

project 2 | assignment 2

In Project 2, we take up Thomas Mullen's novel *The Last Town on Earth*. Published in 2006, the novel takes as its subject the experience of the fictional town of Commonwealth, Washington during the 1918 flu pandemic and World War I. Mullen's novel is from the genre (or category) of literature called *historical fiction*. At its most basic level, this means that while Mullen's work is fictional, it is based on historical research into the real-life social, cultural, and political events that form its backdrop.

The Last Town on Earth begins with this sentence:

The road to Commonwealth was long and forbidding, stretching for miles beyond Timber Falls and leading deep into the evergreen woods, where the trees grew taller still as if trying to reach the sun that teased them with the paucity of its rays. Douglas fir loomed over the rock-strewn road like two warring armies perched on opposing cliffs.

Reading this sentence as deeply symbolic both because of its placement and content will no doubt be a familiar way to read the novel for you: the double meaning in seeing the road to Commonwealth, the town, as equally as dark and forbidding as the difficult journey to commonwealth, or the “common weal”—that which contributes to the common benefit and public good. The “warring armies” of Douglas firs no doubt suggest conflicts that are to unfold in the story we are about to hear.

While we hope you pay attention to literary devices such as these throughout the novel, our primary goal is not to read this work for its literary merit. Rather, we are going to read it as a kind of case study: how, we will ask, do social ethics evolve and devolve in the face of precarity (or insecurity)? While the characters are not real people, the systems and ideologies within which they move replicate those in the world of 1918 Washington state – and beyond.

It is perhaps not surprising that Mullen, when asked when asked why he took this town, at this time, as the subject for his debut novel, seems to have a similar goal in mind:

The real reason I wanted to write this book is when I found out that some towns had done this, I immediately imagined a situation where two men are standing guard and they're confronted by a lost stranger. And the man says that he's cold and he's hungry and he needs food and shelter, and he's begging them for aid. So what do they do? And this moral dilemma that they're confronted with I thought was something that I wanted to explore in fiction, because it calls into question a lot of our moral guidelines, and it points to the way in which we sometimes compromise our moral guidelines in order to protect our self-interest.

We are going to pay attention to the social dynamics and structures surrounding the conflicts at work in Commonwealth. How, we will ask, does a pandemic test the social structures that exist surrounding the care of others? As you know from having lived through a pandemic yourself for the last five months, in the everyday course of things, we tend to see the personal and medical as private. Pandemic forces us to make choices about how we operate in the social sphere in ways we might not have imagined and might not prefer to make.

For Tuesday, September 29, I ask that you read Part I of the novel, “Commonwealth,” which is to be found on pages 3-111. Before reading, you should also browse through these links in the reader’s guide, which will provide you some important historical context: “The I.W.W. in the Pacific Northwest,” “Everett Massacre of 1916 Collection,” and “History of the 1918 Flu Pandemic.” Be sure to at least read through the landing page of each, and feel free to dig deeper into each site to the extent your time, mood, and curiosity allow.

Please be prepared to open our discussion on Tuesday Having read this first 100 pages as well as some of the historical context, what is one of the core ethical dilemmas being sketched out in those first 100 pages? How do you see that dilemma being sketched out? What interests seem to be placed at odds in this dilemma? Philip’s decision to let the unknown soldier into the town is perhaps the most obvious one, and you certainly may plumb it further, but what others are there?