

***The Flamethrowers* (2013) – Discussion Questions – Considerations**
– ENG 4550, Contemporary American Lit, michael wutz –

It's difficult to get handle on a novel like *The Flamethrowers*, which appears to explore the conventions of historical fiction anew by “inventing” an entire family dynasty along the lines of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the bombastic maestro of the Italian Futurists. Much of the Valeras', esp. early, life is loosely modeled on Marinetti's family and his actions as the leader of the Italian Futurists. The novel seems to move in so many different directions – or, to put it differently, probe the capacious space & time of narrative – that finding structures of overarching coherence may prove difficult. At the same time, the book also seems to want to connect various dots in the history of 20th violence and map the art world of 1970s New York, with all its absurdities and perversities for the reader. As Kushner herself once said, “*The fundamental challenge of this novel was to put these divergent things into play, in circulation around each other, and hopefully not tie them together in an overly schematic manner. But I felt instinctively that they were related. Or rather, that meaning would reveal itself by laying them side by side and teasing out their resonances.*” In lieu of an, always inconclusive, conclusion—and having touched on some of the central issues before—let me pose some questions which we can engage in small discussion groups. Please support your ideas with textual evidence.

- How is the meaning-making process in a novel like *The Flamethrowers* different from (or similar to) other texts you have encountered?
- Assuming that the book wants, on one level, to sketch an arc of violence of the 20th century (Western) world, what major moments in *The Flamethrowers* can you identify? How might they connect?
- A related question, perhaps: What kinds of fires and heat do you see in *The Flamethrowers*—from the storm-trooping Arditi in early Fascist Italy to the Moka-throwing Red Brigades, among others? What might Kushner want to say about the links between politics & violence, economics & violence, including art & violence as well?
- Given the predominant theme of an often painful-to-read misogyny (which is often compounded by “Reno's” own naivety), how do you read chapter “19. The Day Rome was Founded, April 21”—a chapter that gives us some concluding insight into the character of Sandro. Is it an explanation, a (partial) exoneration? How might we be invited to read it? (And: come to think of it: what other narratives of the founding of Rome do you know, if any?)

- *The Flamethrowers* has been seen as re-inventing or extending the space of historical fiction, which is often associated with writers like E. L. Doctorow and Don DeLillo of the previous generation. How does she do it? And, along the same lines: *The Flamethrowers* is not, I think, meant to be read as a roman à clef, much as it describes in great detail the New York art scene of the 1970s. Does she want us to rush to a dictionary of modern/contemporary art (or do a google oodle☺)? If so, why? If not, why not? How do you read a novel like this when most readers have an only-surface knowledge of this historical moment?
- *The Flamethrowers* and media: print culture – film – photography – including a concluding Portfolio, photographs interspersed at several chapter openings?