

Mon & Wed 11am-noon + section TBA

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Images & other material from lectures (some from previous versions of course) online
<http://sfcourseimages.blogspot.com/>

WHAT IS THIS COURSE?

What is science fiction? What is it good for? How did it evolve and where is it going? What are its major categories, subgenres, and preoccupations? Can we use the tools developed for examining realist literary fiction to examine (and to better enjoy) tales of aliens and telepaths? Do these tales imply other tools all their own?

This course is for people who want to answer those questions, and to help others in answering them. We will read works that helped establish the genre, and others which fans consider exemplary, pivotal, or just plain good: novels, short stories, a few essays, and some experimental fictional forms that can exist only online. We will spend time with science fiction film, television and comics, and you'll have the chance to write on games and comics, but most of the class will concern sf that uses only words. We'll have classes on space travel, on the environments of Earth and of other planets, on bear-future apocalypse and post-apocalypse, on alternate history, on virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and consciousness without an organic substrate; we'll also look at points of view, metaphors, info-dumps, narrative structures, TV tropes, and other ways to consider storytelling and world-building in general.

WHO SHOULD TAKE IT?

It's open to anybody interested in science fiction, broadly defined, as long as you're also willing to write a few short papers about it (you also get to do a bit of non-graded creative writing)! That means it's designed both for people who have never taken an English course (it could be your first; we hope it won't be your last) and for English concentrators who have taken plenty.

The course is, also, open to graduate students, who should speak to *me* before taking the course, but who are welcome to enroll. Students from Harvard's professional schools (HDS, HLS, GSD, GSE, etc.), and anyone enrolled in an MA program, should attend undergraduate sections and fulfill the requirements for undergraduates, but will write longer papers at the end of the course rather than taking the undergrad final exam. Students enrolled in Harvard's FAS Ph.D. programs should meet separately with me, and write papers for me, rather than attending undergrad sections; if we have enough such students we'll also have a section for Ph.D. students (as we have done before).

WHAT WILL YOU DO? (ASSIGNMENTS & POLICIES)

You'll be writing **three graded papers**: the assignments are described at the end of this syllabus. You'll also be **speaking up and listening** in discussion sections, and completing some **shorter non-graded assignments**. one of which will give you the

chance to begin **an sf story of your very own**. There's also a **final exam**, designed to make sure you've thought about the course as a whole; it consists wholly of questions you'll see in advance. Sections will occasionally use ten-minute quizzes to make sure you've all done the reading. The papers count for 20% of your grade apiece, the exam for 10%, the shorter assignments (all together) and your class participation, all together, for 30%. Participation means showing up to section, listening well, and speaking when you can; I also hope you'll feel free to speak and ask questions in lecture.

Assignments are due to your TF, at noon, on the day that the syllabus gives, unless the assignment itself, or your TF, asks you to do something else. If you are a graduate student, or if you have trouble reaching your TF for any reason, you should email your assignment, by noon, to me.

Late papers go down by as much as one grade per day unless you have spoken to me or to your TF *beforehand*. I'm willing, and your TF should be willing, to accommodate special circumstances which affect deadlines, including illnesses, emergencies, or major extracurriculars such as dress rehearsals or athletic tournaments, but you need to let us know *in advance*.

I do not accept rewrites after papers are graded (the grade you got is the grade you get): I encourage you to create, and to show me or show your TF, rough drafts.

Laptops in lecture are fine if you are using them to take notes, to follow along in an e-text, or for a better view of sites or audiovisual material from our course; I recognize that some students need computers in class for reasons related to diagnosed disabilities. I can and will look over your shoulder in class, however, to see what's on your screen; if it's social media, or something unrelated to our class, I reserve the right to take the laptop away and give it back at the end of class. I discourage laptops in section (because you should be looking at other students); if you need to bring one to section, you should tell your TF why.

As in all Harvard courses, work you submit for credit must be work that you (nobody else) did for this course (and not for another course). Plagiarism consists in the appropriation of work not your own without appropriate citation; it is, as in all Harvard courses, a serious violation of academic norms and of college rules. Also, you may not submit work for this course and for another course (at Harvard or elsewhere) without prior explicit permission from both courses' instructors.

For some weeks, some of the material on the syllabus will *not* be covered in lecture; that's by design—you'll have something to discuss, something everybody has read, in section.

I very much encourage you to stop by my office with questions or suggestions. I'll set office hours—at least two hours per week when I promise to be in my office, available for students—after our second class.

WHAT BOOKS DO YOU NEED?

Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

Robert A. Heinlein, *The Man Who Sold the Moon/ Orphans of the Sky*

Philip K. Dick, *UBIK*

James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon), *Her Smoke Rose Up Forever*

William Gibson, *Neuromancer*

Frederik Pohl, *Gateway*

Kim Stanley Robinson, *Red Mars*

Richard Powers, *Galatea 2.2*

Nalo Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber*

Ted Chiang, *Stories of Your Life and Others*

The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction, ed. Evans, Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. et al.

Nebula Awards Showcase 2017, ed. Julie Czerneda

All these books should be in stock at the Coop; please let me know if the Coop runs out. Most should be inexpensive (several under \$10); most are easily available used (either at the Coop or online). You are welcome to share books with other students, as long as you all do the reading before the relevant class.

WHAT OTHER BOOKS SHOULD YOU CONSIDER? WHAT ABOUT EBOOKS?

H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (Norton Critical Edition, ed. Stephen Arata)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (Broadview Critical Edition, ed. Beth Sutton-Ramspeck)

Jack London, *The Scarlet Plague*

The work we read from these books also exists online, with reliable links on your syllabus, and so I have not required you to buy them; I've ordered editions of Kipling, Wells and London that contain extra material (contexts, drafts, reception history). Other texts for this course exist *only* online. The links on your syllabus are correct and up to date as of August 2017; if any of them turns out to be broken or otherwise inappropriate, please let me know right away!

WHAT SHOULD YOU CALL ME?

Please call me Steph or Stephanie, or—if you prefer formality—Professor Burt. Older references have me as Stephen—it's the same person; the old name's OK but not ideal.

SYLLABUS

WED AUG 30

Introduction. What is science fiction? Handout.

MON SEPT 4

NO CLASS: Labor Day

WED SEPT 6

Wells, *The Time Machine*

If you don't buy the book, use reliable online texts at

<http://www.fourmilab.ch/etexts/www/wells/timemach/html/>

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/WelTime.html>

MON SEPT 11

Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee*, to chapter XX

Bellamy, *Looking Backwards*, chs. 10 and 11 only: reliable online text at

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/BELLAMY/toc.html>

Steph's office hours set

WED SEPT 13

Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee*, chs. XXI to end

Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition": reliable online text at

<http://www.strangehorizons.com/2014/20141124/1suvin-a.shtml> (OK to skim)

Wesleyan: Hawthorne, "Rappaccini's Daughter"

Discussion sections begin!

MON SEPT 18

Gilman, *Herland*; reliable online text at

<http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/GilHerl.html>

Wesleyan: Forster, "The Machine Stops"

Non-graded extrapolation exercise assigned

WED SEPT 22

Heinlein, *Orphans of the Sky* (both "Universe" and "Common Sense")

Wesleyan: Asimov, "Reason"

Extrapolation exercise due in class

Arrange for evening showing of TV show episode (*Firefly*: "Ariel"); you can also watch via Hulu at <https://www.hulu.com/firefly>

MON SEPT 25

Dick, *UBIK*

WED SEPT 27

Wesleyan: Bradbury, "There Will Come Soft Rains"; Ballard, "The Cage of Sand";

Sheckley, "Specialist"

Firefly, "Ariel" (TV show episode; be sure you've seen the show by this time)

FRI SEPT 29

First paper due via email, at noon

MON OCT 2

Tiptree, "The Screwfly Solution," "And I Awoke," "The Women Men Don't See,"
"Houston, Houston, Do You Read?"

Wesleyan: Butler, "Speech Sounds"

WED OCT 4

Tiptree, "The Girl Who Was Plugged In," "Your Faces, O My Sisters," "With Delicate
Mad Hands," "Love Is the Plan the Plan Is Death," "Slow Music"

MON OCT 9

NO CLASS: Indigenous Peoples' Day/ Columbus Day

Please start reading *Neuromancer* for Wednesday

WED OCT 11

Gibson, *Neuromancer* (all)

Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* 49 (1950): 433-50; reliable
online text at <http://www.csee.umbc.edu/courses/471/papers/turing.pdf> (OK to skim)

Arrange for evening showing of *Stalker* (film) sometime in next two weeks; you can also
watch through the link at <http://www.openculture.com/2010/07/tarkovksy.html> (be sure
to turn on English subtitles, unless you speak Russian!) but it's best seen on a big screen.

MON OCT 16

London, "The Scarlet Plague": reliable text online at
<http://london.sonoma.edu/Writings/Scarlet/>

Robinson, *Red Mars*, parts 1-2

WED OCT 18

Robinson, *Red Mars*, parts 3-5

MON OCT 23

Robinson, *Red Mars*, parts 6-8

WED OCT 25

Wesleyan: Smith, "The Game of Rat and Dragon"; Delany, "Aye, and Gomorrah..."

Tarkovsky, *Stalker* (to be discussed in lecture; be sure you've seen the film by this day)

MON OCT 30

Pohl, *Gateway*

WED NOV 1

Creative writing assignment (in lecture class); please remember to bring pen and paper or
laptop to class

MON NOV 6

Powers, *Galatea 2.2*, pp. 1-152

WED NOV 8

Powers, pp. 153-end

Wesleyan: Cadigan, "Pretty Boy Crossover"

Nebula: Shoemaker, "Today I Am Paul"

FRI NOV 10

Second paper due via email, at noon

MON NOV 15

Wesleyan: Ryman, "Everywhere"

Nebula: El-Mohtar, "Madeleine"

Jo Walton, "Escape to Other Worlds with Science Fiction": read online at
http://www.tor.com/2009/02/06/escape-to-other-worlds-with-science-fiction/?WT_mc.id=11091

Rebecca Roanhorse, "Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience":
<https://www.apex-magazine.com/welcome-to-your-authentic-indian-experience/>

WED NOV 17

Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* (all)

MON NOV 20

Greg Egan, "Oceanic": reliable text online at

<http://www.gregegan.net/OCEANIC/Complete/Oceanic.html>

Charlie Jane Anders: "Love Might Be Too Strong a Word": read online at
<http://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/fiction/love-might-be-too-strong-a-word/>

THANKSGIVING BREAK

MON NOV 27

Chiang, "Story of Your Life," "Hell Is The Absence of God," "Liking What You See: A Documentary"

WED NOV 29

Nebula: Okorafor, "Binti"

Kate Elliott, "The Status Quo Does Not Need Worldbuilding,"
<http://www.tor.com/2013/11/05/the-status-quo-does-not-need-world-building/>

Discussion sections *do* meet during this week

WED DEC 6

Third paper due

Low-pressure, make-sure-you've-done-the-reading final exam on examination day.

ASSIGNMENTS

You will write **three graded papers** for this course, each of them 4-8 pages (1200-2400 words) long. We will also have short non-graded assignments, one of which gives you a chance to work on your own fiction. Each graded paper should develop a clear, well-supported argument about one or more works of science fiction. Each paper should cite, appropriately and fully, any secondary sources you use.

Each paper should follow **one** of the assignments below: you may select any three, in any order. If you want to write about a work not on our syllabus, you may do that for one (and only one) of the three papers. (Note that one of the assignments, O., requires that you write about a work not on our syllabus.)

We welcome **rough drafts** and will read them and hand them back to you with our comments; rough drafts must be turned in at least **three days** before the paper is due if you want written comments on them—we will happily look at outlines and answer questions up until the paper is due.

A. Describe the point of view and the style of the narrator in one or two works of science fiction. Use examples (particular sentences or paragraphs). How does the author construct a narrator (first person, if the narrator is a character, or third person, if not) and what does that narrator do for the rest of the work?

B. Ordinary phrases such as "She turned on her left side" can take (as Samuel Delany points out) meanings in sf that they cannot have in our world ("she" might be a robot flipping a switch). Sf also creates new words, such as "grok" and "kemmer." Pick one passage from one work of sf and show how it uses language in particularly science-fictional ways. What do the new words, or words used in new ways, do for the work? for the world that the work constructs?

C. Select a device common in science fiction (e.g. time travel) and show how at least two works use that device. What do their convergent or divergent uses tell us about that work's goals, or about the world it creates?

D. Select a historical event, an invention, a political controversy or a scientific discovery, and show how a work of science fiction written shortly after that event reacts to it. What has the author done to create, from a discovery or a controversy, a story?

E. Describe the implied or intended audience for one or two works of science fiction. Does the work assume readers already know a lot about previous science fiction? about other kinds of literature? does it assume many of its readers are quite young? that all are adults? what other assumptions does it make about its implied readers, how do you know, and what do those assumption say about what the work means or does?

F. Show how one work of SF rewrites, revises, or otherwise responds to another. What do we learn about the later work that we could not have learned without the earlier one?

G. Identify the *novum* in a work of science fiction and then explain how, and whether, that *novum* creates the plot. Does this work support the idea that all science fiction reacts to a *novum*? Is there one *novum*, or are there many?

H. Describe the setting, the place or the world, created in a work of science fiction, with appropriate attention to the language used in that work; then explain how the setting, or settings, may change in the course of that work, and what these changes do or mean.

I. Make an argument about the shape of the plot in a work of science fiction. Why does it begin where it begins? why does it end where it ends? What events must take place before the work can end? Do we read of events in the same order that the characters experience them? If our sequence differs from their sequence, why?

J. Define a subgenre, a kind, within science fiction (for example, "hard sf" or "dystopia"), then show how a work fits or does not fit that definition, and what we can learn about the work by trying (or failing) to apply that definition.

K. Compare a work of SF in prose to a film, television or comics adaptation. What has changed, and why? What do the changes say about the original (prose) work?

L. Pick one of the passages on the handout (definitions and claims about science fiction) you received on the first day of class (this handout should also be online; email us if you need a new e-copy). Then agree or disagree with it, using examples from at least two works of science fiction; then tell us what the passage's truth or untruth says about the works you describe.

M. Read and review a book about science fiction. Some appropriate books are quoted on your handouts from lecture; books about science fiction by Brian Aldiss, Scott Bukatman, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., Samuel Delany, Thomas M. Disch, Edward James, Gwyneth Jones, Justine Larbalestier, Sarah Lefanu, Ursula K. LeGuin, or Gary Westfahl might be good bets. Apply one of the arguments in that book to one or two works of science fiction. Do they work? Are they true? What do they tell us about that fictive work? What aspects of that work do they leave out?

N. Present a definition of science fiction (your own or someone else's); then attack or defend that definition with at least two examples from two authors. What value does the definition have? What aspects of your examples does that definition bring out? What aspects does it obscure? If you are attacking the definition, can you present a better one in its stead?

O. Identify a work of science fiction not on our syllabus and tell us why it belongs on the syllabus next time this course takes place; be sure to explain not only what makes it good, or exceptional, or important, but how it might speak to the works that *are* on our syllabus, and what kind of teaching it would make possible (that is not possible now).

P. Make a well-supported argument about one or more works of science fiction that does not fit any of the assignments above; state a clear thesis, provide useful examples, and attend to the use of language in the work.