

**Discussion/Reading Questions**

Use this as a study guide and/or preparation for class discussion: once you've finished reading each novel, be sure to review the questions before class and make a note of any question you'd like to explore. You might also use any of the questions as writing prompts for your blog entries on the novels; or, as prompts for the critical, creative and/or personal sections of your website. All questions are adapted from those provided by the book publishers or litlovers.

**WEEKS 2-3: Blog 1, Due 2/1****Leni Zumas, *Red Clocks* (2018)**

1. The novel begins with an epigraph from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*: "For nothing was simply one thing. The other Lighthouse was true too." How do you see this quote pertaining to *Red Clocks*?
2. The book's description states "five women, one question – what is a woman for?" What do you think the book says in regards to this question? Are each of these characters meant to represent universal yet different experiences of women? Are there any experiences or perspectives left out of the book?
3. The characters' threads intertwine at the level of plot, but also at the level of form, as the narrative perspective keeps shifting among five different points of view. How does this "braided" structure affect your experience of the novel? What does it suggest about the boundaries between self and other, individual and collective, history and present moment?
4. Ro, Mattie, and Gin are all significantly impacted by new federal restrictions on abortion, fertility treatments, and adoption. How do you respond to their fictional experiences in light of current realities in American politics? Do you think we'll ever see these kinds of laws in the United States? A lot of reviews categorized this book as science-fiction/dystopia. Do you agree? If not, what genre would you place this book under?
5. How does *Red Clocks* define motherhood? What does the world in *Red Clocks* view as a family unit? How does our current society view this? How do you personally define family?
6. Absent loved ones are recurring shadows in *Red Clocks*. Ro's mother and brother, Gin's mother and aunt, Mattie's best friend Yasmine—all are gone, yet they leave significant traces. What roles do grief and loss play in the novel?
7. What does the book say about female relationships? Many of the female characters assume other women have a perfect, ideal life, when they are actually struggling. To what extent does this keep them from being closer friends? What about the friendship between Yasmine and Mattie? Is their friendship similar to or different from the adult female relationships?
8. Eivor the explorer's story seems to be quite different from those of the other women. What did you think of the explorer's story? Why is the Biographer so fascinated with Eivor's story? Is she writing a traditional biography? Was it too disjointed to follow, or did it add value to the story? If so, what did you get from it?

9. During the courtroom trial, the mender reflects: “This predicament is not new. The mender is one of many. They aren’t allowed to burn her, at least, though they can send her to a room for ninety months. Officials of the Spanish Inquisition roasted them alive. If the witch was lactating, her breasts exploded when the fire grew high” (p. 257). Do you think Gin Percival is a witch? Why or why not? Why was it necessary to have the Mender compared to a witch? Specifically, what are the similarities between her trial and the Salem witch trials?
10. In the school music room, after a painful conversation with Mattie, Ro rips a poster of pirates (“THEY CAN HIT THE HIGH C’S!”) off the wall (p. 303). Pirates, shipwrecks, and nautical adventure are juxtaposed against domestic/personal crisis throughout the novel. What do you make of this contrast? And how do whales—from *Moby-Dick* to the stranded bodies Mattie mourns on the beach—figure in?

**WEEKS 4-5: Blog 2, Due 2/15**

**Helen Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014)**

1. How much is this a book about race? Or is it more concerned with interpersonal relationships between women? How does race, class, and/or gender influence those relationships?
2. How are mother/daughter relationships represented in the novel? Why does Boy feel the need to “sacrifice” one daughter for another? Why do you think Boy sends Snow away? Was Boy right to make her decision? Do Snow and/or Bird end up happier or better off for Boy’s decision to separate them?
3. Is Snow an innocent victim or is she as unsettling and manipulative as Boy perceives her? Do you think Boy does enough to make amends with Snow? Why does she feel the need to make amends if she doesn’t regret sending her away?
4. What parallels can you draw between *Boy, Snow, Bird* and the “Snow White” fairy tale (or any other fairy tales)? Does Boy cast more spells than she is able to break? To what extent does she play the role of the “wicked stepmother”? What did you think about the ending? Was this satisfactory or too abrupt, leaving too many issues unresolved? What might the novel be indicating about readers’ desires for the fairy tale “happily ever after”?
5. “I don’t look the way I feel.” What degree of control can Boy, Snow, and Bird exert over their reflections? What is the novel saying about gender and/or racial identity here? How are questions of gender and race linked to issues of class and/or appearance? How does the theme of reflections link to questions of duality, doubleness, or secrets? How does the novel deal with issues of “passing”—such as gender, race, or class “passing”? Did you find some of Oyeyemi’s treatment of these issues too ambiguous or troubling?
6. “It’s not whiteness itself that sets Them against Us, but the worship of whiteness [...] we beat Them (and spare ourselves a lot of tedium and terror) by declining to worship.” How does Boy refuse to worship whiteness? What is the irony or significance of the fact that it is Boy, the main white character in the novel, who makes this claim? How might we read this as the central argument of *Boy, Snow, Bird*?

**WEEKS 6 & 7: Blog 3, Due 3/1****Samantha Hunt, *The Seas* (2004)**

1. In many ways, the narrator of *The Seas* is unreliable. How does this shape your reading of the book? When she asserts, “details make a story even as unbelievable as mine believable,” do you agree? What kind of story is this?
2. How do you feel about the narrator’s love for Jude? Do you judge Jude’s involvement with her? Is their relationship as “fucked-up” as Maggie Nelson claims in her introduction to the book? If so, what do you think is the most troubling part of the relationship?
3. The narrator describes her feelings for Jude: “I am worn out by desire for him like a girl in some book.” Does her love for Jude mirror other romantic relationships you’ve seen in literature? What do you think Hunt is saying here about female desire, or even obsession? How does *The Seas*’ portrayal of female sexuality compare to other books you’ve read?
4. How does the narrator’s connection with her grandfather inform her understanding of the world? What about the absence of her father? Do you think it would be better for the narrator to know if her father is dead or alive?
5. *The Seas* is also a story about a mother and daughter. What do you think the narrator means when she says, “My mother is regularly torn between being herself and being my mother”? What kind of relationship does the narrator have with her mother? What role does the mother play in the narrator’s own sense of identity?
6. Have you, like the narrator of *The Seas*, ever been told that your experience of the world is fundamentally incorrect? Do you think that’s a gendered or raced experience?
7. Do you believe the young narrator of *The Seas* is a mermaid? What can we gain from reading old myths or fairy tales that have been reworked in contemporary fiction? How does a feminist perspective change the story? What is Hunt implying about identity and myth?

**Kate Walbert, *His Favorites* (2018)**

1. How is the epigraph from Willa Cather’s *My Mortal Enemy*, “But you may have a past already? The darkest ones come early,” a fitting opening for *His Favorites*?
2. Jo describes the golf course as “all of it designed for entrapment” (10). What other places and situations in the novel seem built to ensnare? How so?
3. Why is the figure of Stephanie and her death so central to Jo’s story? How would the story change without Stephanie?
4. Many of Jo’s memories of Hawthorne, outside of Master, involve Charlotte P. and Cynthia. What do they each mean to Jo? How do they bookend her experiences at Hawthorne? On page 88, memory is defined as “another draft of a story”—what is the meaning of this? How is the idea of memory woven throughout the story?

5. Why does Cynthia's punishment at the train tracks affect Jo so much? Why didn't she stop it earlier? Why does Jo wait until the end of her "confession" to provide the ending of this episode with Cynthia's "hazing"? Why does Lucy tell Jo that "you have to learn the rules" (126)? What rules, and whose?
6. Jo makes a friend in the weight room, Alex, who suggests she move off campus to the International House. Do you think she followed his advice? Why is this scene included and what is Alex's importance to the story?
7. Jo wishes she could "stand in front of Buddy and hear him speak his judgment of me, the truth. I wanted to hear him call me a murderer" (132). What would hearing that from Buddy mean to Jo? What is she seeking?
8. It is eventually revealed that Jo is telling this story to an investigator. Who did you imagine she might be speaking to throughout the narrative? How did the shifts in perspective and tense affect your reading of Jo's story?
9. What techniques does Master use to groom Jo (and other female students) or manipulate her circumstances at Hawthorne to his advantage. Why is he successful at Hawthorne? Why does no one intervene? Jo ironically comments that one defense perhaps made in Master's treatment of her might be something like, "it was different back then." How does Jo's story speak to more recent public accusations concerning sexual harassment, assault, and abuse of women by men in power? Some have called this a novel that resonates with the #MeToo movement. Would you agree?
10. *His Favorites* closes with the image of Jo and Stephanie, two young girls climbing a magnolia tree, "inching out on a limb they believe would not dare to break beneath the weight of them" (page 149). What does the tree evoke for the reader? What are some other trees used as metaphors in this book and others that you have read?

**WEEKS 9 & 10: Blog 4, Due 3/23**

**Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (1991)**

1. Although much of the book details experiences outside the narrator's house, why do you think Cisneros chose *The House on Mango Street* as her title? What does it reveal about her connection to her family, her home and her neighborhood?
2. How does Cisneros' book impact and/or influence your understanding of the Latinx experience in America? Is the Chicago experience distinct? Is the treatment Mexican-American or Latinx immigrant communities in society—i.e., their systematic exclusion—alike or different from that of other minority groups in U.S.?
3. Cisneros writes, "I'm going to tell you a story about a girl who doesn't belong..." Why does Esperanza feel she doesn't belong? Is her experience universal for all adolescent girls? How is Esperanza's identity shaped by her community? How does her identity shift throughout the vignettes? What factors contribute to this shift?

4. Can or should *The House on Mango Street* be categorized as a coming-of-age novel, or is it more complex than that? How do the children who inhabit Mango Street become the men and women portrayed later in the novel? For instance, what circumstances explain how the children grow into the adults of Mango Street? How does Esperanza set an example for how they can shape their own futures?
5. In “Boys and Girls” (8-9), Cisneros writes, “The boys and the girls live in separate worlds.” How would you describe the respective worlds in which Cisneros's boys and girls live? What kind of men and women are they likely to become when they grow up? How would you sum up the book's depiction of relations between the sexes? How might *The House on Mango Street* be different if the narrator were a boy?
6. Given that the narrator is a young female, how does Cisneros make Esperanza and her stories accessible to older and/or male readers? Does Esperanza's youth affect her telling of the story and her reliability as a narrator? Is there a universal message about one's identity that transcends Esperanza's individual experience?
7. In the story “Hairs,” Esperanza describes her mother's hair as being “like little candy circles all curly and pretty” (6). What does this metaphor, and those in the next paragraph, suggest about Esperanza's feelings for her mother? Where else in the book do metaphor and simile convey information about the narrator as well as about the person or thing she describes?
8. Throughout *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros's narrator describes herself from two points of view: as she sees herself and as she believes others see her. Where in the book does Cisneros convey this dual consciousness? How does Esperanza see herself? How does she think other people perceive her? Where or how might she be an unreliable narrator?
9. To what degree is Esperanza aware of sex and sexuality? What does this indicate to the reader about her age and relative maturity? How do Esperanza's attitudes about gender and gender roles change throughout the book?
10. At the novel's end, Esperanza declares that she is too strong for Mango Street to keep her forever. What is the nature of her strength? Nearly all the characters in Cisneros's book dream of escaping. What do they want to leave? Do you think that Esperanza's dreams of escaping are likely to be successful? How does being poor—as most of these characters are—affect one's chances of escaping a dead-end neighborhood or fulfilling other dreams?

**Jacqueline Woodson, *Another Brooklyn* (2017)**

1. Consider the epigraph from Richard Wright that begins the novel: “Keep straight down this block, / Then turn right where you will find / A peach tree blooming.” In what ways are the images and ideas in this epigraph relevant to the story that follows?
2. How are each of the girls—Sylvia, Angela, Gigi, and the narrator August—similar or different? What does it mean that the girls “came together like a jazz improv”? In what ways is jazz music about relationships? What did the four girlfriends provide each other at different stages of their lives and struggles?

3. August's mother claims that girls and women do not make good friends. What did she mean by this? How does August's experience with her friends support or contradict this idea? What complex forces drew the four girls apart as they grew older? In the novel, are friendships between and among girls sustainable?
4. What are the ways to, using Woodson's phrase, "grow up girl" in *Another Brooklyn*? What does it mean for the girls to have shared "the weight of growing up Girl in Brooklyn?" What were the particular threats or challenges for them growing up in the neighborhood? How did each affect them? How did they respond?
5. While August had her girlfriends, her brother had his faith. How are these two support systems similar or different? August's brother comes to love learning math. Why does it appeal to him? What role does education play for each of them as they grow into adulthood? Why didn't each of the other girls pursue further education?
6. What are the many and varied effects on August of her mother's death? For much of her childhood and adolescence, August believes that her mother will return. Why is this? What does it take and mean to accept such tragedy? Can denial ever be valuable? In what ways is August's father helpful or not as she struggles with her mother's death?
7. Throughout the novel, we get snippets of how various cultures think about death and the dead from August's work as an anthropologist. How could this knowledge help her reconcile the deaths of various characters in the novel? What is added to our understanding of August's experience and life in the city by the fact that she went on to study anthropology? What does such a discipline help her understand about her life?
8. Throughout the novel, Woodson writes, "This is memory." What is the nature of memory? In what ways is memory valuable or burdensome? August says, in the opening of the novel, "I know now that what is tragic isn't the moment. It is the memory." Throughout the novel, in what ways is memory tragic for the characters?
9. After moving to the neighborhood, August and her brother could not go outside but watched other children through the window. Why did their father believe the world wasn't a safe place? In what ways might the image of watching through the window be symbolic?
10. August and her brother notice the profound way that many people in the neighborhood try "to dream themselves out...as though there was another Brooklyn." What does this mean? In what ways is dreaming helpful or harmful during difficult or oppressive times? How does this compare to the theme of escape and freedom in *The House on Mango Street*?
11. In *Another Brooklyn*, how is Brooklyn a place that is both familiar and foreign to its characters (or readers)? Eventually August accepts that Brooklyn was home. Why? What qualities determine a place as home? How might a feeling of home exist separate from any particular place? How does the treatment of home and place in *Another Brooklyn* compare or contrast with *The House on Mango Street*?

**WEEKS 11-13: Blog 5, Due 4/10****R.O. Kwan, *The Incendiaries* (2018)**

1. At its core, *The Incendiaries* is about religious fervor. How does the novel portray faith, both its blessings and dangers? Using example of Jejah, the cult in the novel, why do you think religious cults are so attractive for some people: what do they offer, how do they draw in new followers, and how do they keep them enthralled?
2. On his return to America, John targets Phoebe for his newly born mission. Why Phoebe? What makes her susceptible to his blandishments? How does this compare to Master in Walbert's *His Favorites*?
3. Obsessive love, obsessive faith, and the attendant consequences are driving forces throughout *The Incendiaries*. In what ways are these two kinds of obsessions similar? Does one feel more dangerous? How do they speak to the title itself? What does it mean to be incendiary?
4. Early on in the novel, Will says, about what he remembers, "It's possible these are just the details I've saved. It could be grief's narrowed vision: I've noticed what I've lacked." Do you consider Will to be an unreliable narrator? What does it mean to be a reliable narrator? Why do you think Kwan chose Will to be the narrator of the novel?
5. To what extent is Will a catalyst for events in the novel? How do you construe his actions? In what ways do they foreshadow the turns Will and Phoebe's relationship later takes? Does Will's sexualizing of Phoebe (or other women) affect the way that we think of him?
6. Each of our three main characters is hiding something, and both Will and Phoebe are grieving something catastrophic. How does that motivate each of them? Influence their worldviews? Push them toward or away from religion? Toward or away from other people?
7. The language of *The Incendiaries* has been described as "savagely elegant," "dazzlingly acrobatic," "seductive," "diamond-cut." How does the prose style contribute to the overall reading experience? What might it reveal about the characters themselves?
8. Why do you think the author chose to center Jejah's act of terrorism around an abortion clinic, a health-care clinic? Do you think the members of Jejah truly believed what they were doing was justified? Why has reproductive rights become such a flashpoint for extremists? How else do we see religious extremism on display in the United States?

**Kamila Shamsi, *Home Fire* (2018)**

1. The opening section begins with Isma Pasha nearly missing her flight. How did the indignities she suffered at the hands of "immigration" officials at Heathrow make you feel? Isma's voice is one of compromise and accommodation: how else might you describe her?
2. Why is Parvaiz Pasha determined to honor his father, Adil? What kind of man, husband, and father was Adil, and what did his faith mean to him? When Parvaiz's eyes are opened to the caliphate and its atrocities, did you wonder how he could have been so misled?

3. What do you think of Isma and Eaamon Lone's relationship? Do they have a genuine connection? Why doesn't Isma let on that she knows who Eaamon's father is? What are some of the vast differences between the two families, the Pashas and the Lones?
4. What are your thoughts about Aneeka? How does she define herself in relation to her faith, and how does her attitude toward Islam differ from her sister's? Consider Aneeka's relationship with Eamonn — she is clearly manipulating him, but does she have a higher purpose? As she puts it: "Why shouldn't I admit it? What would you stop at to help the people you love most?"
5. After Isma informs the police that Parvaiz has left for Syria, Aneeka is appalled: "You betrayed us, both of us. Don't...expect me to ever agree to see your face again. We have no sister." Is Aneeka's anger justified? Would it have been better directed at her brother who betrayed them both? What do you think?
6. Where should Isma's loyalty lie: with her brother or her country? By informing the police of Parvaiz's intentions, did she make the right or wrong decision? Can there be a correct moral decision when faced with the impossible choice between family loyalty and duty to society?
7. What is meant by the title, "Home Fire." How does it refer back to yet differ from the World War I slogan, "keep the home fires burning"? What is the relevance of this slogan and the novel, *Home Fire*, to today's world? What do you see in the novel that illuminates and/or resonates with current concerns.
8. Kamila Shamsie has drawn inspiration from the ancient playwright Sophocles and his drama *Antigone*. Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus, was prohibited by law from burying her brother. Why do you think Shamsie chose to rewrite this Greek myth or tragedy within a contemporary context (do a little research of the play if you are unfamiliar with its plot details)? What elements of Antigone inform Shamsie's novel? How does Shamsie infuse any of those elements with new meaning? How might you compare/contrast her rewriting of myth or fairy tale to *The Sea* or *Boy, Snow, Bird*?

### **WEEKS 13-15: Blog 6, Due, 4/26**

#### **Tayari Jones, *An American Marriage* (2018)**

1. Considering the novel is specifically focused on African-American experiences, why does Tayari Jones title her novel, *An American Marriage*? How does the title highlight ways in which African-American experiences (and identities) are often erased or viewed as different from broader concepts of what is "American"? What about the story and characters make the novel particularly "American"?
2. When Celestial asks Roy if he would have waited for her for more than five years, he doesn't answer her question but reminds her that, as a woman, she would not have been imprisoned in the first place. Do you feel that his response is valid, and do you think it justifies his infidelity? Do you believe that he would have remained faithful if Celestial had been the one incarcerated? Does this really matter, and if so, why?

3. In her “Dear John” letter to Roy, Celestial says, “I will continue to support you, but not as your wife.” What do you think she means by this statement? Do you feel that Roy is wrong to reject her offer?
4. You may not have noticed that Tayari Jones does not specify the race of the woman who accuses Roy of rape. How did you picture this woman? What difference does the race of this woman make in the way you understand the novel’s storyline?
5. There are two father figures in Roy’s life: Big Roy is the one who shepherded him into adulthood and helped him grow into a responsible, capable person, but Walter is the one who taught Roy how to survive. Do you feel these men deserve equal credit? If not, which was the more important figure in Roy’s life and why?
6. Big Roy explains that he and Olive never had children of their own because Olive feared that he would not love Roy as much if he had his “own” children. Do you feel Olive had the authority to make that decision? And do you feel she was right in making that decision? How might this compare to Boy’s decision in *Boy, Snow, Bird*?
7. When Roy is released from prison, he first goes to his childhood home and almost immediately makes a connection with Davina. Do you feel that given the tenuous relationship he has with Celestial—who is still legally his wife—he is cheating? Why or why not? And when Roy announces to Davina his intention to return to his wife, do you feel that her anger is justified?
8. Roy is hurt when Celestial, in discussing her career as an artist, doesn’t mention him or the role he played in giving her the encouragement and freedom to follow her dreams, but Walter argues that she is justified in her silence. Do you agree? Do you think her silence is due to shame, or is she just being practical in how she presents herself to advance her career?
9. It is obvious that Andre is different from Roy in many ways. Do you feel that ultimately, he is a better match for Celestial? If so, why? Also, why do you think Celestial and Andre decide against formally marrying? Do you think that as a couple they will be good and nurturing parents? Do you feel that as a couple, they will be better at parenting than Celestial and Roy would have been? If so, why?
10. Andre insists that he doesn’t owe Roy an apology for the way his relationship with Celestial changed. Do you agree? Why or why not? Do you think that Andre strategized to get Celestial to fall in love with him, or did it happen naturally? Do you feel that it was a surprise to them that it happened after all those years? Do you predict that Celestial’s parents will come to accept Andre as her life partner?
11. Toward the end of the novel, Celestial does a complete about-face and returns, at least temporarily, to Roy. Why does she do this? What do you think her emotions were in coming to that decision? Do you feel that it was the right decision? Was it a sacrifice on her part, choosing family loyalty or obligation over pursuing her own desires? If so, how might this link to similar sacrifices made by other characters in novels that we’ve read?

**Terese Mailhot, *Heart Berries: A Memoir* (2018)**

1. What is the significance of the title *Heart Berries*? How is it linked to themes of sickness, medicine, and healing explored throughout the memoir?
2. What about the epigraph from Maggie Nelson: “I would rather have had you by my side than any one of these words; I would rather have had you by my side than all the blue in the world?” How does this set up the tone of the memoir? What are the relations or tensions in Mailhot’s memoir between writing, memory, grief, loss, longing and acceptance. Who is the “you” that Mailhot is addressing in her book?
3. Talk about the horror that was the author’s early years—a childhood marked with addiction, poverty, and abuse. In what way is Mailhot’s story reflective of the way American Indians have suffered at the hands of white people?
4. In the essay "Indian Sick," what are the multiple diagnoses Mailhot receives in the hospital? What makes her sick? Is it a physical or psychological “disease,” a combination of both, or rooted in some other kind of pathology, such as social diseases of systemic poverty, racism, and sexism, or, hauntings of an accumulated history of violence and genocide?
5. At one point, Mailhot quips, "Indian girls can be forgotten so well they forget themselves" and "no one wants to know why Indian women leave or where they go." Why does it seem that native women are treated worse than white women? Is that what Mailhot is saying? How does her representation of the abuse experienced by Indian girls and women compare or contrast to similar experiences by other ethnic/racial groups in other readings from this class?
6. Does the process of writing her memoir generate for Mailhot a burgeoning sense of redemption? Does her story follow the typical arc from suffering to happiness ... or not? How does narrative, or telling her story, allow Mailhot to work-through her trauma and transform it into something empowering?
7. How does Mailhot’s brutal honesty about her pain work to transform her story into one of beauty? Why does she use such poetic language when recounting horrific experiences? Can you compare Mailhot’s approach toward writing about trauma to any other authors that we’ve read?
8. In the final chapter, “Better Parts,” how does Mailhot retell the story of her mother? In what ways does she rewrite her mother’s story as a rewriting of the Christian myth of narrative of the Fall? How does the chapter’s title contribute to our understanding of Mailhot and her mother’s history and/or relationship? What kind of history/relationship is this?
9. In her afterward Q&A with Joan Naviyuk Kane, Mailhot insists that she doesn't "feel liberated from the governing presence of tragedy.... [W]e are not liberated from injustice; we're anchored to it." What does she mean? Can anything reverse or correct the injustices done to indigenous people? Is telling indigenous stories and “claiming voice” an adequate response or strategy? Can or should the wounds of the past be healed?