In this course, we’ll read 21st-century American novels, which, for the most part, have been written by authors who made their name in the 21st-century. 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. In Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Foer experiments with style, images, and typeface in a tale narrated by a boy whose father died in the World Trade Center. In A Visit from the Goon Squad, Jennifer Egan also 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. 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 some of their reviews, to see in part how the gender of the author often shapes a novel’s reception. Junot Diaz’s version of American looks very different from those of Franzen and Goodman, and in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao he 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; an, indeed, the inclusion of Ware’s book points, in part, to the rise of the graphic novel to prominence during the last decade. The last two novels we will read are both historical novels. In The Known World, Jones tells a tale of slavery that focuses, in part, on African-American owners of slaves, while Walbert’s A Short History of Women focuses on the history of the women in one particular family from the 1890s, through the period of early twentieth-century suffrage reform, and into the twenty-first century. Range of method and concerns is the key, then, and it’s that range we’ll explore in this class.
Three 6-8 page essays. 90% of final grade.
Attendance and participation in discussion and in-class activities. 10% of the final grade.

NOTE: The novels are listed in the order in which we will read them. The novels by Franzen, Goodman, Jones, and Ware are all lengthy, and I recommend that you read some or all of them over the summer.

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