

Mischief Managed: Fairy Tales and Children's Literature

"There are some themes," writes Philip Pullman, "some subjects, too large for adult fiction; they can only be dealt with adequately in a children's book." Children's literature may be filled with magic wands and enchanted objects, but within these worlds lies more than glitter and gold. This course will explore narratives written for children, from fairy tales to fantasy and dystopian literature, examining the rich history, complexities, and contradictions of the genre. How do black squiggly lines on a white page conjure worlds that elicit wonder and incite curiosity? Why do these stories have such staying power, and how do they equip us to grapple with the challenges of our contemporary world? What themes, if any, are too "adult" for children? Why are these stories cognitively and emotionally valuable? In Unit 1, we will read a series of fairy tales, exploring the ways that fairy tales have been recycled and interpreted over time. In Unit 2, we will move to classical works of children's literature, such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan*, exploring the shift from moralizing nursery tales to narrative worlds that captured the imagination of the child. How have conceptions of childhood changed over time? In Unit 3, we will turn to modern works of children's and young adult literature, considering the impact of these stories today. How do these stories shape – and how are they shaped by – modern society and culture? What do we learn about ourselves and others from reading children's and young adult literature, and how do these books change the way we think, act, and live?

Tutorial Learning Goals

- Design a research question.
- Craft a critical bibliography around that question, including diverse methods and viewpoints.
- Develop subject-area expertise.
- Explore a range of critical approaches.
- Put secondary criticism in conversation with your own ideas and with other criticism.
- Write with clarity and precision.
- Complete a 20-25 page paper.

Methodologies and Critical Approaches

Aesthetics – *Wonder, The Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, Phil Fischer; "On Vivacity," Elaine Scarry; *Hooked*, Rita Felski; *Enchanted Hunters*, Maria Tatar.

Cognitive Theory – *Justice in Young Adult Speculative Fiction*, Marek C. Oziewicz.

Critical Race Theory – "Notes toward a Black Fantastic: Black Atlantic Flights beyond Afrofuturism in Young Adult Literature," Ebony Elizabeth Thomas.

Feminist & Gender Theory – "Girlhood," Jacqueline Reid-Walsh; *Twenty-First-Century Feminisms in Children's and Adolescent Literature*, Roberta Seelinger Trites.

Historicist Texts on Childhood & Adolescence – “Childhood,” Karen Sánchez-Eppler; “Adult,” Victoria Ford Smith; *Books for Children, Books for Adults: Age and the Novel from Defoe to James*.

Novel Studies – “Genre,” Karin E. Westman; *Uses of Literature*, Rita Felski; *How To Read and Why?* Harold Bloom; *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters*, Blakey Vermeule.

Philosophy of Literature – “Fiction as a Thought Experiment,” Catherine Elgin; “Literature and Knowledge,” John Gibson; *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Jane Bennett

Unit I: Fairy Tales

Class I. Following the Path: “Little Red Riding Hood” and the Origin of the Fairy Tale

What are the origins of the fairy tale? How have fairy tales been recycled over time?

In *Classic Fairy Tales*, ed. Maria Tatar, read:

“Little Red Riding Hood,” pp. 5-29

Vladimir Propp, from *Morphology of the Folktale*, pp. 502-7

Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” pp. 356-63

Class II. Tale as Old as Time: Beasts and Beauties

How do fairy tales explore the concept of monstrosity? What are the ways in which monstrosity can be interpreted? How do these tales help us work through our social and moral anxieties?

Classic Fairy Tales, pp. 30-83; 117-38

Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth”

Class III. Trickster Treat

What is a trickster? How do tricksters push the boundaries of social norms? To what extent do they make, and remake, our world?

Classic Fairy Tales, pp. 229-77, pp. 95-102 (Grimms’ “Snow White”)

African Folk and Fairy Tales, Maria Tatar and Henry Louis Gates

Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, pp. 456-58

Class IV. From Snow to Sea: The Fairy Tales of Hans Christian Andersen

Classic Fairy Tales, pp. 278-325.
“Girlhood,” Jacqueline Reid-Walsh

Unit II. From Fairy Tales to Fantasy Literature

Class V. Off with Their Heads: *Alice in Wonderland* and the History of Nonsense

What is the role of nonsense in and beyond Alice in Wonderland? What is the relationship of nonsense to childhood?

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll
“Fiction as a Thought Experiment,” Catherine Elgin
“Genre,” Karin E. Westman

Class VI. I Do Believe in Fairies: *Peter Pan* and the Child Imagination

How does J.M. Barrie’s novel, Peter and Wendy, celebrate the mind of the child? How does the novel grapple with loss – of innocence, of childhood, of life?

Peter Pan and Wendy, J.M. Barrie
Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*
“Childhood,” Karen Sánchez-Eppler
“Adult,” Victoria Ford Smith

Class VII. Zuckerman’s Famous Pig: *Charlotte’s Web* and the Juxtaposition of Beauty and Horror

What is the role of beauty and horror in children’s literature? How does this juxtaposition create what Maria Tatar calls “ignition power” in the mind of the child reader?

Charlotte’s Web, E.B. White
Enchanted Hunters, Maria Tatar
“On Vivacity,” Elaine Scarry

Unit III. Contemporary Children’s Literature

Class VIII. All That Glitters is Not Gold: Forbidden Knowledge in Philip Pullman’s *The Golden Compass*

How does one’s immersion in a book transform, delight, and enlighten? How does enchantment advance understanding in child readers?

The Golden Compass, Philip Pullman
Enchantment, Rita Felski
The Enchantment of Modern Life, Jane Bennett

Class VIII. Change-Makers: Justice and *Children of Blood and Bone*

How does literature inform our understanding of justice and catalyze change?

Children of Blood and Bone, Tomi Adeyemi
Justice in Young Adult Speculative Fiction, Marek C. Oziewicz

Class IX. People Who Need People: Character Attachment in Children's Literature

Why do we care about fictional characters? What emotional attachments do we form to fictional characters, and why are those bonds long-lasting and important?

Akata Witch, Nnedi Okorafor
Why Do We Care About Literary Characters, Blakey Vermeule

Class X. Real or Not Real: Performative Violence in *The Hunger Games*

How do modern dystopic young adult novels recycle the horror (and hunger) of the fairy tale genre? What, if anything, is too "adult" or graphic for children and adolescents?

The Hunger Games, Suzanne Collins
Theatres of Human Sacrifice, Mark Pizzato
"No More Adventures in Wonderland," Maria Tatar

Class XI. Mischief Managed: *Harry Potter* and Words as Magic

How does Harry Potter carry on the legacy of nonsense? What things can we do with words?

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, JK Rowling (Part 1)
J.L. Austin, "How to do Things with Words"

Class XII. Reading Engagement in the 21st Century

How can we cultivate a lifelong love of reading in an era of social media and technology?

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, JK Rowling (Part 2)
"The Erosion of Deep Literacy," Adam Garfinkel

Assignments

GENERAL NOTES:

- Please email your assignments to me (mgprezioso@g.harvard.edu)
- All the larger, official due dates that I have set—the close reading paper, prospectus, and the JP draft—are on **Fridays at 5 PM**. This is to avoid asking you to submit written work on the day of our class meetings.
- There is one **optional** due date on a Wednesday at 5.
- The departmental deadline for your Junior Paper is on a **Tuesday at 4 PM**. For this assignment, you will need to copy Lauren Bimmler on your email to me.

Participation: 25% of final grade.

This seminar will only succeed if you bring your energy to it, so please come to class having completed all the required readings, with questions and interests to share. Your week 5 office hours, week 8 office hours, week 11 or 12 draft conference, workshop, and Junior Tutorial Conference participation all count towards this grade—as do your Canvas posts. You will not have a Canvas post due every class, but please remember to complete all Canvas post assignments by the due dates listed on this syllabus.

Close Reading Paper: 10%

Write a close reading (5 pages) of a scene from one of the books that we have encountered thus far. Please do not cite secondary sources to inform your interpretation—this is all about your literary critical take, and we will practice close reading together in class.

Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography: 10%

These documents should identify your research question, propose a thesis, and outline the scope of your argument. They should also identify your methodologies of interest and at least ten potential secondary sources. I will upload an assignment and rubric to Canvas, and we will dedicate half of class this week to discussing your prospectuses before the break.

Junior Paper Draft: 15%

Your Junior Paper Draft is your chance to debut your ideas and receive thoughtful feedback from your peers and instructor, so please give it your all. This draft should be at least 20 pages long, including your bibliography. Ultimately, your Junior Paper revision will be graded in part upon how well you have adapted and grown as a writer in reply to my and your peers' comments on

this work; this is a departmental requirement. If you submit an incomplete or careworn draft, that will make your revision process more challenging. On the other hand, if you put thought and effort into this work, then you'll be in a fabulous place for your revision process.

OPTIONAL Junior Paper Second Draft: No grade

If you'd like to send me your Junior Paper by 5 PM on Wednesday, April 24, I will offer final comments to aid in your final round of revisions. You will receive my comments—by which I mean marginal notes, not the full letter that I will offer for your official draft—by the end of the day on April 26. While there is no grade and no official extra credit for this assignment, you will almost certainly end up improving your final paper if you seek out additional feedback.

If all of you decide to submit paper drafts early, then we will try to coordinate a workshop party on Friday the 26th so that you have a chance to discuss your comments as a group.

Junior Paper: 40%, Departmental Deadline.

Your Junior Paper will be a 20-25 page research project on a literary work that we read in this class. If you wish to write about a film or show (even if only in comparison to a literary work) please schedule a meeting with me by Class 6 to discuss your idea. Your final paper must include at least two methodological perspectives and ten secondary sources. We will discuss this project at length in class, beginning in Class 5. There will be two assignments and many in-class workshops to help you plan in advance and succeed on this paper.

Please email your paper to Lauren Bimmler (lbimmler@fas.harvard.edu). Please copy me, Prof. Alan Niles (niles@fas.harvard.edu), and Emily Miller (emily_miller@fas.harvard.edu)