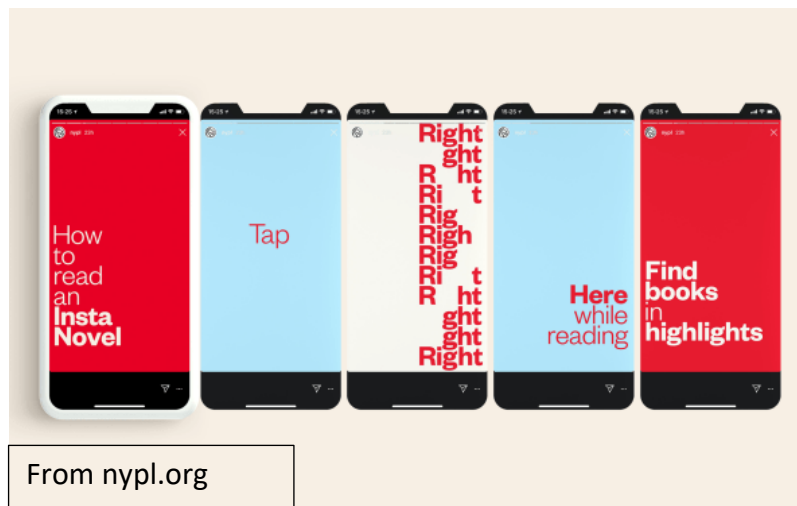


The American Novel and its Publics

Donal Harris // ENGL7/8391 // Thursday, 5:30-8:30pm



Thanks to the New York Public Library, you can now read Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* as an "Insta novel," consciously mimicking the look of Instagram Stories, on your iPhone. This unlikely mix of a nineteenth-century Progressive institution, a turn-of-the century magazine story, and a dominant twenty-first century media technology for sharing narratives about the self, opens up a range of questions about how readers in the U.S. have found – and re-found, again and again – the novels that help explain the world to them. What unseen aspects of Gilman's prose and politics does this new format open for readers? Does something happen to the words and story when a different set of intermediaries deliver them from writer to reader? Does Gilman's story reach a new type of reader – or new types of readers – when it is reborn as new media? And, maybe the most pressing for those of us devoted to the study of literature: why would a library, one of the last bastions of physical books, invest its dwindling resources in a technology that seems to make its stacks unnecessary?

This course addresses these overlapping questions of literary form, format, and readership to help us understand the stylistic and social development of the novel in the U.S. Rather than provide a survey of the twentieth-century American novel or a chronology of always-new, ever-better media and institutions, we'll select a few case studies of longish prose fiction that at different moments of their publication history, and in the hands of diverse intermediaries, made their way into quite different readerships.

Along with *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a magazine novella and Instagram story, we'll likely cover Jean Toomer's *Cane* in Parisian salons and in Penguin paperbacks; F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* on the Western Front and in the Mid-Western high school; Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* on the editing desks of Toni Morrison at Random House in New York and the collectivist Women's Press in London; and that twenty-first century octopus, Amazon.com. We'll supplement primary readings with classic and cutting-edge work in book studies (Robert Darnton, Leah Price), sociology of literature (John Thompson, Jan Radway), and literary history (Aarthi Vadde on Web 2.0, Merve Emre on paraliterary institutions). A full reading list will be available by early December.

Course requirements: semi-regular response papers, an archival assignment, a book review, and a final research project.