

Science Fiction and Cultural Capital

<http://sf20.blogs.rutgers.edu>

Thursdays, 9:50 a.m.

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Office hours: Tuesdays, 10 a.m.–11 a.m. or by appointment

First christened in the lowly milieu of the pulpwood magazine, the genre of science fiction has lately approached the highest precincts of literary prestige, with novelists who have written science-fictional texts winning the Nobel Prize (Lessing, Ishiguro) and SF authors achieving the hardbound solidity of Library of America publication (Dick, Le Guin). But SF's status is far more complex than this image of upward trajectory implies: it is at once a highbrow niche, a nerdy subculture, and a genre of mass-market transmedia entertainment. This course studies key moments in the history of print SF's evolving status, aiming to shed some light on the history of literary status itself over the last century.

The course does not expect students to be or become SF specialists. It emphasizes the broad theoretical and literary-historical themes raised by the study of science fiction: genre, prestige, canons, readerships, media. The course challenges simplistic understandings of “the canon” and of the opposition between high and low culture as they play out across the last century. Against the widely current idea that the evaluation of texts in an academic context is the same as the social privileging or exclusion of authorial identities, we consider the science-fiction genre's relation to the variant forms of *cultural capital* which shape social destinies in our modernity, from everyday print literacy, to technical expertise, to “omnivorous” cultural fluency. All of these forms of status-conferring knowledge or display, reproduced and transmitted in distinctive institutional settings, are of special consequence to the shape of SF.

In addition to making a highly selective survey of the last century of (mostly US) science fiction, the course emphasizes the methodological challenge of incorporating questions of circulation and reception into literary history. The final paper assignment requires attention to these issues as well as to more familiar questions of literary interpretation.

This course satisfies the A5 distribution requirement.

LEARNING GOALS

Students in this course will:

1. gain a working literary-historical knowledge of the genre of science fiction, one of the major categories of twentieth-century literature and media;
2. engage critically with classic and recent scholarship on SF;
3. become conversant with sociological theories of cultural capital in relation to literature and literary institutions;
4. develop a nuanced theoretical understanding of literary status in terms of its role in literary studies and its role in society at large.

REQUIREMENTS

10% SEMINAR PARTICIPATION

There are many ways to participate actively and effectively in a seminar discussion. It is important for everyone, including the instructor, to reflect on what they are doing as a discussion participant and how they can best contribute to the development of the collective inquiry.

For sessions conducted by videoconference, it is particularly important to be as present in the main flow of conversation (as listener or speaker) as the platform allows, and to minimize interruptions and distractions.

I am always happy to meet one-on-one to talk over ideas or concerns about the seminar.

10% INFORMAL WRITING

All students are required to contribute to a course blog every week. There will be rotating assignments, which may include research into reception history using online databases, briefly discussing one of the assigned texts, or commenting on posts by others. All contributions are graded credit / no credit.

10% PRELIMINARY WORK ON FINAL PAPER

Some preliminary writing, reflecting research and analysis on a question of likely relevance to the final project, is due at midterm. Grading is on the basis of effort.

70% FINAL PAPER

An article-length paper (8000–10000 words) on sources and questions of relevance to the course is due at the end of term. It should reflect some original research as far as is possible within the confines of the course and the ongoing global catastrophe. The final

seminar session will be devoted to presentations of research in progress (not separately graded).

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

All reasonable accommodation will be given to students with disabilities. Students who may require accommodation should speak with me at the start of the semester. Students may also contact the Office of Disability Services (ods.rutgers.edu; 848-445-6800).

STUDYING UNDER THE PANDEMIC

The global health and economic crises of this year are severely disrupting the work of the university, as they are disrupting so much else. I am committed to making the course worthwhile, and I hope and expect students will share the same commitment. But I will provide all reasonable accommodation to students whose work is disrupted by illness, by obligations to care for someone who is ill, or by other significant problems created by the pandemic.

SCHEDULE

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 3. INTRODUCTION.

- Suvin, “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre.”
- Rieder, *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System*, chap. 1.
- Optional: Delany, “Aye, and Gomorrah...”

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 10. CULTURAL CAPITAL.

- Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, preface and chap. 1.
- Lamont and Lareau, “Cultural Capital.”
- Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital.”

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 17. EMERGENCE (1): SCIENTIFIC ROMANCE.

- Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, chaps. 1–2.
- Wells, *The Time Machine* (1895).
- Browse periodical contexts for the earliest versions of *The Time Machine* in the references on the course website at sf20.blogs.rutgers.edu/wells.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 24. EMERGENCE (2): PULPS.

- Look through at least the two earliest numbers of *Amazing Stories* on the [Pulp Magazines Project](https://pulpmagazinesproject.com). Read editorial paratexts, and pay attention to advertisements.
Read:

- Wertenbaker, “The Man From the Atom.” The sequel, in *Amazing* 1, no. 2, is optional. As for circulation, consider this story’s first appearance in *Science and Invention* 11, no. 4 (August 1923).
- Wells, “The New Accelerator.” Consider this story’s first appearance in the *Strand* 22, no. 132 (December 1901).
- Stone, “The Conquest of Gola” (1931). Read around in this issue of *Wonder Stories*.
- Look through the August 1938 issue of *Astounding Science-Fiction* on the [Pulp Magazines Project](#). Read, collected from later issues:
 - Asimov, “Reason” (*ASF*, April, 1941).
 - Asimov, “Runaround” (*ASF*, March, 1942). First in *fabula* order.
- Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, chap. 3.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 1. CLIQUES AND CRITIQUE.

- Pohl and Kornbluth, *The Space Merchants* (1953).
- Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, chap. 5.
- Look through *Galaxy* on the [Internet Archive](#):
 - In the first number (October, 1950), read the introductory editorial, the back cover, and look carefully at ads.
 - Consider the periodical context for *Gravy Planet*, *Galaxy* 4, nos. 3–5 (June–August, 1952).
- Cheng, *Astounding Wonder*, chap. 7.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 8. RENOVATION.

- Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (1974), at least through chap. 7.
- Le Guin, “American SF and the Other.”
- Jameson, “World Reduction in Le Guin.”
- Ellison, introduction to *Dangerous Visions*.
- Ballard, “Which Way To Inner Space?” and Ballard, “Fictions of Every Kind.”
- Smith, “Women Science Fiction Writers Don’t Sell.”
- Delany, “To Read *The Dispossessed*” (1976) (excerpts).

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 15. SPECIFIC FORMS OF CONSECRATION.

- Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, complete.
- Le Guin, “A Response, by Ansible, from Tau Ceti.”
- Le Guin’s awards:
 - Franson and DeVore, *Hugo, Nebula, and International Fantasy Awards*.
 - Gunn, *Nebula Award Stories Ten*, introduction and 249–54. Optional: Le Guin’s story about Odo, “The Day Before the Revolution.”
 - Watch at least the first four minutes of Le Guin’s [AussieCon Guest of Honor speech](#) (1975).

- Watch the [recording](#) of Neil Gaiman's presentation of the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters at the National Book Awards (2014) and Le Guin's acceptance speech (or [read the latter](#)).
- English, *The Economy of Prestige*, introduction and chap. 3.
- Streitfeld, "Literary Lions Unite."
- Streitfeld, "Writing Nameless Things."
- Le Guin in the Library of America:
 - Le Guin, *Hainish Novels & Stories*, 1067–81 (chronology up to 2017).
 - Browse: [pages](#) on the website of the Library of America devoted to Le Guin, including the [author page](#).
- Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, chap. 8.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 22. COOLNESS AND CYBERPUNK.

- Gibson, *Burning Chrome*, selections:
 - The preface by Bruce Sterling.
 - "Source Code: An Introduction" (2002).
 - "The Gernsback Continuum" (1981).
 - "Johnny Mnemonic" (1981).
 - "Burning Chrome" (1982).
- Gibson, "Time Machine Cuba."
- Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, chap. 9.
- Materials on Gibson's early reception (thanks to Suzanne Boswell):
 - Gomoll, "An Open Letter to Joanna Russ," and Sterling, [letter to the editor](#), in reply.
 - Adam, "Cyberhero."
 - Gibson, "Cyberspace '90."
 - Jennings, "New Wave Science Fiction."
 - Carter, "Inside Science Fiction Publishing." The whole section on "Science Fiction Today" (41–76) is of interest.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 29. BUTLER: WHAT IS AN (SF) AUTHOR?

- Butler, *The Parable of the Sower* (1993), at least through chap. 17.
- Wilson, *Clarion*, introduction.
- Two news articles on Butler's 1995 MacArthur grant:
 - Griest, "A Grab Bag Of Geniuses."
 - Streitfeld, "A Life Apart."
- Rowell, "An Interview with Octavia E. Butler."
- Butler, "Positive Obsession." Compare the [fragmentary scan](#) of the essay's original appearance in *Essence* 20, no. 1 (May 1989).
- Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler*, chaps. 1, 6.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 5. BUTLER'S CENTRALITY.

- Butler, *The Parable of the Sower*, complete. Read the materials at the back of the book.
- Kilgore and Samantrai, "A Memorial to Octavia E. Butler."
- Thomas, *Dark Matter*, table of contents and introduction; browse "Contributors."
- Batty, review of *Dark Matter* and *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root*, 209–13.
- In and around Imarishah and brown, *Octavia's Brood*:
 - Sheree Renée Thomas, foreword.
 - Walidah Imarishah, introduction.
 - Tananarive Due, "The Only Lasting Truth."
 - Acknowledgments.
 - The anthology's [indiegogo crowdfunding page](#).
- Final paper abstracts due on course blog.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 12. CANON AND EMPIRE.

- Zahn, *Heir to the Empire* (1991).
- Familiarize yourself with the problem of the canon by reading the following in Wookieepedia: the plot synopses of Episodes IV–VII (sic): *A New Hope*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *The Return of the Jedi*, and *The Force Awakens*; "Star Wars Legends"; "Canon."
- Optionally, watch *The Force Awakens* (2015; requires paid subscription to Disney+).
- Guynes, "Publishing the New Jedi Order." The interview with senior media-studies scholar Henry Jenkins in the same volume is also interesting as a reception document.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 19. OMNIVORES AT THE SF BUFFET.

- Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2005).
- Peterson and Kern, "Changing Highbrow Taste."
- Lizardo and Skiles, "Reconceptualizing and Theorizing 'Omnivorousness.'"
- From the Swedish Academy materials on Ishiguro's 2017 Nobel:
 - Sara Danius, "Award Ceremony Speech."
 - "Biobibliographical Notes."
 - Optional: Ishiguro, "My Twentieth Century Evening—and Other Small Breakthroughs."

(THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 26. THANKSGIVING.)

(MONDAY, NOVEMBER 30.)

- Preliminary writing on final paper due on Sakai, building on paper abstract for course blog.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3. SF AND THE GLOBE.

- Okorafor, *Lagoon* (2014). Consider the following contexts for the novel:
 - Smith, “Crisis in Nigeria as President Drops Out of View.”
 - Browse the *Language Varieties* website page on Naijá.
- Glimpses of Nigerian reception:
 - Onwualu, “Why We Need to Hear Stories.”
 - Okorafor, “Nnedi Okorafor Wins the Wole Soyinka Prize.”
- Glimpses of US reception: us and:
 - Dobbs, “Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon*.”
 - Optional: Marquis, “The Alien Within.”

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10.

- Research presentations.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 15, AT 4:30 P.M.

- Final paper due to the graduate office via Sakai. Please send me a copy as well.

BOOKS TO BUY

The required books are available at [Barnes & Noble](#), with further readings made available on Sakai or via the Libraries, in which case I have given URLs or DOIs. Most online library resources must be reached via proxy server or VPN; I am happy to give help with accessing materials. You are very welcome to obtain the required texts elsewhere. Other editions are fine. Please try to print out texts supplied digitally for seminar, to the extent this is practical.

Butler, Octavia E. *The Parable of the Sower*. 1993. New York: Grand Central, 2019. ISBN: 9781538732182.

Gibson, William. *Burning Chrome*. 1986. New York: Harper Voyager, 2003. ISBN: 9780060539825.

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. 2005. New York: Vintage, 2006. ISBN: 9781400078776.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Dispossessed*. 1974. New York: Harper Voyager, 1994. ISBN: 9780061054884.

Luckhurst, Roger. *Science Fiction*. Cambridge: Polity, 2005. ISBN: 9780745628936.

Okorafor, Nnedi. *Lagoon*. New York: Saga, 2014. ISBN: 9781481440882.

Pohl, Frederik, and C. M. Kornbluth. *The Space Merchants*. 1953. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2011. ISBN: 9781250000156.

Wells, H. G. *The Time Machine*. 1895. New York: Dover, 1995. ISBN: 9780486284729. Online alternative available. Other print editions are fine. Penguin and Broadview have versions with notes and other supplements.

Zahn, Timothy. *Heir to the Empire*. 1991. New York: Del Rey, 1992. ISBN: 9780553296129.

OTHER READINGS

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- Asimov, Isaac. "Reason." In *The Complete Robot*, 227–44. Available on Sakai.
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- . "Which Way To Inner Space?" In *A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews*, 195–98. Available on Sakai.
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- Butler, Octavia E. "Positive Obsession." In *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 2nd ed., 123–35. New York: Seven Stories, 2005. Available on Sakai.
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- Delany, Samuel R. "Aye, and Gomorrah..." In Ellison, *Dangerous Visions*, 508–20. Available on Sakai.
- . "To Read *The Dispossessed*." Chap. 7 in *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, rev. ed. 1976. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009. <http://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/lib/rutgers-ebooks/detail.action?docID=776841>.
- Dobbs, Michael Ann. "Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* Shows Just How Messy First Contact Could Get." *io9*, May 12, 2014. <https://io9.gizmodo.com/nnedi-okorafors-lagoon-shows-just-how-messy-first-conta-1574019274>.
- Ellison, Harlan. Introduction to *Dangerous Visions*. Edited by Harlan Ellison. New York: Doubleday, 1967. Available on Sakai.
- , ed. *Dangerous Visions*. New York: Doubleday, 1967. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/inu.30000011372871>.
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