

New Jersey Institute of Technology

Special Topics in Literature:

Contemporary Fantasy

Catalog:	LIT 325-004 ST, Spring 2024
Instructor:	Johanna Deane
Room:	Faculty Memorial Hall 207
Meeting Times:	Mondays/Thursdays 4pm-5:20am
Email:	jmd56@njit.edu with subject line beginning LIT325-004:
Office hours:	M/Th by appointment in Cullimore 115C or via Webex .
Course notes:	Available via the Active Workspace.

Course Description

Since the turn of the 21st century, fantasy literature has not only become mainstream but one of the dominant modes of contemporary English literature, thanks largely to breakthrough film series such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones*, and *The Magicians*, games like *Skyrim*, *The Witcher*, and *Dark Souls*, and a newly global fantasy fandom concerned with matters of gender, race, decolonization, and LGBTQ and disability rights.

In this course, we will survey the major trends and concerns in contemporary Anglophone fantasy, explore modern primary- and secondary-world fantasy, consider fantasy receptions of history and mythology, critically engage with contemporary fantasy, and produce critical analysis of contemporary fantasy.

Prerequisites: Engl102 with a grade of C or higher.

Learning Outcomes

During this course you will:

- Survey major contemporary trends and discourses in the fantasy genre
- Consider and contextualize fantasy's engagement with contemporary society
- Analyze and criticize several notable texts in contemporary fantasy
- Learn to navigate the scholarly literature on the fantasy genre
- Write a critical investigation of a fantasy novel, film, or game of your choice

Required Texts and Materials

- Klune, T. J. *The House in the Cerulean Sea*. Tor Books, 2020. ISBN: 9781250217318.
- Jemisin, N. K. *The City We Became: A Novel*. Orbit, 2020. ISBN: 9780316509886.
- Parker-Chan, Shelley. *She Who Became the Sun*. Vol 1. Tor Books, 2021. ISBN: 9781529043396.

- Patel, Vaishnavi. *Kaikeyi*. Orbit Books, 2022. ISBN: 9780356520193.

Technology

You will be expected to have an Internet-capable computing device for in-class writing.

Attendance

Participation in class activities, discussions, and workshops will contribute to your knowledge and performance. Show up on time, be prepared, and actively contribute to class discussions. Your engagement with the material will impact how much you get from the class.

You may miss up to one week of class without penalty. Every subsequent unexcused absence will result in a reduced participation grade. If you are absent for legitimate reasons (family emergency) you must provide a doctor's note or a note from your dean.

Do not come to class sick. I will excuse absences due to illness if emailed in advance.

Information about Learning Structure

We will prepare for class discussions with readings from assigned stories and books. A substantial further reading list is supplied in addition to mandatory readings; while my lectures will present the ideas to you in abbreviated form, you should use further readings to orient yourself, ground your research, and engage with the class discussions.

If you have questions, contact me via email. I will respond to your emails within 24 hours, except on weekends. Please plan accordingly. Remember to maintain an appropriate tone in all school-related correspondence. This means to include an appropriate SUBJECT line and your NAME in all emails. I will not respond to emails that do not include the sender's name.

NJIT University Code on Academic Integrity

Academic Integrity is the cornerstone of higher education and is central to the ideals of this course and the university. Cheating is strictly prohibited and devalues the degree that you are working on. As a member of the NJIT community, it is your responsibility to protect your educational investment by knowing and following [the NJIT academic integrity code](#).

It is my professional obligation to report academic misconduct to the Dean of Students Office. Any student found in violation of the code by cheating, plagiarizing or using any online software inappropriately will result in disciplinary action. This may include a failing grade of F, and/or suspension or dismissal from the university. If you have any questions about the code of Academic Integrity, please contact the Dean of Students Office at dos@njit.edu.

Accessibility Needs

If you need accommodations due to disability, please contact the Office of Accessibility Resources & Services (OARS), Kupfrian Hall 201, to discuss your specific needs. A Letter of Accommodation Eligibility from the OARS authorizing your accommodations will be required.

The Writing Center

The Writing Center (in the basement of Central King Building and online) is available for one-hour individual and group appointments with professional writing tutors. This resource is intended to help you improve your communication and writing skills. Tutors can help with planning assignments, improving your writing, refining an essay or multimedia project, or other communication-based needs.

For more information, please visit <http://humanities.njit.edu/writingcenter>.

Grading

Participation [15%]

Be prepared to take notes and participate. You must come to every class having read the assigned text for that class, and submit discussion questions at the beginning of each class meeting in the course active workspace for full participation credit.

- For an A (90-100), you will be expected to attend all classes (with no more than 2 unexcused absences), fully participate in all discussions and classroom exercises, engage with your fellow students and the teacher throughout the semester, and participate in at least 90% of in-class writing exercises at a satisfactory level.
- For a B (80-89), you will be expected to attend all classes (with no more than 4 unexcused absences), participate actively in most discussions and exercises, and engage with your fellow students and the teacher for much of the semester. You will participate in at least 80% of in-class writing exercises.
- If you feel that your participation work may go unrecognized, please submit a summary of your participation throughout the semester along with any extenuating circumstances, explaining the grade you feel your participation merits.

Discussion Posts [20%]

You will need to write five informal discussion posts throughout the semester. Each post will meaningfully engage with a different topic, building on classroom discussions and feeding into subsequent classroom discussions. Three of these discussion posts will engage with your classmates' **Critical Reviews**, substantively responding to their arguments. While these posts are informal, they are professional, so be sure to show respect for your classmates' ideas and to provide careful reasoning and clear and thoughtful evidence for your claims. Grading will be pass/fail, but late discussion posts will not be accepted for credit.

- **Discussion 1: What Makes it Fantasy?** Select a contemporary text, describe it, and explain why it is fantasy, drawing on our class discussions.
- **Discussion 2: Response to Critical Review 1**
- **Discussion 3: Worldbuilding in "Our" World.** Both *The House in the Cerulean Sea* and *The City We Became* are set in a version of "our" world. Yet both are recognizably also set in worlds of their own. Analyze the worldbuilding in each.
- **Discussion 4: Response to Critical Review 2**
- **Discussion 5: Response to Critical Review 3**

Critical Reviews [20%]

Critical reviews directly engage with one or more texts in order to place them in their broader generic context, explore their ideas, and draw conclusions about their themes and methods. A successful critical review should have a critical argument or thesis (beyond “this is good” or “this is bad”), and should support its argument with evidence, but its references to criticism and texts are informal, generally not supported by scholarly apparatus. Examples of professional critical reviews include such texts as [Kurt Goldentops and Sungshin Kim’s “The Fantasy Story as a Merciless Laboratory of History: On R. F. Kuang’s ‘Babel, or The Necessity of Violence’”](#) or [Naomi Kanakia’s “Are the Classics Bad For You?”](#) or [Ethan Davison’s “A New View of the Fey Things: On ‘The Big Book of Classic Fantasy’”](#).

Each critical review will be 3-5 pages long, and will engage directly with one or more texts assigned for the class, though you may also reference other texts. Each will be graded A-F using the Written Communication Value Rubric; grading will focus on quality of argument. The highest two grades will become your final Critical Reviews grade. You can complete all three Critical Reviews and drop the lowest grade, or complete only two.

- **Critical Review 1: Contemporary Themes in Fantasy**
 - “Sun, Moon, Dust,” “A Witch’s Guide to Escape: A Practical Compendium of Portal Fantasies,” “Seasons of Glass and Iron,” “Where Oaken Hearts Do Gather,” *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, *Elden Ring*
- **Critical Review 2: Near Fantasy**
 - *The House in the Cerulean Sea*, *The City We Became*, *The Magicians*
- **Critical Review 3: Fantastic Reimaginings**
 - *She Who Became the Sun*, *Kaikeyi*

Final Paper [25%]

You have two major options for your final paper. You may either write a scholarly **Critical Research Essay** [5-7 pages] that engages with the academic literature on contemporary fantasy or write a **Contemporary Fantasy Story** [5-10 pages] that applies the contemporary fantasy analysis we have developed in class, accompanied by a **Critical Methods Essay** [3-5 pages] that explains how your story engages with the academic literature and approaches contemporary fantasy themes and concerns.

- If you write a **Critical Research Essay**, you should offer a clear argument about a contemporary theme, topic, or method in modern fantasy. Successful essays must meaningfully and substantially engage with at least one text assigned for class, but can also include discussions of texts we haven’t covered in class. Successful essays should include a short literature review of relevant scholarship, some close reading of selected texts, and an evidence-based conclusion. It will be graded A-F using the Written Communication Value Rubric; grading will focus on quality of argument, engagement with the scholarly literature, and quality of evidence provided.
- If you write a **Contemporary Fantasy Short Story**, your story should directly engage with themes, concerns, and topics we have explored in class, and you should be able to clearly explain how your story engages with those topics in a thesis-based **Critical**

Methods Essay that explains which texts and contemporary concerns your story is responding to, analyzes your methods of response, and puts your story in conversation with the larger genre. Successful methods essays should include a short literature review of relevant scholarship, close reading of your own story, and an evidence-based conclusion. It will be graded A-F using the Written Communication Value Rubric; grading will focus on quality of argument, engagement with the scholarly literature, and quality of evidence provided.

Because the final paper is due at the end of the term, you are encouraged to bring drafts to office hours, talk to me after class, and otherwise work to develop the strongest possible finished piece. I will also provide written feedback at the conclusion of the term during finals week.

Video Essay or Presentation [20%]

In a video essay to be screened in class, or an in-class live presentation, present on a contemporary fantasy text of your choice, placing it into its genre context, showing how contemporary fantasy scholarship can illuminate the work, and making an analytical argument about the work as fantasy literature. Remember, you are making an **argument**; no more than 2 minutes of your total presentation or video can be plot summary.

- If you do a video essay, submit your video essay at least one class before your scheduled presentation date.
- If you do a presentation, submit your written remarks with your slides. Remember that each double-spaced page of written remarks will take about 2.5 minutes to present, so your remarks should not exceed 3 pages.
- Either way, your presentation will be evaluated on the strength of your **argument**, your **engagement with scholarship**, your **engagement with specifics of the text**, and your **visual and auditory communication**.

Assignment Submission and Revision

All assignments must be submitted on Canvas. I will not accept emailed work. Formatting guidelines will vary according to each assignment, so follow the explicit guidelines found on individual assignment sheets.

- Assignments are due at the beginning of class on their due date. Late class work and homework will only be accepted if your absence is excused.
- Every assignment will either come with a grading rubric or be graded pass/fail on the basis of clear requirements; pass/fail assignments are worth the full amount, while graded assignments are worth 50-100%. Nonsubmission is worth 0%.
- Please contact your classmates for missed work.

Final Grade Calculations

Because all unsubmitted work will receive a 0, while all good-faith attempted work cannot receive a lower grade than 50%, it is in your best interest to submit every assignment on time, even if your submissions are flawed. At the end of the term, your total work will be evaluated according to the university's grading scale.

A = 100-90

B+ = 89-87

B = 86-80

C+ = 79-77

C = 76-70

D = 69-60

F = 59-0

Incompletes will only be given under considerable extenuating circumstances (physical/mental health absences, military service, child care needs, etc.).

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

Week 1: Introduction to Fantasy

January 18 Review syllabus; introduction to fantasy genre; discussion.

Week 2: Defining Fantasy

January 22 What is fantasy?

January 25 Read before class: [Ursula Vernon, "Sun, Moon, Dust"](#)

Write **Discussion 1: What makes it fantasy?**

Discuss: "Sun, Moon, Dust" & What makes it fantasy?

Week 3: Survey of Contemporary Fantasy

Further reading:

- [Jeff Vandermeer, "How Fantasy Literature Helped Create the 21st Century"](#)
- [Farah Mendlesohn, "Toward A Taxonomy of Fantasy"](#)
- [Ren or Raven, "Why We Can't Stop Mapping Elden Ring"](#)

January 29 Read before class: [Alix E. Harrow, "A Witch's Guide to Escape: A Practical Compendium of Portal Fantasies"](#)

Taxonomies of fantasy

- Mendlesohn's intrusive, estranged, portal, & immersive
- Market categories: high, epic, dark, historical, low, urban
- Hybrid categories: fantasy of manners, romantasy, science fantasy, magic realism
- Tonal traditions: sword and sorcery, grimdark, steampunk

February 1 Tropes in fantasy

Before class: Watch [Elden Ring's Lore Explained!](#) and [the first hour of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*](#)

Contemporary fantasy in videogames

- The Dark Souls quasi-series
- The Witcher series
- The Elder Scrolls series
- The legacy of Final Fantasy and fantasy JRPGs
- Minecraft
- League of Legends

Week 4: Influences on Contemporary Fantasy

Further reading:

- [Adam Whitehead, “A History of Epic Fantasy”](#)
- [Lyta Gold, “Sci-Fi, Fantasy, and the Status Quo”](#)

February 5 Concerns of contemporary fantasy. Feminism, postcolonialism, and queer liberation in fantasy.

Read before class: [Amal El-Mohtar, “Seasons of Glass and Iron”](#)

February 8 Class does not meet.

Read [Sarah Pinsker, “Where Oaken Hearts Do Gather”](#)

Write **Critical Review 1: Contemporary Themes in Fantasy**.

Week 5: In Other Worlds

Further reading:

- [Brandon Sanderson, “Sanderson's First Law”](#)

February 12 Discussion: Fantasy worldbuilding

Assigned: **Critical Research Paper** [due at end of term]

February 15 On Magic

Write **Discussion 2: Response to Critical Review 1**.

Week 6: The Shadow of Reality: T. J. Klune’s The House in the Cerulean Sea

February 19 The House in the Cerulean Sea, pp. 1-125

February 22 The House in the Cerulean Sea, pp. 126-284

Week 7

February 26 Class does not meet

Write **Discussion 3: Worldbuilding in “Our” World**

February 29 The House in the Cerulean Sea, pp. 285-396

Week 8: Fantasy and Contemporary Culture: N. K. Jemisin’s The City We Became

Further reading:

- [Gerry Kearns, “Review: *A Queer New York: Geographies of Lesbians, Dykes, and Queers and The City We Became*”](#)
- [C. North, “The Ethics of Quantum Colonialism”](#)
- [Maria Sulimma, “Scripting Urbanity through Intertextuality and Consumerism in N.K. Jemisin’s *The City We Became*: ‘I’m Really Going to Have to Watch Some Better Movies about New York’”](#)

March 4 The City We Became, pp. 1-87
 Urbanity, intertextuality, race, gender, sexuality
 March 7 The City We Became, pp. 88-213
 Queer geographies in contemporary fantasy
 Write **Critical Review 2: The Near Fantasy**

Week 9: Spring Recess

March 10- Spring Recess
 March 16 Classes do not meet

Week 10: Fantasy and Contemporary Culture, Continued

March 18 The City We Became, pp. 214-434
 March 21 Write **Discussion 4: Response to Critical Review 2**

Week 11: Fantasy and History: Shelley Parker-Chan’s *She Who Became the Sun*

Further reading:

- [Samantha Shannon, “My Feminist Call to Historical Fantasy”](#)
- [Kameron Hurley, “We Have Always Fought”](#)
- [Kurt Goldentops and Sungshin Kim, “The Fantasy Story as a Merciless Laboratory of History: On R. F. Kuang’s ‘Babel, or The Necessity of Violence’”](#)

March 25 *She Who Became the Sun* pp. 1-111
 March 28 *She Who Became the Sun*, pp. 112-161

Week 12: Fantasy in TV and Film

Further reading:

- [Nairn and Piatti-Farnell, “The Power of Chaos: Exploring Magic, Gender, and Agency in Netflix’s *The Witcher*”](#)
- [Kirsty Worrow, “‘Pretty ballads hide bastard truths’: Patriarchal Narratives and Female Power in Netflix’s *The Witcher*”](#)
- [Reeba Sara Koshy, “Magic is Might: Understanding the Nature of Magic in Literature”](#)
- [Tania Evans, “The Monstrous Feminine Meets Hegemonic Masculine Violence in *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones*”](#)

April 1 *She Who Became the Sun*, p. 162-411
 April 4 Write **Critical Review 3: Fantastic Reimaginings**
 Contemporary fantasy in TV and film

Week 13: Fantasy and Mythological Reception: Vaishnavi Patel's Kaikeyi

Further reading:

- [J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories"](#)
- [Marlon James, "Our Myths, Our Selves"](#)

April 8 Kaikeyi, pp. 1-91

April 11 Kaikeyi, pp. 92-259

Week 14: Fantasy and Mythological Reception, Continued

April 15 Kaikeyi, pp. 263-475

April 18 Write **Discussion 5: Response to Critical Review 3.**

Week 15: Presentations

April 22 Video essays & Presentations

April 25 Video essays & Presentations

Week 16: Presentations

April 29 Video essays & Presentations

Due: **Critical Research Essay**

or **Contemporary Fantasy Story** with **Critical Methods Essay**