

LIT 521-01: The Contemporary American Novel

(With a Couple of Outliers)

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Hours: TuThs 12:30-2:00 & by appt.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Americanah*.

Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake*.

Barnes, Julian. *The Sense of an Ending*.

Díaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

Franzen, Jonathan. *The Corrections*.

Robinson, Marilynne. *Gilead*.

Ruskovich, Emily. *Idaho*.

Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. (20th Anniversary Edition.)

Whitehead, Colson. *The Underground Railroad*.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

LIT 521 examines a limited number of recent American novels (with a couple of interlopers), some well-known and prize-winning, others less celebrated but nonetheless extraordinary. Arbitrarily limiting our selection to novels published since 1996—the year of *Infinite Jest*—we will explore some of the following questions: What has happened to the American novel since the waning of “postmodernism”? (Did postmodernism really “wane,” or is it still alive and well? Has modernism run its course? What –ism or –isms apply—or should be applied—to the contemporary scene? What new terms can or should we come up with?) Has a new type or form of fiction emerged? What, if anything, unites current writers in terms of interests, narrative strategies, philosophies, and more? What new themes, techniques, and subjects, if any, have emerged in the twenty-first century? Think of this course as a critical experiment: while a great

deal has been written about some of our writers—in particular, Atwood and Wallace—others have received relatively little critical attention: what are they about? do they matter? will readers still be reading them fifty or one hundred years from now? how are they, individually or collectively, advancing the art of literary fiction in America? We will read each work carefully and intensely, but we'll also be working at creating a critical vocabulary or lexicon with which to talk about and describe the contemporary scene.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Each seminar participant will be responsible for the following:

1. Bring to each class, on a 3X5 notecard, **THREE** observations, comments, questions, or critiques about each week's reading. Keep your observations brief and pithy—one or two sentences at most. You will **TURN IN** the notecards at the end of each class. (*Nota bene*: your **THREE** notecard observations/remarks/questions/critiques/etc. **must be written BEFORE COMING TO CLASS!** You may, of course, *supplement* these three notes during class, but you must come to class already armed with three killer insights/questions/comments/somethings.
2. Submit, at the end of the semester (specific due date TBA), a 15-20+ page scholarly essay that analyzes or critiques one (or perhaps, though rarely, more) of the course's primary texts. Your essay must display a working knowledge of (that is, include directly) such secondary sources as may be available (including reviews, interviews, and scholarly articles and books, etc.). Strong, smart-as-hell theoretical readings are especially welcome (depending, of course, upon your interests, investments, and backgrounds in literary and cultural theory).

SYLLABUS

- W Sept 6: Introduction/Semester Plan/Course Goals
- W Sept 13: Selected Readings: Interviews, Essays, Articles, Opinion Pieces
Purpose/Goal: To begin to create a critical vocabulary/set of issues/
themes/subjects/concerns/obsessions/values. . . .
(Note: All readings available on course page.)
- W Sept 20: Wallace 1-491+ appropriate endnotes
- W Sept 27: Wallace 491-981 + appropriate endnotes
- W Oct 4: Atwood
- W Oct 11: Franzen
- W Oct 18: Egan
- W Oct 25: Barnes
- W Nov 1: Díaz
- W Nov 8: Robinson
- W Nov 15: Whitehead
- W Nov 22: ****No Class: Thanksgiving Travel Day****
- W Nov 29: Adichie
- W Dec 6: Ruskovich