

State of the Novel

This MA module will enable students to explore the relationship between formal innovation in the contemporary novel and the expression of social, political, and ethical questions. The syllabus will include fiction that reworks longstanding genres (romance, tragedy, apocalyptic parables) as well as texts that move into striking new territories of linguistic and thematic experimentation. Across the course, we will encounter writers that invite readers to reflect on the cultural status, aesthetic potential, and political mission of the novel as a form. In turn we will be considering how such texts relate to emerging critical debates and approaches that have shaped the very terms with which fiction might be classified and evaluated in the twenty-first century. Students will thus have the opportunity to engage both stylistically and historically with discrete moments of transition in postmillennial writing, moments that compel us to consider how contemporary novelists are inspiring new modes of interpretation. Secondary criticism and theoretical frames will be integrated as the weeks unfold. Students will be encouraged to devise and develop their own avenues of inquiry in preparation for the final assessment on a topic of their choice.

Week 1: What is this thing the novel?

Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality", in *The Novel, Volume 1: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 336-363.

"Forum: Futures of the Novel", *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 44.1 (Spring 2011): 1-30.

Notes for this week

This week we will be thinking about what we mean by "the novel" and what it is to query its state (and status) in the contemporary. The selection of readings for this week are offered as a way of framing "the novel" and of working toward a consensus of what is at stake in this module's focus on the novel, but by no means cover the depth and breadth of scholarly work on the novel and its role.

During your reading this week please look out for, and come to the seminar prepared to discuss:

- A claim made for the novel that surprises you
- How the novel is understood in relation to other literary forms
- The political (un)consciousness (or not) of the novel
- The fears and hopes literary scholars attach to the novel today
- Your own thoughts about the novel and its significance today

Week 2: My Brilliant Friend

Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*, trans. Ann Goldstein (2005)

Conversations about *My Brilliant Friend* on Post45 (there are 6 posts on MBF, and then more on the other novels in the series)

Dayna Tortorici, "Those Like Us: On Elena Ferrante", *n+1* 22 (Spring 2015), online

Notes for this week

We start off with a novel that in various senses has been received as “traditional”: a bildungsroman perhaps (across a quartet); something “like” Jane Austen; a social history read through the life narrative of an individual. Equally the novel has tapped into particular contemporary political formations: the foregrounding of women’s friendships as politically necessary; the financial and political empowerment of women; and the rise of neoliberalism in the global North more generally. The “controversy” surrounding the author’s anonymity has also impacted on the cultural life of the novel.

During your reading this week please look out for, and come to the seminar prepared to discuss:

- What it might mean to think of this novel as traditional or otherwise
- How this novel and its reception cue us into gender politics of the publishing industry today
- Genre
- Reception and communities of readers of novels

Week 3: The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2009)

Glenda R. Carpio, “Now Check It: Junot Díaz's Wondrous Spanglish” in *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination*, eds. Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas, and José David Saldívar (Duke UP, 2016), 257-290

[As background also look at Hanna, Harford Vargas, and Saldívar’s Introduction to the volume, 1-32]

Notes for this week

As with last week, this week we are reading a novel that is in many sense traditional in its narrative concerns and its focus on an individual coming-of-age story. It differs in the way this story is told through an investment in pop cultural forms that push at the borders of the novel form, and “cannibalises” literary and pop cultural history.

During your reading this week please look out for, and come to the seminar prepared to discuss:

- How the novel incorporates other cultural forms
- How the novel articulates author, narrator and protagonist in relation to literary and cultural history
- Genre
- Reception and communities of readers of novels

Week 4: The Contemporary Bildungsroman

Joseph Slaughter, “Becoming plots: Human Rights, the *Bildungsroman*, and the Novelization of Citizenship” in *Human Rights, Inc: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), pp. 86-139

Monica Hanna, “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Cannibalist: Reading Yunió (Writing) in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*” in *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination*,

eds. Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas, and José David Saldívar (Duke UP, 2016), 89-114

Stella Bolaki, "Introduction", *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi Press, 2011), pp. 9-20.

Notes for this week

This week there is no novel to discuss. Instead we will be working with two recent scholarly interventions in "the bildungsroman".

During your reading this week please look out for, and come to the seminar prepared to discuss:

- How the bildungsroman persists in literary culture
- The subject position implicitly and explicitly formed through the bildungsroman
- The capacity for contemporary novels to radically play on/in the bildungsroman
- The political efficacy of the form
- *My Brilliant Friend* and *Oscar Wao* as bildungsroman

Week 5: Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001)

Margaret Russett, "Race under "Erasure" for Percival Everett, "A Piece of Fiction"." *Callaloo* 28, no. 2 (2005): 358-68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3805659>.

Daniel Soar, "Look at me. I on TV", *London Review of Books*, 25.13 (10 July 2003): 30-31.

Notes for this week

Erasure is a novel about novel writing, publishing and reading and the about the cultural and political efficacy of different literary genre. This week we'll be thinking about the ways ethnic and racialized difference is writ through literary genre theory in scholarly and commercial contexts (as interconnected spheres). We'll be continuing discussion from previous weeks on the politics of bringing contemporary protagonists into speech, and on the novel's ability to deconstruct itself whilst retaining a commitment to certain narrative continuities.

During your reading this week please look out for, and come to the seminar prepared to discuss:

- Vernacular writing
- Confessional writing
- How the novel incorporates other cultural forms
- What does Daniel Soar mean when he describes *Erasure* as 'designed to feel like a novel', and Everett as 'brave' for writing it? What can we take from these reflections?
- Racialising difference and cultural capital, or neoliberal multiculturalism

Week 6: Realism Now, or The Novel after Reality TV

Jed Etsy, "Realism Wars" *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 49.2 (2016): 316-342

Anna María Sánchez-Arce, "Authenticism," or the Authority of Authenticity." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 40, no. 3 (2007): 139-55.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44030269>.

Notes for this week

Picking up on our reading across the last couple weeks we will be thinking about questions of genre and representation. We will be considering the novel after reality TV; which is to say how the novel as form is situated in relation to other cultural forms imagined to express, or reflect, contemporary "reality". Both readings for this week ask us to think about realism, reality and authenticity as plural, and multiplex categories, rather than a privileged form with purchase on a verifiably true experience.

During your reading this week please look out for, and come to the seminar prepared to discuss:

- Realism(s) as a contemporary genre in relation to the history of the novel
- The possibility for "authenticity" in the contemporary novel
- How the novels read so far on the module might be situated in relation to "realist" discourses or aesthetics

Week 8: The Vegetarian

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* trans. Deborah Smith (2007)

Youngmin Kim, "Cultural Translation and World Literature in Korea", *Comparative Literature Studies*, 54.1 (2017): 89-106.

extracts from Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 2015).

extracts from Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2012).

Extra reading:

Sarah Shin and Deborah Smith, "Interview with Han Kang", *The White Review Online*, March 2016, <http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-han-kang/>

Notes for this week

This week we are reading a novel by the Korean writer Han Kang. This is the second novel we are looking at in translation, and the third that is in some way engaging with transnational style. This session will give us a chance to reflect on what it means to read in translation and whether contemporary literature is, in the words of Walkowitz, "born in translation". We will also be thinking about the ways *The Vegetarian* renders themes of articulation, expression, communication, as bodily concerns. Reflecting on previous readings of Slaughter's work we might also consider what kind of take on "human rights" is presented here; the novel seems to present us with an ethics of nonhuman rights, challenging the anthropocentrism of the novel form.

During your reading this week please look out for, and come to the seminar prepared to discuss:

- The condition of world literature and globalisation as one in which all literature is to some extent in translation
- The possibility for expression of nonhuman rights in the novel form
- Interiority and the novel
- Speech and the novel

Week 9: Where is the fiction about climate change?

Amitav Ghosh, "Where is the Fiction about Climate Change", *The Guardian* October 28, 2016

McKenzie Wark, "On the Obsolescence of the Bourgeois Novel in the Anthropocene", *Verso Blog*, August 16, 2017

Kate Marshall, "What are the Novels of the Anthropocene? American Fiction in Geological Time." *American Literary History* 27, no. 3 (2015): 523-538.

Notes for this week

This week we are debating Ghosh's provocation with reference to Wark and Marshall's surveys of literature in the Anthropocene, or literature after climate change. We will be discussing whether climate change might be an emergent condition for a new genre of novel, whether literature about climate change operates through pre-existing genre categories, and what kind of novel (if any) might be able to express the scale of the Anthropocene.

During your reading this week please look out for, and come to the seminar prepared to discuss:

- Is the end of human nature a condition for a new literary genre?
- Is the "Anthropocene" a kind of genre—a category for temporarily ordering and making sense of a complex arrangement of ideas, narratives, discourse?
- What other novels that we have read are "about" the anthropocene?

Week 10: The Fifth Season

N.K. Jemisin *The Fifth Season* (Orbit, 2015)

Claire Colebrook, "Framing the End of the Species: Images without Bodies." *sympløke*, vol. 21 no. 1, 2013, pp. 51-63.

Notes for this week

In *The Fifth Season* NK Jemisin offers us a view of earth unmoored from the contemporary human subject. Working with Claire Colebrook's concept of 'geological vision' this week we will discuss what a geological writing/reading might be like, and to what extent Jemisin's novel is this kind of reading/writing.

During your reading this week please look out for, and come to the seminar prepared to discuss:

- What does Colebrook mean by 'geological vision'; is it transposable to literary forms?
- Who/what is the protagonist in this novel

- How do the subjects of this novel come into speech and representation; is this similar to other novels we have read?
- This is the first science fiction novel on the module (though not the first novel interested in science fiction and fantasy); what kinds of questions does this raise for you?

Week 11: Station Eleven

Emily St John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (London: Picador, 2014)

Evan Osnos, "Doomsday Prep for the Super-Rich", *The New Yorker* Jan 30, 2017

Notes for this week

This week we focus again on representations of human agency and the capacity for the novel to imbricate human nature in nonhuman nature. We will also be thinking about the temporality of the contemporary novel—to what extent can a novel be *after* human culture and how might our anxieties about the end of human culture be expressed in literary form? During your reading this week please consider (and come to the seminar prepared to discuss):

- What literary methods, including intertexts does Mandel make use of in depicting a future landscape?
- Consider narrative and time in *Station Eleven*
- To what extent is this novel concerned with realism and authenticity?

Week 12: Essay Planning Workshop

This week students will bring along brief essay plans and outlines and we will workshop them in class.