

Speculative Fiction Studies

“The forceps of our mind are clumsy forceps, and crush the truth a little in taking hold of it.” - H.G. Wells

Course Description:

Speculative Fiction Studies explores and illuminates a genre apart from, and in some ways broader than, the traditional canon of literary fiction. The goal of this course is to explore in what sense the act of “speculation” is central to all literature, but particularly crucial to this genre, which encompasses what we recognize today as fantasy and science fiction as well as alternative histories and futures, utopias and dystopias. Beginning with some of the grandfathers of speculative fiction (Edgar Allan Poe, H.G. Wells, and E.M. Forster) and advancing into the contemporary era, students will explore the evolution of this lively, diverse genre, and consider how its themes and tropes act as allegories for the problems of the human condition. The course will focus on a variety of short- and long-form readings, with class discussion, individual and group projects, analytical writing, speculative writing, and finally research writing as the avenues of assessment. Students will also be presented with scholarship and literary theory in the field of speculative fiction, the better to understand the deep philosophical, literary, and cultural implications of this genre.

INSTRUCTOR:

- Tracy Townsend
- A115C, on campus from 9:30-4:30 A through D days and by appointment.
- 630.907.5954
- ttownse@imsa.edu

Meeting Days, Time and Room(s)

10:00-10:55 A, B, D (A116)

12:20-1:15 A, C, D (A116)

Text(s) / Materials:

You will be expected to bring your current reading packets (critical essays, short stories, and novellas), whether in paper or .pdf form, to class, and your copies of our core texts as we read and discuss them:

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? by Philip K. Dick

A Canticle for Leibowitz, by Walter M. Miller, Jr. / *Lord of Light* by Roger Zelazny

Neverwhere, by Neil Gaiman / *Among Others*, by Jo Walton / *The Golem and the Jinni*,

by Helene Wecker

War of the Worlds, by H.G. Wells / *The Martian Chronicles*, by Ray Bradbury
Binti, by Nnedi Okorafor

Various texts for literature circles, as they become available
Short story collections (online, in .pdf or web link form)

Personal computers will be used regularly, as this class strives to be paper-free (as much as can be done practically), so be sure to bring it and your power supply regularly. Also, a copy of our current readings and a writing utensil for marking that reading are crucially important.

Essential Content:

This course will focus on a range of concepts central to the English team learning standards, and the SSLs but most particularly:

A.1 describing relationships between and among the author's style, literary form (**in this case, the genre of Speculative Fiction and its conventions**), and intended effect on the reader. [SSL-IV.C; IL-2.A.4c]

A.2 identifying and analyzing the philosophical assumptions and axioms underlying an author's work (**particularly those axioms and assumptions which provide foundation to, or exemplify the ideologies of, speculative fiction**). [SSL-II.A; McREL-5.IV]

A.7 drawing upon their work in other disciplines and their understanding of concepts in other disciplines to gain new insights into literature (**students will use their knowledge of the sciences and social sciences, as gained in past and current coursework and reinforced in class discussion, to provide lenses for substantive literary analysis**). [SSL-I.B]

A.8 applying knowledge gained from literature as a means of understanding contemporary and historical economic, social, and political issues and perspectives (**particularly as this relates to Speculative Fiction's use of allegory and metaphor for social and political commentary**). [SSL-III.B; IL-2.B.5b]

B.4 identifying and analyzing the defining characteristics and structures of a variety of complex literary genres (**the largest purpose of this course will be to help students understand the many definitions of, and arrive at their own conclusions about, the Speculative Fiction genre**). [SSL-IV.C, IL-1.B.4b, 5b]

C.1 using speaking and discussion skills to participate in and lead group discussions. [SSL-I.A, IV.B; IL-4.B.5b]

C.2 delivering formal and informal oral presentations

- D.3 creating a research presentation related to academic topics and presenting the findings in oral or multimedia formats, using contemporary technology. [SSL-III.A, IV.B, V.B, IL-3.B.5, 5.C.5a]

Instructional Design and Approach:

In this course, we will develop further the critical thinking and critical reading skills introduced in your core coursework and previous electives, using the framework for genre construction and contemporary literary criticism as our guide. We will read and discuss a wide variety of texts ranging from SF's infancy to its more recent triumphs. At least one research-based student presentation will complement our readings, and you will routinely be asked to express your growing understanding of the critical discourse of Speculative Fiction through written assignments. Because we are a community of learners, everyone's full participation in regular collaborative work is integral to the course. Also, because it is the instructor's belief that writing is an iterative and imperfect process, students will have opportunities to revise written work for a higher grade.

Student Expectations:

- o Consistent **attendance** and significant **participation** in class. It is not sufficient for a student's molecules alone to be present; all class periods will require some amount of active participation from all students.
- o Civilized behavior. Classes of this type thrive based on students' ability to express their ideas not only forcefully and clearly, but with respect for the opinions and feelings of others.
- o Work produced in accordance with instructor deadlines and IMSA's policies of academic honesty. Academic dishonesty in any form will be penalized to the fullest extent of the guidelines provided in IMSA's student handbook.

Assessment Practices, Procedures, and Processes:

The main credit-bearing work for this course falls into a few categories: Papers, Quizzes, Homework, and Presentations/Projects. The weighting of the will be as follows:

Papers: 60%
Quizzes: 10%
Homework 10%
Presentations/Projects: 20%

Each quarter will feature one short paper, one longer paper or project, and an assessment involving presentation and research skills. Students can expect to receive a homework assignments or take reading quizzes semi-regularly throughout the course.

Students may revise each of their written assignments (excepting quizzes) once during the quarter in which they are assigned. The old grade will be averaged with the revised grade and replace the original mark in the PowerSchool record. Any late work will receive a penalty of one half-letter grade per calendar day it is turned in late. One week after the original deadline, late work will no longer be accepted.

Please Note: *It is the policy of this instructor, and the policy of the English department at IMSA, not to round quarter or term grades. Do not ask to have your grade rounded, as the instructor cannot ethically comply with that request.*

Sequence of Topics and Activities

Day One: *What Kind of Geek Are You?* (Defining what brings us to this course)

- Why we have the urge to speculate: “Forbidden Brides of the Faceless Slaves in the Secret House of the Night of Dread Desire,” by Neil Gaiman

Reflective Paper/Diagnostic: What Kind of a Geek Are You?

Weeks 1-2: The Birth of Science Fiction, of Science Fandom, and the Early Speculators -- “The Genre of the Question”

- “Day Million,” by Frederick Pohl (“the given world” and defamiliarization)
- “Some Presumptuous Approaches to Science Fiction,” by Samuel R. Delany and
- “The Golden Age of Science Fiction is Twelve,” by David Hartwell
- Selected fiction by E.M. Forster, Edgar Allan Poe, H.G. Wells, Jules Verne

Position Paper: “The golden age of speculative fiction is twelve” -- or not.

Weeks 3-5: Speculative Fiction’s Subgenres and Sublimities

- The theory: “Hard SF” by Kathryn Cramer
- The fallacies of “hard” versus “soft” categorizations
- The stories: “Reason,” by Isaac Asimov; “The Cold Equations,” by Tom Godwin; “‘Repent, Harlequin!’ Said the Ticktockman,” by Harlan Ellison; “The Colour Out of Space,” by H.P. Lovecraft; “Hungry Daughters of Starving Mothers,” by Alyssa Wong; “Our Talons Can Crush Galaxies,” by Brooke Bolander; “Johnny Mnemonic,” by William Gibson; “Pretty Boy Crossover,” by Pat Cadigan; “The Last Flight of Doctor Ain,” by James Tiptree, Jr.; “The Engine at Heartspring’s Center,” or “A Rose for Ecclesiastes,” by Roger Zelazny; “Fondly Fahrenheit,” by Alfred Bester; “Kyrie,” by Poul Anderson; (others as time allows)

Week 6:

World-Building Project: A scientific concept that adapts itself to speculative fiction (in any subgenres; will include presentation, research, and creative writing)

Weeks 7-9: The Alien/The Other in Speculative Fiction

- short fiction (“When it Changed,” by Joanna Russ; “Out of All Them Bright Stars,” by Nancy Kress; “The Golem” by Avram Davidson; “Super-toys Last All Summer Long,” by Brian Aldiss; “Cat Pictures, Please,” by Naomi Kritzer; “Ye Highlands and Ye Lowlands,” by Seanan McGuire – others as time allows)
- selections from *R.U.R.* by Karel Capek (as time allows)
- *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick

Analysis Paper: Responses to The Alien/The Other

Weeks 10-13: Science Fantasy & Cultural Fusions

- *Lord of Light* by Roger Zelazny
- *Binti*, by Nnedi Okorafor

Position Paper: Genre, and culture, appropriation in sf.

Weeks 14-15: The “High Fantasy” Tradition (Literature Circles)

- excerpts from *A Guide to Fantasy* by Philip Martin (defining the space between fantasy and science fiction within the speculative fiction genre)

Literature Circles: *The Last Unicorn*, by Peter Beagle; *A Wizard of Earthsea*, by Ursula K. Le Guin; *The Hobbit*, by J. R. R. Tolkien; *The Book of Three*, by Lloyd Alexander; *Howl’s Moving Castle*, by Diana Wynne Jones; *Stardust*, by Neil Gaiman; *The Blue Sword*, by Robin McKinley

Group Presentation

Weeks 16-18: Modern Fantasy

- *Neverwhere*, by Neil Gaiman or *Among Others*, by Jo Walton or *The Golem and the Jinni* by Helene Wecker
- “Toward a Definition of Science Fiction,” by James Gunn; “The Critics and the Monsters,” by Ursula K. Le Guin; “The Making of the American Fantasy Genre,” by David Hartwell; selections from Philip Martin’s *A Guide to Fantasy Literature*
- “26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss,” by Kij Johnson; “Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros” by Peter S. Beagle; “Selkie Stories Are For Losers,” by Sofia Samatar; “When it Ends, He Catches Her,” by Eugie Foster; “The Witch of Duva,” by Leigh Bardugo; “Brimstone and Marmalade,” by Aaron Corwin (others, as time allows)

Definitional Paper/Blog Post: Prompt TBA