

# Contemporary U.S. Novel

## Contact information

Instructor	Matthew Wilkens
Course	English 40753: Contemporary U.S. Novel
Meetings	MW 1:30–2:45
Location	347 DeBartolo
Office hours	320 Decio; W 3:00–5:00 and by appointment. Reserve office hour slots at <a href="http://bit.ly/wilkens_appointments">bit.ly/wilkens_appointments</a>
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## Synopsis

An advanced-undergraduate-level examination of very recent novels from the United States.

## Description

This course is devoted to the last decade of U.S. fiction. Its aim is to provide an overview of currently developing—and often competing—trends in contemporary literature and to offer a preliminary theorization of the literary-cultural present in the United States.

To this end, we'll read seven American novels published since 1996. These texts present an array of responses to the changing cultural landscape of what we might call late postmodernism, a period concerning which there is as yet little critical consensus. The books we read will provide us with material for an emerging understanding of what this moment and its aesthetic production look like; the ways in which they embrace, differ from, and reject the cultural dominants of postmodernism proper; the paths they suggest for twenty-first century fiction; and the ways in which they adapt and redeploy earlier cultural forms. By the end of the semester, you will be in a position to offer your own analysis of contemporary cultural production and to speculate on the future of American literature.

Two notes. (1) There are no formal prerequisites, but it will help to know something about the history of twentieth-century fiction (modernism, postmodernism, the various realisms and naturalisms, etc.) and to have read as widely as possible in the primary literature of the period. (2) The reading load will be fairly heavy, especially during the first half of the semester (see the list of texts and page counts below).

## Objectives

This course has three primary objectives, which can be arranged in order of increasing generality. First, it aims to provide a specific body of knowledge about recent novelistic writing in the United States. Students who complete this course will be prepared to undertake more advanced work in contemporary literary studies and to begin making their own contributions to it. Second, it provides a basis for further work in the literary humanities,

cultural studies, and social sciences generally. It introduces students to methods and critical vocabularies employed in these fields and familiarizes them with the resources used in conducting independent literary research. Third, it seeks to build students' skills in critical and metacritical analysis, including their ability to evaluate competing forms of argument, evidence, and justification.

### Written work and grading

Two papers of ten pages each will be required, one due mid-semester and the other taking the place of a final exam. Alternatively, advanced students may write a single twenty-page term paper or equivalent project. (In either case, you will be required to write on *Infinite Jest* in some way at least once.) In addition, short responses or other exercises will be required for each reading over the course of the semester. Overall grades will be based on the long papers or projects (35% each, or 70% for a single term paper/project), responses (20% in sum), and class participation (10%). *You must satisfactorily complete all assignments to pass the course.*

### Readings

David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (1996, 1104 pp.)

Anne Carson, *The Autobiography of Red* (1999, 160 pp.)

Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005, 368 pp.)

Uzodinma Iweala, *Beasts of No Nation* (2005, 142 pp.)

Rivka Galchen, *Atmospheric Disturbances* (2008, 256 pp.)

Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (2011, 336 pp.)

Karen Russell, *Swamplandia!* (2011, 416 pp.)

In addition, essays from the scholarly literature on contemporary fiction will be assigned and available.

### Policy statements

#### Attendance

Two absences (one week of meetings), no questions asked. Additional absences will lower your grade.

#### Late work

Late work is generally not accepted. If you find yourself in exceptional circumstances, talk to me well in advance of the deadline and we may be able to find an accommodation.

### Collaboration and plagiarism

Talking to other students—especially those in the course—about your ideas is a good thing. Taking other people's words or ideas without attribution is plagiarism and will result in honor-code-related unpleasantness. When in doubt, cite. And feel free to ask me about specific cases or problems and about the mechanics of research documentation. For

references and guidelines, see the library's [plagiarism](#) and [documentation](#) sites and the university's [academic code of honor](#).

### Disabilities

Students with documented disabilities who need accommodations or have questions should speak with me directly and contact the [Office of Disability Services](#).

### Email

Email is a useful tool, but it is not (generally) secure. I will discuss grades and other confidential information over email only if you use encryption software (typically PGP/GPG).

### Sakai

We'll be using a new course management system in place of Concourse this semester. It's called Sakai; access it at <https://sakailogin.nd.edu>. This is where you'll post weekly responses and conduct other course-related business.

### Schedule

**NB. All dates and assignments subject to change.**

WEEK 1 (8/22)	Welcome and introduction
WEEK 2 (8/27)	Jameson
WEEK 3 (9/3)	Wallace
WEEK 4 (9/10)	Wallace
WEEK 5 (9/17)	Wallace
WEEK 6 (9/24)	Foer
WEEK 7 (10/1)	Foer
WEEK 8 (10/8)	Carson. <b>Paper I due Friday, 10/12.</b>
WEEK 9 (10/15)	<b>Fall break, no class meetings.</b>
WEEK 10 (10/22)	Iweala
WEEK 11 (10/29)	Galchen. <b>Class cancelled on 10/31.</b>
WEEK 12 (11/5)	Galchen
WEEK 13 (11/12)	Russell
WEEK 14 (11/19)	Russell. <b>Thanksgiving, no class 11/21.</b>
WEEK 15 (11/26)	Whitehead
WEEK 16 (12/3)	Whitehead/Conclusions and review
FINALS WEEK	<b>Final paper due in lieu of exam (12/13 by 12:30 pm)</b>