Global and Local: 21st Century British Fiction

In this course, we will read seven 21st-century British novels. The novels are written in a variety of styles and deal with a variety of topics. Jane Gardam’s often funny, and often moving Old Filth examines law, empire, and the complicated lives and loves of its three central characters. While Gardam looks back at empire, the writing of second-generation immigrants has been very much part of 21st-century British literature, and we will read two such novels. In NW3, Zadie Smith traces the lives of two black women from the part of London that makes up the novel’s title, while in Brick Lane, Monica Ali focuses, in part, on generational clashes fueled by gender among immigrants in London’s east end. In Cloud Atlas, the most obviously experimental novel of those we will read, David Mitchell weaves together a number of stories set in different parts of the world at different moments in story. Despite the tricks played by its narrator, Ian McEwan’s much applauded Atonement is much more obviously realist than either NW3 or Cloud Atlas. McEwan has said that he thinks fiction is potentially redemptive, and we will consider whether that is true of his novel, while also looking at what he has to say about the reliability, and otherwise, of memory and story-telling. We will end the class with two works of genre fiction, The Damned United by David Peace, and Embassytown by China Mieville. Like much of Peace’s work, The Damned United is “faction,” a mix, that is to say, of fiction, fact, and journalistic storytelling. The major character in the book is a real person, the football manager Brian Clough. The book, which has been called “the best sports novel ever written,” examines the disastrous 44 days Clough spent managing Leeds United, who were then the biggest team in English football. The complexities of language and communication are at the heart of Embassytown. Mieville writes speculative fiction. He is also said to write “Weird Fiction,” and both, like “faction,” have recently been part of a long running debate about when or whether genre fiction should be given the same respect as more openly literary fiction. Reading The Damned United and Embassytown will give us the opportunity to enter that debate. The class is, then, far from being a foolproof guide to trends in the 21st-century British novel, but it should serve as a starter guide to some of its styles and concerns.

Reading
Monica Ali, Brick Lane (2003).
Zadie Smith, NW (2012).

Assignments
- Three 6-8 page essays. 65% of final grade.
- Blog posts and participation in discussion and in-class activities. 35% of the final grade.

Note: There are film versions of a number of the books that we read, and I may make evening film showings part of the syllabus for the class.