

Bridgewater-at-Oxford Summer Programme, July 2019: Oxford Fantasists

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Course Description:

In this course, we will explore the two main Oxford-based groups of twentieth-century British fantasy fiction: the 'Inklings' and the so-called 'Oxford School'. The former, and best-known, circle of writers was made up largely of Oxford professors, whose main proponents, especially with regards to fantasy literature, were J.R.R. Tolkien (Exeter, Pembroke, and Merton Colleges) and C.S. Lewis (University and Magdalen Colleges). Later on, while never acknowledged as such at the time, the 'Oxford School' encompasses a group of "second-generation" fantasy authors who were mostly taught, or at least influenced by, Tolkien and Lewis whilst students at Oxford. Three of the best-loved, award-winning authors associated with this group include Susan Cooper (Somerville College), Alan Garner (Magdalen College), and Philip Pullman (Exeter College). To place readings in context, this course will also explore selected influences and source materials used, both directly and indirectly, by some of these authors, focusing in particular on the profound influence of medieval, early modern, and folkloric literature on their work.

Course Requirements and Organisation:

The course is divided into eight sessions of two hours each. Please bring along the set text for each session in either print or electronic form. It is **imperative** that you read each text **prior** to the class in which it will be discussed. To that end, please refer to the outline below, which lists the readings in the order in which they will be covered (required readings marked with an asterisk*). There is a fair amount of primary reading involved so please be sure to read as much as possible in advance of the start date (supplementary readings will be provided in advance). The course will take the form of a series of seminars, each introduced by a short lecture, with each student expected to participate actively in the ensuing seminar discussion. The final session will be divided into shorter 'tutorials' for which students must prepare a written sample from

their assessed essay as well as an essay plan, to be discussed in groups of two or three. The tutorial is one of the most distinctive features of the Oxford system, so this is intended to give students a taste of what studying in Oxford is really like!

Grades will be based on **attendance, class participation, the formative written sample and essay plan, and one academic essay** (25% of the final mark for the first three elements, and 75% for the final essay). The formative written sample should be around **1,000 words** from the draft of the main essay. The main essay itself should be **2,500–3,000 words** in length, and it should be **properly referenced**, including **at least three secondary/critical sources**, a **bibliography** of works cited, and a **word-count**. You must write on **at least two different works** of fiction from those studied during the course. (Note that this essay will be due for submission by **23:59 GMT on Wednesday 31st July**.)

Course Schedule and Required Reading(*):

1. **July 8th:** ‘Introduction: Approaching Fantasy Literature’
Reading: J.R.R. Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-stories’ (1939)*
2. **July 10th:** ‘Oxford Before Fantasy – Top Hats and Cheshire Cats’
Readings: Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)* and *Through the Looking Glass* (1871)* [often published in the same volume]
3. **July 12th:** ‘*The Hobbit* – Fantasy Begins’
Readings: J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (1937)*, the Old Norse *Vafþrúðismál* (‘Vafthrudnir’s Sayings’), and some Old English *Riddles*
4. **July 15th:** ‘*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: A New Kind of Fantasy?’
Reading: C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950)*, Hans Christian Andersen, ‘The Snow Queen’ (1844)
5. **July 17th:** ‘Fantasy in Place 1: Wales and Alan Garner’s *The Owl Service*’
Readings: Alan Garner, *The Owl Service* (1967)*, the Middle Welsh *Math fab Mathonny* (‘the Fourth Branch of the *Mabinogi*’)
6. **July 19th:** ‘Fantasy in Place 2: England and Susan Cooper’s *The Dark is Rising*’
Readings: Susan Cooper, *The Dark is Rising* (1973)* [Book 2 of the *The Dark is Rising* sequence], excerpts from assorted Anglo-Saxon/Old English sources
7. **July 22nd:** ‘Fantasy Returns to Oxford: Philip Pullman’s *Northern Lights*’
Readings: Philip Pullman, *Northern Lights* (UK)/*The Golden Compass* (US) (1995)* [Book 1 of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy], selections from John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667)
8. **July 24th:** Sample Essay Tutorials (in pairs or threes, lasting 30–40 minutes each)

NB The novels to be studied are, of course, **required reading**. Familiarity with the various series from which they are taken (where relevant) is *not* essential—hopefully reading and studying these selected best-known texts will whet one’s appetite for the rest! As far as editions are concerned, any edition you can get your hands on will do (and all should be readily, and cheaply, available online). Copies of the introductory essay and supplementary readings for each week will be supplied separately in digital format.

Medieval Literature – Select Supplementary Bibliography

Given that Tolkien and Lewis were heavily influenced in their fantasy writing by the medieval literature that they taught as professors at Oxford, the texts below are provided as further readings for students interested in this aspect of Tolkien’s creative process in particular—however, they are *not* required reading for this course. Similarly, although it is not required reading for this course, Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* comes highly recommended (and it’s better than the films)!

The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology, ed. and trans. by Kevin Crossley-Holland, 4th edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) [This is an accessible collection of various Old English texts in translation, including the complete *Beowulf*, one of Tolkien’s best-loved poems.]

Lee, Stuart, and Elizabeth Solopova, *The Keys of Middle-Earth: Discovering Medieval Literature Through the Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 2nd edn. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) [This book is a worthwhile investment for anyone interested in Tolkien’s sources and inspirations, and the introduction is particularly useful for newcomers to medieval literature.]

The Poetic Edda, trans. by Carolyne Larrington, rev. edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) [This is one of our main sources for Old Norse mythology and legend.]

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, trans. by Bernard O’Donoghue (London: Penguin, 2006) [This was a text beloved to Tolkien, and one which he edited and translated himself.]