

Stephanie Wells
UC Berkeley OLLI, Winter 2025

Suburban Ennui and Dystopia in American Fiction

This course will examine the weirdly specific genre of American suburban fiction initially made so notorious in the 1960s and 1970s by writers like Updike and Cheever. What is it about this aspirational niche of the American dream that so often leads those who have “achieved” it into despair or alienation? Through several novels and short stories epitomizing this genre, we’ll explore themes of technology, sexuality, marriage, whiteness, class, NIMBYism, parenting, and the yearning for home that even home itself can’t satisfy.

The course contains four novels that you’ll need to procure; short stories are all posted on the course website. Please have the readings done before each class meets if you can.

Reading list (subject to change with student input)

Week 1:

John Cheever, “O Youth and Beauty!” (1953), “The Swimmer” (1964)
Joyce Carol Oates, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” (1966)
John Updike, “The Orphaned Swimming Pool”(1970), “When Everyone was Pregnant” (1971)

Week 2:

Margaret Atwood, “The City Planners” (1965)
Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (1961), chapters 1-4

Week 3:

Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (1961), chapters 5-9
A.M. Homes, “Adults Alone” (1990)

Week 4:

Rick Moody, *The Ice Storm* (1994)
Ben Percy, “Writs of Possession” (2011)

Week 5:

Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (1972)
Richard Ford, “Everything Could Be Worse” (2015)

Week 6:

Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides* (1993)
George Saunders, “The Semplica-Girl Diaries” (2013)