MINIMALISM

And Bobbie Ann Mason
WHAT IS MINIMALISM?

• Art movement encompassing music, visual arts, etc. that arose after WWII.
• For our purposes: a “school” of contemporary writing (first arising in the 1970s and 1980s) that includes Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Bobbie Ann Mason, Mary Robison, Tobias Wolff, etc.
• Involved a renaissance of the short story
• Interestingly, many writers put into this “school” object to the label.
• Raymond Carver: “Somebody called me a ‘minimalist’ writer. But I didn’t like it. There’s something about ‘minimalist’ that smacks of smallness of vision and execution that I don’t like.”
DERIVES FROM HEMINGWAY

- Less is more
- “Iceberg Principle”—(Also called the “Theory of Omission”)
- Stripped down prose
- Accessible vocabulary
CHARACTERISTICS OF MINIMALISM

• Ordinary subjects
• “Slice of life” type stories
• Deadpan narratives
• Slightness of story (not much really happens; no large plot devices)
• Realistic, colloquial dialogue
• Often rely on the present tense
• Raymond Carver: “It’s possible to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language.”
CRITIC CYNTHIA HALLETT ON MINIMALISM

• Minimalist stories rely on dialogue and perfected surface details rather than introspective comments by the narrator or characters to tell a story.

• Minimalist fiction rejects “storyness” in many ways. Without the typical trajectory of conflict-development-resolution, readers eavesdrop on the characters.

• Emphasis, then, NOT on plot so much as on characterization, setting, and the meaning accrued by build-up of simple details, texture of lives lived

• In other words, storytelling is replaced by patterning, texturing—and the reader becomes a more active participant, puzzling out what’s been given and withheld.
Bobbie Ann Mason’s Minimalism

- Inclusion of popular culture items: t.v. shows, videos, songs, fast food restaurants, etc.
- Sometimes called “K-Mart realism” or “shopping mall realism”
- Mason: “I think the surface is the reality. . . . My characters live in a world in which television and popular music are an intimate part of their lives, and I take that seriously.”