

Monsters, Magic, and Machines: Writing Fantastic Fiction

Instructor: Carmen Machado

Course Number: English 398

Semester: Fall 2014

Meeting Times: Wednesday & Friday, 1:10pm – 2:20pm

Classroom: Zinzendorf 103

Email: machadoc@moravian.edu

Office Hours: Wednesdays, 11am – 12pm, or by appointment

Office Phone Number: TBD

Office Location: TBD

Course Description

In contemporary literature, “realism” is often used as shorthand for “literary.” The implication, of course, is that serious writing only happens within a faithful representation of reality. But this is a strictly modern idea. Literature is historically filled with ghosts, gods, magic, talking animals, and the walking dead. Some of the most powerful and popular storytelling of our time has examined the nuances of the human condition in our own future, in alternate realities, and on other worlds.

In this course, we will read a variety of fantastic literature—from early fables, fairy tales, and parables, to 19th and 20th century horror and science fiction, to present-day slipstream and steampunk—and use those influences to tell our own stories. Students will learn techniques to help them weave their own supernatural tales, bust through genre tropes, and explore their obsessions.

This is a writing class. Students will be required to write, workshop, and thoughtfully revise at least one short story during the course of the semester.

Prerequisite: ENGL 211, 212, or 215, or signature of Chair.

Course Goals and Structure

In this course, students will evaluate their own and others' work in a supportive atmosphere, while examining the tools of the prose writer's art and reading the published work of successful speculative/fabulist/fantastic/genre fiction writers. Students may choose to submit a variety of fictive forms for critique, including short stories, flash fiction, and excerpts from novels.

After completing this course, students should be able to:

1. Write short fiction pieces (or novel excerpts) in the speculative/fabulist/fantastic genre.
2. Demonstrate the ability to revise manuscripts.
3. Analyze each other's work and write/verbally provide constructive and critical feedback and line-edits of the work of their classmates.
4. Demonstrate the ability to understand and analyze literary texts in the speculative/fabulist/fantastic genre.

Required Texts and Materials

VanderMeer, Jeff. *Wonderbook*. Abrams Image Books, 2013. (ISBN: 978-1-4197-0442-0)

Handouts (sometimes hard copies, sometimes in electronic form via email or Blackboard) will also be provided by instructor. You should always come with a notebook and writing utensil to class.

Attendance and Participation

We will meet twice a week—sometimes only once a week—for fourteen weeks; that isn't much time when you consider all we have to do. If you are serious about writing, you will show up *on time*, every time. Your final grade will be reduced by two percentage points for each missed class; more than three missed classes will result in a failing grade. Please arrive for class on time; if you are chronically late to class, I will begin to count lateness as absences.

If you miss class, it is your responsibility to find out what you missed and what is due the next class, whether via a fellow classmate or consulting AMOS. I will *not* hunt you down to give you your assignments. “I was absent and didn't know this was due” is not an excuse for missing work.

Additionally, simply showing up to class does not equal participation. I will be looking for “active participation” (volunteering thoughtful answers on a regular basis) *in addition to* “passive participation” (being there, taking notes, even looking attentive).

In short: Students are required to come to class and be enthusiastic participants.

Cell Phone Policy

Under no circumstances will I tolerate cell phone use of any kind during class. *This includes texting*. I will remind you in the beginning of every class to silence or turn off your cell phones. If your phone goes off during class, or if you are caught texting or otherwise engaging your cell phone during class time, you will be marked as having an unexcused absence and must leave the classroom.

New Work Policy

It should be noted that for the purposes of this class, you should not be submitting existing work, whether it was done on your own or for another creative writing/English class. You cannot grow as a writer if you keep recycling old material; everything done for this class should be 100% yours and 100% new. If you are unclear how this policy may apply to your specific circumstance, please see me and we can discuss it.

A Note on Plagiarism

I would hope that it goes without saying that any work you submit for this course must be your own; to plagiarize in an upper-level writing course is to convey a shocking disrespect for writers and their work. Refer to the College's policy on academic honesty (available in the Student Handbook) for any needed clarification.

A Note to English Majors

In preparation for creating an English Major Portfolio in your senior capstone seminar, please save both digital and hard copies of your work for this class, including drafts with peer and instructor comments.

ADA Accommodations: Students With Disabilities

Moravian encourages persons with disabilities to participate in its programs and activities. If you anticipate needing any type of accommodation or have questions about the physical access provided, please speak to Dr. Hinnefeld. Students who wish to request accommodations in this class for a disability must contact Ms. Elaine Mara, assistant director of academic support services for academic and disability support, at the lower level of Monocacy Hall, or by calling 610-861-1401. Accommodations cannot be provided until authorization is received from the Academic Support Center.

The Writing Center is located in a building that is not accessible to persons with mobility impairments. If you need the services of the Writing Center, please call 610-861-1392.

Guidelines for Typed Work

All of your out-of-class work must be typed on plain white typing paper and should conform to the following guidelines: double-space, Times New Roman (or similar) 12-point font, 1-inch margins on all sides, page numbers on the bottom of every page.

Mark the top of the first page with:

Student Name	(That's you!)
Instructor's Name	(Carmen Machado)
Class Title	(Writing Fantastic Fiction)
Date	(Date of that week's class)

Pay attention to assignments that have word counts associated with them. If you violate the formatting or word count restrictions that I have in place, I will dock your grade accordingly.

Respect

The ability to give and receive constructive criticism is absolutely crucial to your development as a writer. You will do it with the tact and decorum that such work demands, especially in the workshop setting. Additionally, I cannot guarantee that you will love every topic that we cover in this class, but you should participate and respect me and your peers by attending class, providing your input, and giving good and thoughtful feedback.

Syllabus & Schedule Policy

The instructor reserves the right to make changes in the schedule and assignments indicated by this syllabus, which is to be considered as a proposed plan and not a contract. The instructor is obligated to give students *who attend class regularly* reasonable notice of such changes.

Evaluation

Here how your grades will break down for this class. Please note that writing is a subjective discipline, but I will be primarily grading your work according to your attention to class

discussions, workshop feedback, and effort.

Please also note that if you do not hand in an assignment on time, it will be considered a zero. I will not accept late assignments, no matter the reason. Plan ahead—printing & computer problems will not be considered a valid excuse.

Attendance: 10%

Coming to class, on time, every time.

Participation: 10%

Doing the reading & assignments; being an enthusiastic participant.

Other Exercises/Assignments: 10%

Doing the in-class and out-of-class assignments and exercises.

Workshop Story: 20%

Writing your workshop story with attention to lectures, readings, and formatting requirements.

Workshop Feedback: 20%

Writing thoughtful, thorough, and respectful feedback for your classmates that meets all requirements.

Final Revision: 20%

A final revision of your workshop story. Revision does not equal proofreading; you will be expected to recast, rethink, examine, test, tear apart, and rebuild your story.

Personal Statement: 10%

A personal statement explaining your revision process will accompany your final revision.

Writing Fantastic Fiction
Schedule

WEEK ONE / August 27th & 29th
INTRODUCTION

Wednesday, August 27th

In class:

- Introduction & icebreakers.
- Fill out student questionnaires.
- Make contact list.
- Discuss workshop procedure.
- Schedule workshops.
- Discuss Kelly Link essay re: obsession.

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Make a list of your obsessions. There should be at least 30 of them.
- **Fiction Reading:** N/A
- **Nonfiction Reading:** Chapter 1 of *Wonderbook: Inspiration and the Creative Life*; “Literary Revolution in the Supermarket Aisle: Genre Fiction Is Disruptive Technology” by Lev Grossman, and “It’s Genre. Not That There’s Anything Wrong With It!” by Arthur Krystal

Friday, August 29th

In class:

- Discuss nonfiction reading.
- Conversation: Your list of obsessions. Why we write. Why we write genre. What is genre? What is speculative fiction?
- Conversation: The genre cycle.
- Exercise: Genre scene exercise.

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Autobiography of a Reader (handout)
- **Fiction Reading:** “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Ursula LeGuin & “Magic for Beginners” by Kelly Link
- **Nonfiction Reading:** Chapter 3 of *Wonderbook: Beginnings and Endings* & “Confronting Reality by Reading Fantasy” by Lev Grossman

WEEK TWO / September 3rd & 5th
FANTASY

Wednesday, September 3rd

In class:

- Discuss fiction & nonfiction reading.
- Conversation: What makes an effective opening line in a story? Why does it matter?

- Exercise: Write 50 different first lines for fifty different stories.

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Take 5 of your favorite first lines and write an opening page (no more than 200 words) for each one.
- **Fiction Reading:** “Singing My Sister Down” by Margo Lanagan & “Little Gods” by Tim Pratt
- **Nonfiction Reading:** Chapter 2 of *Wonderbook: The Ecosystem of Story*

Friday, September 5th

In class:

- Discuss fiction & nonfiction reading.
- Conversation: The guts of the story.
- Exercise: The mermaid exercise.

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Take a scene from “Singing My Sister Down”—I will let you know which one—and rewrite the scene from a different POV. Then, rewrite the scene in a different style (see pages 62-3 of *Wonderbook* for examples). Lastly, try a different tone.
- **Fiction Reading:** “Gone” by John Crowley & “A Buyer's Guide to Maps of Antarctica” by Catherynne M. Valente
- **Nonfiction Reading:** Chapter 4 of *Wonderbook: Narrative Design*

WEEK THREE / September 10th & 12th
FANTASY

Wednesday, September 10th

In class:

- Discuss fiction & nonfiction reading.
- Conversation: Recasting ‘Singing My Sister Down’
- Exercise: The path to the cabin exercise.

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Read, annotate, and critique Friday’s workshop story.
- **Nonfiction Reading:** Chapter 5 of *Wonderbook: Characterization*

Friday, September 12th

In class:

- WORKSHOP #1

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Write a portal fantasy scene where a person or creature in a magical world stumbles into our world. Have them describe what’s happening deep in their POV—without much understanding of what’s actually happening.
- **Fiction Reading:** “Exotic Pleasures” by Peter Carey & “Hwang’s Billion Brilliant Daughters” by Alice Sola Kim

- **Nonfiction Reading:** Chapter 5 of *Wonderbook*: Characterization
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WEEK FOUR / September 17th & 19th
SCIENCE FICTION

Wednesday, September 17th

In class:

- Discuss fiction & nonfiction reading.
- Conversation: Characters—what are they? What aren't they?
- Class exercise: Writing voices from vintage photographs.

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Read, annotate, and critique Friday's workshop story.

Friday, September 19th

Before class:

- **Optional, but strongly encouraged:** Writer, artist, and naturalist Julie Zickefoose will be speaking to Dr. Hinnefeld's Intro to Creative Writing class from 11:45am – 12:55pm about writing about animals without falling into anthropomorphism, and letting nature lure you into writing. Great for writers of all disciplines! (Room TBD.)

In class:

- WORKSHOP #2

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Make a list of 10 mothers from your childhood or adolescence (not your own). Write a fictional account of one of them having one of the following experiences: watching a cat have a litter of kittens, surviving a sinking ship and crawling onto a mysterious beach, being arrested for a crime she doesn't remember committing, or shoplifting something from a store.
 - **Fiction Reading:** "Jon" by George Saunders & "The Veldt" by Ray Bradbury
 - **Nonfiction Reading:** Chapter 6 of *Wonderbook*: Worldbuilding
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WEEK FIVE / September 24th & 26th
SCIENCE FICTION

Wednesday, September 24th

In class:

- Discuss fiction & nonfiction reading
- Conversation: Worldbuilding
- Class exercise: Create three brand-new science fictional worlds, based on a point of departure of your choosing

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Read, annotate, and critique Friday's workshop story.

Friday, September 26th

In class:

- WORKSHOP #3

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Set a scene or story (less than 1,000 words) in one of the three worlds you created. Make sure you indicate the restrictions/point of departure of your world!
 - **Fiction Reading:** “Sandkings” by George R. R. Martin & “Porn Star” by Alissa Nutting
 - **Nonfiction Reading:** TBD
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WEEK SIX / October 1st & 3rd
SCIENCE FICTION

Wednesday, October 1st

In class:

- Discuss fiction & nonfiction reading.
- Conversation: The genre controversy.
- Exercise: TBD

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Read, annotate, and critique Friday’s workshop story.

Friday, October 3rd

In class:

- WORKSHOP #4

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** TBD
 - **Fiction Reading:** “Snow, Glass, Apples” by Neil Gaiman, “A Day in the Life of Half of Rumpelstiltskin” by Kevin Brockmeier
 - **Nonfiction Reading:** The introduction of “My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me” by Kate Bernheimer
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WEEK SEVEN / October 8th & 10th
FAIRY TALES, FOLKTALES, & URBAN LEGENDS

Wednesday, October 8th

In class:

- Discuss fiction & nonfiction reading.
- Conversation: Fairytales, folktales, urban legends; the power of storytelling & oral traditions
- Exercise: Hand out & discuss Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Read, annotate, and critique Friday’s workshop story.

Friday, October 10th

In class:

- WORKSHOP #5

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Take your particular Scary Story to Tell in the dark. Adapt it in any way you see fit.
 - **Fiction Reading:** “Bluebeard” by Charles Perrault, “Variations on Bluebeard and Dalton’s Law Along the Event Horizon” by Helena Bell, “The Twelve Dancing Princesses” by the Brothers Grimm, and “The Girl Detective” by Kelly Link
 - **Nonfiction Reading:** N/A
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WEEK EIGHT / October 15th & 17th
FAIRY TALES, FOLKTALES, & URBAN LEGENDS

Wednesday, October 15th

In class:

- Discuss fiction & nonfiction reading.
- Conversation: Adaptation & retellings. Discuss our adapted urban legends.
- Exercise: TBD

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Read, annotate, and critique Friday’s workshop story.

Friday, October 17th

In class:

- WORKSHOP #6

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** TBD
 - **Fiction Reading:** “Housesitting” by Bennett Sims, “The Bees” by Dan Chaon
 - **Nonfiction Reading:** “Why I Write Horror” by Hubert Dade
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WEEK NINE / October 22nd & 24th
HORROR

Wednesday, October 22nd

In class:

- Discuss fiction & nonfiction reading.
- Conversation: Look at “Deep Dark Fears” Tumblr; what is horror?; building suspense.
- Exercise: Good thing/bad thing (The Undeading)

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Read, annotate, and critique Friday’s workshop story.

Friday, October 24th

In class:

- WORKSHOP #7

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Write a list of 100 things that terrify you.
 - **Fiction Reading:** “Casting the Runes” by M.R. James & excerpt from Junji Ito’s *Uzumaki*
 - **Nonfiction Reading:** Excerpt from “Supernatural Horror in Literature” by H.P. Lovecraft
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WEEK TEN / October 29th & 31st
HORROR

Wednesday, October 29th

In class:

- Discuss fiction & nonfiction reading.
- Conversation: Our lists of fears.
- Exercise: Character interviews.

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Read, annotate, and critique Friday’s workshop story.

Friday, October 31st

In class:

- WORKSHOP #8

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Find the most terrifying thing on your list, and write.
 - **Fiction Reading:** Excerpt of “Tales from Outer Suburbia” by Shaun Tan, “The Human Soul as a Rube-Goldberg Device” by Kevin Brockmeier, “An Index of How Our Family Was Killed” by Matt Bell, & “Footnotes” by C.C. Finlay
 - **Nonfiction Reading:** Review of “A Void,” Excerpt from *Many Subtle Channels: In Praise of Potential Literature* by David Levin Becker
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WEEK ELEVEN / November 5th & 7th
FLASH, FORMAT CONCEIT, & IMAGES

Wednesday, November 5th

In class:

- Discuss fiction & nonfiction reading.
- Conversation: Writing with formal conceits, writing from & with images.
- Exercise: One line, and then the next, and then the next.

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Read, annotate, and critique Friday’s workshop story.

Friday, November 7th

In class:

- WORKSHOP #9

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Cannibalism & Constraint (pg. 308-9 from *Wonderbook*)
 - **Fiction Reading:** “The Coldest Girl in Coldtown” by Holly Black & excerpt from “Weetzie Bat” by Francesca Lia Block
 - **Nonfiction Reading:** Chapter 7 of *Wonderbook: Revision* & “Junior Varsity Is Where the Work Gets Done” by Eliot Schrefer
-

WEEK TWELVE / November 12th & 14th
YOUNG ADULT

Wednesday, November 12th

In class:

- Discuss fiction & nonfiction reading.
- Conversation: What is YA? Revision.
- Exercise: Young adult concerns.

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Read, annotate, and critique Friday’s workshop story.

Friday, November 14th

In class:

- WORKSHOP #10

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Read, annotate, and critique Monday’s workshop story.
-

WEEK THIRTEEN / November 19th & 21st

Wednesday, November 19th

In class:

- WORKSHOP #11

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Watch the trailer for Chuck Wendig’s *Blackbirds* (<http://youtu.be/gcR1B-48IK4>) & write your own microfiction (under 500 words) about a different character’s encounter with Miriam Black.

Friday, November 21st — **NO CLASS!**

November 25th & 28th

NO CLASS / THANKSGIVING BREAK

WEEK FOURTEEN / December 3rd & 5th

Wednesday, December 3rd

In class:

- **No class, but attendance at Chuck Wendig event at 4pm is MANDATORY.**

4pm

- **CHUCK WENDIG VISIT! (location TBD)**

Due next class:

- **Assignment:** Final revision of your workshop story & personal statement.

Friday, December 5th

In class:

- Hand in final story revision & personal statement.
- Discussion re: submissions & publications
- Final questionnaires.