

ENG 236  
The Contemporary Novel: Experiments in Form  
M/T/R/F 13:00–16:00  
Bausch & Lomb 269

Instructor: Eric Loy  
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Office Hours: by appointment

### **Course Description**

Historically, the formation of the modern novel can be considered an innovation—or rather, a series of innovations—in literary fiction. In the context of new media and digital culture, that innovation continues today. This course will focus on popular authors at the forefront of literary experimentation, examining the ways in which their novels push material design and narrative structure to the conceptual limit of print fiction. Possible course texts include Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, J.J. Abrams's *S.*, George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo*, and Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts*. In examining these new novels, our fundamental consideration will concern how such texts reshape the book as a media format of the present and reinvigorate the novel as a literary form of the future.

### **Course Objectives**

Successful students of ENG 236 will:

- Develop skills of "close reading" literary works
- Develop critical awareness of formal trends in contemporary literary production
- Gain historical understanding of the formation of the book as a media technology
- Gain historical understanding of the formation of the novel as a literary mode
- Apply new knowledge in the production of a formally experimental work of research and literary criticism

### **Required Texts**

*House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski. Pantheon, 2nd ed. or later.

*The Unfortunates* by B.S. Johnson. New Directions, Box Ed. (2009)

*S.* [*Ship of Theseus*] by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst. Mulholland, Slp Ed. (2013)

*The Pickle Index* by Eli Horowitz, illus. Ian Huebert. Sudden Oak, Box Ed. (2015)

--All other texts provided by instructor, on library reserve, or accessed online

### **Grading**

Final Grades in this class will be calculated as follows:

- Classroom Participation: 30%
- Short Papers: 30%
- Final Project: 40%

### **Assignments**

- Readings will be assigned for each class session and must be read prior to meeting on the date listed; selections labeled “In-Class” will be read and discussed as a group during class time and do not require prior preparation
- Short papers (approx. 2-3pp) will be due on Thursday evening during the first three weeks of class; papers will be submitted and shared via email to all class members; papers will be discussed in class during Friday sessions; short papers are expected to be informed-though-informal responses to either
  - topics or questions raised in class discussion
  - topics or questions raised in assigned readings
  - other topics or questions relevant to our readings or discussion
- A final project will be due on the last day of class (details to follow)

### **Attendance & Participation**

Because the success of this course depends on discussion and in-class reading and writing, attendance is required and participation is graded.

Students are expected to attend all classes and be prepared with the day’s reading(s) and assignment(s). Keep in mind that participation is not limited to talking frequently in class; it also includes active listening, asking questions, reading aloud, sharing responses, completing in-class writing/reading, etc.

If you anticipate missing any class sessions, please contact me immediately.

### **Classroom Policies**

To better facilitate discussion, you must bring the day’s reading(s) / book(s) with you to class. Laptops and tablets are permitted (sometimes required) for relevant class work, and supplemental in-class readings will often be distributed electronically. If you don’t have access to a laptop or tablet, please see me to make other arrangements.

### **Academic Honesty**

From the College of AS&E:

“In all cases of suspected plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty, the College's procedures and policies governing academic honesty will be followed. This pertains to all work in writing courses, including (but not limited to) rough drafts, final drafts, presentations, multimodal projects, and informal writing assignments. As required by College policy, all instances of academic dishonesty are reported to the College Board of Academic Honesty.”

For the complete College policy concerning academic honesty, see <https://www.rochester.edu/college/honesty/>.

### **Schedule Policy:**

Course schedule (below) is subject to change, with sufficient notice.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

WEEK 1**Monday, July 2**

Course Introduction

In-Class Reading: “The Book as Idea” from *The Book* by Amaranth Borsuk (pdf)

In-Class Spotlight: The Illuminated Books of William Blake

**Tuesday, July 3**

Read: *House of Leaves*, pp. front cover–106

In-Class Reading: “Haunted House—An Interview with Mark Z. Danielewski” from *Critique* 44.2 by Larry McCaffery & Sinda Gregory (pdf)

In-Class Spotlight: *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* by Laurence Sterne

**Thursday, July 5**

Read: *House of Leaves*, pp. 107–312

In-Class Spotlight: *Mumbo Jumbo* by Ishmael Reed

Due by 10PM: Short Paper #1

**Friday, July 6**

Read: *House of Leaves*, pp. 313–422

In-Class Spotlight: *Only Revolutions* by Mark Z. Danielewski

WEEK 2**Monday, July 9**

Read: *House of Leaves*, pp. 423–585, 645–back cover (“Whalestoe Letters” optional)

In-Class Reading: Excerpts from *Writing Machines* by N. Katherine Hayles (pdf)

In-Class Spotlight: *A Humument* by Tom Phillips

**Tuesday, July 10**

Read: *The Unfortunates*, pp. Introduction–section 6 of “your” novel

In-Class Reading: “Books Beyond Text” from *Books as History* by David Pearson (pdf)

In-Class Spotlight: *Composition No. 1* by Marc Saporta

**Thursday, July 12**

Read: *The Unfortunates*, pp. sections 7–18 of “your” novel

In-Class Spotlight: *Pale Fire* by Vladimir Nabokov

Due by 10PM: Short Paper #2

**Friday, July 13**

Read: *The Unfortunates*, pp. sections 19–27 of “your” novel

In-Class Spotlight: *Building Stories* by Chris Ware

WEEK 3

**Monday, July 16**

Read: *S.*, pp. front cover –201

In-Class Spotlight: Artists' Books in Rare Books and Special Collections, RR Library

**Tuesday, July 17**

Read: *S.* pp. 202–258

In-Class Reading: “The Book as Interface” from *The Book* by Amaranth Borsuk

In-Class Spotlight: The Visual Studies Workshop

**Thursday, July 19**

Read: *S.*, pp. 259–374

In-Class Spotlight: *Tree of Codes* by Jonathan Safran Foer

Due by 10PM: Short Paper #3

**Friday, July 20**

Read: *S.*, pp. 375–back cover

In-Class Spotlight: *Bats of the Republic* by Zachary Thomas Dodson

WEEK 4

**Monday, July 23**

Read: *The Pickle Index*, pp. Days 1–5 (both books)

In-Class Spotlight: *themystery.doc* by Matthew McIntosh

**Tuesday, July 24**

Read: *The Pickle Index*, pp. Days 6–10 (both books)

In-Class Spotlight: *Between Page & Screen* by Amaranth Borsuk

**Thursday, July 26**

Explore: [The Pickle Index app](#) (via iOS App Store)

Explore: [Editions At Play](#), Visual Editions x Google Creative Lab

**Friday, July 27**

Due: Final Projects