In Dear Ra, we are told, among many other things, that ‘narrative equals death.’ If that is so, then Johannes Göransson’s 21st-century epistolary novel is very much alive, as it bobs and weaves through the mundane details and arcane allusions of our culture, filled with feints and jabs in all directions, warding off the threat of premature closure. Dear Ra is sharp, funny, morbid, and deliriously (re)readable.

- STEVEN SHAVIRO, author of The Cinematic Body and Connected

TEACHING GUIDE

DEAR RA

by Johannes Göransson

978-1-937865634 / 98 pages / $15.95

Recommended Classes:
- Creative Writing
- Hybrid Forms
- Literary Fiction
- Experimental Writing
- Assemblage / Experimental Forms
- Narrative Studies

Keywords:
- Experimental / Poetry / Fiction / Hybrid / Prose /
- Letters / Epistolary Novel / Literary / Narrative /
- Desire / Dream / Metaphor / Obsession

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Dear Ra participates in the tradition of epistolary books. Look at some of the conventions of this mode of writing: Why do you think it was such a popular form in the early days of the novel? What are some tools it gives you for writing a narrative?

2. How does the book’s structure influence and create an overall narrative? Is the narrative one-sided? How is the epistolary form both utilized and subverted?

2. Ra never replies to the letters. And much like the addressee of traditional sonnets, Ra merely generates more and more texts by her silence. Dear Ra is also a kind of deranged sonnet sequence (the speaker compares himself to Sidney’s Astrophil and Stella). Like many Elizabethan sonnets, it depends heavily on metaphors. Read John Donne’s “Holy Sonnet 14.” Look at the movement between the different metaphors. How does the form of the sonnet and the movement, not through narrative, but through metaphors, function in the book?
3. What kind of metaphors does a dead person use? How might a live person misinterpret those metaphors? How do various metaphors operate in the book?

4. How is this a book about desire and repulsion and love and disgust and attraction and horror? How are these themes explored both in the actual language and content, but also the structure and syntax?

5. Many of the sentence structures used in the book were taken from books like Nabokov’s Lolita, Jean Genet’s Our Lady of Flowers and Don Delillo’s Great Jones Street. How do you see the influences of these other texts, both in terms of form and content, in Dear Ra? How does the book operate as a conversation with other entities and the dead?

Possible Assignments:
- Part of the toolkit of the epistolary novel is that it allows for certain parts of the narrative to be obfuscated - perhaps because they cannot be revealed and must be kept secret, or - paradoxically - because they’re already known to the addressee. Write a letter from a person to a friend. Play around with what is already understood between them as well as what the narrator does not want to reveal.
- An important influence on this book often deranged fan letters that celebrities receive. Like the addressee of Elizabethan sonnets, idols seldom reply. And like the addressee, this silence tends to generate an obsessive communique. Write a letter to a celebrity in which the real narrative is the speaker’s obsession. Allow yourself to become a monstrous figure. Allow the celebrity to become monstrous. Allow yourself to feel obsessed.
- Or possessed. Write letters to a dead person.
- In part II of the book, the speaker the idolizing dynamic becomes unmoored, and he begins to write letters not to the silent Ra but to a “Deer,” to Nabokov’s wife Vera and then to the famous poet John Ashbery. Rewrite any of your previous letters as letters to a literary figure, preferably one which you don’t adulate but have complex feelings toward. Allow yourself to explore your feelings about this writer, even if they seem immoral or wrong, even if it reveals things about yourself that make you uncomfortable.
- What’s your favorite painter? What’s your favorite drink? What’s your favorite body part? Write poems about them. Write poems that are them. Write poems to them. Write poems that use them as props.

More Assignments From the Author:
- I first saw Basquiat's work when a girlfriend who worked at some interior decorating magazine wrote me an email with an image from the latest issue saying: look at this painter. These paintings look like your poems.” By chance there was an exhibition of his paintings at the Tony Schafrazi Gallery in Soho. Look up Jean Michel Basquiat’s paintings on the Internet. Remember that the paintings in real life are huge. What would these paintings look like as poems? Write those poems.
Some of this I wrote while living in a small room in Spanish Harlem. It was summer and I had no air conditioner. There was honking in the street. Look yourself up in a hot place. Write some poems. Burn them up. Imitate a sarcophagi. Write a dedication on the inside of it.