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Course: English 3140-1  
Term: Spring 2020  
Class number: 33730  
Room: 5-244  
Time: TTh 1:00-2:15

### **English 3140 “Genre Fiction”**

Traditional literature courses teach students to read, analyze, and interpret canonical texts, the most highly valued and admired works in the fields of American, British, and World literature. However, in their daily lives most English majors read large quantities of popular fiction in various genres—fantasy, science fiction, romance, mystery, and horror—and many aspire to write such works. In this course, we will apply powerful reading strategies and critical theory to popular fiction while exploring questions such as:

- How do genre conventions influence readers and writers?
- How do reader expectations differ from genre to genre?
- Why is genre fiction popular and pleasurable to read?
- Can genre fiction be serious? Literary?
- How can we evaluate genre fiction?
- What are relevant critical approaches?
- How does one write genre fiction?

The final project for students in this course can be either a critical paper or a short story. The course explores relationships between popular and canonical literature, and between the creative and critical processes, in such a way that students' understanding of traditional approaches to literature is enhanced.

#### **Course Goals:**

Students who finish this course will be able to

- Identify the structures and reader expectations of major genres of popular fiction and how they work to create meaning;
- Understand and use theoretical terms and concepts used in describing narrative technique;
- Create coherent settings, believable characters, and effective plotlines in their own writing and critique such devices in the writing of others;
- Develop their ability to use various stylistic techniques through frequent short writing exercises;
- Present on the writing craft of particular authors and stories in class;
- Demonstrate the above abilities in blog posts, presentations, and either a short story or a critical paper.

## **Required Books:**

Beagle, Peter, ed. *The Secret History of Fantasy*. San Francisco: Tachyon, 2010.

Hammett, Dashiell. *The Maltese Falcon*. New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 1992.

Le Guin, Ursula K., *Steering the Craft: A 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story*. New York: Mariner Books, 2015.

Mosley, Walter. *Devil in a Blue Dress*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1990.

Samatar, Sofia. *A Stranger in Olondria*. Easthampton, MA: Small Beer Press, 2013.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966.

Vandermeer, Jeff. *Bourne*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.

## **Recommended:**

Vandermeer, Jeff. *Wonderbook (Revised and Expanded): The Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction*. New York: Abrams Image, 2018.

Plus online stories and articles.

## **About the Reading:**

Edgar Allan Poe invented the detective story with his detective Auguste Dupin, who first appeared in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” We will follow that story with “The Speckled Band,” a Sherlock Holmes story by Arthur Conan Doyle that is clearly influenced by Poe. In fact, Doyle was accused of plagiarism! These stories will be followed by two detective novels: *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett and *Devil in a Blue Dress* by Walter Mosley. Hammett’s novel establishes the noir detective genre. Mosley’s character Easy Rawlings, a black detective operating in 1950’s Los Angeles, builds on the noir tradition.

After exploring the detective genre, we will move on to fantasy with a couple of stories from Robert E. Howard, who invented the sword and sorcery genre of fantasy with his hero Conan the Cimmerian. Then we will move on to the more sophisticated fantasy of J. R. R. Tolkien and *The Hobbit*. The line between fantasy and science fiction is sometimes blurry. Orson Scott Card says that in a fantasy world the laws of physics are different from our own world because magic works, but in science fiction the laws of physics are the same as in our own world. That is as good a definition as any, but technology, especially unexplained technology, often looks and functions like magic.

We will continue to explore the genre of fantasy with stories from a collection edited by Peter Beagle, *The Secret History of Fantasy*. Beagle is the author of several fantasy novels, including *The Last Unicorn* and *A Fine and Private Place*. This collection is designed to show that fantasy is not just sword and sorcery. For the fantasy stories you will be filling out “Story Response Sheets” that focus on the elements of story craft.

At the end of the fantasy portion of the course we will read Sofia Samatar’s *A Stranger in Olondria*. Nic Clarke, in the “Strange Horizons” blog, says, “As you might expect (or hope) from a novel that is in part about the painting of worlds with words, the prose in *Stranger* is glorious.” Abigail Nussbaum says, in her “Asking the Wrong Question” blog, that the first paragraph of the novel “tells us that this is a book whose power is rooted first and foremost in worldbuilding and language, and that both are executed in a manner that is ornate and even a touch overwhelming.” Gary K. Wolfe, writing in *Locus* magazine says “*A Stranger in Olondria* is less a conventional epic than a gorgeously imagined ghost romance, which undermines its apparently familiar quest setting at almost every turn.” Later he calls it “a celebration (quite literally) of the power of story.” This novel demonstrates mastery of every technique and device we will have studied by this point in the course. However, it is a slow read, especially at first, not because it is long (it isn’t) but because every sentence contains and expresses some kind of beauty.

We will finish with *Bourne* by Jeff Vandermeer. Is it science fiction? Or is it fantasy? We will figure it out.

Along the way, we will read critical articles online and explore the writing exercises in Ursula Le Guin’s *Steering the Craft: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Guide to Sailing the Sea Of Story*. Jeff Vandemeer’s *Wonderbook* is another writing handbook, beautifully illustrated and cleverly written, but this time I decided to make it recommended rather than required.

There will be reading questions posted for most of the novels and short stories. Download the reading questions before you do the reading. I will not collect the answers to these questions, but you may find them helpful in understanding the books.

### **Attendance:**

Although this course has an online component, this is **not** an online class. Attendance and participation are essential. If you **must** miss class, contact me through phone or email and make arrangements to make up the work. Under no circumstances will a student who has missed more than 10% of the course through unexcused absences be allowed to pass the class.

### **Online Participation:**

This course has a Blackboard site attached to it. All handouts and assignments will be posted there. Reading and discussion questions for the stories and articles will also be posted. You should check the site at least twice a week for announcements, links and posted materials. I will send an email when I post something new.

## Assignments and Grading

### Personal Blogs:

We will use the Blackboard blog tool to post in-class writing exercises, story ideas, and bits of original writing for comment. Starting in the second week, you are required to post at least once a week, and then visit at least one other student's blog and comment on their posts. That is the minimum, but I hope that you will participate even more fully in the online discussions.

In the early part of the course your blog posts will mostly be writing exercises from the Le Guin book. After posting, read through some of the other students' responses and comment on at least one of them. Although I will read and comment on discussion posts as we go along, at the end of the quarter I will read through all of your posts and evaluate your online participation as a whole according to the following criteria:

- Posts—You will post from week 2 to week 14. Each writing activity post is worth 2 points for a total of 26. Initially, these will mostly be from the Le Guin book, but later there will be some from Vandermeer and some of my own. Toward the end you will be posting bits and pieces of the story you are working on or ideas for your critical paper, if you choose not to write a story.
- Comments—You will continue to comment through Week 15. Each comment is worth 1 point, for a total of 14.
- Timeliness of posts and comments—Posts should happen approximately one per week. Five points are possible for timeliness. If you do all of your comments in one week at the end of the quarter, you will get no points in this category.
- Quality—In writing exercises, I am looking for an honest, engaged attempt to do the writing task. In comments, I am looking for engagement, substance, insight, good discussion. Posts don't have to be long to achieve that. Five possible points for quality.
- Writers love to hear positive comments, but honest, constructive criticism is what helps even a good a writer improve. Try to achieve a balance. Disagreements if they occur, should be respectful.

**Final Project:** For your final project you can write **either a critical paper or a short story**.

### Critical Paper

If you choose to write a critical paper you will write a critical analysis of a fictional text or texts you have chosen in terms of the narrative techniques we have studied in the course. At least one of the texts you analyze must be one we read for the course. The paper should be eight to ten pages, double-spaced, in 12-point font with one-inch margins. Sources should be documented in MLA style. The final draft is due the day of the final exam meeting.

A “mini-proposal” for the paper describing the approach, the text or texts that is the object of study, a possible thesis, a rationale for the project, and at least three sources is

due at the beginning of the eighth week. The final paper should have an abstract, an introduction, a discussion of the critical approach, a discussion section in which you apply the approach to the text, and a conclusion.

If you choose to do a critical paper, talk to me about alternatives to the Character Depth Analysis and World Building Plan assignments.

### **Short Story**

If you choose to write a story, it should be 10 to 20 pages of fiction. It need not be complete, but you should have at least an outline that shows where you are going with it. Stories will be evaluated under the following criteria:

- The originality and interest of the “What if?” question, fantasy concept, or problem in detection.
- The presentation and development of characters.
- The nature of the plot, especially in terms of the nature of the conflict and the problem(s) the character(s) must solve.
- Your ability to use details to suggest a possible fantastic, science fictional, or historical world.
- Your ability to use the devices of narration and the effectiveness of the writing at the stylistic level.
- The quality of your proofreading. In other words, grammatical errors, punctuation problems, misspellings, and awkward sentence structure should not detract from the expression of your ideas.

A mini-proposal for your story is due at the end of the ninth week. It should include a description of the viewpoint character, the setting, and something about the problem or conflict. I will provide a template.

### **Turning In Papers Electronically:**

Most papers will be uploaded to the “Assignment” tool in Blackboard. If you email a paper to me, please name the document file something like this:

LastNameFirstName-Assignment-Course.doc

### **Academic Integrity**

Turning in work that uses words or ideas from sources but without documentation may constitute **plagiarism**. See the “Academic Integrity” page on the Cal Poly website:

<https://www.cpp.edu/~studentconduct/academic-integrity/index.shtml>

## Weighting of Assignments

Assignments	Points
In-class participation	<del>20</del> 12
Personal Writing Blog: Writing Exercises and Other Original Writing—26 points Comments on the Posts of Other Students—14 points Timeliness—5 points Quality of Posts and Comments—5 points	50
Story Response Sheets (5 points each, collected in class)	40
Take-Home Early Midterm (Detective Fiction)	20
Take-Home Late Midterm (Fantasy)	20
Mini-proposal for story or paper (Basically an elevator pitch)	10
Character Depth Analysis	10
World Building Plan	10
Short Story or Paper	60
Take-Home Final on <i>Stranger in Olondria</i> and <i>Bourne</i>	20
<del>Poster Session on Short Story or Paper</del>	<del>30</del>
Discussion Board Participation 1 original post and 1 comment for each class day (2 days per week for 6 weeks=24 posts) 2 points for each post or comment.	48
Total	300

Grading Scale for 300 Points			
A	278-300	C	218-229
A-	269-277	C-	209-217
B+	260-268	D+	200-208
B	248-259	D	188-199
B-	239-247	D-	179-187
C+	230-238	F	178 or less

## Schedule of Readings and Assignments

Dates	Topics, Assignments, and Activities
<b>Wk1</b>	<b>Detective Fiction</b>
Tu. 1/21	Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder” (in Online Resources)  “Writing the Short Story” handout and “Story Response Sheet” (in Course Documents)

Th. 1/23	Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" Conan Doyle, "The Speckled Band" Le Guin, Introduction and Chapter 1, "The Sound of Your Writing." Story Response Sheet (Choose one story)
<b>Wk2</b>	
Tu. 1/28	Hodson, "The Recoil of 'The Speckled Band': Detective Story and Detective Discourse" (in Course documents) Le Guin, Chapter 2 "Punctuation"
Th. 1/30	Hammett, <i>The Maltese Falcon</i> Chaps. 1-9, (3-89)
<b>Wk3</b>	
Tu. 2/4	Hammett, <i>The Maltese Falcon</i> Chaps. 10-15, (90-150) Le Guin, Chapter 3 "Sentence Length and Complex Syntax."
Th. 2/6	Hammett, <i>The Maltese Falcon</i> , Chaps.16-20 (151-217) Rabinowitz, "How Did You Know He Licked His Lips?": Second Person Knowledge and First Person Power in The Maltese Falcon" (in "Course Documents")
<b>Wk4</b>	
Tu. 2/11	Mosley, <i>Devil in a Blue Dress</i> (45-141, Chapters 1-13) Le Guin, Chapter 4, "Repetition."
Th. 2/13	Mosley, <i>Devil in a Blue Dress</i> (142-263, Chapters 14-31) Discuss Take-home Early Midterm (Detective Fiction)
<b>Wk5</b>	<b>Fantasy</b>
Tu. 2/18	Phelan, "Narrative as Rhetoric: Reading the Spells of Porter's 'Magic'" (in "Course Documents") Le Guin, Chapter 5, "Adjectives and Adverbs."
Th. 2/20	Farah Mendelsohn, "Rhetorics of Fantasy" (Link in "Online Resources") Howard, "The Tower of the Elephant" (Link in "Course Documents") Story Response Sheet on "Tower of the Elephant"

<b>Wk6</b>	
Tu. 2/25	Howard, “Red Nails: (We will only discuss the first section “The Skull on the Crag,” but you can read the rest of it if you are interested.)  Le Guin, Chapter 6, “Verbs: Person and Tense”
Th. 2/27	Tolkien, <i>The Hobbit</i> , Chapters I and II. Also look at any maps or other introductory material.  Aimee Bender, “What Writers Can Learn From ‘Goodnight Moon’” (in Course Documents)
<b>Wk7</b>	
Tu. 3/3	<i>The Hobbit</i> ; Chapters III through X;  Le Guin, Chapter 7 “Point of View and Voice.”
Th. 3/5	Finish <i>The Hobbit</i> ; Chapters XI through XIX
<b>Wk8</b>	
Tu. 3/10	Reading in Beagle, <i>The Secret History of Fantasy</i> : “Ancestor Money” by Maureen F. McHugh “Scarecrow” by Gregory Maguire  Le Guin, Chapter 8, “Changing Point of View.”  Story Response Sheet (Choose one story)
Th. 3/12	Reading in Beagle, <i>The Secret History of Fantasy</i> : “Lady of the Skulls” by Patricia A. McKillip “The Barnum Museum” by Steven Millhauser  Story Response Sheet (Choose one story)
<b>Wk9</b>	
Tu. 3/17	Reading in Beagle, <i>The Secret History of Fantasy</i> : “Mrs. Todd’s Shortcut” by Stephen King “Snow, Glass, Apples” by Neil Gaiman  Le Guin Chapter 9, “Indirect Narration.”

	Story Response Sheet (Choose one story)
Th. 3/19	Reading in Beagle, <i>The Secret History of Fantasy</i> : “Fruit and Words” by Aimee Bender “The Empire of Ice Cream” by Jeffrey Ford  Story Response Sheet (Choose one story)  <b>Story Mini-proposal Due</b>
<b>Wk10</b>	
Tu. 3/24	Reading in Beagle, <i>The Secret History of Fantasy</i> : “The Edge of the World” by Michael Swanwick “Super Goat Man” Jonathan Lethem  Le Guin Chapter 10, “Crowding and Leaping.”  Story Response Sheet (Choose one story)
Th. 3/26	Reading in Beagle, <i>The Secret History of Fantasy</i> : “John Uskglass and the Cumbrian Charcoal Burner” by Susanna Clarke “The Book of Martha” by Octavia E. Butler  Story Response Sheet (Choose one story)  <b>Characterization Depth Analysis Due</b>
<b>Spring Break</b>	<b>3/28-4/3</b>
<b>Wk 11</b>	
Tu. 4/7	Reading in Beagle, <i>The Secret History of Fantasy</i> : “Sleight of Hand” by Peter S. Beagle “Mythago Wood” by Robert Holdstock “26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss” by Kij Johnson  Story Response Sheet (Choose one story)  <b>World building Plan Due</b>
Th. 4/9	Discuss Take-Home Late Midterm (Fantasy)
<b>Wk 12</b>	
Tu. 4/14	Samatar, Books One and Two, 1-80
Th. 4/16	Samatar, Book Three, 83-137

<b>Wk 13</b>	
Tu. 4/21	Samatar, Books Four and Five, 141-270
Th. 4/23	Samatar, Book Six, 273-99
<b>Wk 14</b>	
Tu. 4/28	Vandermeer, <i>Bourne</i> , Part One, 3-56.
Th. 4/30	Vandermeer, <i>Bourne</i> , Part Two, 59-193
<b>Wk 15</b>	
Tu. 5/5	Vandermeer, <i>Bourne</i> , Part Three, 197-323
Th. 5/7	Discuss Take-Home final
<b>Final</b> Tu. 5/12, 1:00-2:50	<del>Poster session: Create a poster, a short powerpoint, or a handout out and prepare to present to roving groups of students for 3-5 minutes at a time.</del> <b>Final story due by midnight</b>