LITERATURE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

English 229-01
Tuesday/Thursday 12:40-2:00 pm
Palamountain 304
Professor Paul Benzon
pbenzon@skidmore.edu

Office: Palamountain 316
Office Hours: Wednesday 10:30-12:30, Thursday 11:15-12:15, and by appt.
Course Blog: https://lda16.wordpress.com/

Course Description
What is the place of literature in the digital age? We exist in a moment when more people have access to more text than ever before, when words jostle constantly against images, videos, and sounds across a global network, and when many of us carry the tools to become globally published authors in our pockets every day. What does it mean to read and write literature within such a moment? What new social and cultural questions arise, and how might authors address those? What new possibilities emerge for writing itself in a digital context—what new modes of representation and expression? How do we as readers need to think differently in order to read within the digital?

In this course, we'll take up these and other questions as we consider how contemporary authors represent, respond to, and employ digital technology in their writing. We'll read novels by authors attempting to capture how recent technological changes have redefined our conceptions of space, time, memory, art, and politics within a global, networked culture. We'll engage with experimental works that push at the boundaries of the page and the book in an attempt to rethink print literature alongside the digital. And we'll explore "born-digital" literature that takes shape within our computers and mobile devices and across the public, collaborative, constantly changing space of the web. Our ultimate goal will be to develop a new understanding of the creative possibilities for reading and writing within the digital environment of the twenty-first century.

Course Goals
Through this course, you will learn to
- Read complex literary works in a variety of forms and media carefully and critically
- Study how contemporary authors experiment with literary material in response to technological change
- Attend to how factors such as visuality, materiality, medium, and interactivity shape literary meaning
- Engage with critical and theoretical material in ways that illuminate larger issues within course texts
- Write thoughtfully and critically about contemporary literature in a range of formats and contexts

Required Texts
Robin Sloan, *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* (ISBN 1250037751)
Hitori Nakano, *Train Man* (ISBN 0345498690)
Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (ISBN 0375703764)
Sam Barlow, *Her Story*
Editions at Play/Other Digital Texts TBD
Selected other texts available on Blackboard, online, or in class, listed below in the course schedule

Grading
You must complete all of the following course assignments in order to pass the course:

Class Participation	20%
Course Blog	15%
Analytical Paper	10%
Textual Annotation	15%
House of Leaves Presentation	5%
Book Reflection	15%
Future Literature Essay	20%

Late work will be marked down one grade level for each class period after the due date (for example, from a B+ to a B for one late day). Extensions will only be granted in the case of an emergency documented by a college dean.

Preparation, Participation, and Class Structure
We will spend our class time each day on a variety of different activities, including but not limited to full-class discussions, small-group discussions, presentations, and in-class writing. While I may occasionally give short lectures, the bulk of our time will be spent talking and engaging together with the course material and with each other's ideas. In order to do this, it is essential that you come to class prepared to address the day's material. This means printing out (if necessary) and completing all reading before class, bringing the reading to class, and being prepared to discuss the reading thoughtfully. You should have interpretations, questions, and responses to share with the class, and you should be prepared to offer these and to be called on in our conversation. The more each of you brings your own thinking to the discussion, the more all of us will get out of class—I encourage you to offer perspectives, ideas, examples, oppositions, questions, and other contributions as much as possible. If you are uncomfortable with speaking in class, please let me know or come see me at the beginning of the semester so that we can work together to make things easier for you.

Although I will rarely lecture, that does not mean that you should not take notes on what the class has to say about the material we are discussing, just as you would in a lecture course. Having a record of the class' comments, concerns, debates, etc., will be extremely valuable to you in preparing to develop topics and arguments for further writing and thinking in the course. More broadly, consistently remaining actively engaged in our discussions, even if only as a listener and note-taker at certain moments, will help you to develop as a critical thinker and writer.

Because some of our course material exists only in electronic format, being able to use electronic devices to engage with the readings and do research and other work will add a great deal to our thinking in class. However, these devices should be used in class only for class-related work such as note-taking, class writing or reading, and research. If I ask the class to put away electronic devices so that we can focus on other material, please do so. If inappropriate computer or electronic use becomes a problem for some members of the class, I will revoke permission to use them for the class as a whole. If you have questions about whether a certain use of technology is appropriate or not, please don't hesitate to ask me.

Course Blog
Over the course of the semester, we will all post regularly to a course blog focused on the texts and issues we will be discussing in class. This work will serve several purposes: firstly (and most immediately), it will give us a chance to think and talk critically about some of the course material before we discuss it in class and to gear our discussion towards issues and questions that are important to you or that you are curious about. Secondly, it will give us first-hand experience with what it means to write in a digital world. Finally, giving you the opportunity to bring new material and new areas of concern into our conversation, it will also help you to generate topics, ideas, and arguments for papers.

Blog Posting. Note that the blog is located on our independent course website at https://lda16.wordpress.com/, **not on Blackboard** (although we will use Blackboard for email, papers, and other elements of the course). You are not required to register with WordPress in order to post on

the blog, but you must subscribe to the blog so that you receive notifications of new material that I post, and you should include your name or other identifying information in your posts so that we can all follow the conversation online and I can give you credit for your work. The most recent main post will appear at the top of the page—click on the comments link for that post to read what others have written and post your writing.

Blog Content. Your work on the blog will take different forms at different points in the semester. Sometimes I will post a question for you to respond to, while at other times your posts can be more open-ended; sometimes I will ask you to address a particular passage or other element from the reading, while at other times I will ask you to think about a broader issue or question that connects several texts. The blog is a space for us as a group to be reflective about the material we are discussing, and to begin to air initial responses, interpretations, and reactions before we pursue them more fully in class discussion. In this spirit, your posting to the blog should be thoughtful and analytical—you should offer interpretations and questions rather than summaries or solely personal responses.

Each week on the blog, you should submit **one post of your own and one response to a classmate's post.** Your own post should be at least 250-300 words—you might write and edit your post in Microsoft Word or a similar program so that you know the length of your post and so that you have a backup of it on your computer. I encourage you to include images, links, video clips, and other media elements in your posts as relevant—this is fairly easy to do and we will discuss it in class at the beginning of the course. Your response can be shorter than your post, but should engage your classmate's post thoughtfully and substantively.

Blog Scheduling. In order to ensure that everyone has a chance to post, comment, and absorb the online discussion before we discuss a given text in class, blog posts are due by **10:00pm the night before we discuss a text in class**, and comments are due by the time we meet in class (see the course schedule below for specific due dates). **Because of the time-sensitive nature of the blog, late posts and comments will not receive credit. Plan accordingly to make sure that you can be responsible for getting your writing online on time.**

Blog Grading. I will grade your blog posts on a scale of 1-5 each week. Criteria for each grade are as follows:

Grade Characteristics
1 The post is missing, late, or severely underdeveloped, consisting of only a few sentences.
2 The post is underdeveloped: it meets most the technical requirements of the assignment (use of text, use of media, length, etc.), but only engages with the material and the issues it raises in a passing or overly general sense.
3 The post is sufficient: it meets all of the technical requirements of the assignment, and addresses the material and the issues it raises in reasonable depth, but does not do much to develop or respond to them.
4 The post is successful: it uses textual or other material to make analytical claims, and begins to develop them, but those claims or connections are not fully developed or analyzed.
5 The post is exceptional: it uses textual or other material to make thoughtful, original analytical claims and/or connections and engages and analyzes the issues it raises in independent, in-depth ways.

I will grade blog comments on a credit/no credit basis.

Analytical Paper
At the end of our first section of the course on "Narratives," you will write a short analytical paper (3-4 pages) in which you make an argument about how one of the readings from this section engages questions and issues of digital culture and what that reading's engagement with digital culture suggests more broadly. In this paper, you should develop your argument through sustained close analysis of the text you choose. I will provide more in-depth instructions for this assignment early in the semester.

Textual Annotation
As part of our work in the "Pages" section of the course, you will choose a single page or two-page spread from *House of Leaves* to scan, annotate, and write about in a short (2-3 page) reflection. This assignment is intended to give you an opportunity to engage in close, in-depth analysis of a small unit of text with an eye towards how visual elements such as layout, paging, color, and typography shape the literary meaning of a print text. I will provide more in-depth instructions for this assignment as we begin our work on *House of Leaves*.

House of Leaves Presentation
On the final day of our discussion of *House of Leaves*, we will discuss a variety of literary and critical intertexts for the novel. You will be responsible, along with a group of partners, for presenting one of these intertexts to the class as a whole. I will circulate a signup sheet for this project as we begin our work on *House of Leaves*.

Book Reflection
As part of our work in the "Books" section of the course, you will write a 4-6 page paper analyzing how the visuality and materiality of one of the texts from this section raise questions of technology, textuality, authorship, and readership. I will provide more in-depth instructions for this assignment as the time gets nearer.

Future Literature Essay
Your final assignment for the course will be a 6-8 page paper. The goal of this assignment is to give you a chance to reflect on the future of literature in the digital age and on how our readings for the semester, particularly those in the last section of the course, address and respond to this issue. We will discuss this assignment well in advance of the due date at the end of the semester.

Attendance
You are permitted a total of two absences throughout the semester without penalty. For each subsequent absence, your final course grade will drop one-third of a letter (e.g., from an A- to a B+), and after four absences, you risk failing the course. Repeated or excessive lateness will also count as an absence.

If you miss all or part of a class, it is your responsibility to keep up with the work for the course—make sure to follow the syllabus, stay on track with the reading, turn in any written work that was due for the day, and consult a classmate, check the course website on Blackboard, or come see me during my office hours to talk about what you might have missed in class.

Office Hours
I want each of you to be successful in this class. Helping each of you develop as readers, writers, thinkers, and students of literature is important to me, and I want to do what I can to help you achieve those goals

and succeed in my class. More importantly, I have a great deal of interest in the material we will be working on this semester, and I would love for you to get the same enjoyment and excitement from it that I do. If you have any questions, problems, or things you want to discuss—about the course, the readings, writing assignments or paper ideas, life at Skidmore, future academic or career plans, or anything else at all—or if you simply want to talk more about what we're doing in class, please come see me. I encourage you to think of meeting with me not just as a last resort or something to do when you need help, but as a central part of making your learning more productive, meaningful, and enjoyable. My office hours are Wednesday 10:30 am-12:30 pm and Thursday 11:15am-12:15pm in Palamountain Hall 316—this time is set aside for us to talk and for me to help you and work with you. If you aren't free during that time, get in touch with me before or after class or by email and we can set up a time that is more convenient—I'm also happy to talk via Google Chat, Skype, or other means. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you are having trouble or feel you need help, or for any other reason at all.

Accessibility
If you anticipate needing accommodations regarding any element of this course, please come talk with me early in the semester so that we can work together to address these issues. You should also visit the Office of Student Academic Services at http://www.skidmore.edu/accessibility/index.php for more information.

Academic Integrity
Independent thinking and writing are crucial elements of both your work in this course and the intellectual culture of Skidmore more broadly. Violating these principles through plagiarism or other academic dishonesty is a serious offense. Plagiarized work will receive a failing grade for the assignment and may result in more serious consequences as well. If you have any questions about citation, attribution, or plagiarism, please do not hesitate to ask me before you hand in your work. For more information about Skidmore's academic integrity policy, visit http://www.skidmore.edu/advising/integrity/index.php.

Course Schedule

The schedule below may change over the course of the semester. I will announce any changes in class and/or via email. It is your responsibility to keep abreast of these changes by attending class, checking your email and the class blog regularly, and contacting me or coming to my office if you have any questions.

Narratives	
Tues. January 26	Course Introduction: What Is Literature in a Digital Age?
Thurs. January 28	Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel," "The Garden of Forking Paths" **Introductory Blog Due Wednesday 10pm**
Tues. February 2	Robin Sloan, *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* 1-97 **Blog Post on Sloan Due Monday 10pm**
Thurs. February 4	Robin Sloan, *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* 98-196
Tues. February 9	Robin Sloan, *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* 197-end **Blog Post on Sloan Due Monday 10pm**
Thurs. February 11	Hitori Nakano, *Train Man* 1-124
Tues. February 16	Hitori Nakano, *Train Man* 125-245 **Blog Post on Nakano Due Monday 10pm**
Thurs. February 18	Hitori Nakano, *Train Man* 245-end

Pages	
Tues. February 23	Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* front cover-54 NB for *House of Leaves*: read all materials—appendices, footnotes, exhibits, etc.—as they are referred to in the text, **not** at the end **Blog Post on Danielewski Due Monday 10pm** **Analytical Paper Due Monday, February 22**
Thurs. February 25	Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* 55-79 (including appendix material 584-644)
Tues. March 1	Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* 80-252 **Blog Post on Danielewski Due Monday 10pm**
Thurs. March 3	Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* 253-346
Tues. March 8	Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* 347-422 **Blog Post on Danielewski Due Monday 10pm**

Thurs. March 10	Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* 423-528 *House of Leaves* **Presentations**
Tues. March 15	**No Class: Spring Break**
Thurs. March 17	**No Class: Spring Break**

Books

Tues. March 22	Stephanie Strickland, "Born Digital," Other Critical Texts TBA **Blog Post on Critical Readings Due Monday 10pm** **Textual Annotation Due Monday, March 21**
Thurs. March 24	Amaranth Borsuk and Brad Bouse, *Between Page and Screen*
Tues. March 29	Amaranth Borsuk and Brad Bouse, *Between Page and Screen* (cont'd) **Blog Post on Borsuk Due Monday 10pm**
Thurs. March 31	William Gibson, *Agrippa* *The Agrippa Files* Website
Tues. April 5	William Gibson, *Agrippa* (cont'd) Matthew Kirschenbaum, "Text Messaging: The Transformissions of 'Agrippa'" **Blog Post on Gibson and Kirschenbaum Due Monday 10pm**

Futures

Thurs. April 7	Lev Manovich, "Database as a Genre of New Media" Marie-Laure Ryan, "Toward an Interactive Narratology" **Book Reflection Due Friday, April 8**
Tues. April 12	Sam Barlow, *Her Story* **Blog Post on Barlow Due Monday 10pm**
Thurs. April 14	Sam Barlow, *Her Story* (cont'd)
Tues. April 19	Shelley Jackson, *My Body* **Blog Post on Jackson Due Monday 10pm**
Thurs. April 21	Shelley Jackson, *Skin*, *Snow*
Tues. April 26	Reif Larsen, *Entrances and Exits* **Blog Post on Larsen TBA Due Monday 10pm**
Thurs. April 28	Robin Sloan, "Inventing Media"
Tues. May 3	**Final Class: Conclusions, Reflections, Celebrations** **Future Literature Essay Due Monday, May 9, 9:00am**