HON-H234 (16216) Literature of Time & Place: 21st Century American Fiction
Gareth Evans
MW 11:15am-12:30pm; HU 108

Reading:
- Jennifer Egan, A Visit from the Goon Squad.
- Karen Jay Fowler, We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves.
- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Americanah.
- Chris Ware, Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid in the World.
- Edward Jones, The Known World.
- Ben Fountain, Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk.
- C.E. Morgan, All the Living.

In this course, we will read eight 21st-century American novels. The novels we read vary in style, content, and concern, just as the authors vary in their race, ethnicity, gender, regional, and national background. Three of the books I have selected are part of what I see as key trends in 21st-century American fiction. The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao and Americanah are part of the transnational turn in recent American fiction, and that means, in part, that they are as much concerned with the countries in which their authors were born, the Dominican Republic and Nigeria, as they are with the United States. Graphic novels, too, are an increasingly evident part of the 21st-century literary landscape, and I’ve included Chris Ware’s Jimmy Corrigan, which is frequently hailed as the most important graphic novel published during this century. The book reads the last one hundred and fifty years of American history through the lives of three extraordinarily dysfunctional Corrigan men. Its layout, which does not always allow left to right or linear reading, also points to the different ways in which the story of the Corrigans, and of America, might be told. I’ve chosen the other five books we’ll read either because it takes up a topic—this is particularly true in Fowler’s case—that is the center of much public and academic debate, or—I think of Egan here—because of the way it is told, or because it is concerned with some of the issues or events I see as central to American life. Karen Jay Fowler’s We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves begins in Bloomington, Indiana, and while it is a novel about a family, it is also a novel that focuses on animal intelligence, and asks, as Fowler has said, “what it means to be a human animal.” Jennifer Egan’s A Visit from the Goon Squad, which is concerned with time and with memory, as well as the amount people do not know about each other, also experiments with the different methods of storytelling, as Egan dips in and out of the lives of a group of people involved in the music business since the mid 1970s. In The Known World, Edward P. Jones’s God like narrator tells a tale of slavery that focuses on the brutality of American slavery, on the different ways in which slaves and free blacks attempted to deal with such brutality, and with the behavior of African-American owners of slaves. Ben Fountain’s Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk has been compared to Catch 22, and it offers a satirical account of the war in Iraq, and of the reception a group of soldiers receive when it is invited to appear at the half-time ceremonies of a Dallas Cowboys Thanksgiving football game. We’ll end the class with C.E. Morgan’s All the Living, which is a love story set, for the most part, on a small tobacco farm in Kentucky. It’s a novel, too, with religion at its heart. Range of method and concern is one key to the class, then. I want us to think, too, however, about the connections between the books we read, our ability to connect, or otherwise, to the characters they portray, the different ways in which the novels explore their characters’ attempts to connect, and the connection between characters and the worlds in which they live. If you read the books in the way I want to read them, you will put yourself in the heads of the writers you read, and the people you read about, however different they may be from you.

Writing Requirements and Grades:
- Three essays, each of which is six to eight pages in length. 70% of your final grade. You may revise your first essay if it receives a grade below B+.
- Eight blog posts, each of which should be between of 350 and 500 words long. Four of the blog posts will be graded, and you will receive a checkmark for each of the others. The lowest grade you receive for a blog post will not count towards your final grade. 30% of your final grade will be based on your blog responses and on your participation in class.

Note: If you are looking for books that celebrate America, and can do Americans, this is not the class for you. Some of the books we read are about archetypal losers, and to read and write about them well, you need to read the books empathetically. The reading load is likely to seem heavy at times, and I therefore recommend that you read some or all of the novels during the summer. If you read only two of the novels, read Americanah and The Known World, and I say that simply because they’re the two longest novels we will read.