

ENG 28a: Contemporary Environmental Writing

Fall 2015

MW 2-3:20

Dr. Irr

Course Description

This course examines literary responses to the natural environment, focusing on recent decades. For 2015, the central theme will be the emerging genre of climate fiction—or “cli-fi” for short. These novels are often, but not always, set in a near future dystopian world in which climate change has accelerated, oil supplies have been depleted, and familiar social institutions are in crisis. They magnify the pressing environmental concerns of the present in order to imagine the possible directions and effects of human action. They also intermingle different genres—from science fiction to the thriller, romance, and prose documentary; tracking the migration of climate concerns from a specialized subgenre into the literary and cultural mainstream will be a central theme of the course. Throughout the semester, we will approach cli-fi as a series of thought experiments, and the course will be dedicated to assessing the inner workings of these experiments and evaluating their results.

Readings

J. G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (1962)

Ursula Le Guin, *The New Atlantis* (1975)

Michael Crichton, *State of Fear* (2004)

Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Windup Girl* (2009)

Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior* (2012)

Nathaniel Rich, *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013)

Margaret Atwood, *Maddaddam* (2013)

David Mitchell, *The Bone Clocks* (2014)

Films

Interstellar (2014)

Snowpiercer (2013)

Assignments

-participation: 20%

-reading scrapbook: 15%. Throughout the term, students will keep a scrapbook of ideas, comments, passages, news items, images, etc. related to the course topic (representing climate change). Scrapbooks will be collected three times during the semester. Scrapbooks should have at least weekly entries and consist (by the end of term) of a minimum of 20 pages of annotated entries.

-in-class presentation: 5% Each student will deliver a 10-minute presentation explaining one or more scrapbook items they have collected.

-three analytic essays, 1750-2000 words each: 20% each.

Learning Goals

- Improve critical reading and thinking skills
- Employ key concepts from literary criticism
- Assess contributions of literature to current scientific and political controversies
- Deepen existing writing skills

M 8/31: first day. Helen Simpson, "Diary of an Interesting Year"

W 9/2: Ballard

M 9/7: Labor Day. No class

W 9/9: Ballard

M 9/14: Le Guin

W 9/16: Snowpiercer

M 9/21: **paper 1 due**

W 9/23: Yom Kippur. No class

M 9/28: Sukkot. No class

T 9/29: Brandeis Monday. Crichton

W 9/30: Crichton

M 10/5: Shmini Atzerat. No class

W 10/7: Crichton. **Collect scrapbook**

M 10/12: Brandeis Thursday. No class

W 10/14: Bacigalupi

M 10/19: Bacigalupi

W 10/21: Bacigalupi

M 10/26: Kingsolver

W 10/28: Kingsolver

M 11/2: Kingsolver

W 11/4: in class: Interstellar. **paper 2 due**

M 11/9: Rich

W 11/11: (Veterans Day) classes in session. Rich

M 11/16: Rich

W 11/18: Atwood

M 11/23: Atwood. **Collect scrapbook**

W 11/25: Thanksgiving. No class

M 11/30: Mitchell

W 12/2: Mitchell

M 12/7: Mitchell

W 12/9: scrapbook display day.

M 12/14: **paper 3 due**