



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA  
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES

## HUMANITIES SEMINARS

### The Plays of August Wilson

Professor Charles Scruggs

Fall 2020

TUESDAYS 1 PM - 3 PM

OCTOBER 6, 13, 20, 27, AND NOVEMBER 3, 2020

August Wilson left as his legacy a ten play cycle that documents each decade of the Twentieth Century in terms of the African-American experience. In his plays Wilson is adept at exploring the historical moment in what has been called “The American Century.” The course will begin with *Gem of the Ocean* whose setting (1904) depicts the diaspora after the slaves have been set free. The last play in the cycle, *Radio Gulf*, is set in 1997 and focuses upon the new black middle-class. In between we will read his brilliant *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (setting: 1920s) and *The Piano Lesson* (setting: 1930s), in addition to the other plays in the cycle. The centerpiece of the course will be the theme of permanence and change in African-American life and culture.

**Charles Scruggs** is an emeritus professor of American literature at the University of Arizona. He has written books and articles on African-American Literature and film, and he is presently working on a book on Claude McKay, a Harlem Renaissance novelist and poet. He has also published articles on Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Ernest Hemingway, John Fowles, Raymond Chandler, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift and on American film.

#### Class Schedule

- Oct 6: *Gem of the Ocean* and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. Settings, 1904 and 1911. Focus: Law and Migration in the post-Civil War era.
- Oct. 13: *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* and *The Piano Lesson*. Settings, 1927 and 1930s. Focus: Country Blues, the Urban recording scene and the legacy of history
- Oct. 20: *Seven Guitars* and *Fences*. Settings: 1948 and 1957. Focus: Big City Blues, Fame, and Baseball
- Oct. 27: *Two Trains Running* and *Jitney*. Settings: 1969 and 1977. Focus: gentrification in the post-Civil Rights era
- Nov 3: *King Hedley II* and *Radio Gulf*: Settings: 1985 and 1997: Focus: racial violence, gender conflict and the Black Middle-Class on the make.

In terms of a specific setting, August Wilson sets all his plays in Pittsburgh’s Hill District.

#### About the texts:

All 10 plays listed above are required reading for this course. One can purchase them on Amazon Prime for a good price if you buy them used (some as low as \$2.00). If you buy them new, they range from \$6.98 (*Fences*) to \$11.99. (*Ma Rainey* and *Seven Guitars*). The “Internet Archives” has 8 of the 10 plays available online, and the Main Library at the University of Arizona has them all as e-books. However, you need to be a member of the Library to get them.