

“Lock up your libraries
if you like; but there is
no gate, no lock, no bolt
that you can set upon
the freedom of my
mind.”

—VIRGINIA WOOLF



ENG 3430/WGS 3200:

Survey of Women and Literature

Intro to the Course: Texts & Themes

Dr. Hope Jennings, Wright State University

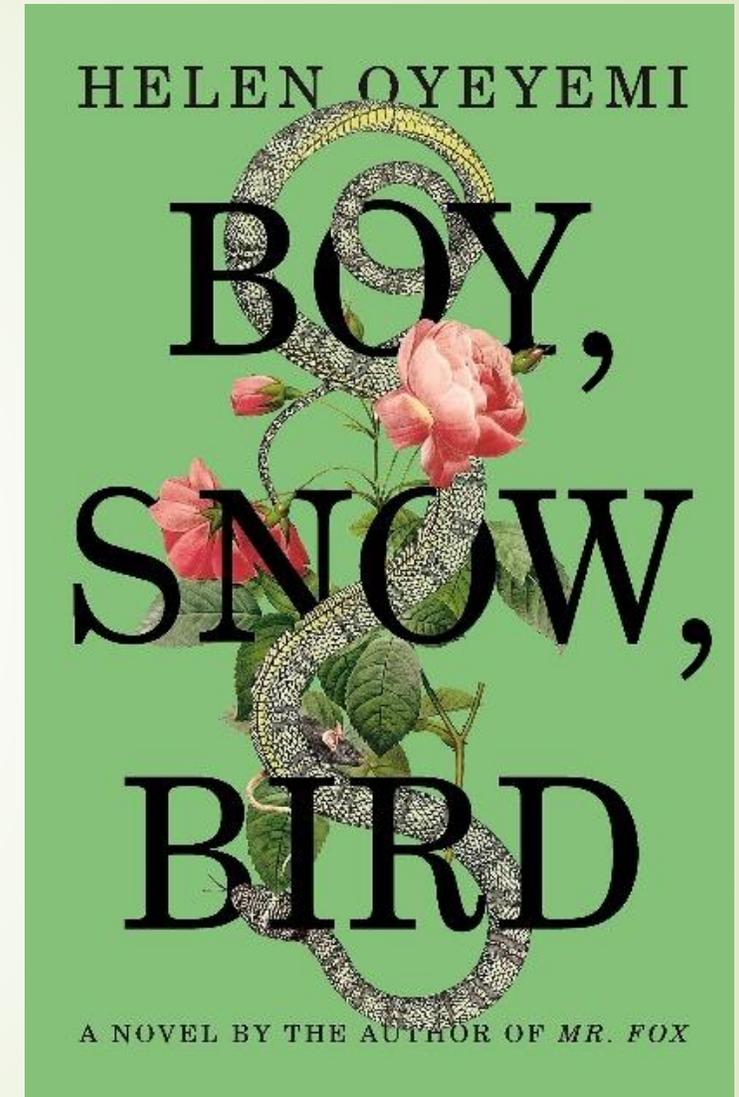
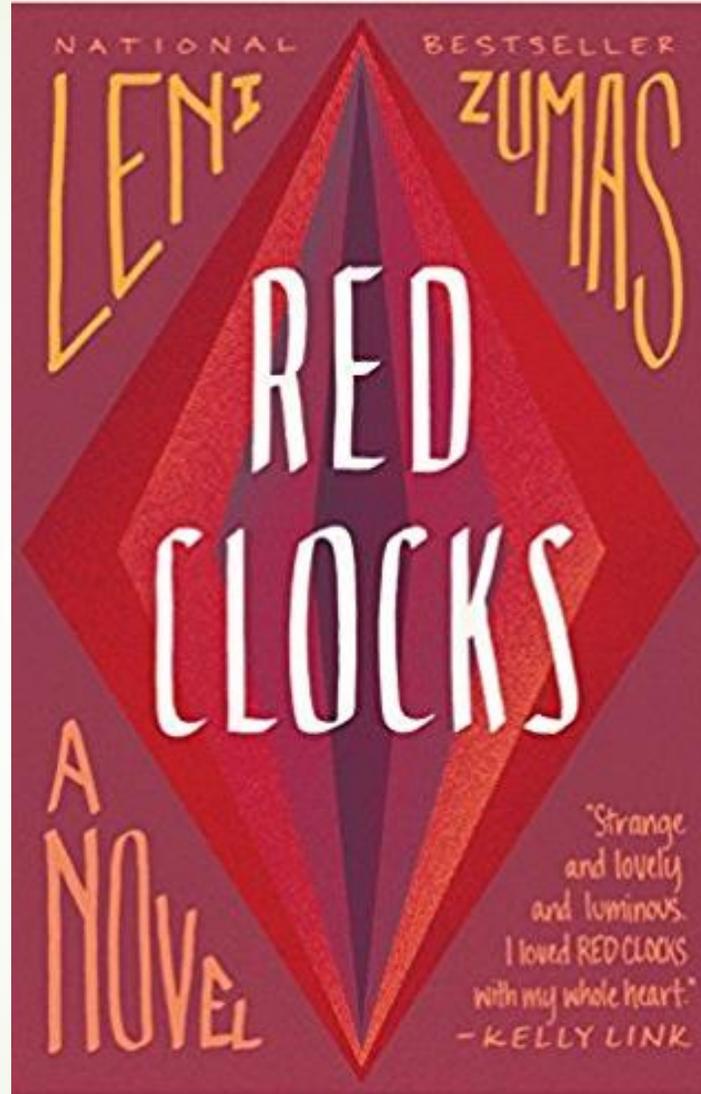
Overview of Texts and Themes

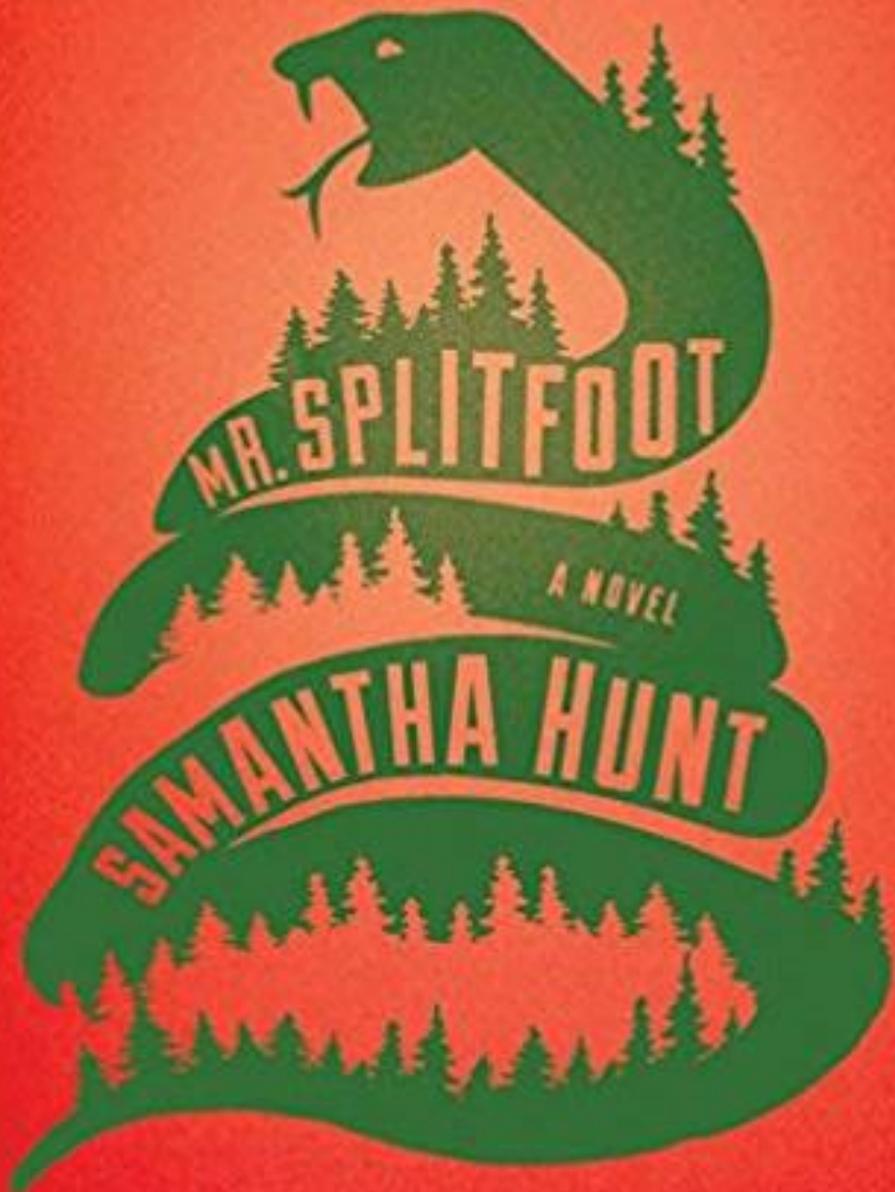
Although many of the texts that we are reading overlap in genres and themes, each of the texts approach these from varying regional and ethnic perspectives, experiences, identities, and histories.

- ▶ **Major Genres:** Fairy Tale, Myth, Dystopia, Coming-of-Age and College Campus Narratives, Family Histories, and Memoir
- ▶ **Major Themes:**
 - ▶ Childhood, Girlhood, and Adulthood
 - ▶ Mothers, Fathers, and Daughters
 - ▶ Sibling Relationships and Gender Roles
 - ▶ Female Friendships, Rivalries, and Role Models
 - ▶ Familial, Platonic, and Romantic Love
 - ▶ Marriage, Motherhood, and Singlehood
 - ▶ Trauma, Loss, Grief, and Healing
 - ▶ Class, Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality
 - ▶ Racism/Sexism and Injustice/Resistance
 - ▶ Immigration, Assimilation, and National Identity
 - ▶ Reproductive Freedom and Oppression
 - ▶ Religious Faith/Belief and Extremism
 - ▶ Community, Place, and Belonging
 - ▶ Memory, Narrative, and Storytelling

Weeks 2-5

- Girlhood/Motherhood
- Mothers, Daughters, and Sisters
- Reproductive Freedom and Oppression
- Female Friendships and Rivalries
- Race, Class, and Gender "Passing"
- Beauty Myths and the Body
- Patriarchy, Sexism, and Racism
- Dystopia and Fairy Tale
- White and Biracial Perspectives (Pacific Northwest & East Coast)



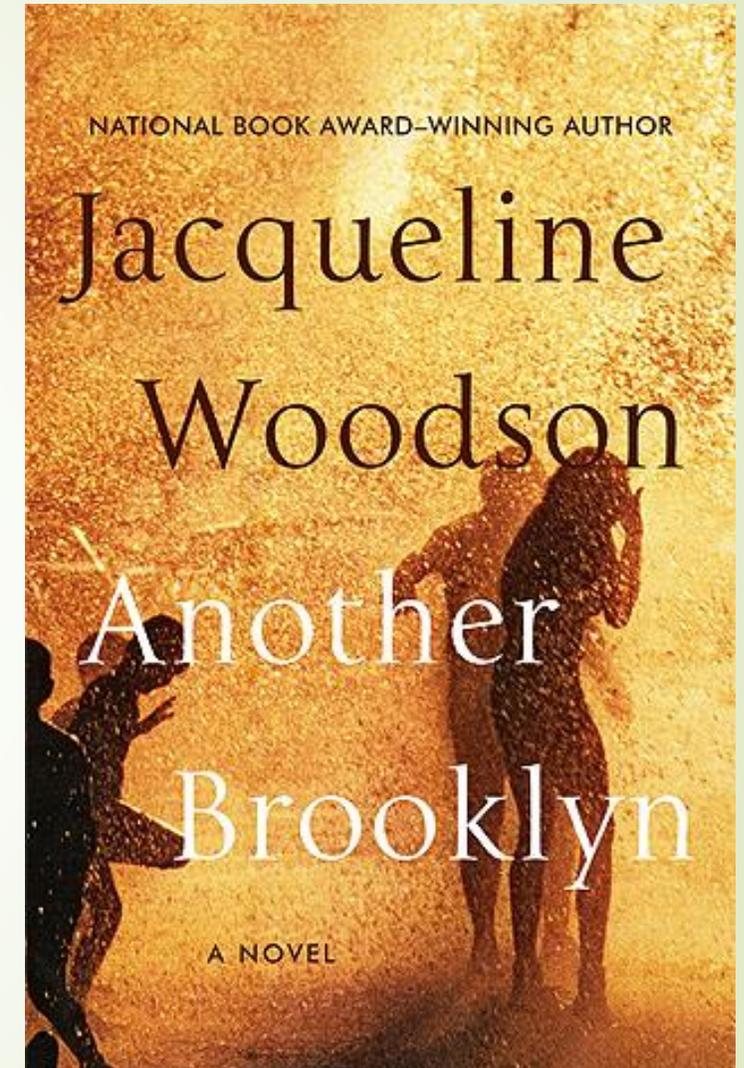
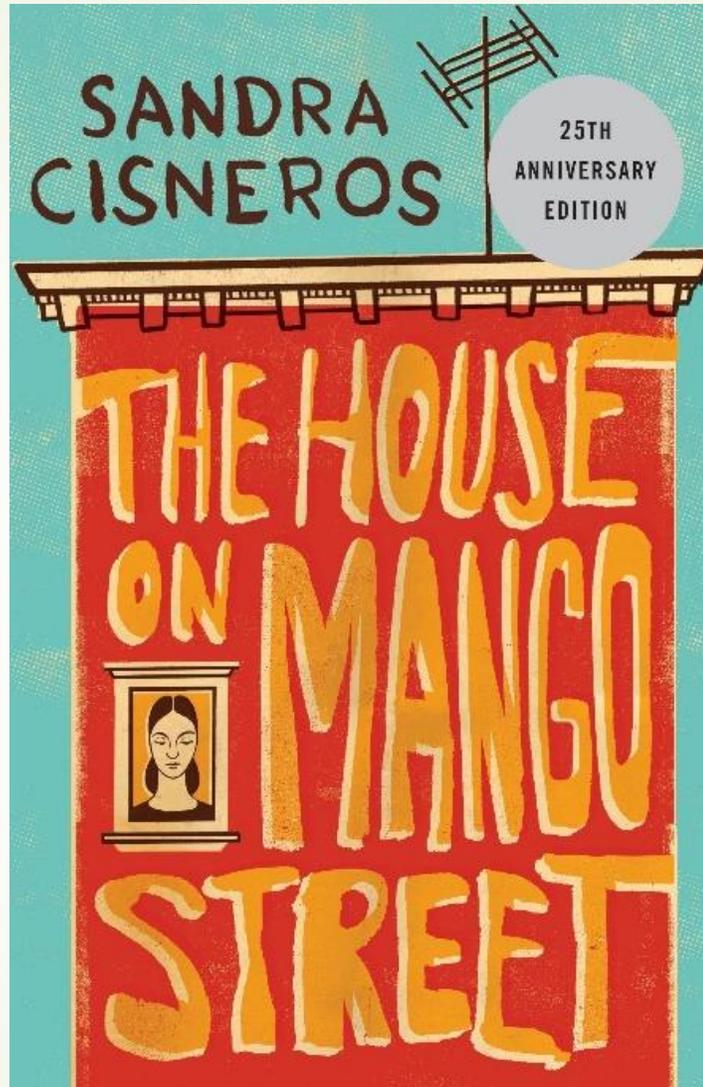


Weeks 6 & 7

- Mothers and Daughters
- Sibling and Family Relationships
- Pregnancy and Bodies
- Desire and Imagination
- Place, Identity, and Belonging
- Religion, Faith, and Belief
- Ghosts, Hauntings, and Past/Present
- Gothic and Surrealism
- White Working & Middle Class Perspectives (Upstate New York)

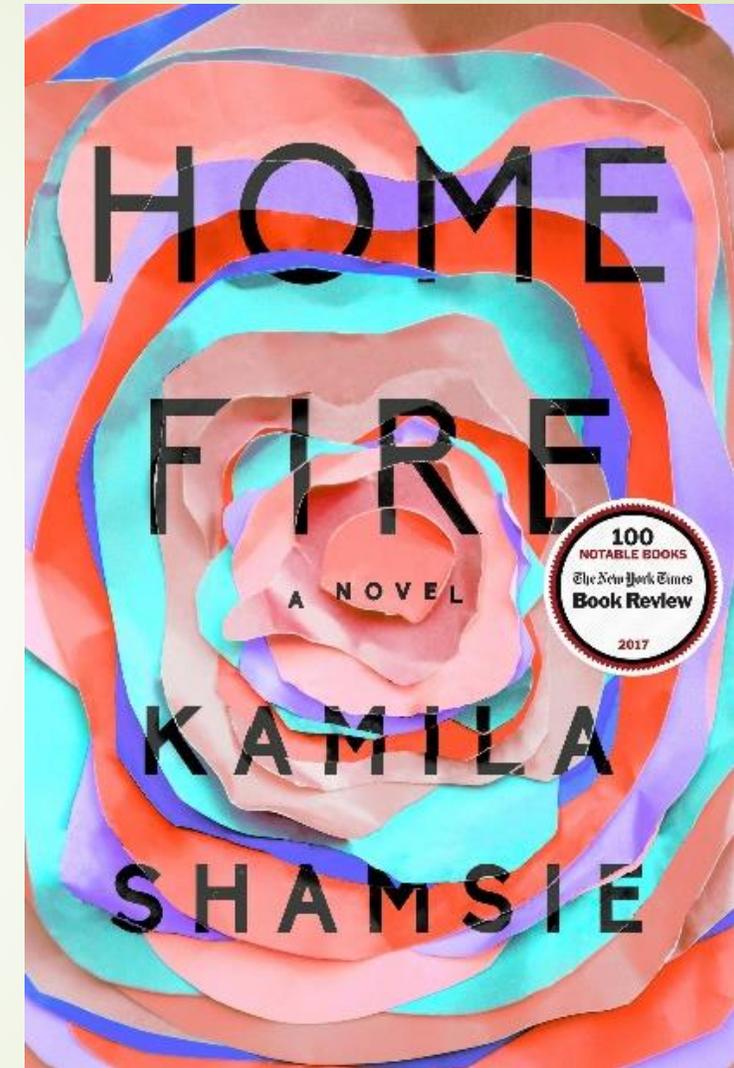
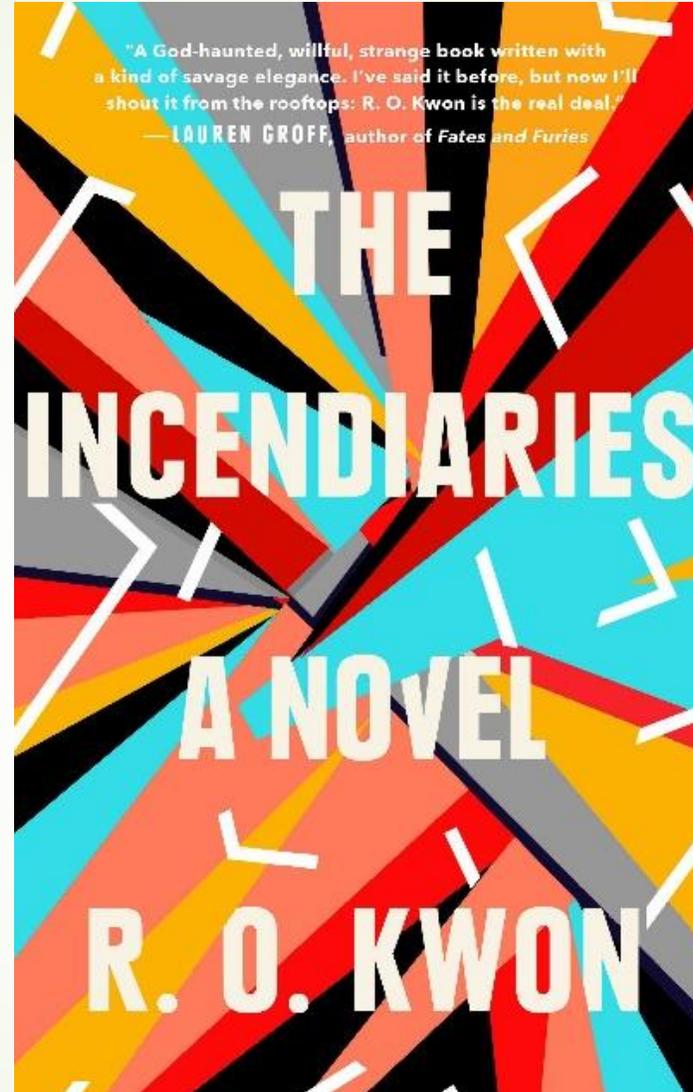
Weeks 9 & 10

- Childhood and Girlhood
- Family and Community
- Place and Belonging
- Race, Class, and Ethnicity
- Immigration and Religion
- Female Friendships
- Sexuality and Gender Roles
- Maternal Loss and Grief
- Memory and Narrative
- Writing as Freedom/Healing
- Coming-of-Age Narratives
- Latinx and African American Perspectives (Chicago/New York)



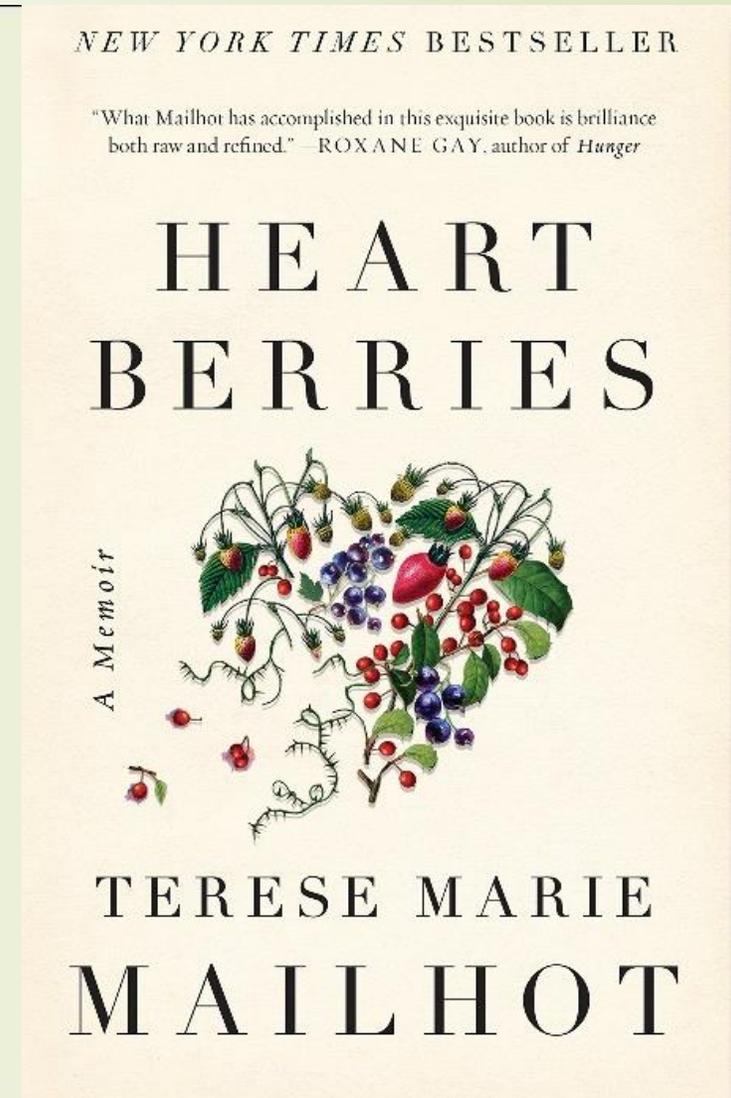
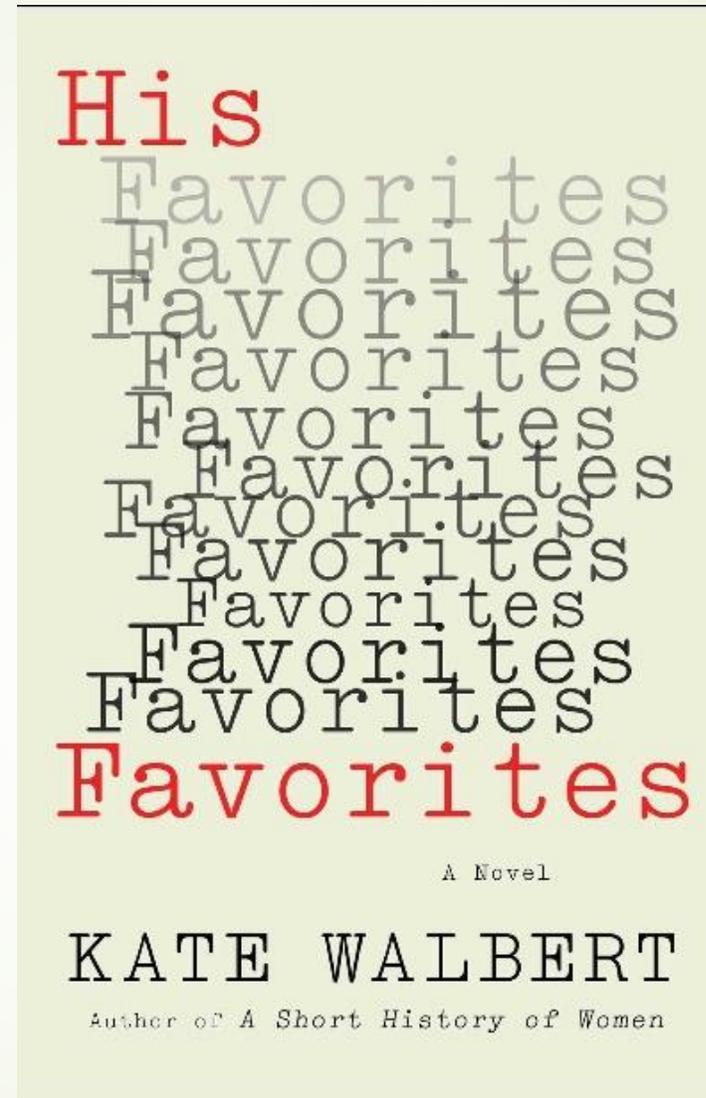
Weeks 11-13

- Sibling Relationships and Gender Roles
- Maternal Loss and Paternal Abandonment
- Place and Belonging
- Immigration and Assimilation
- Racism and National Identity
- Religious Freedom, Oppression, and Extremism (Christian and Islamic)
- Faith, Belief, and Hope
- Romantic and Platonic Love
- Education vs. Indoctrination
- Memory and Narrative
- Rewriting Myth/Tragedy
- College Campus Narratives
- American Korean and British Pakistani Perspectives (California, New York, London, and South Asia)



Weeks 13-15

- Mothers and Daughters
- Female Friendships
- Girlhood and Sexuality
- Power and Sexual Abuse
- Place and Belonging
- Isolation, Grief, and Loss
- Familial/Romantic Love or Abuse
- Trauma, Mental Illness, and Healing
- Memory, Narrative, and Storytelling
- Place, Community, and Belonging
- Family Histories and Personal Memoir
- White Middle Class and First Nation Perspectives (New England and Canadian Northwest)



History of Women's Writing Themes & Genres

- ▶ Feminist Polemic & Women's Rights: Education, Equality, Emancipation
- ▶ Women Writers on Writing: Influence, Inspiration, Mentorship
- ▶ Wrestling with Eve: Revisionary Approaches Toward Religion
- ▶ Killing the Angel: Marriage, Motherhood, Madness
- ▶ Re-Writing Bodies & Sexuality: Desire, Difference, Identity
- ▶ Re-Writing Myth & Fairy Tale: Language, Silence, Voice
- ▶ Re-Writing Pasts & Futures: Feminist Utopia/Dystopia



Feminist Polemic & Women's Rights: Education, Equality, Emancipation

- ▶ Lack of a women's tradition of writing was often connected to the dilemma of women who aspired to be taken seriously as intellectuals and found the doors of education closed to them.
- ▶ Mary Wollstonecraft is perhaps the figure most famously associated with early feminist polemics, as she argued for female equality through education based on a secular rather than religious rationale.



- ▶ In the 19th C. Sojourner Truth and other early American Black Feminists extended the argument to include women of other races and classes -- linking suffrage and abolitionist movements.
- ▶ These women blazed the way for later figures to continue the tradition of the feminist polemic into the early twentieth century, as well as mid-twentieth second wave & civil rights movements.

Women Writers on Writing: Influence, Inspiration, Mentorship

- ▶ Virginia Woolf famously argued in *A Room of One's Own*, “We think back through our mothers if we are women.”
- ▶ For women writers, finding lost literary foremothers has often been an empowering experience, allowing the woman writer to not feel so alone in her literary aspirations.
- ▶ Women writers often sought to celebrate their literary foremother's work, to pay homage to what that writer's work or mentorship has meant to their own literary endeavors.



Wrestling With Eve: Revisionary Approaches toward Religion

- ▶ Many women writers, from the Renaissance to the 20th century, have explored the figure of Eve and other Biblical women to provide an alternative perspective to their stories and women's lives, including their oppression.

He must make woman lower than
So he can be higher than.
Oh what cruelty,
In history what misery
It is only a legend
You say? But what
Is the meaning of the legend
If not
To give blame to women most
And most punishment?



- ▶ For example, in the poem “How Cruel is the Story of Eve,” British poet Stevie Smith suggests that Genesis is the root of Patriarchy, making a case for why, through the centuries, women writers have had to wrestle with the legacy of our “first ancestor,” or at the least, one of our earliest literary mothers.



Killing the Angel: Marriage, Motherhood, Madness

- In her 1942 address to the Women's Service League, Virginia Woolf famously instructed her audience that "part of the occupation . . . of a woman writer" is to kill the "Angel in the House."
- Woolf describes her own "Angel" as "always creeping back when I thought I had despatched her," an image that recalls Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper".
- "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a cautionary tale of what might happen to a woman when her identity and choices remain restricted to the domestic sphere – either a symbolic or very real madness, which is a theme also explored in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1848).

Re-writing Bodies and Sexualities: Desire, Difference, Identity

- Historically, women have been associated with Nature and the body as opposed to the masculine realms of Culture and mind.
- Because “woman’s” body, and by extension female desire, was viewed as unruly, primal, savage, and dangerous (like Nature or Eve), it was “man’s” duty to control and tame her.
- A key strategy for controlling women’s bodies and desires has been to reduce their identities to the reproductive function and maternal role.
- For many women writers, redefining and reclaiming their bodies has been of primary importance and is often explored through intersecting identity markers such as race, class, sexuality and age.

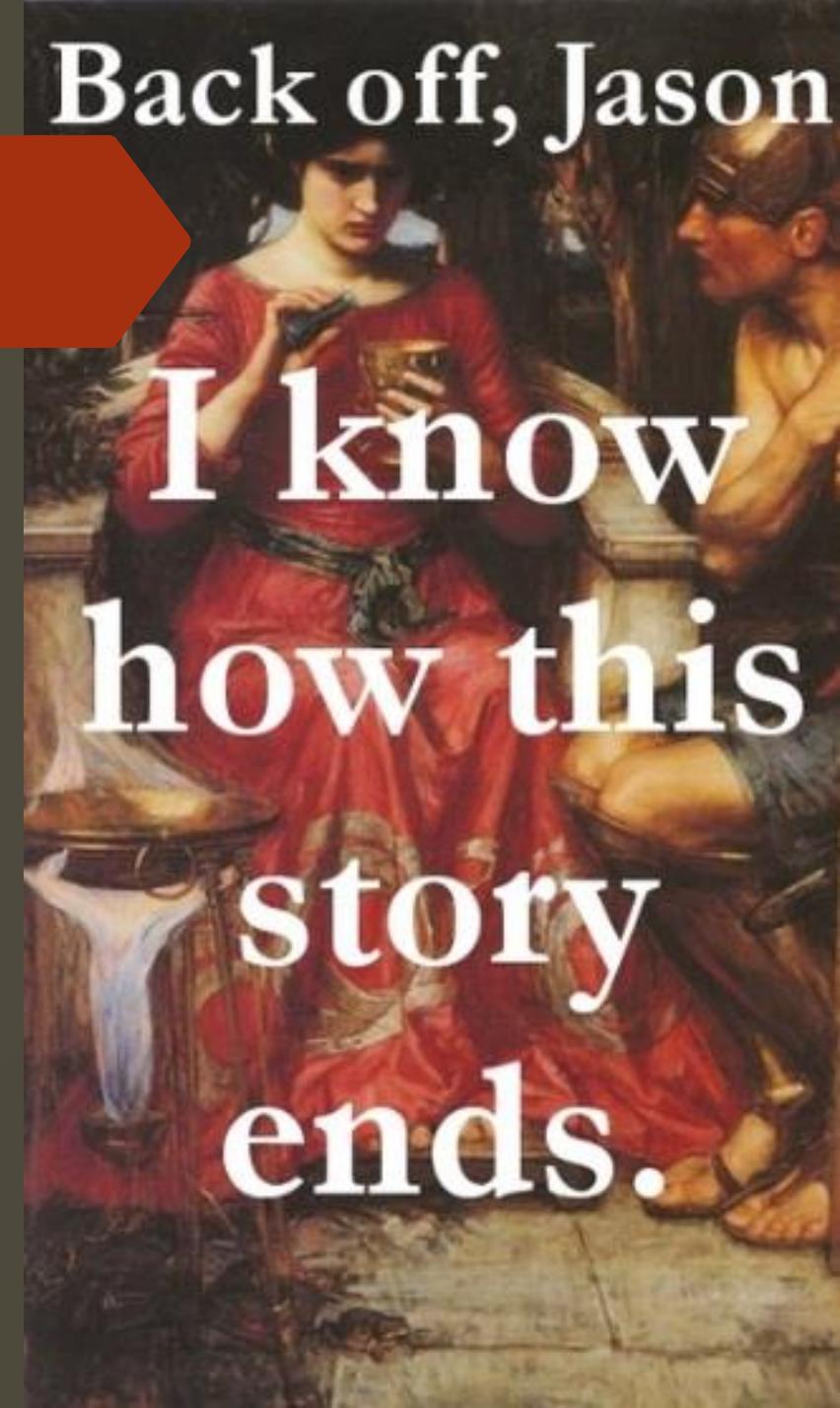


Re-writing Myth and Fairy Tale: Language, Silence, Voice

- Many women writers attempt to re-vision traditional stories found in classical myths and fairy tales by changing narrative conventions, empowering both female and male protagonists, and encoding feminist themes and values.
- Historically the spirit of inspiration, the muse, has been gendered as feminine, and the creator of art or literature has been gendered male.
- Thus, it has been important for women writers to re-imagine Greek and Roman myth for their own purposes in order to inhabit and re-interpret female mythological figures.

Back off, Jason

I know
how this
story
ends.





Maybe the fairy tale ending is where the Stepmom is the Fairy Godmother, and the Mother of the Year is the Wicked Witch..



TOM GAULD

- Much like myth, fairy tales encode and often reproduce cultural norms concerning gender roles and are powerful cultural forces in the socialization of children.
- Although women have long been involved in the cultural production of fairy tales, since the 1970s the fairy tale has been of interest to feminist critiques of patriarchy and androcentric narrative traditions.
- Feminist revisionist versions of myth and fairy tale work to disrupt, subvert and redefine gender stereotypes and roles, and thus serve as a vehicle for challenging patriarchal ideologies and reclaiming women's voices and agency.

Re-writing Pasts & Futures: Feminist Utopia/Dystopia

the signs in the revolution against a dystopian society

me-kasa:

Aries: dies right away before the revolution even starts(everybody: "Aries, no!" you: "fuck, yes!")

Taurus: survives by staying on the down low

Gemini: survives but is actually evil in the end by working for the bad guys

Cancer: survives by lashing out and killing the most bad guys

Leo: probably "the chosen one"

Virgo: dies right before the end of the revolution

Libra: dies a martyr

Scorpio: the ruler of the dystopian society

Sagittarius: survives and brutally avenges the death of the mother you watched die in front of you at the hands of the government

Capricorn: survives by using logic and manipulation

Aquarius: dies bc you refused to take a human life

Pisces: creator of the philosophical system of the dystopia

Source: me-kasa

- When Women's Studies was established as a disciplinary field In the 1970s, many women writers and feminist presses were focused on women's history and the recovery of female-authored literary texts.
- For example, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* was "rediscovered" and became influential in contemporary portrayals of idealized all-female communities where women might experience a respite from the systemic discrimination of patriarchy and more self-determined lives.
- Although feminist utopias critique the flaws within patriarchy, they can also have as many flaws of their own; feminist dystopias thus became a popular form of critiquing such utopian visions while also continuing to expose patriarchy as a social evil that results in a lack or absence of individual freedoms, and especially for women in their status as "second-class citizens."