In this course, we will read eight 21st-century American novels. The course has no thesis to propound, and the novels we read vary in style, content, and concerns, just as the authors vary in their race, ethnicity, gender, and regional background. Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* provides a darkly humorous dystopian account of a technologically obsessed future America. In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Egan experiments with the ways in which a story may be told as she dips in and out of the lives of a group of people involved in the music business since the mid-1970s. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Diaz focuses on an overweight Dominican-American comic book fan, or nerd, and the alternately comic and tragic events of his days in New Jersey and the Dominican Republic. Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* also focuses on a series of dysfunctional men and is frequently hailed as the most important graphic novel published during this century. The inclusion of Ware's book points, in part, to the rise, and growing influence on other writers, of the graphic novel, Diaz included, during the last decade. In *The Known World*, Jones’s God like narrator tells a tale of slavery that focuses, in part, on African-American owners of slaves. Amy Waldman’s *The Submission* examines the furore that occurs when a Muslim architect as chosen to design the memorial for the victims of 911, while the novels by Franzen and Goodman are both large, sprawling state of the nation novels, and we’ll read them back-to-back, along with a comparative review of the novels, to see in part how the gender of the author often shapes a novel’s reception. Range of method and concerns is the key, then, and it is that range we’ll explore in this class.

Gareth Evans has a Ph.D. in English and a master’s degree in library and information science. He has a long-standing interest in British and American working class and left-wing literature from the nineteenth-century through the 1930s. These days, he is particularly concerned with the ethical, moral, and political questions raised by the books he teaches and reads. He has a wide range of interests, academic and otherwise, and he views the classroom as a place to embrace and encourage intellectual curiosity.

**COURSE TEXTS**

- Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story*
- Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*
- Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*
- Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid in the World*
- Edward Jones, *The Known World*
- Amy Waldman, *The Submission*
- Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom*
- Allegra Goodman, *The Cookbook Collector*

*Books are available at Boxcar Books, 408 E. Sixth Street, Bloomington, IN 47408.*

**NOTE:** The novels are listed in the order in which we will read them. The novels by Franzen, Jones, and Ware are long, and I recommend that you read some or all of them over the summer. Students often have problems with Jones’s novel. Two recommendations: go with the flow and make use of the character list that follows the end of the novel.

**ASSIGNMENTS**

- Three 6-8 page essays. 90% of final grade.
- Attendance and participation in discussion and in-class activities. 10% of the final grade.