

Women's Work

Spring 2025

Dr. Chris Hedlin

[Sheedy Family Program](#)

chedlin3@nd.edu

Course description

Dear students,

In this course, we'll explore 'women's work' in three senses. First, we'll consider the history of gendered "separate spheres" in the United States, the way in which some kinds of labor – care work, teaching, and domestic chores, for example – came to be seen as properly the concern of women, while other kinds of work, like business careers and scholarly pursuits, became coded masculine.

Second, we'll understand 'work' in the sense of a work of literature: we'll read popular novels by and about working women and probe how their fictional representations compare and contrast with women's lived realities.

Finally, we'll take 'women's work' as the starting place for you to engage in your own purpose-driven career discernment, taking gender as a key, always-present variable. Through partnerships with ND Women Connect and ThinkND, we'll interview, read fiction alongside, and dialogue with ND alumni, probing how 21st century women (and men, too) are overcoming gendered barriers in the workplace and finding meaning in their work. We'll approach stories – literary and personal – as a form of data and use that data collaboratively to interrogate the gendered working life.

I look forward to thinking alongside you.

Truly,



Prof. Chris Hedlin

Table of Contents

Course description	1
Learning goals	3
ThinkND and ND Women Connect	3
Required materials	4
Assignments	4
Formative assignments (recurring).....	5
Fiction reading.....	5
Perusall readings.....	5
Dialogue groups.....	5
Class debriefs.....	5
Participation and attendance.....	6
Major assignments (one-time).....	6
Labor based grading check-ins.....	6
Informational interviews.....	6
ThinkND/ND Women Connect live virtual event.....	6
Mastery assignments (optional).....	6
NDWC Shared Read online forum.....	7
ThinkND article.....	7
Women’s Work: Our Big Questions	8
Course schedule	9

Learning goals

In this course, my overarching goals are that you learn to or grow your ability to...

1. Comprehend and appreciate the nuances of literature you read through close reading and distant reading. Understand the differences between these literary methods and what each can yield for your appreciation of texts.
2. Evaluate gaps and exaggerations in fictional representations of working women, as compared to data you glean from interviews, your personal experiences, business reports, and social scientific studies.
3. Historicize the concept of “women’s work” in an American context. In other words, trace where our society got the idea that some forms of labor (domestic chores, childcare, writing romances) are for women and others (scholarly pursuits, the business world, serious writing) are for men.
4. Articulate original ideas about novels and nonfiction texts in large and small groups, and generate original questions to prompt such discussions.

5. Use generative AI tools to brainstorm ideas, craft writing, and get feedback on work. Evaluate answers generated by AI and use original thought to strengthen output.
6. Reflect on your own questions, values, concerns, and beliefs surrounding gender and the working life and set guiding goals you can bring into the workforce and/or family life.
7. Dialogue with peers and ND alumni about their perspectives on gender and work and their personal stories. Compose questions to prompt such conversations.
8. Identify and practice techniques for authentically growing your professional network, both via email and in informational interviews with ND alumni.

ThinkND and ND Women Connect

One of the distinctive aspects of this course is the opportunity for you to interface directly with Notre Dame alumni as part of the course structure. Through partnerships with [ThinkND](#) and [ND Women Connect](#), Notre Dame alumni will be able to read along at home as we learn about women's work and dive into our featured novel for the semester, Bonnie Garmus's *Lessons in Chemistry* (2022). As I guide you through the course content, I'll do the same for alumni via a short series of videos and podcasts hosted on the ThinkND website. As we read *Lessons in Chemistry*, so will hundreds of ND alumni who participate in NDWC's twice-annual Shared Read program. Pretty cool, huh?

How does this affect you? First, I hope it can offer fruitful "real world" insights into people's diverse working lives and also organic opportunities to grow your network. As you'll read more about below, one of your assignments in the course will be to conduct informational interviews with alumni. Folks participating in the virtual version of the course will have the option to write to us, telling us about their careers and volunteering themselves for this purpose.

Additionally, if you contract for an A in the course, you'll join the NDWC Shared Read Facebook group and participate in book discussions not only with your classmates but with ND alumni around the world – people who are reading not for a grade but from a genuine investment in lifelong learning.

Finally, at the end of the course, you'll all work with me and your peers to host a live webinar for ND alumni who have been reading and learning alongside us at home. I hope this event can put you in conversation with folks who are navigating questions about work, family, and meaning at all life stages.

Required materials

You'll need hard copies (not ebooks or audiobooks) of the following novels:

- Kiley Reid's *Such a Fun Age* (2019) (ISBN: 978-0525541912)
- Bonnie Garmus's *Lessons in Chemistry* (2022) (ISBN: 978-0385547345)
- A novel that your small group chooses during the first weeks of class

You may check them out from the library, get them used, or borrow from a friend, but each person in the class will need their own copy. If possible, I encourage you to get a copy in which you can take handwritten notes.

Additional readings will be posted on the reading annotation platform Perusall (see below for what that is). If you're able, I highly encourage you to print our Perusall readings (you can download copies with your notes included) and bring them to class. If printing costs are prohibitive to you, please reach out to me.

You'll also need a physical, not-electronic notebook – ideally one dedicated specifically for our class – and a writing utensil for class each day. See below for technology policy.

Assignments

This class will have no exams, essays, or formal presentations. Instead your responsibilities outside of class will center on reading closely, preparing to participate actively in class discussions, and dialoguing with classmates and Notre Dame alumni about course topics. To those ends, below is a summary of the major assignments for the course.

Formative assignments (recurring)

Fiction reading

It can be hard to enjoy a novel when you're worried about taking notes, memorizing plot points for quizzes, or finishing as fast as possible to get to other assignments. To try to put some of the pleasure back in fiction reading, you'll have the option to attend communal reading times to complete your assigned novel-reading for this course. If you agree to those terms, I'll let you read as fast or slow as you want with no external accountability metrics. See [the prompt](#) here.

Perusall readings

When we have nonfiction reading to complete for the course (for example, critical essays on the novels or background information on historical concepts), you will complete those independently on Perusall, a live online reading and annotation platform. See the [full prompt](#) here.

Dialogue groups

You will meet once a week in small groups to dialogue in response to novels that we're reading in class and from [this list](#). In addition to keeping up with the reading, each person is responsible for preparing two questions to bring to their group's weekly meeting. You'll also write a reflection about key ideas that emerged in your conversations and strengths/weaknesses in your group dynamics. Finally, about 6 weeks into the semester, I'll ask each group to share aloud a few thoughts on their group's chosen book-- a verbal book review of sorts. See [the full prompt](#) here.

Class debriefs

Exams are one way to test whether students are processing class content. But, for multiple reasons (testing anxiety, “cramming” leading to low retention), I don’t think they’re the most effective method, at least not for a class like ours. Instead of giving exams, I’m going to have you submit a 3-part debrief assignment after each class period where we introduce new content. The assignment will ask you to **review** key concepts, **reflect** on what you find interesting (or other personal reactions), and then **connect** the lesson to something happening in the ‘real world’ or something you’ve learned in another class. These debriefs are due 24 hours after the class period ends. Here’s the [prompt](#).

Participation and attendance

We will spend the majority of our class time having discussions in which you are actively responding to our readings and one another. Everyone’s progress in the class depends upon these conversations. For that reason, it is crucial that you attend class and participate to the best of your ability, and these count toward your formative assignment category. See the “Participation” and “Attendance” policies below.

Major assignments (one-time)

Labor based grading check-ins

As detailed below, this course will use labor-based grading, where you take an active role in determining your final grade, based on criteria spelled out at the start of the term. This grading system relies upon regular student-professor communication and your active self-reflection. We’ll have three check-ins: an initial questionnaire, midterm progress report, and final conference. You’ll be responsible for answering questions about your performance as part of each check-in. See the [full prompt](#) here.

Informational interviews

Often I hear students say that they know they’d benefit from conducting informational interviews, but they feel intimidated to do it. In this course, you’ll practice by interviewing two or three Notre Dame alumni about their work experiences, including as they touch on course themes such as balancing work in and out of the home, confronting gender discrimination in the workplace, or finding meaning in their work. I’ll offer how-to guidance before and after the experience. See the [full prompt](#) here.

ThinkND/ND Women Connect live virtual event

As your final assignment, you will help me host a live virtual event for ND alumni based on our course material. This will be the culminating event for alumni who have participated in the virtual version of the course hosted on ThinkND’s platform. In preparing for and attending the event, you’ll be reviewing key course themes, so your participation will take the place of a final exam.

The virtual event will be Wed., April 30 at 8 p.m. ET. If you cannot attend, let me know ASAP, so we can set up an alternative assignment for you.

Mastery assignments (optional)

If you choose to contract for an A in this course, you'll complete two additional assignments, which will invite you to interface more extensively with the ThinkND and ND Women Connect communities. In the process, you'll synthesize key concepts from the course and practice conveying them to general audiences.

If you feel like these mastery assignments are a significant undertaking, you're correct. An A grade, both in my mind and by the University's standards, is a marker of exceptional work.

NDWC Shared Read online forum

The alumni group Notre Dame Women Connect has a robust, twice-annual Shared Read program. The program has two components: an online discussion forum, which lives on Facebook, and a host of local in-person book clubs. If you contract for an A in the course, you'll join the NDWC Shared Read Facebook group and participate in the online discussions of *Lessons in Chemistry* during the weeks we're reading the novel. Here's [the prompt](#).

First Five

If you contract for an A, once during the term, you'll lead a 5-minute warm-up activity that helps us connect the day's readings to a piece of artwork, a current event, or an object from pop culture. Your goal is to show us a creative way into the readings and "big questions" at hand. [Here's the prompt](#).

Women's Work: Our Big Questions

Because so many of the topics in this course intersect, I didn't divide the course into units. Instead, here's a list of some of the big questions I care about that we'll confront together.

On meaning, vocation, achievement, and success

Will achievement make me happy? Is my goal in life to be successful?

How important is passion to a meaningful career? Should I feel called to my work?

Can my calling be something besides my career (like raising a family)?

Can childrearing be meaningful work?

What if I feel called to multiple things?

On "women's work"

Where did the idea of domestic labor/care work being "women's work" come from?

How much extra work are women really doing? What are the effects on their well-being?

Should domestic labor count toward the GDP?

On workplace DEI

How diverse are workplaces today? Do DEI programs work?

What are the biggest barriers to women's equal pay and representation in the workforce?

Is the workplace a meritocracy?

On women in fiction

Why use novels to study working women?

How are women represented in fiction today? What jobs do fictional women have?

Is women's literature trash (in the vein of "trashy romances")?

Course schedule

Week 1

Topic and in-class activities	Read this on Perusall	Do this on Canvas
T 1/14 Welcome <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introductory activity- representations of women's work 2. Community intros 3. Perusall login and hw preview 	–	First class debrief due within 24 hours of class ending
Th 1/16 Course overview <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discussion: group dynamics (perspective getting and amplifying voices) 2. Q&A on major assignments 3. ThinkND/ND Women Connect preview 4. Pria 5. Dialogue group organizing 	"Women's Work" syllabus Prompts <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Perusall 2. Fiction reading 3. Dialogue groups 4. Labor based grading 5. Class debriefs 6. First Five (optional...mastery) 	Fill out introductory questionnaire with labor-based grading contract.
NO Friday DEAR: Instead, two options for make-up classes for Tuesday: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 8-9:15 a.m. 2. 10:30-11:45 a.m. Make sure you read and annotate Ursula Le Guin, "Sur" (1982) before you come.		

Week 2

Note that your dialogue group should meet (and you should submit questions to Canvas) for the first time this week.

Topic and class activities	Read this	Do this on Canvas
T 1/21 NO CLASS (football) Make-up classes on Fri., 1/17 Why read fiction to study women's work?	Ursula Le Guin, "Sur" The New Yorker (1982) - look for this at your local library or purchase online as a part of <i>The Unreal and the Real: Selected Stories of Ursula LeGuin</i>	
Th 1/23 Is women's literature trash?	"Is women's literature...bad?" ThinkND episode with guest	

	Dr. Ashley Reed, Virginia Tech Natalia Fierro-Gomez, " Opinion: How BookTok is causing women to look like sellouts. " <i>The Hornet</i> (2024)	
Friday DEAR: Kiley Reid, <i>Such a Fun Age</i> (2019)		

Week 3

Topic and class activities	Read this	Do this on Canvas
T 1/28 SAFA	Reid, <i>Such a Fun Age</i> (first third) - look for this at your local library or purchase online	
Th 1/30 Informational interviews how-to	Prompt: Informational interviews Rebecca Knight, " How to get the most out of an informational interview, " <i>Harvard Business Review</i> (2016)	
Friday DEAR: <i>Such a Fun Age</i>		

Week 4

Topic and class activities	Read this	Do this on Canvas
T 2/4 SAFA	Reid, <i>Such a Fun Age</i> (middle third)	
Th 2/6 How important is passion to a meaningful career? Should I feel called to my work?	Derek Thompson, " Workism is making Americans miserable, " <i>The Atlantic</i> (2019) Miya Tomitsuku, " In the Name of Love, " <i>Jacobin</i> (2014)	
Friday DEAR: Finish <i>Such a Fun Age</i>		

Week 5

Topic and class activities	Read this	Do this on Canvas
----------------------------	-----------	-------------------

T 2/11 SAFA	Reid, <i>Such a Fun Age</i> (finish)	
Th 2/13 Guest speaker: Kim Powell, author of <i>The CEO Next Door</i>	Elena L. Bothelo, Kim R. Powell, et al. " What sets successful CEOs apart, " <i>HBR</i> (2017) Elena L. Bothelo and Kim R. Powell, "Introduction," <i>The CEO Next Door</i> (2018) - find this at your local library or purchase online	
Friday DEAR: Your dialogue group's novel		

Week 6

Topic and class activities	Read this	Do this on Canvas
T 2/18 Will achievement make me happy? Is my goal in life to be successful?	Byung-Chul Han, "Beyond a disciplinary society," <i>The Burnout Society</i> (2010) - find this at your local library or purchase online Arthur Brooks, " Success addicts choose being special over being happy. " <i>The Atlantic</i> (2020) Kristin Neff, "Opting out of the self-esteem game," <i>Self-Compassion</i> (2011) - find this at your local library or purchase online	
Th 2/20 What's the history of gendered work in the US? How did some forms of work become coded masculine and others feminine?	"That's Women's Work (A History)," ThinkND podcast with guest Dr. Dan Graff, Institute for Social Concerns, Notre Dame Catherine Beecher and Harriet Stowe, " Table of Contents " and " The Christian Family. " <i>American Woman's Home</i> (1869)	
Friday DEAR: Your dialogue group's novel		

Week 7

Topic and class activities	Read this	Do this on Canvas
T 2/25 Can my calling be something besides my career (like raising a family)? Can childrearing be meaningful work?	Rachel Cusk, "Introduction," <i>Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother</i> (2001) 7 of my favorite contemporary poems on motherhood	
Th 2/27 What if I'm called to multiple things?	Andrea Veltman, "What makes work meaningful?" <i>Meaningful Work</i> (2016) - out of print but may be at your local library Martha Nussbaum, " Lessons of Ancient Greece " (1988)	
Friday DEAR: Your dialogue group's novel		

Week 8

Topic and class activities	Read this	Do this on Canvas
T 3/4 How much extra work are women really doing in the US? What are the effects on their well-being?	Emily and Amelia Nagoski, "Human Giver Syndrome," <i>Burnout</i> (2019) - find at your local library or purchase online Jancee Dunn, "Introduction: Meters gonna hate," <i>How not to hate your husband after kids</i> (2017) - find at your local library or purchase online	
Th 3/6 Should care work count toward the GDP?	Caroline Criado-Perez, "Women and the GDP," <i>Invisible Women: Exposing data bias in a world designed for men</i> (2019) - find at your local library or purchase online	Submit midterm progress report (labor-based grading) and dialogue group midterm reflection
No Friday DEAR (spring break): Finish your dialogue group's novel, if you haven't already, and be prepared to review it during class on the Tuesday we get back.		

Spring break: March 8-16.

Week 9

Topic and class activities	Read this	Do this on Canvas
T 3/18 Dialogue group book reviews	Your dialogue group's selected book	
Th 3/20 How are working women represented in fiction? What kinds of jobs do they do?	Erin Davis, " The physical traits that define men and women in literature " <i>The Pudding</i> (2020) "Big Data, Little Women," ThinkND podcast with guest Dr. Sabrina Lee, Calvin University	
Friday DEAR: Bonnie Garmus, <i>Lessons in Chemistry</i> (2022)		

Week 10

Topic and class activities	Read this	Do this on Canvas
T 3/25 LIC	<i>Lessons in Chemistry</i> (first ¼) - find at your local library or purchase online	
Th 3/27 How diverse are workplaces today? Do DEI programs work?	McKinsey, selections from reports, " Diversity Wins " (2020) and " Women in the Workforce " (2024) Lisa Leslie, " What Makes a Workplace Diversity Program Successful " (2020), Greater Good Institute at Berkeley	
Friday DEAR: <i>Lessons in Chemistry</i> (2022)		

Week 11

Topic and class activities	Read this	Do this on Canvas
T 4/1 LIC	<i>Lessons in Chemistry</i> (first half)	
Th 4/3 What are the biggest barriers to women's equal pay and representation in the	Sheryl Sandberg, "Introduction," <i>Lean In</i> (2013)	

workforce?	- find at your local library or purchase online Claudia Goldin, "Introduction," <i>Career and Family</i> (2022) - find at your local library or purchase online	
Friday DEAR: <i>Lessons in Chemistry</i> (2022)		

Week 12

Topic and class activities	Read this	Do this on Canvas
T 4/8 LIC	<i>Lessons in Chemistry</i> (¾ done)	
Th 4/10 Is the workplace a meritocracy?	Pew Research Center report, " Americans value different things in men and women " (2017) Caroline Criado-Perez, "The Myth of meritocracy" (selections), <i>Invisible Women</i> (2019) - find at your local library or purchase online	
Friday DEAR: <i>Lessons in Chemistry</i> (2022)		

Week 13

Topic and class activities	Read this	Do this on Canvas
T 4/15 LIC	<i>Lessons in Chemistry</i> (finish)	
WED TV night, 7:30-10 p.m., O'Shaughnessy 242: <i>Lessons in Chemistry</i>, Ep. 1 and 2 (AppleTV)		
Th 4/17 TV version - LIC	–	
NO Friday DEAR (Easter)		

Week 14

Topic and class activities	Read this	Do this on Canvas

T 4/22 Informational interview discussion	–	Prepare your interview transcripts and observations for class discussion.
Th 4/24 Informational interview discussion	–	–
No Friday DEAR (because no assigned reading)		

Week 15

Topic and class activities	Read this	Do this on Canvas
T 4/29 Debrief 1. Prep for Zoom event 2. Prep for summative grading report 3. Fill out class evaluation 4. Recap takeaways	–	–
WED., 4/30 Live virtual event with ND alumni on Zoom	–	Practice your contribution for Zoom event
NO Friday DEAR (reading day)		

Week 16: Finals week

No final exam. Instead individual conferences with me to present your summative grading report. Sign up here.
