-93; A- = 92-90; B+ = 89-87; B = 86-83; B- = 82-80; C+ = 79-77; C = 76-73; C- = 72-70; D+ = 69-67; D = 66-63; D- = 62-60; F = 59 or lower.

Reading Assignments: Readings are assigned generally as two per week. Please do the readings before class, that way you will be prepared for the lecture and discussion.

I. Week One: January 8, 10, 12

- A. Reading Assignment: Horowitz, 1-41
- B. Reading Assignment: Horowitz, 42-79

II. Week Two: January 17, 19 (No class Monday)

- A. Reading Assignment: Horowitz, 80-116
- B. Reading Assignment: Horowitz, 117-163
- C. Grading Assignment: **Critical Reading #1 Due (pp. 117-163), January 19**

III. Week Three: January 22, 24, 26 (Pass out Exam One)

- A. Reading Assignment: Horowitz, 164-207
- B. Reading Assignment: Horowitz, 208-258
- C. Grading Assignment: **Exam One Due, January 26**

IV. Week Four: January 29, 31, February 2

- A. Reading Assignment: Samuel, Intro (ix-xx), 1-28
- B. Reading Assignment: Samuel, 29-55

V. Week Five: February 5, 7, 9

- A. Reading Assignment: Samuel, 57-85
- B. Reading Assignment: Samuel, 87-115
- C. Grading Assignment: **Critical Reading #2 Due (pp. 57-85), February 9**

VI. Week Six: February 12, 14, 16 (Pass out Exam Two)

- A. Reading Assignment: Samuel, 116-145
- B. Reading Assignment: Samuel, 147-178
- C. Grading Assignment: **Exam Two Due, February 16**

VII. Week Seven: February 19, 21, 23 (Pass out Paper One Assignment)

- A. Reading Assignment: Bader, 1-24
- B. Reading Assignment: Bader, 25-47

VIII. Week Eight: February 26, 28, March 2

- A. Reading Assignment: Bader, 49-76
- B. Reading Assignment: Bader, 77-106
- C. Grading Assignment: **PAPER ONE Due, February 28**

IX. Week Nine: March 5, 7, 9

- A. Reading Assignment: Bader, 107-127
- B. Reading Assignment: Bader, 129-161
- C. Grading Assignment: **Critical Reading #3 (pp. 129-161), Due March 9**

X. Week Ten: March 12, 14, 16 (Pass out Occult Practice Assignment)

- A. Reading Assignment: Bader, 163-191
- B. Reading Assignment: Bader, 193-226

SPRING BREAK – MARCH 18-24

XI. Week Eleven: March 26, 28, 30 (Pass out Exam Three)

- A. Reading Assignment: Bader, 227-239
- B. Reading Assignment: Braude, Preface, ix-xxii
- C. Grading Assignment: **Exam Three Due, March 30**

XII. Week Twelve: April 2, 4, 6

- A. Reading Assignment: Braude, 1-23
- B. Reading Assignment: Braude, 25-54
- C. Grade Assignment: **Occult Practice Interview, Due April 6**

XIII. Week Thirteen: April 9, 11, 13

- A. Reading Assignment: Braude, 55-76
- B. Reading Assignment: Braude, 77-105
- C. Grading Assignment: **Critical Reading #4 (pp. 77-105), Due April 13**

XIV. Week Fourteen: April 16, 18, 20 (Pass out Paper Two Assignment)

- A. Reading Assignment: Braude, 107-126
- B. Reading Assignment: Braude, 127-152

XV. Week Fifteen: April 23 Last Class

- A. Reading Assignment: Braude, 153-177
- B. Grade Assignment: **None**

XVI. Week Sixteen: Final Paper (due April 30)

- A. **Grade Assignment Due: PAPER TWO (SLO), Noon, Hardcopy, My Mailbox**
(4 Glebe, in lounge off driveway, in mailbox in hallway next to lounge)