

**SEMINAR:
DICTATORSHIP IMAGINED: NOVELS OF
AUTHORITARIANISM AND TOTALITARIANISM**

Context and goals:

After the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union it seemed for a while that democratic forms of government were ascendant and that soon authoritarian and totalitarian forms of government would be a topic for history books only. But in recent years authoritarian rule has reasserted itself in Russia, some member states of the European Union have become increasingly authoritarian (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic), in other countries authoritarian political movements have gained strength, and even the United States – long considered the leader of democratic nations – has recently elected a president with clear authoritarian inclinations, and democratic institutions and norms are under daily assault.

For us, who live in this moment, the daily news and events can be confusing and disorienting and it can be difficult to know what to think, how to behave and react. In this situation, narrative fictions can help us view the lives of characters in imagined (but often rooted in history) authoritarian and totalitarian societies, both from a distance and from the inside.

Reading, analyzing, and discussing these novels in their historical context should enable us to understand our current moment more clearly and confront it more effectively.

Method and expectations:

We will study and discuss 11 novels in 13 weekly meetings of two hours, on Thursdays from 10-12 (see weekly schedule). In

most class session I will give a brief introduction to the novel, its author and its historical context. But most of the class time will be devoted to conversation and discussion. Class participation is very important and therefore the only clear expectation in this course is the careful and timely reading of the novels.

With each novel we will try to build our understanding of these imagined authoritarian and totalitarian states and societies from the narrative up, rather than from theoretical concepts down. I will, however, occasionally add theoretical and conceptual texts to the discussion, in order to firm up and refine our observations and analyses.

By the end of the seminar we should have a clearer understanding what the elements, characteristics, features and methods of authoritarian and totalitarian rule are. We will also have seen how people who live under those regimes adapt, resist, rebel, live, or die. These observations and understandings will hopefully be useful to us as readers and citizens in a democracy that is worth defending and in need of defense.

READING LIST

Jack London, *The Iron Heel*(1908). New York: Penguin, 2006.

Franz Kafka. *The Trial*. (1914/1925). New York: Schocken, 1998.

Sinclar Lewis, *It can't Happen Here*(1935). New York: Signet Classics, 2014.

Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* (1940). New York: Scribner, 1968.

Hans Fallada, *Every Man Dies Alone*(1947). Brooklyn: Melville House, 2009.

George Orwell, *1984*(1949). New York: Signet Classic, 1961.

Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*. (1953). New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013.

Philip K. Dick, *The Penultimate Truth*(1964). New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1992.

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*(1986). New York: Anchor Books, 1998.

Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*.(2004). New York: Vintage Books, 2004.

Dave Eggers, *The Circle*.(2013). New York: Vintage Books, 2014.

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Taught by: Jens Kruse, Professor of German Emeritus

Contact: jkruse@wellesley.edu

When: Spring 2018, Thursdays, 10-12

Where: Orcas Island Public Library, Room TBD

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

| <u>Week</u> | <u>Date</u> | <u>Topic</u> |
|-------------|-------------|--|
| I | February 1 | Introduction Jack London, <i>The Iron Heel</i> (1908) |
| II | February 8 | Franz Kafka. <i>The Trial</i> . (1914/ 1925) |
| III | February 15 | Sinclar Lewis, <i>It can't Happen Here</i> (1935) |
| IV | February 22 | Arthur Koestler, <i>Darkness at Noon</i> (1940) |
| V | March 1 | Hans Fallada, <i>Every Man Dies Alone</i> (1947) |
| VI | March 8 | George Orwell, <i>1984</i> (1949) |
| VII | March 15 | Ray Bradbury, <i>Fahrenheit 451</i> . (1953) |

VIII March 22 Philip K. Dick, *The Penultimate Truth*
(1964)

BREAK: CLASS RESUMES APRIL 26

IX April 26 Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*
(1986)

X May 3 Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*.
(2004)

XI May 10 Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (2013)

XII May 17 [Extra Time]

XIII May 24 [Conclusion}