Welcome to the Cowell Core Course, *Imagining Justice, Past and Present*!

By now you’ve all received the summer reading assignment. This is the written component. Cowell’s motto, “The Pursuit of Truth in the Company of Friends,” applies particularly well to your Core course sections. We’d like to start this pursuit off from day one, getting to know each other as a community of writers and thinkers, so we ask that after you have read the assigned summer reading, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* and *Daughter’s Keeper*, as well as the attached essay called “The Moral Instinct,” you respond to each of three essay questions with a few paragraphs of thoughtful consideration and analysis, using some quotes and references to specific events and passages in the texts as examples and evidence. This assignment is due at the first section meeting of your class (either Thursday, Sept. 24 or Friday, Sept. 25), and about three pages total (double-spaced) is sufficient. These responses need not form a formal essay (though you may later build on them to do so in sections), but should help you to explore and then refine some of your reactions and thoughts about the texts. You need not respond to all aspects—every question—of a prompt. These prompts are meant to allow you to choose a direction to focus on in your answer.

We hope they will allow you to start meaningful conversations with one another right away, prepared with ideas—pursuing truth, not necessarily having it all in hand. They’re also a chance for you to introduce yourselves as writers to your instructor.

1. *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* This novel traces the life of someone who eventually becomes a suicide bomber. Many of us have never considered how or why someone might commit such a violent and desperate act. What, in your reading of the story, were the key things—both personal experiences and larger sociopolitical dynamics—that drove this character’s transformation, and how might this story help us better understand some of the context that underlies such acts more generally? Did it change the way you thought about terrorism? Was there anything it helped you understand about violence, warfare, and ethnic/gender conflict? If so how; which specific aspects/passages altered your thinking and feeling? (If you have personal experiences that also shape your response, you are welcome to include them.)

2. *Daughter’s Keeper* What fundamental questions of justice raised by the book do you find the most significant and urgent? What passages and events (or storylines, symbols etc.) best illustrate the problem, and how do they work to make the reader consider the questions—of wrongdoing and debts to society, of fairness, proportionality, mercy, and compassion? Do the simple categories of guilt and innocence, perpetrator and victim begin to become more complex, and if so, how? Do you think our criminal justice system needs reform, and how does this book help you understand that? (If you have personal experiences that also shape your response, you are welcome to include them.)

3. “The Moral Instinct” argues that societies share many of the same ideas and feelings about justice and morality, though they may focus on different aspects or prioritize some over others. Choosing a specific scene or two from one of these books, how does “The Moral Instinct” help us better understand (and evaluate, even, perhaps, respect) conflicting values and ideas of justice in the chosen novel? Many of us disagree about a question of justice with friends or family members whom we respect. If you do, how does this essay (use specific quotes or particular points in it) help you understand and reconsider these differences?

Questions? Email course coordinator Catherine Carlstroem: mastodon@ucsc.edu