

THE 2016-2017 ENGLISH HONORS SENIOR SEMINAR (English 399W)

Professor Jason Tougaw

READING MINDS, TOUCHING BRAINS

I was surprised first by its weight, and then by what I had suppressed—an awareness of the once-living man, a stocky seventy-year-old who had died of heart disease. When the man was alive, I thought, it was all there—internal pictures and words, memories of the dead and the living.

—Siri Hustvedt, *The Sorrows of an American*

“Mind reading underlies the human capacity for acquiring language, for fictional play, for telling stories, for fathoming intentions, for deceiving, for sympathy, for identifying.”

—Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care about Fictional Characters?*

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“MY BRAIN IS ALWAYS SENDING ME OFF ON LITTLE MISSIONS,” writes memoirist Naoki Higashida, “whether I want to do them or not.” Higashida asks readers to imagine his physical brain as a kind of portal to his mind. You can hold a brain or examine a neuron, but you can’t touch a self or read a mind. Nevertheless, we spend a great deal of time trying—in life and in literature. When we read literature, we experience simulations of other people’s mental lives: perception, emotion, memory, imagination, consciousness. The words on the page stimulate brain activity and shape our perceptions. In this English Honors Seminar, we will read literary works that tell stories about relations among brain, mind, and self. We will also read psychological, neuroscientific, and literary theories that explore questions raised by those relations: What can the brain teach us about the mind? Or the mind about the brain? Why are fantasies of touching brains to find minds so prevalent in literature? Why do we spend so much time imagining the mental lives of others? How do literary tools like language, aesthetics, and rhetoric enable—or impede—access to the minds of others? What do scientific tools like brain imaging and neurosurgery teach us about selfhood? What might we learn about being human through examining altered states of consciousness or neurological difference?

Literary works are likely to include Chaucer’s *The House of Fame*, Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Isherwood’s *A Single Man*, Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Sacks’s *An Anthropologist on Mars*, David Lodge’s *Thinks. . .*, Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, David B.’s *Epileptic*, Plascencia’s *The People of the Paper*, Higashida’s *The Reason I Jump*, Forney’s *Marbles*, Marsh’s *Do No Harm*, and Hustvedt’s *The Blazing World*—as well as poetry by John Donne, Emily Dickinson, Sharon Olds, and Sapphire. Psychology and neuroscience readings are likely to include works by Sigmund Freud, Joseph LeDoux, Antonio Damasio, Matthew Lieberman, and Gail Hornstein. Literary and cultural criticism is likely to include works by Elaine Scarry, Gabrielle Starr, Paul John Eakin, Victoria Pitts-Taylor, Fernando Vidal, Blakey Vermeule, and Lisa Zunshine.

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