Notes on Romina Paula, *August*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

Why it is Important That Novels Fail in Many Ways

This essay began as a review of Romina Paula’s novel "August," but in the end what I had to say was very simple. Yet the book's themes are potentially complex (it's about suicide, abandonment, love, fidelity, and memory) and it struck me as odd that a complicated structure, like a novel, can seem to become a matter of simple problems. This essay is more about that problem than about Paula's novel. First I rehearse my difficulties with the novel, then I explain why it seems to be significant that novels often fail in many ways, even though reviews tend to focus just one or two themes.

A word about the word "failure." I am not talking, in this essay, about the author's intentions: many novels, hopefully most, succeed for their authors and readers. "Failure" is, I think, the ordinary condition of average art in any medium: it denotes the fact that the majority of novels aren't remembered for long, and don't participate in the conversations about what might count as ambitious or challenging novels in the 21st century. There's more on "failure," "average" art, and other subjects in this essay on visual art: ow.ly/iVrh30bxbds. I am interested in what can be done with the novel when it's written, and read, in full awareness of precedents from modernism to the present. "Fail" could be put in scare quotes as a reminder that it doesn't mean a novel isn't rewarding, entrancing, or moving--and it certainly doesn't mean a novel isn't successful--but rather that it does not respond to the last hundred years of novels, so it is not a part of the conversation about what novels can be.

I'd like to thank Andrei Molotiu, who read a first draft of this and pointed out that my lists of things that cause novels to "fail" sound prescriptive, as if I have a ready-made list of things novels should avoid. For me, it's nearly the opposite of that. I try to have no preconceived ideas about what a novel is, how it will present the world, what it imagines as a character, or the lack of one, how it works with language.

This is an anti-prescriptive position, or attitude: each novel proposes implicit norms, practices, and theories of form and content as it goes along, and a reader will notice when it diverges from those parameters. For example, a novel might depict a character as amnesiac, and then recount an episode in which she remembers things
perfectly; that kind of diversion from an established condition requires an acknowledgment: the narrator needs to explain it, or the novel needs to provide a logic that makes sense of it. Otherwise readers will doubt first the character, then the narrator, and then the implied author. Most novels don't have that sort of obvious continuity problem, but all novels have unevenesses and inconsistencies. They are what I am responding to in Paula's novel: she proposes the novel is about suicide, but pays unaccountably uneven attention to that theme. In the second part of this essay, my lists of "failures" are meant in the same way: they are things novelists commonly establish and then lose track of, or lose control over. None of the items in my lists in the second part of this essay are necessarily problems: they become so when they are not acknowledged in the structure of the novels that create them. This means even a tremendously inconsistent novel, one that has most of the "failures" I list, can be successful: "Naked Lunch" is an example, because lack of consistency is built in to the structure. Conversely, very careful and consistent novels can be failures: Agatha Christie is a good example for me, because her books are perfectly uniformly logically constructed, with none of the "failures" I list here, and yet the results are not interesting as novels.

One last thing: the translation of "August" is exceptional, nearly flawless. Here is just one example from hundreds. "So I ask him, then, if he gets away a lot like this; do you get away a lot like this?" That semicolon is a wonderful solution to a difficult problem of voicing.

1. Criticism of "August"

The novel suffers most, for me, from an inability to imagine things other than the main story, which concerns a woman who struggles to decide how she feels about an ex-boyfriend she’s encountered on a trip out of town. That narrative is well written, and wouldn’t have raised any issues for me, if it weren’t for the fact that she encounters her ex-boyfriend on a visit to Esquel (a town in the southwest of Argentina) where she had gone to stay with the parents of a friend of hers who has died by suicide. The parents exhume their daughter’s body, have it cremated, and scatter the ashes, and she stays in her dead friend’s room. The friend who has died is addressed throughout in the second person, which is an effective strategy at least in the English translation. This has potential, but five major subjects are missing:

(a) We don't get a sense that the narrator understands how the parents feel, and therefore
(b) We don't believe the author has had any close experience of parents who have lost a child.
(c) We are barely told anything about the dead person’s sister, who also visits.
(d) Until late in the book, we know nearly nothing about the narrator’s own mother, who abandoned her as a child, and who she thought was dead. (Even after we’re told, we still don’t see any reflection of the mother’s actions on her daughter, the book’s narrator, which is bizarre given that the entire book is about commitment.)
(e) We are never told how to imagine the narrator’s relationship with the woman who died. It’s almost as if the person who died was just an idea, not a person the narrator actually knew.

These are the principal gaps in the narrator’s imagination when it comes to the narrative about suicide. The implied author appears as a person who has known people who have died by suicide, but she does not seem to have experienced other people’s reactions to suicide, and she does not seem to have thought much about what parents feel. She comes across as a teenager: the scenes of attraction, doubt, drinking, and travel are the most persuasive.

Given that the novel is about suicide, the narrator’s lack of engagement with survivors (and herself, because she thought her mother had died by suicide), and the implied author’s apparent obliviousness to her own lack of imagination about those characters, leaves implied gaps in the narrative. The logic of the novel calls for more meditations on suicide, in several different ways.

I can imagine a new chapter for each of the friend’s parents, whose grief is nearly invisible in the book; more chapters on the narrator’s own mother, who abandoned her; a chapter on the narrator’s awareness of her similarity to her mother, which isn’t developed and almost seems not to have been noticed by the narrator or the author; a chapter on the narrator’s father, who comes across as absurdly affable and forgiving, given that his wife left him and their children; and above all, chapters on the friend who died: not in order to solve her absence, but to let us know the narrator has spent time thinking about it. All we hear about that is that she likes one of her former friend’s CD’s, her cat, and her leather jacket.

These criticisms are all matters of gaps in the narrator’s and the implied author’s imagination. It "fails" in this sense: it proposes subjects and ways of thinking about them, and then it diverges from those ways, without accounting for its reasons. The book is mainly a teenage-style love story, with several serious stories about suicide and abandonment standing in the wings.

2. Why it is important that novels "fail" in many ways

I think a reasonable starting point in considering the criticism of modern and contemporary novels is that a typical novel fails. If the novel is reviewed, the review will usually focus on one or two things that seemed to go wrong, but as readers know, that doesn’t tally with the experience of reading.

Novels ordinarily fail continuously and repeatedly, dozens or hundreds of times over the course of a reading, and the variety of the sources of failure testifies to the richness and complexity of the genre. If novels failed for just a couple of reasons -- as scientific theories can fail, for example, by being simply falsified -- they wouldn’t be as challenging, and it wouldn’t be as important to be as ambitious as possible both in reading and in writing them.
For example, it could be said that "August" doesn't quite cohere. The reason why lack of unity or coherence is a common verdict is not simply that unity is an elusive goal, but because there are so many sources of incoherence, so many ways that a novel can be at odds with itself, undermine itself. A writer can abuse a trusting reader, disabuse a generous one, undermine its own logics of time and narrative, stray from depictions of character, lose inertia, lose track of voice, tone, mood, affect, realism or naturalism, idiom, style. It is the proliferation of pitfalls that makes novels so interesting, not the single judgment--lack of coherence, in this case--that might emerge in a review. "Coherence," in this example, is a kind of covering term: a simplification brought on by a reader's exhaustion.

This may sound abstract, but it is only a way of putting a common reader's experience: when you begin a novel, after the initial pages (during which it's normal to suspend judgment, and try to attend to the author's intentions), it is common to encounter different kinds of infelicities one after another: obtrusive digressions or ellipses, surprising and apparently uncontrolled lacunae, shifts in tense, solecisms, inappropriate asides, unwarranted assumptions about the reader's interests or knowledge, unnoticed borrowings, cliches, uncontrolled shifts from tragedy to satire or comedy, a million sorts of awkwardnesses, a tone that lapses, unintentional narrative discontinuities, failures of depiction, lags and douleurs, unconvincing details. Unless you note these one after another, producing a kind of endless and unreadable microcriticism, they will begin to coalesce in your mind, and form into groups. (I am thinking of Empson here: specific flaws combine in the mind into nebulous combined criteria.)

As you move on toward the end of the book, even simplified lists of reservations may become too long to remember. At the same time, if the author is living and might read the review, it may seem unhelpful to articulate more than one or two principal problems with the book: novels are so deeply woven into their authors' ways of thinking that it seldom helps to review issues one by one. (Teachers in MFA writing programs have to wrestle with that sort of problem: readers and reviewers usually don't.) Only the most patient and skillful reviewers, like Adam Mars-Jones, can conjure more than a few of a novel's distinct problems, and even then it takes many pages to do so.

But just because reviews simplify and condense readers' reactions doesn't mean that those simplified judgments are adequate. What matters in novels is the number of ways they fail, the bewildering and entangled and multidimensional way that novels fail continuously, on every page. That matters because is is the clearest evidence that modern and contemporary novels can actually in some meaningful way contain thought.