

HUMS 639  
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Office hours: TTH 4-5 and by appt

### ***The Contemporary Novel and the “Crisis of Democracy”***

Especially since the US presidential election of 2016, authors of literary fiction have contended in ways both direct and indirect with a widely shared perception that democratic government is threatened by profound crisis and that democratic societies are divided by economic and cultural conflicts that present severe challenges to their peace and even viability. We will read celebrated recent novels which take up these problems and consider them alongside readings in political theory and social science that address various aspects of the challenges that currently confront democracies. Our focus will be on the ways that literary writers have understood and dramatized democratic crisis and the beliefs their works reflect about the civic and political role of literature.

#### **Requirements**

- 3 response papers (1,000 words or less) (20% of final grade each)
- 1 term paper (30,000 words or less) (30% of final grade)
- Class participation (10% of final grade)

#### **Required Texts**

Ayad Akhtar, *Homeland Elegies*  
Honoree Fanone Jeffers, *The Long Songs of W. E. B. Dubois*  
Phil Klay, *Missionaries*  
Rachel Kushner, *The Mars Room*  
Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*  
George Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*  
Gary Shteyngart, *Our Country Friends*  
Colson Whitehead, *Nickel Boys*  
*And additional readings available on Moodle (m)*

## Schedule

June 28

George Saudners, *Lincoln in the Bardo*

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, introduction, "Gatekeepers in America" *How Democracies Die* (m)

Walt Whitman, selections from *Democratic Vistas* (m)

June 30

Musa al-Gharbi, "Race and the Race for the White House: On Social Research in the Age of Trump" (m)

Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, introduction, *Let Them Eat Tweets: How The Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality* (m)

Lilliana Mason, introduction, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (m)

Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The First White President" (m)

July 5,

Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*

Eugene McCarragher, "We the People?: 'How Democracies Die,'" *Commonweal* (m)

Jan-Werner Muller, preface, *Democracy Rules*

July 7

Colson Whitehead, *The Nickel Boys*

July 12

Rachel Kushner, *The Mars Room*

July 14

Ayad Akhtar, *Homeland Elegies*

July 19

Gary Shteyngart, *Our Country Friends*

July 21

Phil Klay, *Missionaries*

July 26

Honree Fanone Jeffers, *The Love Songs of W. E. B. Dubois*