NOTE:

The following reading guide is to help you focus your reading and understanding of the book for the Friday discussion. The Thursday quiz will be composed of roughly 10 questions that ask basic information about the book and the introduction (format will be multiple choice, matching, etc and should take less than 10 minutes). You should know the main plot points as well as the places and people described in the story. One or two of these questions will appear on the first mid-term.

SHORT SUMMARY:

Mesopotamia. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The second and third millennia BCE. The story is simple and compelling. The King of Uruk, Gilgamesh, ruling about the time of 2500 BCE, is two-thirds god, one-third human. He is a bully who abuses his people. To tame him, the people of Uruk call on the gods to help, and the gods create the wild and handsome Enkidu. The two become friends and defy the gods in their violent adventures. Gilgamesh must face the very human conditions of loss and death. The images in the epic are spectacular and rival any video game students will ever play. There are frightening passages of hand-to-hand combat, revenge plots, sexual awakenings, and the sad image of a dying friend. The universal theme of friendship is the theme that drives the epic of Gilgamesh, which is considered the first hero’s journey.

From Mesopotamia, the story was first written down long after King Gilgamesh was supposed to have ruled. It was based on earlier Sumerian legends of Gilgamesh. The most complete version of the epic was preserved on eleven clay tablets in the collection of a Seventh century BCE Assyrian king and was found by A. H. Layard, a British archaeologist, in 1850.

TERMS, NAMES AND PLACES:

Some terms, names and places you will find helpful for the Thursday quiz and Friday discussion:

Ea, Eanna, Enil, Humbaba, Ishtar, Ninsun, Shamhat, Shiduri, Uruk Utnapishtim, Urak

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

These are NOT the questions that will appear on the quiz. However, many of these will form the basic structure of the discussion in the Friday sections. You are expected to have some thoughts about these themes and ideas, though there is no one “correct” answer for which we are explicitly looking.

1) What are the main plot points in this story?
   - Is Gilgamesh the sole hero?
   - What role does Enkidu play?
   - The translator suggests this story challenges the neat division of the world (and one’s actions) into black and white. Do you agree?

2) What are the dominant themes in the story and what do they tell us about Mesopotamian Society? In particular, think about the following themes:
   - Friendship
   - Mortality (and immortality)
   - Relation between the Gods and Heroes
3) In class we've discussed the complex ways in which we can define "civilization." How do you think the Mesopotamian listener's of Gilgamesh defined civilization?
   - How might Gilgamesh and Enkidu's transformations suggest civilization is defined in Mesopotamia?

4) Gilgamesh was originally an orally transmitted poem and thus has several tools embedded within the text to facilitate memory.
   - What evidence do you see within the text, or in the introduction, that might reflect the poem's initial oral composition?
   - Why would it be significant in our understanding of the story that it was initially recited orally?

5) How are women (human and divine) depicted in this story? What does this reveal about contemporary attitudes toward women?

Some other things to think about when reading the story:
   - The role of dreams in the story
   - The nature of kingship in ancient Mesopotamia.
   - How is the story of the flood significant

MAP: