

ENGLISH 242: READING PROSE FICTION WEIRD FICTION

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ENGL 242 C

Spring Quarter 2021

MW 11:30-1:20

Online Course

“If the thing did happen, then man must be prepared to accept notions of the cosmos, and of his own place in the seething vortex of time, whose merest mention is paralyzing.”

H. P. Lovecraft

“The sense of *wrongness* associated with the weird—the conviction that *this does not belong*—is often a sign that we are in the presence of the new. The weird here is a signal that the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete.”

Mark Fisher

COURSE OVERVIEW

This course explores the genre of weird fiction—often referred to as “cosmic horror” or “supernatural horror”—and its developments over the course of (roughly speaking) the past century. Readings will include works by authors ranging from Robert Chambers and H. P. Lovecraft to Victor LaValle and Mariana Enríquez. Special attention will be given to the cultural politics of weird fiction, including discussions of how the genre takes up questions of race, gender, the human, and climate change.

Over the course of the quarter, students will sharpen their analytical, communicative, and argumentative skills through regular writing assignments and weekly discussion groups. Through these assignments and discussions, students will work to understand concepts central to literary studies and to deploy these concepts as optics for engaging literature and culture.

Learning Objectives: Successful completion of this course means that:

- Students are acquainted with a range of texts useful to understanding the course topic and doing future work in the area.
- Students have an appreciation for and knowledge of literature’s relationship to related areas or disciplines.
- Students are able to contextualize and analyze the materials covered, historically, politically, and culturally.

Required Materials: We will be reading the following texts. I have requested that the University Book Store stock these texts. However, you are welcome to purchase these elsewhere, but please make sure to check the ISBN number and to buy the edition listed below so that our page numbers will be consistent. These texts are *required*:

- **Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (FSG Originals, 2014).** ISBN: 9780374104092
- **Caitlín R. Kiernan, *Agents of Dreamland* (Tor Books, 2017).** ISBN: 9780765394323
- **Victor LaValle, *The Ballad of Black Tom* (Tor Books, 2016).** ISBN: 9780765387868
- Additional readings will be provided via Canvas.

You will also need the following additional course materials—however, if you’re experiencing difficulty acquiring any of these, please talk to me:

- A computer (or phone) with a webcam for online Zoom meetings.
- Reliable internet access.
- A Dropbox, Google Drive, or similar cloud storage account on which you regularly back up your work.
- Money to rent any films unavailable through UW.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

DISCUSSIONS, PARTICIPATION, AND INFORMAL WRITING (60% OF FINAL GRADE):

Participation (15% of final grade): You are expected to come to your discussion group meetings and conferences prepared to participate. This means, importantly, that you should seek to **contribute to the conversation** even on days you aren't leading it. (You might think of it as paying it forward—leading a discussion can cause a bit of anxiety, and it really helps to ease that if the others in your group are engaged, active participants.) I understand that not everyone feels comfortable speaking up in class and, as a result, this class may require you to step outside your comfort zone. However, it is my hope that, by working with a smaller discussion group on a regular basis, you'll develop a degree of familiarity and comfort with one another, despite the awkwardness of online meetings. That said, if speaking out is something that you truly find difficult or uncomfortable, talk with me and we can strategize some ways to overcome that. Participation also includes **watching the weekly lectures** (and Canvas provides me with an array of statistics on this, so I will know whether or not you have been watching these).

Weekly Reflections (15% of final grade): Each week, you will be required to write brief and informal reflections on the content for the week. These are intended to prepare you for your weekly discussions and will be graded on a complete/incomplete basis. These need not be long or polished: a paragraph or so will generally suffice. Generally speaking, these reflections should in some way respond to the prompts posted by your discussion group leader for the week. That said, there are a range of ways in which you might respond or reflect. You might, for example, jot down some short responses to the prompt provided by your discussion leader. Or, on the other hand, you might raise some follow up questions in response to the prompt. Your ultimate goal with these, however, is quite simple: You should come to discussions having already thought about (and roughly sketched out) a thing or two that you might contribute to the discussion. *Note: You are not required to post a weekly reflection on the weeks you are leading discussion—on these weeks, your discussion prompt will count as your weekly reflection.*

Discussion Prompts & Discussion Leadership (2 x 10% of final grade): Twice this quarter, you will each be required to lead (with one other person) your discussion group's meeting to discuss the week's readings. This will involve two responsibilities: First, you will be required to **write 2-3 discussion prompts to anchor your discussion** and, second, you will be asked to **lead the group's meeting and discussion** for the week. You will not be required to do this every week but, rather, in your groups, you will develop your own discussion schedule. Each member must lead at least twice. For more on this, see the **Discussion Leader Guide** page on Canvas.

Discussion Overview Paper (10% of final grade): For each discussion group meeting, one member will be responsible for taking detailed notes and writing up a **concise summary of the meeting**. While your summary does not need to cover *everything* your group talked about, you should summarize and explain some of the key moments of insight and inquiry. What ideas did your discussion generate? What questions were raised and how were they answered? What new questions did your discussion generate? Did you answer them? What questions or provocations remain? The purpose of these overview papers is twofold: First, it helps me to see how your conversations are going, what interests you, and what you are learning. Second, these papers will serve as a shared set of notes for your whole group (which is not to say that you can't or shouldn't take your own notes). When it comes time write your essays and term paper, these will likely be valuable resources. Each of you will be responsible for writing **one overview paper** over the course of the quarter. For more on this, see the **Discussion Overview Guide** page on Canvas.

FORMAL WRITING (40% OF FINAL GRADE):

Midterm Exam (10% of final grade): The midterm exam will consist of short essay questions. The exam will be open book and open note, but will be timed, so you should study and organize your notes in advance.

Final Exam (15% of final grade): The final exam will follow the same format as the midterm, but you should expect it to be slightly longer. Like the midterm, this exam will be open book and open note, but will be timed, so you should study and organize your notes in advance.

Final Reflection Essay (15% of final grade): At the end of the quarter, you will be asked to write a 4-5 page "reflection essay" on a topic of your choosing. The primary goal of this paper should be to raise, to explain, and to articulate the importance of **one question (or set of questions) that has arisen from your readings and discussions in this course**. While you might posit potential answers to your question, your aim with this paper is

not to *answer* your questions so much as to think through them *as* questions. In other words, I'm interested in what lines of questioning this course has provoked for you and how you might go about thinking through these questions. For more on this, see the **Reflection Essay Guide** page on Canvas.

COURSE POLICIES

Attendance: This course meets virtually and is largely asynchronous. What this means is that *most of the time* you won't have to "attend" anything. However, you will have **weekly discussion meetings** throughout the quarter, for which attendance is mandatory. You will attend these through Zoom (which has been integrated into Canvas). You will also **weekly lectures** that you are required to watch—these will be recorded, so you're free to watch them at your own convenience, but you should be sure to watch them *before* you meet with your discussion groups. We will very rarely meet as a full class, simply because the size of this class tends to be too large for productive conversations, particularly when meeting online. However, I will offer periodic optional review sessions.

Missed or Late Work: While our meetings will be asynchronous, you will have specific times and days that assignments are due. Because this timing is important to the success of the class, you must submit your work on time. **Late work will be counted as missed work.** However, if something comes up, please get in touch with me. I understand that extenuating circumstances will likely happen for some of us, and I'm happy to try and accommodate those as best I can.

Turning in Work: Everything for this class will be submitted via Canvas. While many of you will have used Canvas before, there are a couple things I ask that you take note of:

- Any time you submit an assignment on Canvas (or any online form, for that matter), you should **double check to make sure your submission has gone through**. This is your responsibility as a student, not mine. Claiming that you submitted your work and that (for some reason or another) it simply did not go through *does not* constitute an acceptable excuse for late or missing work. If Canvas isn't working, email me and attach the assignment.
- Any documents that you submit must be saved either as Word or PDF files. **Do not submit Pages files because Canvas cannot process them.**

Classroom Behavior: Ultimately, there is only one rule in this class: **Act in ways that will benefit the learning of those around you.** This means that you should be respectful and attentive. You should ask questions. You should challenge your peers' ideas and arguments, but you should do so in constructive (rather than hostile) ways. You should come to class. You should come to class *on time*. I could go on, but you get the point.

Academic Integrity: Plagiarism, or academic dishonesty, is presenting someone else's ideas or writing as your own. In your writing for this class, you are encouraged to refer to other people's thoughts and writing—*but you must clearly acknowledge where these ideas are coming from*. As a matter of policy, any student found to have plagiarized any piece of writing in this class will be immediately reported to the College of Arts and Sciences for review.

Complaints: If you have any concerns about the course or your instructor, please see the instructor about these concerns as soon as possible. If you are not comfortable talking with the instructor or not satisfied with the response that you receive, you may contact the following Expository Writing Program staff in Padelford A-11: Director Candice Rai, (206) 543-2190 or crai@uw.edu; CIC Director Kimberly Gillis-Bridges, kgb@uw.edu; or CIC Assistant Director Brittney Frantece, britfran@uw.edu. If, after speaking with the Director or Assistant Directors of the EWP, you are still not satisfied with the response you receive, you may contact English Department Chair Brian Reed, (206) 543-2690.

Guidance to Students Taking Courses Outside the US: Faculty members at U.S. universities—including the University of Washington—have the right to academic freedom which includes presenting and exploring topics and content that other governments may consider to be illegal and, therefore, choose to censor. Examples may include topics and content involving religion, gender and sexuality, human rights, democracy and representative government, and historic events. If, as a UW student, you are living outside of the United States while taking courses remotely, you are subject to the laws of your local jurisdiction. Local authorities may limit your access to course material and take punitive action towards you. The University of Washington has no authority over the laws

in your jurisdictions or how local authorities enforce those laws. If you are taking UW courses outside of the United States, you have reason to exercise caution when enrolling in courses that cover topics and issues censored in your jurisdiction. If you have concerns regarding a course or courses that you have registered for, please contact your academic advisor who will assist you in exploring options.

Changes to Course Policy and Syllabus: This document is subject to change. Any changes to the syllabus or course policy will be discussed and agreed upon in class. Minor changes to the course calendar are possible (and even likely), but I will never make a formal, sequence-based assignment due *earlier* than initially scheduled.

UNIVERSITY RESOURCES

Writing Centers: Whether you are working on developing a topic, structuring an argument, or revising a paper, the UW's writing centers can be a big help. The staff at these writing centers are happy to help you at any stage in the writing process. I highly recommend scheduling a visit. See their web pages for more:

- Odegard Writing and Research Center: <https://depts.washington.edu/owrc/>
- CLUE Study Center: <http://depts.washington.edu/aspuw/clue/home/>

Accommodations: If you need accommodation of any sort, please let me know so that I can work with the UW Disability Resources (DRS) to provide what you require. More information may be found at <http://www.washington.edu/students/drs/>.

Religious Accommodations: Washington state law requires that UW develop a policy for accommodation of student absences or significant hardship due to reasons of faith or conscience, or for organized religious activities. The UW's policy, including more information about how to request an accommodation, is available at Faculty Syllabus Guidelines and Resources. Accommodations must be requested within the first two weeks of this course using the Religious Accommodations Request form available at <https://registrar.washington.edu/students/religious-accommodations-request/>.

Counseling Center: UW Counseling Center workshops include a wide range of issues including study skills, thinking about coming out, international students and culture shock, and much more. Visiting the Counseling Center can have an extremely positive impact on your success and well-being at the University of Washington. Check out available resources and workshops at: <http://depts.washington.edu/counsels/>.

Q Center: The University of Washington Q Center builds and facilitates queer (gay, lesbian, bisexual, two-spirit, trans, intersex, questioning, same-gender-loving, allies) academic and social community through education, advocacy, and support services to achieve a socially-just campus in which all people are valued. For more information, visit <http://depts.washington.edu/qcenter/>.

CLASS CALENDAR

In order to avoid too much confusion, the weekly schedule for this course will be roughly the same every week. However, it will be your responsibility to know when *you* are responsible for things like leading a discussion or submitting a discussion overview paper. That said, the general format for this class is as follows. The items in **bold** are things that *everyone* is responsible for *every* week:

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
Complete readings for the week. Watch lecture video. Submit discussion prompts by	Post your weekly reflection by midnight (unless it's your week to lead the discussion).	Meet with your discussion group for at least one hour of discussion (during class time).	Submit discussion overview paper by midnight (if it's your week to do this).	

midnight (if it's your week to lead).				
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A couple notes: [1] This calendar is subject to change. Any changes made will be announced in the weekly lecture video and/or in the announcements section of Canvas. [2] The brackets at the right contain *rough* page counts for each reading to help you plan out your reading time. (I say *rough* because some page counts come from different editions of the text than we will read in class and others are page estimates for online resources that do not actually have pages.) Keep in mind that page lengths will vary—some pieces will use smaller text and smaller spacing (thus more words per page) while other texts are more spaced out and thus shorter than they appear. It's also worth noting that the fictional texts will probably be quicker, easier reads than the more dense theoretical ones. Just make sure to look ahead and plan your time accordingly.

WEEK 1: INTRO TO THE WEIRD

Readings	Schedule for Week
<i>Complete before class on Monday 3/29:</i> Syllabus [8] <i>Complete before viewing Week 1 Lecture:</i> Poe – “MS. Found in a Bottle” [11] Plato – “Allegory of the Cave” [4] Thacker – <i>In the Dust of this Planet</i> (Preface) [9]	M 3/29 (Class Meeting): First class meeting via Zoom. T 3/30 (Lecture): View Week 1 Lecture by the end of the day. W 3/31 (Discussion Groups): Meet with discussion groups via Zoom. Th 4/1 (Due Date): Complete discussion group schedules by midnight. I've set the schedule as your discussion group home page and given everyone in the group access to edit it.

WEEK 2: EARLY WEIRD TALES

Readings (complete by Monday 4/5)	Schedule for Week
Chambers – “The Repairer of Reputations” [32] and “The Yellow Sign” [19] Lovecraft – <i>Supernatural Horror in Literature</i> (Introduction) [5] Fisher – <i>The Weird and the Eerie</i> (Introduction) [6]	M 4/5 (Discussion Questions): Discussion leaders submit discussion prompts by midnight. T 4/6 (Weekly Reflections): Post weekly reflection by midnight (unless you are a discussion leader for the week). W 4/7 (Discussion Groups): Meet with discussion groups via Zoom. Th 4/8 (Paper Due): Submit discussion overview paper by midnight (if this is your week).

WEEK 3: H. P. LOVECRAFT—THE FATHER OF COSMIC HORROR

Readings (complete by Monday 4/12)	Schedule for Week
Fisher – “The Out of Place and the Out of Time: Lovecraft and the Weird” [11] Lovecraft – “The Call of Cthulhu” (Opening Paragraph) [1], “The Whisperer in Darkness” [68], and “From Beyond” [6]	M 4/12 (Discussion Questions): Discussion leaders submit discussion prompts by midnight. T 4/13 (Weekly Reflections): Post weekly reflection by midnight (unless you are a discussion leader for the week).

	<p>W 4/14 (Discussion Groups): Meet with discussion groups via Zoom.</p> <p>Th 4/15 (Paper Due): Submit discussion overview paper by midnight (if this is your week).</p>
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WEEK 4: SURREALISM & WEIRD PHILOSOPHICAL FICTIONS

Readings (complete by Monday 4/19)	Schedule for Week
<p>Carrington – “The Oval Lady” [8], “Cast Down by Sadness” [8], and “White Rabbits” [7]</p> <p>Borges – “The Circular Ruins” [5], “The Book of Sand” [4], “The Disk” [3]</p>	<p>M 4/19 (Discussion Questions): Discussion leaders submit discussion prompts by midnight.</p> <p>T 4/20 (Weekly Reflections): Post weekly reflection by midnight (unless you are a discussion leader for the week).</p> <p>W 4/21 (Discussion Groups): Meet with discussion groups via Zoom.</p> <p>Th 4/22 (Paper Due): Submit discussion overview paper by midnight (if this is your week).</p>

WEEK 5: MID-CENTURY WEIRD

Readings (complete by Monday 4/26)	Schedule for Week
<p>Du Maurier – “The Birds” [38]</p> <p>Start Reading <i>Annihilation</i></p>	<p>M 4/26 (Discussion Questions): Discussion leaders submit discussion prompts by midnight.</p> <p>M 4/26 (Review Session): Optional review session via Zoom. Bring any questions that you have for me.</p> <p>T 4/27 (Weekly Reflections): Post weekly reflection by midnight (unless you are a discussion leader for the week).</p> <p>W 4/28 (Discussion Groups): Meet with discussion groups via Zoom.</p> <p>W 4/28 (Midterm Exam): Midterm exam questions will be posted. Essays will be due 24 hours after prompts are made available.</p> <p>Th 4/29 (Paper Due): Submit discussion overview paper by midnight (if this is your week).</p>

WEEK 6: THE VANDERMEERS & THE NEW WEIRD

Readings (complete by Monday 5/3)	Schedule for Week
<p>VanderMeer – <i>Annihilation</i> [195]</p>	<p>M 5/3 (Discussion Questions): Discussion leaders submit discussion prompts by midnight.</p> <p>T 5/4 (Weekly Reflections): Post weekly reflection by midnight (unless you are a discussion leader for the week).</p>

	<p>W 5/5 (Discussion Groups): Meet with discussion groups via Zoom.</p> <p>Th 5/6 (Paper Due): Submit discussion overview paper by midnight (if this is your week).</p>
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WEEK 7: THE NEW LOVECRAFTIAN WEIRD

Readings (complete by Monday 5/10)	Schedule for Week
Kiernan – <i>Agents of Dreamland</i> [123]	<p>M 5/10 (Discussion Questions): Discussion leaders submit discussion prompts by midnight.</p> <p>T 5/11 (Weekly Reflections): Post weekly reflection by midnight (unless you are a discussion leader for the week).</p> <p>W 5/12 (Discussion Groups): Meet with discussion groups via Zoom.</p> <p>Th 5/13 (Paper Due): Submit discussion overview paper by midnight (if this is your week).</p>

WEEK 8: THOMAS LIGOTTI'S POSTMODERN WEIRD

Readings (complete by Monday 5/17)	Schedule for Week
<p>Ligotti – “On the Writing of Horror” [20]</p> <p>H. P. Lovecraft – “The Horror at Red Hook” [22]</p> <p>Begin reading <i>The Ballad of Black Tom</i></p>	<p>M 5/17 (Discussion Questions): Discussion leaders submit discussion prompts by midnight.</p> <p>T 5/18 (Weekly Reflections): Post weekly reflection by midnight (unless you are a discussion leader for the week).</p> <p>W 5/19 (Discussion Groups): Meet with discussion groups via Zoom.</p> <p>Th 5/20 (Paper Due): Submit discussion overview paper by midnight (if this is your week).</p>

WEEK 9: THE POST-LOVECRAFTIAN WEIRD

Readings (complete by Monday 5/24)	Schedule for Week
LaValle – <i>The Ballad of Black Tom</i> [149]	<p>M 5/24 (Discussion Questions): Discussion leaders submit discussion prompts by midnight.</p> <p>T 5/25 (Weekly Reflections): Post weekly reflection by midnight (unless you are a discussion leader for the week).</p> <p>W 5/26 (Discussion Groups): Meet with discussion groups via Zoom.</p> <p>Th 5/27 (Paper Due): Submit discussion overview paper by midnight (if this is your week).</p>

WEEK 10: CONCLUSIONS—THE WEIRD & THE EERIE

Readings (complete by Monday 5/31)	Schedule for Week
Mariana Enríquez – “Adela’s House” [16] and “Under the Black Water” [20]	<p>T 6/1 (Discussion Questions): Discussion leaders submit discussion prompts by noon PST</p> <p>T 6/1 (Weekly Reflections): Post weekly reflection by midnight (unless you are a discussion leader for the week).</p> <p>W 6/2 (Discussion Groups): Meet with discussion groups via Zoom.</p> <p>Th 6/3 (Paper Due): Submit discussion overview paper by midnight (if this is your week).</p> <p>F 6/4 (Review Session): Optional review session via Zoom. Bring any questions that you have for me.</p>

FINALS WEEK

Readings	Schedule for Week
No readings.	<p>W 6/9 (Final Exam): Final exam questions will be posted. Essays will be due 24 hours after prompts are made available. You should submit your Final Reflection Essay with your final exam.</p>