

**American College of Physicians
Tennessee Chapter**

**Reading Retreat 32
March 8 – 10 , 2019**

Montgomery Bell State Park, Burns, Tennessee

Vulnerable Populations

Friday, March 8 7:00 – 9:30 p.m.

Introduction: Philoctetes and Vulnerability (lecture)

J. M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* (novel)

Ursula K. LeGuin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (story)

Saturday, March 9 9:00 – 11:30 a.m.

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (essays)

Ta-Nehesi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (essay)

Langston Hughes, selected poems

Gwendolyn Brooks, selected poems

Saturday, March 9 2:00 – 4:30 p.m.

Abraham Verghese, *My Own Country* (memoir)

Sunday, March 10 8:30 – 11:00 a.m.

Philip Roth, *Nemesis* (novel)

Joyce Carol Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" (story)

- "Little Red Riding Hood" (folk tale)
- "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" (folk tale)
- "The Pied Piper of Tucson" (*Life Magazine* article)

Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People" (story)

Program Notes

The National Institute of Health generally defines “vulnerable populations” as “patients who are racial or ethnic minorities, children, elderly, socio-economically disadvantaged, underinsured or those with certain medical conditions.” To these we might add LGBTQ persons, the physically and mentally disabled, immigrants, the incarcerated, the undereducated and illiterate, and more. In each case, the NIH notes that members of these populations often have reduced or restricted access to adequate medical care, and that health care providers may be “undereducated about the lives and concerns of vulnerable populations.” This year’s reading retreat aims to increase our awareness of and attention to such people, both as part of the patient populations we serve and as people with particular life experiences and concerns that may be different from what is considered culturally normative. As Mark Anderson points out in his announcement of the retreat topic, while the underservice of vulnerable populations is not a new problem, our current political and cultural climate seems to amplify the dangers posed to them. Perhaps the medical community can decrease some of those dangers.

I will introduce the topic of vulnerability at our first session on **Friday evening** through the lens of the ancient legend of **Philoctetes**, a Greek soldier wounded by snakebite during the Trojan War and abandoned on the island of Lemnos. While you need not read anything specific about Philoctetes, the Wikipedia entry on him is a reasonable account, so you might start there for some background. Most of our first session, though, will be dedicated to discussion of Nobel laureate **J. M. Coetzee’s** 1980 novel ***Life & Times of Michael K.*** – a powerful parable about disability, displacement, privation, and survival. We will also take up **Ursula K. Leguin’s** famous story “**The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas**” (in your reading packet), which asks us to consider what David Brooks has called “the tragic compromises built into modern life” – accepting the suffering of a vulnerable few as necessary to a more general social well-being.

Our second session, on **Saturday morning**, will focus on the vulnerability of ethnic minorities in our society, and specifically African-Americans. To do so, I’d like to lay several works side-by-side for discussion. **James Baldwin’s** ***The Fire Next Time*** (1963) comprises two essays in letter form, one to his fourteen year-old nephew about the realities of race in America, and another on the subject of race and religion. **Ta-Nehesi Coates’s** Pulitzer Prize-winning extended essay ***Between the World and Me*** (2015) is clearly modeled on Baldwin’s book, being an epistolary essay to his young son and updating Baldwin’s effort to express the hard realities of blackness in America. Next to these works, let’s also consider some selected poems by **Gwendolyn Brooks** and **Langston Hughes**, both of whom chronicle in verse the often-marginalized black experience (these are included in our reading packet).

Abraham Verghese's well-known memoir, ***My Own Country: A Doctor's Story***, will focus our discussion on **Saturday afternoon**. Early in his medical career, in the mid 1980s, Verghese treated some of the first patients in Tennessee to be diagnosed with AIDS. His book recounts the challenges of treating these patients in a social climate of fear and distrust, and reflects on the struggle and vulnerability of gay men in places like rural Appalachia, where LGBTQ people are still so often ostracized. This classic of medical literature is an important reminder that the vulnerable among us require special and particular attention from the health-care community.

Our final session on **Sunday morning** will consider two other vulnerable populations: children and women. ***Nemesis***, the final novel by American writer **Philip Roth**, recounts a terrible outbreak of polio in the summer of 1944 in Newark, New Jersey. It is an unadorned meditation on vulnerability and helplessness, and particularly on our individual obligations to recognize and protect "the least among us." Next to Roth's novel, we will consider a set of inter-related texts (all provided in the reading packet): principally, we'll look at **Joyce Carol Oates's** famous short story, ***"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"*** (1966), describing an encounter between a teen-aged girl and a male acquaintance. As Oates obviously draws on several other texts, we will also look at a couple of versions of the "Little Red Riding Hood" and "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" folk tales, and at a *Life Magazine* article that Oates says partly inspired her story. Finally, let's also look at **Flannery O'Connor's** well-known story, ***"Good Country People."***

Vulnerability is, a critical topic for health care providers, but also for anyone concerned with what Jean-Jacques Rousseau once called "the social contract," and particularly our obligation to better understand and improve the diverse experiences of our fellow human beings.

As always, I look forward to reading and talking with you in March – this time, at our new location at Montgomery Bell State Park!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Greg O'Dea', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Gregory O'Dea, Ph.D.
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