

Science Fictional and Magical Realities

Instructor: Karina Mathew

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Time & Location: TBA

Office Hours: By appointment on Calendly

Description: In recent years, “science fictional” stories and magical realism have enjoyed a surge of popularity among authors and readers alike. These works depict settings that appear familiar, but with a twist; they contain an element of the technologically futuristic, the magical, or the uncanny, and can even bring into question the boundary between fact and fiction. But what accounts for this growing interest in the strange and strangely familiar, and what about our own time draws such fascination about alternate realities? What role can the science fictional or the fantastical play in reexamining history and the present day—or even in creating new futures?

In this course, we will examine the way science fiction and magical realism expand upon or resist the postmodern literary tradition, commenting upon the normative realities of contemporary society. The first section considers how postcolonial narratives and formalist and structuralist approaches to speculative fictions reflect or destabilize hegemonic histories and epistemologies. Then, in the second unit, we will examine how postcolonialism, gender, sexuality, race, and posthumanism offer a lens for imagining alternative realities. Finally, we end with an investigation into emerging ways of writing about our uncertain present day—including recently published works of indigenous science fiction and solarpunk—that suggest new ways to imagine the future.

Goals: This course will equip you with skills for independent writing and research in literary criticism. The theoretical texts paired with each week’s readings are examples of how secondary sources can prove to be indispensable tools to deepen your own reading—and allow you to frame your questions and arguments within the scholarly conversation in which you will partake. The weekly writing assignments and discussions are designed to provide a scaffold for your development as a writer, troubleshoot challenges as a group, and help you discover what methods work best for you.

By the end of this tutorial, you will not only be an efficient researcher and writer, but a scholar with a voice and work which you are proud to contribute. You will be able to:

- ❖ Develop your own research question to enlarge or deepen our understanding of the texts or questions with which we have grappled during the semester
- ❖ Engage with scholarship and theory on your chosen subject, and synthesize it to support your own contribution
- ❖ Learn the nuts and bolts of efficient writing and research
- ❖ Write a 20-25 page research paper

Required Texts:

Ian McEwan, *Atonement*
Carlos Fuentes, *Aura*
Olga Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*
Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*
Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*
Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower*
Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*
Becky Chambers, *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*

Recommended for purchase but not required (selections will be provided digitally):

Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories*
Ted Chiang, *Stories of Your Life and Others*
Ken Liu, *The Paper Menagerie*
Carmen Maria Machado, *Her Body and Other Parties*
Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*
Grace Dillon (editor), *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*

Required viewing*:

Charlie Booker, *Black Mirror*, Season 3, “Nosedive” (2016)
Russell T. Davies, *Years and Years*, Season 1, “Episode 1” (2019)
Denis Villeneuve, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)
Mamoru Oshii, *Ghost in the Shell* (1995)
Ryan Coogler, *The Black Panther* (2018)
Wanuri Kahiu, *Pumzi* (2009)

*These works are readily available through the library or on streaming services.

Course Schedule

Unit 1:

Postmodernism and Speculative Fiction

This unit introduces us to postmodernism and the epistemologies of our selected genres and modes: science fiction and magical realism. Together, we will consider how postmodernism's emphasis on the self-reflexive text—and its ultimate manifestation in metafiction (the text that knows it's a text)—helps us consider literary, cultural, and political constructions. We will then trace how this formal awareness gives rise to a break from realist literary works in science fiction and magical realism, and the colonialist and technocratic societies they resist or are implicated in.

Week 1: Postmodernism and Metafiction

Due (ungraded): course paper you are most proud of

Primary reading: Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

Secondary reading:

Paula Geyh, "Introduction" (first 4 pages) and Timothy Parrish, "History and Fiction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Fiction*

John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion"

Fredric Jameson, "Introduction" in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*

Class activity/discussion: modeling the Harvard classroom; close-reading and reading literature through a theoretical lens

Optional reading: David Lodge, "Consciousness and the Novel"

For next week: begin "reverse engineering/outlining" the sample essay

Week 2: Magical Realism and Postmodern Literature: Beyond Literary Realism

General Meeting #1, Tutorial Program Welcome and Overview

Due: reverse-engineered sample essay and outline

Primary Reading: Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," Jorge Louis Borges, "The Aleph," Carlos Fuentes, *Aura*

Secondary Reading:

Theo L. D’haen, “Magic Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers,” in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*

Brenda Peynado, “Is Fabulism the New Sincerity?” *LitHub*, May 17, 2021.

<https://lithub.com/is-fabulism-the-new-sincerity/>

Additional required reading: sample essay

Class activity/discussion: discussing your “reverse engineered” sample essay

Week 3: Magical Realism’s Remade Histories: Postcolonialism and the Postwar Novel

Primary Reading: Olga Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*

Secondary Reading:

Stephen Slemon, “Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse,” in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*

Agnieszka Czyżak, et al., “Looking for a Path of One’s Own: The Groundbreaking Role of Olga Tokarczuk’s *House of Day, House of Night*”

Class activity/discussion: meeting the writing fellow

Week 4: Science Fiction’s Alternate Realities: Formalist and Structuralist Approaches

Due: short paper

Primary Reading: Ted Chiang, *Story of Your Life and Others* (selections); Ken Liu, *The Paper Menagerie* (selections)

Secondary Reading:

Victor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*.

Darko Suvin, “Estrangement and Cognition,” and “SF and the Novum,” in *The Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, “Introduction: Science Fiction and This Moment,” in *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*

Class activity/discussion: integrating theory

Week 5: When Reality Reflects Science Fiction: Technology and Postmodernity

Primary Works: Charlie Booker, *Black Mirror*; Season 3, “Nosedive” (2016); Russell T. Davies, *Years and Years*, Season 1, “Episode 1” (2019); Denis Villeneuve, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)

Secondary Reading:

Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra”

Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”

Veronica Hollinger, “Cybernetic Deconstructions: Cyberpunk and Postmodernism”

Class activity/discussion: effective research and integrating sources

Week 6: Choosing Your Text, Choosing Your Topic (no readings)

General Meeting #2, Seniors Tell All: Reflections on the Junior Essay

Assignment: selecting your topic journal entry

Use this week’s break from assigned readings to study the syllabus, identify the text you want to write on, and read ahead, if we haven’t covered the text already.

Class activity/discussion: Choosing a viable research topic

Event: Library Visit

Unit 2:

Alternate Views of the Present and Future

Having considered postmodern literature’s relationship to history and technology, in this unit we look closer at the ways our selected genres think outside hegemonic structures, allowing voices from the margins to give rise to alternate realities. We examine how gender, race, and even non-human perspectives inflect the stories we know, or create worlds and futures that seem fantastical.

Week 7: Enchanted and Cursed Realities: Feminist Retellings of Age Old Tales

Primary Reading: (selections) Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*; (selections) Carmen Maria Machado, *Her Body and Other Parties*; Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*

Secondary Reading:

Judith Butler, “Women’ as the Subject of Feminism,” in *Gender Trouble*

Helen Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”

Jeanne Jorgensen, “Gender, Sexuality and the Fairy Tale in Contemporary American Literature,” in *The Fairy Tale World*

Class activity/discussion: writing the prospectus and annotated bibliography

Week 8: Posthumanism and Non-Human Storytellers: A New Vision of the Human

Due: prospectus and annotated bibliography

Primary Works: Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, OR Mamoru Oshii, *Ghost in the Shell* (1995)

Secondary Reading:

Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto” (selections)

Katherine Hayles, “Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers”

Lars Benaerts, et al., “The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators”

Class activity/discussion: getting support and feedback on writing

Week 9: Afrofuturism: Race and the Construction of Alternate Futures

This week: Schedule individual conferences on draft progress

Due: reverse engineer and outline sample essay 2

Primary Works: Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower*; Ryan Coogler, *The Black Panther* (2018)

Secondary Reading:

Mark Dery, “Black to the Future”

Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism”

Samuel R. Delany, “The Mirror of Afrofuturism”

Additional required reading: sample essay 2

Class activity/discussion: discussing the reverse-engineered sample essay

Optional reading:

Dann J. Broyld, “The Underground Railroad as Afrofuturism: Enslaved Blacks Who Imagined a Future and Used Technology to Reach the ‘Outer Spaces of Slavery’”

Week 10: Queering Communities in Space

Due: draft

Primary Reading: Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Secondary Reading:

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Introduction: Axiomatic” (selections) from *The Epistemology of the Closet*

Wendy Pearson, “Alien Cryptographies: The View from Queer”

De Witt Douglas Kilgore, “Queering the Coming Race? A Utopian Historical Perspective”

Class activity/discussion: giving and receiving feedback on writing

Week 11: Draft workshop (no readings this week)

Unit 3:

New Ways of Responding to Troubled Futures

In recent years, two perspectives on the future have gained prominence and visibility in American culture: indigenous traditional knowledge and stories, and an emerging genre of climate fiction called *solarpunk*. While the myriad stories and myths of indigenous peoples around the world have existed for millenia, we consider what it means for these groups to represent themselves and be represented in our current moment. Finally, we conclude the course by considering how the optimistic spirit of resistance in solarpunk responds to the irony of the postmodern literature encountered in the first week of the course.

Week 12: Indigenous Science Fiction and Climate Change

Primary Works: Grace Dillon (editor), *Walking the Clouds* (selections)

Secondary Works:

Grace Dillon and Pedro Neves Marques, “Taking the Fiction Out of Science Fiction: A Conversation about Indigenous Futurisms”

Daniel Heath Justice, “Introduction: Stories That Wound, Stories That Heal” in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*

Kyle Whyte, “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises”

Week 13: Solarpunk: Storytelling and Resilience in the Anthropocene

This week: Individual conferences on draft progress

Due: 5-minute conference-style presentations

Primary Viewing and Reading: Becky Chambers, *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*; Wanuri Kahiu, *Pumzi* (2009)

Secondary Reading:

Italo Calvino, “On Lightness”

Gregory Lynall, “Solarpunk,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate*

Alyssa Hull, “Hopepunk and Solarpunk: On Climate Narratives That Go Beyond the Apocalypse,” *LitHub*, November 22, 2019,

<https://lithub.com/hopepunk-and-solarpunk-on-climate-narratives-that-go-beyond-the-apocalypse/>

Recommended: Hayao Miyazaki, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984)

Reading Week

Final Paper Due (to department and tutor)

Junior Tutorial Conference Presentations

Assignments

- ❖ **Short Essay** (5 pages) (10%)
- ❖ **Prospectus & Annotated Bibliography** (15%)
- ❖ **Draft** (15%)
- ❖ **Final Paper** (20-25 pages) (40%)
- ❖ **Participation & Preparation** (20%)
- ❖ **Conference Presentation** (ungraded)

Course Policies & Additional Information

Student support hours: For student support hours, you have the option of meeting with me over Zoom, in my office, or for a walking-meeting. (For more on walking-meetings and why they’re beneficial, see this Harvard Business Review article, “[Sitting is the Smoking of Our Generation](#)” by Nilofer Merchant.) Let me know what meeting format you would like when making an appointment on Calendly.

Inclusion and Accessibility: The primary principle for success in any learning environment is that of respect: for each other and the work we produce, and the means we conduct ourselves in relationship to our fellow researchers and research. In the course of this tutorial, we may encounter material that is new to us: it may take us by surprise or raise difficult questions. Some of this material might be in the texts we read, and others might be in the words of our peers. I encourage open conversations that confront, rather than side-step, these difficult topics. By agreeing to discuss and critique this content in a way that is both respectful and constructive, we can create a welcoming and robust learning environment that grows *with* us. As the instructor of the course, I will do my part to flag potentially unsettling material that you may want to discuss with me beforehand, while also realizing that what is “problematic” for me may be different for you. Having conversations about these subjects can aid us in developing a model for future conduct in the university that is inclusive and sensitive.

Academic Integrity: Plagiarism is the use of another person’s ideas or writing without giving them proper credit. In the Information Age, our ideas are one of our greatest sources of power, and we deserve to be credited even as we give credit; to empower others as our ideas empower us. For example, a lesser known form of plagiarism is rearranging someone else's words as a “paraphrase.” This usage generates no idea of its own, merely recycling another writer’s intellectual labor. The consequences of plagiarism can range from failing an assignment to dismissal from the course, or even more serious actions. It bears repeating that A.I. chatbots like ChatGPT, while helpful supplements to other research tools, cannot be used to produce your own course assignments: all writing must be your own.

By familiarizing yourself with the [Harvard College Handbook](#), the [Harvard Guide to Using Sources](#), and Harvard FAS’s Honor Code, you can begin to use information responsibly and intentionally: “*Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one’s own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.*” I also welcome you to discuss this topic with me if you have any lingering questions or just feel unclear about proper usage.

Collaboration: Today more than ever, learning the skills of collaboration are important to success in the university and beyond. I encourage you to turn to your fellow students as your teammates, fellow brainstormers, and peer reviewers. However, note that the work you turn in under your name must be your own, and input from collaborators must be cited.

Attendance: In courses the size of our tutorial, each student’s attendance counts: we are a team. You learn from your peers as much as they learn from you, which is why attendance at all of our meetings and events is required. However, I understand that life frustrates even our most earnest attempts to be avid learners, and that COVID-19 has complicated matters even further, so I offer everyone a “free” absence without explanation. More than one absence, however, will harm your participation grade, and an overall pattern of absence, tardiness, and poor participation could be grounds for failing the course. This is not because I want to penalize you, but because you will have missed out on the opportunity to adequately equip yourself to successfully produce the kind of research project this course requires. Please email me in a timely manner to communicate any events or information that might prevent your full participation, and we will have a conversation about it. Last minute notifications make it harder to plan ahead effectively. If you receive a quarantine mandate from HUHS, please let me know as soon as possible, and I will do my best to arrange for you to “Zoom in” to class, or at the very least record the class for you and follow up with a one-on-one meeting.

Due Dates & Late Grades: Unless otherwise specified, assignments are due by the course start time on the date listed in the schedule. Late assignments will be docked 1/3 letter grade per day late, except for the final paper, which must be turned in by the due date. Students failing to turn in a final paper, or turning it in late without an official excuse, will fail the tutorial. I am happy to

grant extensions if given advance notice, preferably a few days ahead of the assignment, but no less than 24 hours.

Laptops: Laptops are permitted in class, and the use of iPads/tablets is encouraged. However, please practice courtesy to yourself and others by limiting your laptop use to course-related notetaking and searches only. During peer conversations, we will limit our use of digital devices.

Email: I will use email and Canvas to distribute important info throughout the semester—from emailing you handouts to adjusting assignments and deadlines. To help us develop a healthy relationship to our email accounts, I will send material and announcements on Mondays, and only email outside of that time to notify you of any *crucial* last minute information (e.g. sudden campus closure). I will respond to emails within 24 hours (if I haven't, you are welcome to send a follow up email). Please send me your questions over email ahead of time, rather than a couple of hours before an assignment is due, so that I see your email in time.

Accommodations for students with disabilities: Accommodating students is part of Harvard policy, and I will work with you to make sure you can participate fully in our course. Please familiarize yourself with the related policy: “*Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term, (September 10, 2021). Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.*”