

Geoffrey B. Elliott
Sample Syllabus
Survey of Mainstream Fantasy Literature

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Note that information on the syllabus is subject to change. Reasonable efforts will be made to notify students of any changes that do occur.

Survey of Mainstream Fantasy Literature is a course meant to introduce undergraduate English language and literature majors and minors to the general scope of fantasy literatures of the United States and Britain from approximately 1950 to the early 2000s. The increasing popularity of such literature in mainstream US and British cultures and as subjects of academic study suggests attention to foundational texts in the genre is well worth paying.

Course Objectives/Outcomes

Students successfully completing Survey of Mainstream Fantasy Literature can expect to do the following:

- Read and understand texts generally classified as fantasy literature, demonstrating the understanding thereof through in-class and online discussions, as well as in occasional in-class minor assignments;
- Develop an understanding of the generic commonplaces of fantasy literature in the mainstream tradition, both in terms of the benefits to inquiry and expression they provide and of the problems attendant on them, demonstrating the understanding thereof through in-class and online discussions, as well as in occasional in-class minor assignments;
- Present and defend ideas about how the commonplaces emerged *as* commonplaces and why they continue to be so, doing so in in-class and online discussions, as well as in occasional in-class minor assignments;
- Propose a topic of inquiry about how a work of fantasy literature (which may not be written by any of the authors represented on the list of required readings) serves to interrogate, subvert, undermine, or critique generic commonplaces while remaining, doing so in a manner consistent with expectations for research into the field;
- Review recent research relevant to the proposed topic of inquiry, demonstrating familiarity therewith through an annotated bibliography;
- Argue convincingly in favor of the results of the inquiry proposed in the form of a conference-length paper suitable for delivery at a regional, national, or international conference; and
- Demonstrate overall familiarity with the concepts and materials treated in the course through successful completion of a summative exam.

Required and Recommended Texts and Resources

Survey of Mainstream Fantasy Literature **requires** ten textbooks:

- Douglas A. Anderson, ed., *Tales before Tolkien*
- George RR Martin, *A Game of Thrones*
- JRR Tolkien, *The Return of the King*
- Katharine Kerr, *Daggerspell*
- Patricia McKillip, *The Riddle-Master of Hed*

- Peter S. Beagle, *The Last Unicorn*
- Robert Jordan, *The Eye of the World*
- Robin Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice*
- Stephen R. Donaldson, *Lord Foul's Bane*
- Ursula K. LeGuin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*

Electronic editions are available of many, if not all, of the works assigned for the course. Students who opt to use them are advised that they—not the instructor, program, department, or institution—are responsible for securing access to the text during class time and for any hardware or software problems attendant upon their doing so.

Although the course focuses on the development of a mainstream fantasy literature tradition since the 1950s, some gesture towards the formation of that tradition is in order, hence the inclusion of the Anderson text. Tolkien's work is included as a touchstone and common departing-point, with the specific volume selected because it more neatly manifests a number of the commonplaces of fantasy literature than do the earlier volumes.

The other texts included exist in an uneasy tension. They do contribute to what prevailing understandings of fantasy literature as a genre is, to be sure, and they do try to strike some balance between male and female authorship. But they also fail to reflect the engagement of dominant traditions in the genre with authors of color. It is in part to work against such failure, and the failure of dominant tendencies in fantasy literature to engage with persons of color, that the major assignment sequence in the course is oriented as it is. Further, the specific failures of the required texts to treat and reflect persons of color will comprise a recurring thread in the required online discussions (see Table 1, below).

In addition to required texts, the following resources will be helpful or vital in carrying out the tasks of the course:

- The institution's writing/tutorial centers
- *ElliottRWI*, www.elliottrwi.com
- *Purdue University Online Writing Lab*, <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>
- Major English-language dictionary, such as those from Oxford University (preferred) and Merriam-Webster
- Access to campus email and information management systems
- Pen/pencil and paper every class meeting

In the course of completing the required tasks for Survey of Mainstream Fantasy Literature, students will be obliged to seek further outside sources, such as from major journals and longer scholarly publications. Useful examples of the former include

- *Extrapolation*
- *Fafnir* (predominantly English-language despite being hosted and edited in Finland)
- *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*
- *Journal of Popular Culture*
- *Journal of Tolkien Research*
- *Mythlore*
- *Tolkien Studies*

Any number of supplemental primary sources can be found, as well, which should make easier the identification of subjects of inquiry for course papers. *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* is a particularly prominent example, offering high-quality shorter works in the eponymous genres.

Other sources yet may be helpful. The lists above are not meant to be exhaustive.

Evaluation/Assessment

How student grades in the class will be determined according to the distribution in Table 1, below.

Table 1: Grading Distribution

Assignment or Category	Percent of Grade
Abstract (Abstract)*	10
Annotated Bibliography (AnnBib)*	15
Conference Paper (ConfPpr)*	20
Summative Exam (SumEx)*	15
Online Discussions (Discus)	15
Minor Assignments (MinAss)	15
Professionalism (Prof)	10
Total	100

* Indicates a major assignment.

Major and some minor assignments will be assessed in terms of their demonstrated performance in several categories (these will be discussed in more detail on the individual assignment materials). Individual categories on such assignments will be assigned a number of “steps,” individual motions through the grading scale indicated on Table 3, below; the total number of steps, positive or negative, will indicate the final assignment score.

Some minor assignments will only be offered an overall score. Such scores also conform to Table 2, below.

Table 2: Grading Scale

Score	A+	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D	F	0
Steps	+7	+6	+5	+4	+3	+2	+1	+/-0	-1	-2	-3 or more	N/A*
Numerical Equivalent	98	95	92	88	85	82	78	75	72	65	55	0

*Grades of zero (0) result from non-submission of assignments or from academic integrity violations.

Final grades for the term will be reported according to the standard grading scale in force at the institution.

Each of the major assignments (aside from the SumEx) is expected to be submitted as a work of polished prose—work that has been written and revised more than once; major assignments will be assessed against the expectation. For undergraduates, this is to be considered practice for either graduate school or professional endeavor. In either case, rushed work is not likely to be favorably regarded.

I generally grade major assignments through rubrics that are published in advance of the assignments being due. In using them, I shall do my best to give you better and more useful

feedback on the work you do than simply “fixing” your punctuation and spelling and slapping a grade on the work. Mechanical “correctness” is important in that it enables access to the ideas being presented, but organization, depth, and originality of thought are more so, and the rubrics used to assess assignments reflect that importance.

In this class, the fact that you or somebody else paid for you to have a seat does not entitle you to any specific grade; by registering and meeting the requirements for this class, you have earned the right to have access to higher learning and the **opportunity to earn** credit, much as you have to pay to take a martial arts class but are not assured of earning any specific belt. I do not **give** you a grade, you **earn** a grade; I report to you on the quality of the work you turn in to me, as measured against standards expressed for each assignment.

Student Professionalism

Please treat the classroom with the same degree of attention and consideration as any professional space. Please show up to class prepared and on time; **this means having necessary materials, having completed the assigned readings, and having prepared any assignments upon entry into the classroom.** Silence or deactivate cell phones during class time, and refrain from private conversations outside of group/class discussion. If you are late, please be respectful of the instructor and others in the classroom by quietly and quickly finding a seat without gratuitous comment, questioning, or other obtrusive behavior (this includes interrupting the instructor mid-lecture to explain your tardiness, ask what the class is doing, or make other comments). The same requests also apply to those who need to leave early. If you feel the need communicate with the instructor about your late arrival or early departure, please do so via email, during office hours, or before or after class.

Please note that excessive tardiness or early departure will negatively impact your professionalism. Please note also that egregious violations of professional conduct will result in your being asked to leave; if you are thusly asked to leave, you will be counted absent for the class.

Late Work

Timeliness in submission of work is crucial to effective evaluation and revision of it; therefore, you ought to submit work when it is due, as indicated by the course calendar. Failure to do so will incur grade penalties. Major papers and major homework assignments submitted late will be penalized at the rate provided for by institutional policy. In-class and minor or daily assignments **may not** be submitted late.

Note that frequent late submission or substantially late submissions will negatively affect students' Prof scores.

Students who miss in-class work or whose major papers and/or homework assignments are late because of military or legal service, university-sponsored events, or university-documented disability may be allowed to make up the work or may be excused from it on a case-by-case basis in consultation with the instructor.

Revision

In some circumstances, **major (not minor)** assignments may be revised. After receiving instructor-reviewed major assignments, students may meet with the instructor to confer about what must be done to improve the paper and how much time is available for doing so. Students who have such meetings and successfully carry out the indicated adjustments to their work in the time allotted them will have their papers re-graded. (Students should note that grading on revisions is somewhat harsher than on earlier versions, as additional review carries the expectation of higher levels of performance.) The higher of the two grades received for the assignment will be recorded and factored into final grade reporting.

Late submissions of requested revisions will not be accepted.

Attendance

Successful completion of the class will rely in no small part on the discussions conducted during class time. Accordingly, attendance is vital, and it will be checked during each class meeting. In recognition that there are circumstances that prevent regular and complete attendance, however, a certain number of absences are permitted before grade penalties begin to accrue for absences alone (missed or non-submitted work may still impose grade penalties, however); institutional policy makes such provisions.

Except as provided for by institutional policy, the only absences which do not count against the regularly allotted number (i.e., “excused absences”) are those incurred by military or legal service. Such absences will require documentation **prior to the absence** to be excused. Illnesses, deaths in the family, outside employment, and transportation problems **are all counted among the allowed absences**. Only rare exceptions will be permitted, and those only by explicit approval of institutional authorities.

Tardiness/Early Departure

Students are encouraged to note the above statement from program policy, repeated here for convenience: “Students are expected to arrive in class on time in order to be counted present.” Students are additionally subject to being counted absent if they leave before a class meeting is dismissed, or if they are out of the room for protracted periods during class (usually more than five minutes), or multiple times in a given class period.

Discussion of Grades and Progress

Unless otherwise provided for by institutional policy, I am always happy to discuss your progress and grades with you. I am not going to discuss your grades with your parents, your siblings, your roommates, your spouses, your children, or anyone else except as required by my superiors and the law. I am also not going to discuss your grades over the phone or through email; if you want to know your grades, come see me during office hours or set up an appointment, and we can go over how you are doing, what you have done well, and what you can improve upon.

It is your responsibility to keep up with your grades and progress in the course. The time to review them is not after they have been submitted, but throughout the semester, when there is something you can do about them.

Students with Special Needs

I am, of course, happy to provide reasonable accommodation for documented special needs students may have. I need the appropriate documentation, per institutional policy, to be able to determine what accommodations are reasonable and appropriate; students desiring such accommodations must ensure that the appropriate documentation reaches me in a timely fashion.

As a note, the texts studied in the class may involve frank discussions and depictions of various acts currently considered objectionable. Sensitivity to such concerns is to be expected, but not to such a degree as forecloses open and sincere inquiry into the content and function of texts and their continued deployments in popular culture.

Academic Integrity

As a course meant for senior undergraduates and beginning graduate students, Survey of Mainstream Fantasy Literature is offered with the understanding that students are familiar with general and institution-specific principles of academic integrity. Particulars will vary by institution; general principles include, but are not limited to, avoidance of

- Unauthorized collaboration, unauthorized consolidation of assignments, undocumented or inappropriately documented use of primary and/or secondary materials, and overuse of appropriately documented primary and/or secondary materials;
- Purchasing the academic and/or scholarly work of others and presenting it as if it had been conducted by the student;
- Obtaining unauthorized access to testing and examination materials and/or providing such access to others; and
- Falsification of class records.

Penalties for violations of academic integrity are likely to be severe; do not provoke them.

Contact Policy

Email is my preferred mode of contact outside of class time; I check my email at least once (and usually more often) each day I am scheduled to teach, typically in the morning. As a note, I do not sit up all night waiting for my email inbox to chime, and I may not have time to read and answer all emails before class.

Agreements

Students who remain enrolled in the class past the add/drop date signal their understanding of and agreement to the policies and procedures outlined in this syllabus.

A form will be distributed allowing students to opt into or out of the use of their work in the course for study and professional development purposes. Opting in or out will make no difference to grading.

General Course Calendar

Readings and minor assignments not already on the course calendar (Table 3, below) may be announced in class. When they are, they are to be treated as appearing on the calendar at the correct time. Also, readings may not always be discussed in class. You are still responsible for

knowing the material; the readings form the bases for discussions and are likely to undergird any necessary quizzes and/or homework.

“Readings Due” indicates that the readings listed are assigned **to be completed before the beginning of class** on the day listed, unless otherwise noted.¹ “Assignments Due” indicates that the activities listed are to be completed and submitted at the time and in the manner indicated. Due dates for major assignments are already noted by week.

In the event that a given class day has neither reading nor activity listed, class will still meet normally. The only times class does not meet as scheduled will be announced in advance (if possible) or posted on the door to the classroom.

Table 3: Course Calendar

Week	Readings Due	Assignments Due
1	Syllabus (in class) ²	
2	Anderson, <i>Tales before Tolkien</i> Discus Assignment Sheet (in class) Abstract Assignment Sheet (in class)	
3	Tolkien, <i>The Return of the King</i>	Discus 1 (electronically before class begins on the last class day of the week)
4	Beagle, <i>The Last Unicorn</i>	Abstract—preliminary version (electronically before class begins on the first class day of the week) Discus 2 (electronically before class begins on the last class day of the week)
5	LeGuin, <i>A Wizard of Earthsea</i>	Discus 3 (electronically before class begins on the last class day of the week)
6	Donaldson, <i>Lord Foul’s Bane</i> AnnBib Assignment Sheet (in class)	Abstract—final version (electronically before class begins on the first class day of the week)
7	McKillip, <i>The Riddle-Master of Hed</i>	Discus 4 (electronically before class begins on the last class day of the week)
8	Jordan, <i>The Eye of the World</i>	AnnBib—preliminary version (electronically before class begins on the first class day of the week) Discus 5 (electronically before class begins on the last class day of the week)
9	Kerr, <i>Daggerspell</i>	Discus 6 (electronically before class begins on the last class day of the week)
10	ConfPpr Assignment Sheet (in class)	AnnBib—final version (electronically before class begins on the first class day of the week)
11	Martin, <i>A Game of Thrones</i>	Discus 7 (electronically before class begins on the last class day of the week)

¹ The current calendar lists items only by week. Individual days will depend on the specific schedule of the instructional term; dates on course calendar will be refined as additional information becomes available.

² The first week lists only the syllabus as assigned reading to allow students time to acquire and begin to read the assigned texts. Class time not taken by covering the syllabus will be given over to foundational lectures discussing canon-formation and inclusivity. The latter will expand upon and refine comments made under “Required and Recommended Texts and Resources,” above.

Week	Readings Due	Assignments Due
12		ConfPpr—preliminary version (electronically before class begins on the first class day of the week) Discus 8 (electronically before class begins on the last class day of the week)
13	Hobb, <i>Assassin's Apprentice</i>	Discus 9 (electronically before class begins on the last class day of the week)
14		ConfPpr—final version (electronically before class begins on the first class day of the week) Discus 10 (electronically before class begins on the last class day of the week)
15	No new readings	SumEx (in class during the assigned time)

Dates to remember will vary by institution and term, as many will concern themselves with institutional, local, state, and federal holidays, or with the instructor's conference activities.